



AUGSBURG park

a forgotten dream

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AMERICAN POETS, novelists, painters, and purveyors of culture generally have long accepted William Cowper's thesis that God made the country and man made the city. However much Thomas Jefferson, the practical statesman who described himself as a "savage of the mountains of America," understood that manufacturing centers were an economic necessity, he scornfully believed "the mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body," and urged the nation to stay "down on the farm."¹

A hundred fifty years later, the architect Louis H. Sullivan declared that his first visit to Boston when he was eight years old was like moving "a flourishing plant from the open to a dark cellar. . . . He mildewed; and the leaves and buds of ambition fell from him." Sullivan's brilliant disciple from Wisconsin, Frank Lloyd Wright, devoted much of his energy to a plan for demolishing cities, which he regarded as "bureaucratic mobocracy."² Scientific urban development and metropolitan planning have tried to dispel this stigma, but the age-old lure of the pastoral life persists.

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Such rural reveries were present when Augsburg College was moved from Marshall, Wisconsin, to Minneapolis in 1872. Interested benefactors had donated to this Lutheran institution of learning (first named Augsburg Seminary) a small parcel of land a short distance south of Minneapolis along the Mississippi River's west bank, near the home of Judge Isaac Atwater. When an addition to the town was platted, the location became Seventh Street at Twenty-first Avenue South. According to John H. Blegen, who was an Augsburg student in 1875 and a member of the faculty from 1885 to 1916, the campus was surrounded by prairie when he first saw it: "On the south side there was not a single house so far as the eye could see, except a decrepit, uninhabited hut," which was rumored to be haunted. Swamp-land and prairie to the north and west separated Augsburg from the cluster of modest buildings that was the center of Minneapolis. To further emphasize the rural atmosphere, a horse, a cow, a pig, and a dog were cared for by the students—the horse for transportation, the cow to supply the board-

¹ Julian P. Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 8:568-570 (Princeton, 1953); Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual Versus The City*, 25 (New York, 1964).

² Louis Sullivan, *The Autobiography of an Idea*, 98 (New York, 1949); Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Living City*, 34 (New York, 1958).

ing club with dairy products, and the pig to act as a garbage disposal. The dog served only as a pet. Outbuildings and sheds to shelter this collection of animals undoubtedly contributed to a barnyard campus scene and provided a familiar link for the predominantly rural Norwegian Lutheran students who came from scattered farms in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Dakota Territory to enroll at Augsburg.³

Town planners in 1856 set Minneapolis boundaries that they “deemed ample to serve for the next twenty-five or thirty years,” but by 1872 St. Anthony had merged with Minneapolis, and the population had increased from 5,830 in 1860 to 18,087 in 1870. Fortunately for Augsburg during its early years, the largest contributor of land for the campus site was energetic and ambitious Edward Murphy, who donated to the college four lots across the street from Murphy Square, an area set aside as the first Minneapolis public park when Murphy platted his eighty acres as an addition to the city in 1857. Charles E. Vanderburgh, a state supreme court judge from Minneapolis, gave two lots, and Eugene M. Wilson, first mayor of the newly consolidated

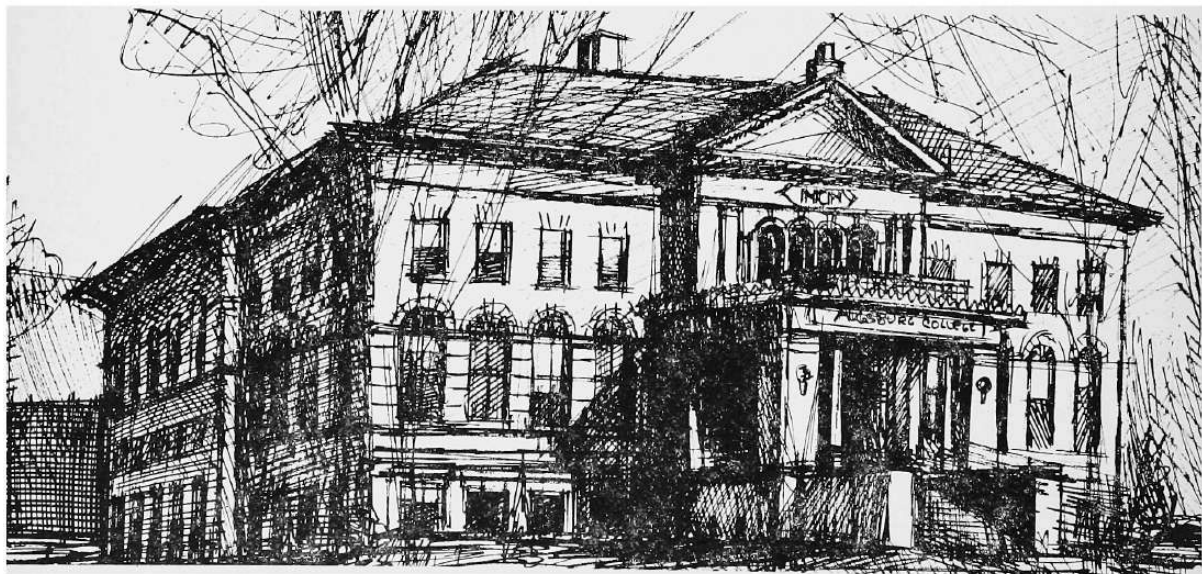
towns of Minneapolis and St. Anthony, contributed one lot to the institution. Thus, as the city engulfed Augsburg, Murphy Square preserved a fenced, tree-shaded natural beauty spot that was — at least to the eye — a part of the campus.⁴

DESPITE what seemed in 1872 to be far-sighted planning for space and fresh air, several factors later combined to convince Augsburg developers that a less metropolitan site was necessary. In 1910 the city limits of Minneapolis extended south to Fifty-fourth Street, and Cedar Avenue — within easy access of the campus — was bustling with commerce, including “saloons and other distractions.” One early Norwegian settler recalled that at the turn of the century “patrol limits made Cedar Avenue an oasis in an otherwise ‘dry’ section of the city. To many thirsty souls a

³ John H. Blegen, “Memoirs,” 108. This and all other manuscript sources cited are in the Augsburg College Archives, Minneapolis.

⁴ Isaac Atwater, ed., *History of the City of Minneapolis*, 34, 84, 95, 397 (New York, 1893); Marion D. Shutter, ed., *History of Minneapolis*, 1:228 (Chicago, 1923); “Memorandum of Augsburg Development, 1871.”

Main Hall, built in 1902, housed all of Augsburg's classroom space until 1939.



gå på Cedar' (go down on Cedar) meant just one thing: to tank up." Augsburg's President Georg Sverdrup, a scholarly, sensitive educator, admitted that city life had its temptations for his students, and the Augsburg Alumni Association in 1912 warned the school against becoming "hampered by encroaching influences." For students to develop physical and mental health, they argued, "more room and more fresh air . . . can be gotten in the outskirts of the city."⁵

Combined with the distractions of the growing community was the more practical problem of inadequate classroom and dormitory space. Until about 1915 Augsburg was known primarily as the Lutheran Free Church *Presteskole*, or training school for ministers, in which a student enrolled for a three-year course in the academy (or high school), graduated to a four-year course in the college department, and finally qualified for the ministry by completing three years' work in theology. Enrollment figures over Augsburg's first forty years, while not spectacular, were at least sufficient to pay salaries to a small group of instructors and to provide modest food and lodging for students. The 1873 enrollment was a mere twenty-four students; by 1915 Augsburg was bursting at the rafters with more than 150 young men. Three buildings (two of which were built of wood and already deteriorating) served a variety of functions. In addition to dormitories and classrooms, they housed a chapel, dining club, administrative offices, library, museum, gymnasium, lavatories, and boiler room.⁶

Moreover, educational standards were improving; accreditation for institutions of

higher learning was being discussed, and Augsburg was finding itself part of the larger educational community. Many of the students who enrolled in the academy soon found they were better suited for areas of service other than the ministry, thus creating a demand for a broader curriculum. Students asked for elective courses, and a teacher-training program met with sporadic success after 1911.⁷

Furthermore, as if in response to John Dewey's 1899 vision of the city's progressive school in the industrial age, where the playground would spontaneously create "natural divisions of labor, selection of leaders and followers, mutual cooperation and emulation," pressures to enter the arena of intercollegiate sports were mounting.⁸ Augsburg's potential athletic leaders were without adequate training space, nor was there sufficient land for a playing field in the surrounding area of crowded city blocks. Writing in the school's newspaper in 1919, a student who favored elective courses as a means of upgrading the school also added that a "better location is an absolute necessity. We have no campus where the students can get proper exercise. As a consequence they often seek their enjoyment in questionable places. They must spend their leisure hours somewhere."⁹

Croquet and handball were the acceptable outdoor sports on campus, while indoors only organized calisthenics offered an outlet for these exuberant young men during the long winter months. As a result, the usual pranks occurred in rooms and halls. Like buildings at the University of Minnesota and elsewhere, the dormitories lacked central heating, and every room was equipped with its own wood-burning stove. A group of boys one evening assembled one of these contraptions on a step halfway between a first and second floor landing, balancing the overhanging remainder precariously on the step below with a length of stovewood. Lights were doused and quiet reigned until the unsuspecting proctor going the rounds of bed-check stumbled into

⁵ Carl G. O. Hansen, *My Minneapolis*, 151 (Minneapolis, 1956); Augsburg Alumni Association, Minutes, May 24, 1912.

⁶ Hans A. Urseth, "The New Building," in *Mindeblade Om Indvielsen Af Augsburg Seminariums Nye Bygning*, 76-84 (Minneapolis, 1902).

⁷ *Lutheran Free Church Messenger*, August 15, 1919, p. 7; Augsburg College Catalogue, 1911.

⁸ John Dewey, *The School and Society*, 28 (Chicago, 1900).

⁹ *Augsburg Echo*, May, 1919, p. 11.

it. He and the ancient heating device clattered to the foot of the stairs, rousing the entire campus, including the dog.¹⁰

WORLD WAR I took its toll of Augsburg enrollment; in 1919 there were only seven graduates. Admission of women was suggested as a means of propping up the sagging financial structure, and coeducation became a topic for heated discussion. Lack of housing for girls was a logical deterrent. Members of some congregations also argued that Augsburg would lose its *Presteskole* concept should ladies be admitted. One writer denounced coeducation, maintaining that it would encourage girls to go “romping with a casual male, to chase adventure, mischief, scandal and cheap notoriety—perhaps elopement [when] statistics have time and again shown, that nearly half of high school and college contracted marriages have terminated in the divorce courts.” Another countered by asking, “what if some of the young men and women do fall in love? Is that a sin?” The times favored women’s rights, and the all-male barrier at Augsburg was broken in the fall of 1921.¹¹

The decision to admit women, together with the return to normal male enrollment following the war, further intensified the problem of overcrowding. This situation, plus the disdain of Augsburg’s friends for its city environment, led to the adoption in 1920 of a resolution which read in part “that the Board of Trustees of Augsburg Seminary be instructed to look about for a better location.”¹² The resolution prompted Knute B. Birkeland to announce in September, 1921, that land was available in the Village of Richfield. Birkeland, a onetime minister whose business acumen had paid off by way of investments in Canadian real estate and oil interests in Texas and Oklahoma, was one of Augsburg’s most influential and staunch supporters and the president of its board of trustees. With this encouraging news, it seemed clear that the time had come for Augsburg to move to suburbia,

and on January 24, 1922, the Augsburg Park Association was incorporated.¹³

The association, with Birkeland as business manager, immediately set out to acquire Augsburg Park, a forty-acre tract of land fronting on Wood Lake. It was bounded on the north by Sixty-ninth Street, extended south to Seventy-second Street, and ended at Nicollet Avenue on the east. The old Dan Patch line, then called the Minneapolis, Northfield and Southern Railroad, carried freight “through the middle of it, thus making the land very accessible.” Birkeland further explained that “Lyndale Avenue, which is paved, runs right thru. . . . Between Lyndale Avenue and Wood Lake there is a beautiful 22 acre plot. . . . a ten room modern house on the property . . . would make an ideal residence for the president. This tract of ground is about as distant from the center of Minneapolis as is Minnehaha Falls . . . less than two miles south of the city limits.”¹⁴

The proposed plan specified that all but twenty-two acres of the tract was to be divided into lots and sold to Lutheran Free Church members for a nominal sum. Profits accruing from this venture would then be applied on the purchase of the remaining twenty-two acres, which section was to become the Augsburg campus, debt free and at no charge to the institution. If the plan succeeded, Augsburg would get land without cost; buildings could be erected with the money realized from the sale of the old property.

After the annual conference in 1912 approved the proposition for acquiring the Wood Lake tract at a price of \$117,000, “For Sale” signs cropped up on the old cam-

¹⁰ Interview with Einar C. Andreason, Minneapolis, March 31, 1967.

¹¹ *Messenger*, August 15, 1920, p. 4; July 15, 1921, p. 4; November 15, 1921, p. 7.

¹² *Lutheran Free Church Conference Reports*, 1920, p. 228. A file of these reports is in the Augsburg College Library.

¹³ Augsburg Park Association, Minute Book, 1; *Folkebladet*, 45:776 (December 9, 1925).

¹⁴ Association Minute Book, 43; *Messenger*, September 15, 1921, p. 6.

pus, and inspectors visited "with the view in mind of buying Augsburg and converting it into a school for crippled children." Articles and editorials appeared regularly in the school newspaper and other journals, both Norwegian and English, eloquently reminding their readers of the beauties of nature and arguing the advantages of residence in Augsburg Park. One such piece, reflecting the attitudes then current in the Augsburg community, declared: "The old neighbors, who were supporters of the school, have moved away to more desirable locations, and their place has been taken by a more or less undesirable class of people of varied race and color. . . . Many Free Church people retire to Minneapolis to spend their old age or to provide a higher education for their children. At present they are scattered over the city. These will now have an opportunity to settle in a congenial neighborhood of friends and acquaintances in the vicinity of the school."¹⁵

Sale of the lots proceeded at a modest pace. By August, 1927, the Augsburg Park Association listed eighty-nine members, many of whom had agreed to purchase two or more lots in the development. However, the financial burden of \$7,000 yearly interest on the property, with additional taxes and incidental expenses, including several private loans, became a growing concern for the association's investors.¹⁶

THE REVEREND Birkeland had died under mysterious circumstances in December, 1925, leaving the Augsburg Park Association indebted to his estate for more than \$18,000 on notes endorsed by him to various loan

¹⁵ *Echo*, October, 1922, p. 7; March, 1923, p. 31. The quotation is from the *Messenger*, April 15, 1922, p. 3.

¹⁶ Association Minute Book, p. 2; *Conference Reports*, 1949, p. 42.

¹⁷ Grant W. Anderson to Fred Paulson, July 7, 1926, in the George Sverdrup Papers. For a discussion of Birkeland's death and its political repercussions, see George H. Mayer, *The Political Career of Floyd B. Olson*, 182 (Minneapolis, 1951).

¹⁸ *Folkebladet*, 46:824-826 (December 29, 1926); 47:10 (January 5, 1927).

companies and individuals.¹⁷ State-wide interest in his death may have prompted less optimistic persons than board members and friends of Augsburg to question the association's financial standing. A year later the *Folkebladet*, a Norwegian-language weekly newspaper published in Minneapolis, printed a communication from the Rockford Circuit of the Lutheran Free Church pointing out "the alarming fact that Augsburg Park Association finds itself with a debt of \$67,120, which the people of the Free Church must pay off or lose the large sums of money they have already paid in. Anyone can see that a circumstance like this could be of fateful consequence to a little church body consisting of only about 30,000 members." The correspondents wondered whether the resources were "wasted or misused." In the following issue the association's board of trustees accused the Rockford people of merely citing the debt without taking into account property owned by the association. Furthermore, the board asserted that the association was legally incorporated and not a part of the Free Church: "the question will never come up of whether or not the Free Church can be responsible for the Augsburg Park Association debt." A similar "malicious utterance," they scolded, "if made concerning an ordinary business, would stand in danger of being answerable before the law."¹⁸

Then the great depression rolled "like a thunderstorm" across the land. The crash brought tragedy to individuals and businesses alike, and the Augsburg Park Association, already burdened by an alarming debt, was no exception. At a meeting early in 1930, board members were advised that the treasury was exhausted and the association would be obliged to default on its first half-year tax payment. The following year, unable to pay taxes or interest, discouraged members at the annual meeting of the Lutheran Free Church recognized the futility of this ambitious effort in the face of national economic disaster. They adopted a resolution formally abandoning

all plans to move the college "in view of the fact that the moving . . . involves a sum of money too large . . . to raise, and also in view of the arrangement made with the University of Minnesota whereby students attending Augsburg College may take subjects at the University . . . that are not offered at Augsburg which arrangement would not be practicable should the school be moved out to Augsburg Park."¹⁹

The depression was at its worst; sale of lots in Augsburg Park ceased. Continuing delinquent taxes had to be paid or the property would revert to the state, and holders of notes were in danger of suffering a total loss. As a stopgap, these people were encouraged to accept choice remaining lots at a drastically reduced price in lieu of payment on their notes. None of the creditors accepted this offer, preferring to sustain their losses rather than risk additional failure.²⁰

A solution to this dilemma was found in the spring of 1936 when the Augsburg board of trustees agreed to accept forty acres of land from the Augsburg Park Association in full payment for a loan of \$37,000 made to the association in 1927, shortly after Birkeland's death. At the same time Aug-

burg became responsible for paying delinquent taxes on the entire tract. Holders of unsecured notes readily agreed, upon invitation by the association, to accept payment of the principal on the easiest possible terms: in installments and without interest. In return, Augsburg Park board members helped dispose of leftover lots not included in the actual campus site. They raised enough money among themselves to advertise the residential lots for sale to city customers on a strictly cash basis. In this way taxes were paid on several desirable lots; a few reverted to the state. Simultaneously, a fund-raising campaign by friends of Augsburg enabled the association to pay remaining outstanding notes. In addition, nearly \$9,000 was presented to the seminary as a gift. The college thus gained ownership of Augsburg Park, but at a high price.²¹

ALTHOUGH students picnicked occasionally at "Augsburg's future home" following these events, interest in Augsburg Park faded. Memorial Hall, a substantial four-

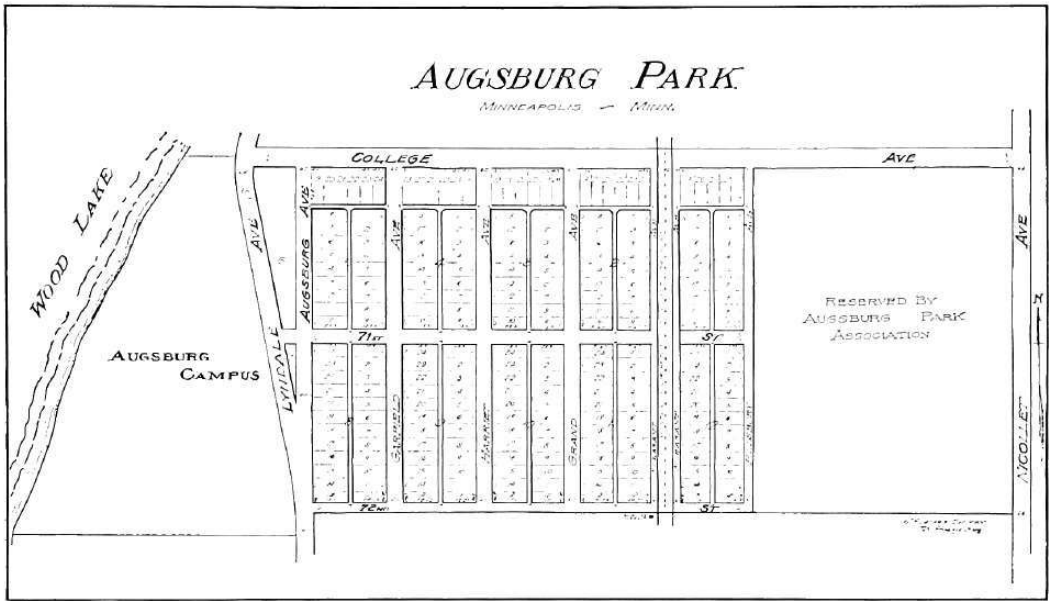
¹⁹ Hansen, *My Minneapolis*, 153; *Conference Reports*, 1931, p. 32.

²⁰ *Conference Reports*, 1949, p. 48-51.

²¹ *Conference Reports*, 1949, p. 50.

The ten-room house on the Augsburg Park property which was scheduled to become "an ideal residence for the president"





Plat of Augsburg Park

story boys' dormitory, was built on the city campus in 1939; the acquisition of Sivertsen Hall at the same time provided accommodations for up to forty girls. The following year a note of optimism about coming to terms with life in the inner city was reflected when one student boasted of the "miles of homes all surrounded with green lawns" in Minneapolis. Streets were lined "with o'erhanging shade trees," and "lakes, boats, beaches, golf-courses, parks" made Minneapolis "as desirable a city as one could want. . . . We're proud of our association with her."²²

No group was courageous enough to promote another possible failure until 1945, when a real estate company submitted to the Augsburg board of trustees a list of the estimated values of remaining lots in Augsburg Park and offered to buy the tract outright for a sum considerably less than the

probable selling price of individual lots.²³ This time a "Campus Plans Committee" was organized to assess once more the merits of moving to Richfield. Many of the same reasons—and some new ones—were given: the unattractiveness of the city environment with smoke and dirt from nearby railroads and industry; lack of recreational facilities; teachers moving to more attractive neighborhoods "at a distance from the institution itself"; and the expense and legal difficulties in acquiring more land adjacent to the existing campus—all these, plus the one overwhelming possibility that if Augsburg chose to stay in a semiblighted area, it "would seem almost certain to be always regarded as a minor institution. . . . a new campus would probably place the school in a better position ultimately to enlist the support of other Lutheran Churches if such support should be desired."²⁴

Proponents realized, of course, that hindrances stood in the way of relocation. First, it would be necessary to convince the people of the Lutheran Free Church, already skittish from their experience of a few years earlier, that the move was "practicable and desirable." Second, there was as yet no

²² *Conference Reports*, 1940, p. 26, *Echo*, May 9, 1940, p. 2.

²³ Victor J. Engberg to Augsburg College and Theological Seminary, October 18, 1945, in Papers of the Board of Trustees.

²⁴ "Memorandum to the Campus Plans Committee," July 2, 1946, in Augsburg Park File.

sewer system in Richfield, and obviously "we should not move our main campus out there until this has been done."²³ Third, Minneapolis merchants had been most cooperative in providing employment opportunities for Augsburg students who would not have been able to attend college without benefit of this aid. The planning committee reasoned, however, that increased transportation facilities from Richfield to the downtown area made the distance problem less vital than it once was. And last, the school must be content to begin on a small scale "and not even try to complete the whole task in our present generation." The optimistic planning committee pointed out that the challenge of an unfinished campus could "in itself no doubt be a stimulus and an inspiration." They suggested using facilities in both places until building operations were completed at Augsburg Park.²⁵

While members of the Lutheran Free Church and Augsburg pondered these questions, it came to their attention that the Village of Richfield had begun to deposit rain and storm surface water from the surrounding area onto the Augsburg Park property, creating a rather substantial pool. When the college objected, the village offered Augsburg \$36,000 for the land, pointing out that it could, in fact, also acquire the site by condemnation proceedings. That threat produced an agreement forthwith, allowing Richfield the right of access for a five-dollar monthly rental fee. No action was taken on the sale offer; the price was too low to be considered.²⁶

"AN ACT to provide for the eradication of slum and blight areas and rehabilitation and rebuilding thereof through the medium of neighborhood redevelopment corporations with powers of eminent domain" was passed by the state legislature in 1945. Essentially, this act enabled Augsburg to acquire slum property in the city for campus development at a price not inflated by speculation. Although no redevelopment corporation was formed, friends of Augs-

burg launched a vigorous building fund campaign, and the purchase of lots surrounding the Augsburg campus proceeded briskly. Augsburg trustees reported to the Lutheran Free Church at its annual meeting in 1946 that the earlier decision to abandon plans for moving had not been altered and that "future expansion of the campus will be planned in the neighborhood where Augsburg has stood for 74 years."²⁷

No actual large-scale construction was undertaken during this period of fund raising, however, and at a meeting of the trustees on October 21, 1947, the president of the college, Bernhard Christensen, pointed out to members that additional facilities were an urgent necessity. Although the delay was explained in terms of exorbitant postwar building costs, it was more than likely that a hope remained of Augsburg yet finding peace and tranquility near its own Walden Pond.²⁸

Then, on May 1, 1949, the Village of Richfield purchased Augsburg Park for \$60,000, and the familiar question of country versus city life for Augsburg was at last laid to rest. One pastor seemed relieved: "It would not be advisable for us to build at Augsburg Park anyway, since it would be moving our College too close to another well-established College (St. Olaf), for our own good." Said another: "it may be well for Augsburg to be located in the strategic position it now holds amongst Lutheran Colleges. If Augsburg should be moved to Augsburg Park, this would be lost."²⁹

²³ "Memorandum to the Campus Plans Committee," July 2, 1946; "Agreement for Maintenance of Augsburg Employment Service," filed in Board of Trustees, Minutes, 1949-50.

²⁴ Board of Trustees Executive Committee, Minutes, September 18, 1946; George S. Michaelsen to Leonard Lindberg, September 19, 1946, both in Papers of the Board of Trustees; *Conference Reports*, 1946, p. 30.

²⁵ Minnesota, *Laws*, 1945, p. 924; *Conference Reports*, 1946, p. 29.

²⁶ Board of Trustees, Minutes, October 21, 1947.

²⁷ *Conference Reports*, 1949, p. 33; Viggo S. Dahle to Board of Trustees, December 15, 1948; A. C. Rykken to George S. Michaelsen, December 10, 1948, in Papers of the Board of Trustees.

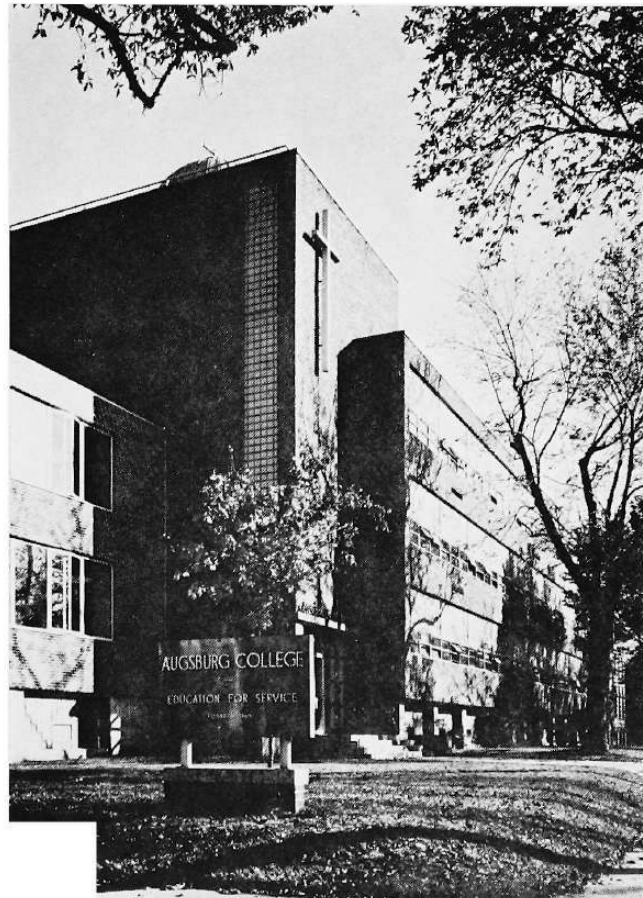
President Christensen, who was Augsburg's chief for twenty-four years, regretfully justified the wisdom of the decision: "On a lovely, spacious campus, the beauty and riches of life and the world lie open and apparent to all. In the dingy circumstances of a crowded city the external beauties must be created if they are to exist; and the potential beauties of the human spirit, though redeemed by Christ, are encrusted and overlaid by the effects of human selfishness and sin. . . . it is among . . . the confining walls and the unrepossessing environment of the cities that human life is largely lived. Here, then, we too are to live and grow and serve Christ, trying to be fertile seed[s] of life and beauty . . . in a civic community."³⁰

As if in response to President Christensen's faith, Augsburg College today enjoys the distinction of being the only private liberal arts college in Minneapolis. It offers a Bachelor of Arts degree in twenty-nine fields of study. Fourteen campus buildings are in use on approximately five city blocks. At this writing, continuing land acquisition includes an area of about nine additional blocks for further expansion. Fairview Hospital and St. Mary's Hospital and Junior College on the west bank of the Mississippi River are just across the street from Augsburg. These institutions, with the University of Minnesota and Luther Theological Seminary, have formed the University Community Development Corporation — a group that is attempting in part to encourage an exchange of information between organizations and public officials and recommending action appropriate for commu-

nity conservation and rehabilitation "for charitable, scientific, literary or educational purposes."³¹

Oscar A. Anderson, a member of the board of directors of the University Community Development Corporation, and currently Augsburg's seventh president, proudly proclaims: "Rolling hills, stretches of greenwood, elm-shaded walks and ivy covered buildings, so often attached to the popular image of a college, will not be true of Augsburg. . . . It is [our] singularly unique opportunity to carry on . . . educational enterprise against the skyline of a great metropolis. . . . Liberal arts education which takes Christianity seriously, in our developing urban culture, constitutes the self-image of Augsburg which is continually coming into sharper focus." The school's spectacular growth in little more than a decade has brought about a change in its attitude from a sense of apologetic misfortune at having lost its rural heritage to that of optimistic pride in the opportunity to become an "asphalt campus."³²

Augsburg's Science Hall, built in 1949



³⁰ *Conference Reports*, 1947, p. 44.

³¹ *Augsburg College Contact*, June, 1966, p. 10. A file of this publication is in the Augsburg College Archives.

³² *President's Annual Report*, 1964–65, p. 3; *Contact*, June, 1966, p. 11.

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