



A mural on the side of Spellman Hall photographed shortly before the demolition.

The Importance of *Place*

I vividly remember standing in a field with a small group of University administrators as the wrecking ball made its first dent in Spellman Hall in February 2011. Then, after the old residence halls were reduced to rubble and hauled away, our community watched as brick by brick Monroe Street Market was built up. Phase one of the project was completed this fall and in this issue of *The Catholic University of America Magazine* is a four-page photo feature about its development (pages 20–23).

The magazine also features a news item on the first modest steps toward development of West Campus — the more than 40 acres just across Harewood Road that the University purchased in 2004. I had the opportunity to tour the property a month or so after Monroe Street Market's grand opening (see page 8).

Visiting these two very different sites got me thinking about the importance of place at The Catholic University of America. When the American bishops set out to found the University, their first order of business was to find a place for it. Washington was chosen because, in the words of the bishops, it was a city “neither Northern, nor Southern, nor Western,” but “common ground upon which we can all meet to establish a national institution.” That common ground was a 66-acre parcel of land purchased from two family estates. The land itself had a storied past. In the early 19th century it belonged to Samuel Harrison Smith, a prominent newspaperman, and received many distinguished visitors, including Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Henry Clay.

When the bishops began to build on the newly acquired property, first Caldwell Hall, then McMahon, they built in stone. These buildings were meant to last for centuries. They reflected the University's commitment not just to its mission of education and research, but to doing these things in *this* place.

Commitment to place is not always convenient. But it's important. When St. Benedict wrote his rule for monastic life in the sixth century, he stipulated that anyone seeking to join the community must promise stability to the community. Stability, he said, provides the workshop in which we can practice good works.

Our commitment to this place means accepting the University's past, present, and future as our own — with all the problems and potentials that come with it. We don't walk away from the challenges that face our campus and our neighborhood. We dedicate ourselves to addressing them. So, when we recognized that the University and Brookland communities needed better access to shops, housing, restaurants, and the arts, we worked with community leaders, city officials, and developers to build Monroe Street Market.

When the University purchased the land of West Campus from the Armed Forces Retirement Home in Washington, we did so not only to provide for our long-term expansion but also to protect and preserve the integrity of the place in which we are situated. We are in no hurry to develop West Campus, even as many deer continue to roam freely through it. The work we do now, excavating and clearing the land in a sustainable manner, is a measured investment in the University's future in this place.

Today instability is the norm. It's not uncommon for individuals and families to relocate for school or work or better climates. It's not uncommon for entire businesses to move out of state or overseas. But we miss something with all this movement. Because it takes time to discover and appreciate all of the hidden treasures of a place. I still stumble upon little corners of our campus or vistas whose beauty I had not fully appreciated.

Contrary to popular wisdom, familiarity breeds love.