



Second thoughts

by Roger Ebert

Some two years ago, when I was even more naive and arrogant about the purpose of a university than I am now, I wrote something in this column to the effect that the University of Illinois could be a good place — if they ever got it finished.

I don't know for sure what that was supposed to mean, but it certainly did not refer to physical construction or bicycle lanes or intramural gymnasiums. I suppose maybe I meant that the University was still learning how to be a university, as all of these sprawling supercampuses in the midwest must someday learn.

Two years ago I had a greater faith than I do now in the theory that things can be finished. I was more of a doctrinaire liberal then. It was my opinion that our society, for example, could be steadily improved through enlightened action by government and citizen, and that at some undefined moment later in my life the process would be completed and the society perfected.

This is a belief I have had to abandon after a great deal of painful thought, and I now think it likely that we may never finish building this society we started on two centuries ago.

I have no doubt, however, that we are moving toward some goal. We are not a static society; we are steadily completing something. If the prevailing political philosophy does indeed survive in November, we will continue to complete whatever it is we are working upon. If, instead, Goldwaterism is the winner, we will move toward some other goal even more uncertainly.

Despite the fact that Good Old Ike commissioned a dozen famous men — all the way from Adlai Stevenson to Billy Graham — to write a book on "The National Purpose," we still follow an uncharted path as a nation. I suppose that is better, in a democracy, than definitely committing ourselves to the direction shared by the majority; for it seems to me that the inevitable end of our current national romance with materialism would be an enormous incubator large enough to hold everyone who is not definitely subversive.

These thoughts have led me back in a circle to my attitude about the University and its purpose. I am no longer so brashly certain this will be a good University "if they ever get it finished." I am beginning to believe it will be a better University if they do not.

There is still, at least, the possibility of change here. There is still an honest feeling that we do not know where we are going, or why. There is still a sense, shared by the more thoughtful members of both the academic and student communities, that we are moving in the dark but that we are still at least free to move.

During the past year I have had opportunity to visit several smaller campuses, some of them with less than a thousand students. At most of them, I found a depressing dedication to the idea of a "model student." These are colleges that believe they are turning out a product, instead of an assortment of individuals. The students are expected to reflect, in their actions and attitudes, the "best image" of the school. Indeed, they are often sent to such schools for the specific purpose of being made into "Sweet Briar girls" or "Citadel men."

There is, thank God, no such thing as an "Illinois student." We are so various that not even the most misty-eyed alumni could confuse us. We are not typical — of each other, or of anything else. This University is too big, and we are too many, for it to be possible that a product could be turned out here.

True, there are some who still cling to the fiction that every individual student here has an image to uphold. The handbook on student discipline still retains that foolish phrase about "conduct unbecoming a student," as if a student, as a student, should conduct himself in any way differently than if he were a nameless, faceless citizen. There are nearly 30,000 students on this campus, and it is futile for the University to expect them all to behave in such a way that the best image of the University is served.

This is because, at last, the University must admit that it has grown too much to have that sort of image anymore. This is not 1910, nor even 1925. This is 1964, and the campus is so large that it retains no self-identity, per se, which applies to all of its parts. It is simply a community of people who are likely to do what any group of 30,000 people might do in 1964.

This is not idealism, but realism. And it helps to explain why I am not too anxious for the University to be "finished." I believe that there can be no final definition of what this University should or could be. It is too large, and too free, to be defined. And that is not a weakness but a strength.