

NEW LIFE

U of U's Student Life Center, School of Dentistry Add Depth to Salt Lake Campus

By Brad Fullmer | Photos by Dana Sohm



The striking exterior of the U's spacious new Student Life Center is evident in the early evening hours, with an abundance of glazing and other unique materials.

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When the University of Utah joined the PAC-12 in June 2010, it meant that not only would the U need to upgrade its athletic facilities to keep pace with other ‘big-boy’ conference schools, it would require other new world-class, state-of-the-art facilities as a way of bolstering the collective image of the entire 1,530-acre campus in Salt Lake City.

Whatever it takes to catch the eye of the next four-star football or basketball recruit, given that conference schools are benefitting from an expected take of more than \$20 million each annually from lucrative TV revenues.

Two new buildings illustrate the high level of complexity of design and construction being done at the University of Utah campus. Both the George S. Eccles Student Life Building and the Ray and Tye Noorda School of Dentistry involved lengthy processes from fund raising to design to final completion in January, but were well worth the wait, said Barbara Snyder, VP of Student Affairs at the U.

“The Student Life Center was well over a decade-long process – it’s the nature of universities,” said Snyder. “It’s a very vibrant, open, active, energetic place. It has become an amazing gathering place. It’s just very cool, very inviting and welcoming.”

On the \$41 million, 4-story, 178,000 Student Life Building, Managing Principal Brent Agnew of Salt Lake-based MHTN Architects said design was “highly influenced by the students” including past student body officers, and even the general population through surveys.

“The goal was to provide what the students really wanted,” said Agnew. “They also wanted this to be a recruitment tool for the University, and wanted to make

Dazzling interior spaces include a challenging 45 ft. climbing wall (left) and three full-size basketball courts. The center aims to be a place for U students to improve their health and wellness, as well as just hang out and socialize.



sure it stacked up well against other PAC-12 competition. From a personal perspective, there is something exciting and different about the way student-oriented facilities take shape. You have the excitement of so many people with so many diverse backgrounds to enjoy the spaces, from incoming freshmen to the President of the University.”

Peggy McDonough, MHTN Principal-in-Charge, said her firm has been specializing in Student Life Center design for major universities since the mid-90’s, beginning with the University of Arizona in Tucson (now a formidable PAC-12 rival for the U). The key to a successful design, she says, is trying to visualize a student’s wants and needs in a building, both in form and function.



“For the architects, we ask what from a student’s perspective will want them to be on campus and have a place to call their own,” said McDonough. “What is going to motivate them to hang out? Especially for a commuter campus, which the U has typically been. It’s great to think of ways to motivate students to want to be there.”

Snyder added: “The architects really listened to our students and incorporated things that I would not have thought of, but were important to our students, like the ‘combative room’ with hanging punching bags. It’s been an amazing addition to our campus. I honestly believe we our helping our student population be more healthy.”

The spacious building is designed to be a transformative project on the U



campus – intended as the hub of social and recreational activity. Programs and services include open recreation, fitness classes, sport clubs, climbing, intramural sports, individualized fitness, outdoor adventure operations, exercise performance, staff training, and aquatic programming.

It serves as a connective building and is oriented as the terminus of the HPER Mall, the main pedestrian east-west corridor through the lower campus. The climbing wall tower is a focal point as one travels east, towards the upper campus. Located at the base of the Legacy Bridge, easy access is provided from the upper campus into a central circulation space that runs through the building into the west entry plaza.

The building's 'V'-shaped circulation path allows for pedestrian traffic to flow through the first level, where users can observe the many activities taking place within the Student Life Center and enjoy its gathering spaces and public functions in the open areas of the building. The design focuses on the seamless transition from inside to outside, both in circulation and in programmed area. A key aspect of the design was taking advantage of the Wasatch Front's pleasant shoulder seasons by programming the outdoor space surrounding the building and enabling spaces to open and flow into one another.

McDonough added the owner did not want the Student Life Center to look like an academic building, but something that could build upon the surrounding nature.

"We wanted the exterior to communicate a more playful message which is done by tilting mullions, and the use of a variety of colors in the skin and some of the geometries," she said. "We were playing with the idea of the illusion of folding, and the idea that it's signifying there are action and motion things going on in the building.

"Rec Centers tend to look like big closed box buildings," McDonough continued. "We countered that by dividing programs into major arms – one arm is more of the metal primary enclosure, the other the three-court gym, pool and track – and it's housed in terra cotta with glass volumes coming off and out of it."

Bret McDonald, Project Manager for Salt Lake-based Okland Construction, >>



said a demanding schedule required construction workers to be on the same page at all times.

“It was bid with a 15-month schedule from August 2013 and we finished December 24, 2014,” said McDonald. “Because of the nature of the project a lot of specialized type products, like the climbing wall and the terra cotta had large lead times. The concrete was a little trickier as the designer wanted a board form look on the exterior and wanted us to use a line on all forms. It adds quite a bit of time as the liner itself was multi-depth and you have to shim each vertical board behind the liner.”

McDonald said the steel and concrete structure has a complex building envelope

system with glazing, terra cotta, metal panels and other different materials and that the building is covered with a silicone spray on ‘air barrier’ membrane.

“This was a cool project for us,” he added. “It was neat after it opened to see how many students were using it. It’s a really unique building, very open, but also very functional. They were able to fit all the activities into it. It’s got a nice modern look and the interior is more upscale from a regular rec center.”

School of Dentistry

In addition to the Student Life Building, the new 4-story, 79,220 SF School of Dentistry building is another beautiful addition at the University of Utah. This

project was also designed by MHTN and built by Okland, and was designed to complement the natural Utah landscape. Rough-hewn masonry references the jagged lines of the surrounding Wasatch foothills, terra cotta panels gives heed to nearby Red Butte Canyon, and custom art panels depict regional imagery of dry desert clay and aspens. From the interior, one is connected to the expansive Utah sky through a plethora of glazing.

The design takes advantage of the sloping site, placing the prominent building facade along Wakara Way and sinking the 78,500 SF parking garage into the hill to the north. This allows for pedestrian access directly to the main lobby from the south, and patient drop-off and vehicular

Left: The center's gymnasium features state-of-the-art fitness equipment. Right: The U's School of Dentistry finally has its own building, a stylish facility in the Research Park area. (courtesy Okland)



access from the north into the main lobby. The two lobbies come together in an open waiting room and reception that extends vertically, visually connecting the three floors.

“They had some very particular ideas on what they wanted,” said Agnew. “It’s kind of a legacy building for (Dean Emeritus Dr. Lynn Powell), who was part of the design process. It was a challenging site, but the

building fits in well in Research Park.”

The building is organized with clinics on the entry level, allowing immediate access for patients. Students claim the second level with teaching spaces, labs, collaboration areas, and a state of the art simulation lab. Casual study spaces are peppered in between labs and classrooms, offering areas for impromptu learning and socializing. The Main Lecture Hall is centrally located on the second level, intended for use by various campus organizations. Staff areas and administration are on the third level, immediately accessible to the students. Natural light floods the circulation areas in the staff area, maintaining the connection to the natural world. ■

U of U Student Life Center

- Owner:** Utah DFCM; University of Utah
- Architect:** MHTN Architects
- Rec Center Design:** Hastings & Chivetta
- GC:** Okland Construction
- Civil:** Great Basin Engineering
- Electrical:** Spectrum Engineers
- Mechanical:** Colvin Engineering
- Structural:** Reaveley Engineers + Assoc.
- Elec. Sub:** CR Lighting
- Mech. Sub:** J&S Mechanical

U of U School of Dentistry

- Owner:** Utah DFCM; University of Utah
- Architect:** MHTN Architects
- Design Specialist:** Kahler Slater
- GC:** Okland Construction
- Civil:** PSOMAS
- Electrical:** Ken Garner Engineering
- Mechanical:** VBFA
- Structural:** Reaveley Engineers + Assoc.
- Elec. Sub:** STF Electrical
- Mech. Sub:** Halverson Mechanical