

# Student Unions, *Campus as One*

by Kyle Taft, AIA

As universities seek smart growth solutions for their campuses, both new and remodeled buildings must be designed or adapted to compliment their campus surroundings. As a major building type on campus, the student union, whether renovated or new, impacts the texture of the campus. Among a multitude of design considerations used to successfully integrate the student union within the campus fabric, are three significant concepts: visual connections, physical relationships, and symbolic representations.

## Visual Connections

On many college and university campuses, a central role of the student union is to provide a positive first impression to visitors, prospective students and their families, community members, and the public at large. Through proper placement on campus in relation to arrival zones and transportation corridors and nodes, an immediate visual connection can be established with the student union, allowing it to serve as an ambassador for the college or university. Such visual connections support the student union's role as a central greeting place and arrival zone, where people come to learn more about the university and campus. Visitors can be immediately connected with a source of campus information and services.

The student union fills a vital role as a provider of information to visitors as well as students, faculty, and staff. Information desks, electronic kiosks and thematic displays

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make the union a great place for first-time visitors to learn about the campus through human contact, complementary literature, and interactive electronic programs.

On some campuses, this information service is taken to the next level with the introduction of a "One-Stop-Shop," a location where students can obtain services that are normally spread across campus in a variety of buildings. At the newly remodeled and expanded Centennial Student Union on the campus of Minnesota State University, Mankato, the One-Stop-Shop includes an information desk, campus ID card source, and outreach services of the regis-

trar, the scholarship office, and the bursar's office. This convenience allows students to resolve their business concerns at one location rather than traipsing across campus.

Once at the student union, it is important for visitors and campus users to obtain a visual connection with the rest of campus. A strong visual link from the union to campus immediately connects people to the whole university community. This connection should provide them with a clear understanding of where they are and where they would like to be. Likewise, the union can provide an anchor for people negotiating the campus, a visual link back to the student union from all directions as they extend their circle of explorations. Once on campus and away from their arrival point, the union can offer a way back home, acting as a "north star," visually prompting the explorers on how to return to their beginning point.

The principle of visual connection applies to other facets of the student union; visually inviting one to enter, connecting the interior to the exterior, and offering clear and understand-



**Rendering of the new Auburn University Student Center, showing relationship to the campus green.**

able orientation within the building. Windows and clear line of sight within the building provide the link between the visitor and the building itself and additionally allow natural lighting of the union interior. Once inside, the link back to campus also comes by way of the views allowed through these windows. The remodeled and expanded Shaw Center at Westminster College in Salt Lake City exemplifies these visual connections from campus into the union and from the union to the campus.

### Physical Relationships

As student unions are built new, rebuilt, remodeled, and expanded, consideration must be given to their physical relationships to transportation corridors, pedestrian pathways, service and dock entries, other buildings, open space, and view corridors. Geographic and climatic influences should also be considered as building projects are planned. Heightened awareness of how the student union building influences the world and our environment reminds us that principles of sustainable design must be used in design decisions for both new and remodeled student unions. Reusing and renovating existing structures promotes sustainability. Many colleges and universities often prefer to recycle a building, rather than tear it down and build new.

When student unions were added to campuses, many during the post-World War II era of the late 1940s, a goal was to locate them at or near the heart of campus, and to provide a powerful and attractive public presence with clear and under-



**Hearth room at Centennial Student Union, Minnesota State University, Mankato.**

standable links to transportation and pedestrian corridors. As campuses have grown, the student union may no longer be at the heart of campus nor oriented to provide the best relationship to the campus. While new student unions can be designed with these principles in mind, existing student union buildings can be reoriented, renovated, refurbished, reinvented, and expanded to regain and enhance their role of public interface and prominence on campus.

What was once the service side of a student union—with docks, dumpsters, and non-descript facades—can no longer afford to under-perform. The student union needs “four front doors,” and each façade needs to invite and attract visitors as well as the campus population. At the University of Arizona Student Union Memorial Center, the north façade of the original student union presented docks, compactors, and dumpsters to those arriving from Mountain Avenue. The new building provides an attractive and inviting north arrival zone not only for the student union, but for the campus as well,

Many colleges and universities often prefer to recycle a building, rather than tear it down and build new.



**Centennial Student Union, Minnesota State University, Mankato, showing clear lines of sight.**

directing people through the “canyon” that flows through the student union’s retail corridor, and into the main mall, the heart of campus. An underground dock area now removes offending services from public view and eliminates interference with pedestrian and vehicle traffic arriving at the university.

When ideally located along major pedestrian pathways, the role of the union as a service provider is strengthened and reinforced. Strategic placement of retail operations and dining options will encourage healthy use of these important sources of revenue, helping the union earn its way. Plazas, patios, and decks can also be key elements in establishing a link between the union and the campus, offering options for dining, programming, and just being seen. At the University of Arizona Student Union Memorial Center, food service op-



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tions abound and are afforded the option of interior or exterior dining seating.

Sometimes an exterior space can be underutilized and ineffective at meeting the needs of the campus. Climate can play a role in this situation. At the University of Minnesota, Mankato, a sunken patio area was walled off from the campus with 10-foot-high concrete walls and affectionately dubbed the "prison yard." The Minnesota climate took this space out of use for much of the academic calendar year. By reducing the height of the wall, adding a roof and a sun shaded curtain wall, this space has become "The Hearth Room," appropriate for the Minnesota climate and giving the student union a better relationship to the campus and the environment.

### Symbolic Representations

With its role of ambassador for the campus, the student union can represent the character and image of the college or university. Each college or university is remembered or differentiated by unique attributes and characteristics embodied by the institution, its students, staff, faculty, and administration. The mission of the university, its focus, and goals also help

determine this character and image. As the student union is built, remodeled, or renovated, its architectural design can symbolically represent the character and image of the campus. Without being heavy handed, the design can provide an intuitive understanding of what the university represents.

At Auburn University, the new Student Center's 185,000 square feet are home to dining options, meeting and conferencing space, lounges and gathering space, programming and performing areas, offices, work rooms, and headquarters for student organizations and government. The challenge and directive from campus administration was to follow the architectural guidelines established to reinforce the campus style of Georgian architecture and thus reinforce the character and image of Auburn University. While the Georgian style and proportions readily accommodate smaller footprints, the large project size required careful planning, proportioning, and placement of program elements. The successful design is a vital link in the students' academic, social, and recreational pursuits, and captures the character and image of Auburn University.

Symbolic representations can also focus our vision and understanding on events, ideals, and principles. Embodied within the architecture of the University of Arizona Student Union Memorial Building are concepts of freedom, dedication, and sacrifice of those who served in the country's defense, specifically in relation to those who served on the USS Arizona and were lost during its destruction at Pearl Harbor in 1941. Subtle symbolic references are embodied in the architecture; the angular end of the canyon wall symbolically references the prow of a ship; bridges that connect portions of the buildings upper levels are subtle reminders of bridges on a battleship; a mast element and a sail-shaped sun shade reference nautical features without blatant reproduction; a circular roof over the central rotunda is reminiscent of the battleship's gun turrets.

In the 19th century Pocatello, Idaho was the scene of annual gatherings of trappers, explorers, and Native Americans. These rendezvous brought diverse cultures together in events of sociality and sharing. In a similar way,



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**North Arrival Zone at the Student Union Memorial Center, University of Arizona.**

the architecture of the new Rendezvous Center at Idaho State University allows a diverse population of students, faculty, and staff to gather for academic pursuits in 50 new classrooms, participate in residential living in 300 new residential suites, and to socialize in the new satellite student union that unifies the entire structure. This symbolic unifying of the campus is further supported by the location of the Rendezvous Center on campus, connecting the upper and lower portions of campus as well as unifying the residential,

academic and recreational zones of campus at the epicenter of campus life.

### **Future Growth**

As an essential gathering place, the student union offers many opportunities to make strong connections to the campus and at the same time strengthen the image and identity of the university. When planning for the future, in redesigning or building new, key considerations will successfully integrate the student union into the existing campus, promoting smart future growth of the campus at large.

The strong position of a student center in its campus gives visitors and students alike a vital heart to their living, learning, and socializing pursuits. A fully connected student union with its visual connections, physical relationships, and symbolic representations, can positively contribute over the years by giving a stable, yet flexible base of services for a growing, changing campus as it responds to the challenges of the future. 🏛️

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