



From a Neo Classical Gym to a Classic Student Center

**Adaptive Re-use Creates Vibrant
Student Center at Illinois Wesleyan
University**

by

Thomas D. Kearns, AIA

Hansen Center photos by Peter Aaron/ESTO

Memorial Gymnasium "before" photos courtesy of SBRA

Gymnasium is usually thought of as a place of physical exercise and sport. But the ancient Greeks, who coined the word from "gymnos" (meaning naked), gave it a much broader meaning. It was a place to gather, socialize and learn - exactly how we would describe a "student center" today. Illinois Wesleyan University has undertaken to convert an existing Memorial Gymnasium into the magnificent Hansen Student Center.

More than any other facility on campus, the student union must constantly reinvent itself to maintain its role as the central player that engages the entire college or university community. In addition to the traditional student life services, such as social, recreational and dining facilities, student unions have taken on a diverse range of additional programs.

As a result, union facility managers must constantly rethink how to deliver these services to meet the needs of today as well as the unknown needs of tomorrow. Rather than tearing down or investing in all new construction, renovation and adaptive reuse are increasingly selected as the highest and best use of existing student union space. This strategy not only retains the best of the original building but also adds contemporary components that



(Title page) Existing Memorial Gymnasium offered the perfect site for the new Student Center. The exterior was rehabilitated to honor the building's historic significance, as well as its important new function. (Above) At night, the Hansen Center glows like a beacon, welcoming the University community to this important campus precinct.

meet high standards of architectural and interior design as well as cost efficiency and expanded programmatic needs.

Such is the 33,000-s.f., Hansen Student Center, which opened its doors just two years ago, at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Illinois. Founded in 1850, Illinois Wesleyan University is an independent university, which is ranked among the best small, comprehensive colleges and universities in the nation. Operating on an annual budget of approximately \$60 million, the University has a current enrollment of 2,099 full-time students, 1,350 of which live in residence halls on campus.

Our primary design challenge at Shepley Bulfinch Richardson & Abbott (SBRA) was to honor and preserve the historical significance of the neoclassical Memorial Gymnasium, a campus landmark from the 1920s, while transforming the facility into a vibrant student center with a view to the future. (The renovated building has since won the Heritage Award for Preservation Excellence from the Bloomington Historic Preservation Commission in recognition of praiseworthy adaptive reuse of an historic building.)

"SBRA had designed several projects on campus, including Ames Library, so they had a great deal of credibility with us," said James Matthews, Dean of Students. "The manner in which they conducted the feasibility study convinced everyone that they were the right folks for the job."

A significant, student-initiated project, the Center was to provide student "hang out" space, which had never existed on campus.

"I cannot see any element of the Hansen Center today that does not bear the imprint of student thinking and/or approval," said Matthews. "From the bold colors and furniture design, that were both student

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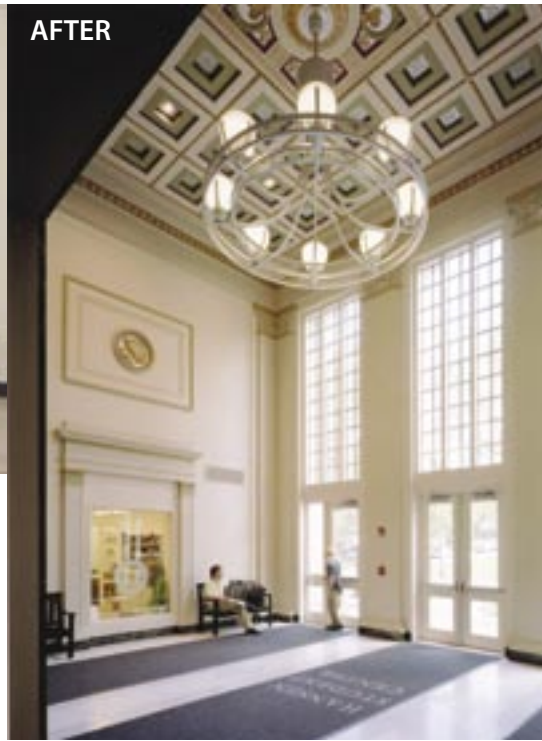
– Dean James Matthews

choices, to the philosophy behind the building, the entire project was almost entirely student formulated. They wanted non-institutional space, as wide a variety of spaces as possible, flexibility in potential use of all spaces and a building that offered students choices for programming."



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The main lobby was also rehabilitated. The white, coffered ceiling was enlivened with new colors and a custom-designed chandelier installed to brighten the space.



To meet those needs, Hansen Center’s spatial and programmatic flexibility creates dedicated space and a significant amount of non-dedicated space that can be easily reconfigured to support changing program needs.

In transforming the original basketball court, the team designed an inviting, two-story, skylit Centre Court lounge as a “black box theater” to accommodate a broad range of student activities. Moveable furniture and flexible sound and

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lighting systems allow the mezzanine above the lounge to be converted to amphitheater seating when the area below is set up with a stage as performance space. Brackets on the torchière columns can support theatrical lighting, banners or curtains that further enhance the feel of a stage set.

Last fall the students hosted a film series, musicals, band concerts, and guest lectures. Although the maximum occupancy was initially limited to 350 people by the fire marshal, as a result of the more streamlined evacuation procedures implemented in case of fire, that capacity has been raised to 600 occupants, enabling the University to accommodate the large crowds the events have recently attracted.

“Although not anticipated, Hansen Center successfully doubled as a study space this past semester during final exams, and the students were very excited about this new use,” said Matthews. Large study tables were moved into Centre Court, the University hired a masseuse to

give hand and foot massages to help ease the students’ tension, and Hansen Center hours were extended until 2 a.m., one hour later than the library. Dean Matthews says that the space worked so well during exams that the large tables may be returned to Centre Court on a permanent basis to accommodate students who wish to study there any time they choose.

Radiating from Centre Court are student meeting spaces and Administrative Offices, with a “Quiet Lounge” located just off the foyer. A Student Interest Group workroom, Senate Meeting Room and Senate Offices are located on the mezzanine, which offers a view to the lower performance space. Additional service areas on the main level include Hattie’s, a single, efficient, point-of-sale location with food service to support the coffee house and e-mail center on one side and the “Small Mart” convenience store on the other.

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The flexible “living room,” Centre Court, can serve as a casual hangout space, formal function room, performance area or a venue for visiting speakers. The “before” image shows the first floor basketball court before the renovation. Existing bleacher stands seen in the “before” image were removed in favor of a new second story mezzanine.

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A "street" defined by the mezzanine balcony above features an information desk, a coffee bar and other amenities.

Named for Harriet Rust, a donor and trustee who was much beloved by the students, Hattie's has not attracted the number of students during the daytime as Dean Matthews had anticipated, largely because it competes with another on-campus coffee bar that serves Starbucks. Hattie's offers Seattle's Best.

"We're thinking of extending the hours and transforming the coffee house into a cybercafé with more computers to attract more students," he said. "Student use of the computers has already proven to be very strong, and the flexibility built into the design can accommodate the anticipated increase in high-tech use."

An important anchor destination to draw the entire University community through Hansen Center, the Campus Bookstore is designed to spill out into Centre Court for book signings and other events.

In addition to fully restoring the existing building envelope, several innovative interior design elements on the main level contribute to the success of this adaptive reuse project. In the entrance lobby, the existing coffered ceiling and classical inset columns are complemented by a contemporary chandelier, which creates a transition from the building's historic character to the lively ambience of Centre Court, beyond. Along the semi-circular periphery of the original basketball court, street lamps, "sidewalk" coffee bar, café tables and chairs and the Campus Bookstore display windows contribute to the ambience of a casual street scene.

On the lower level, Tommy's Grille is a multipurpose space that serves as a traditional pub with a restaurant, dance club, sports bar and game room, offering students an alternative to downtown bars and Greek organizations. As an example of programmatic flexibility, where the space supports a variety of similar program uses without any reconfiguration of space, the daytime eatery can be easily transformed into an intimate nightclub for live performances in the evening by simply softening the lighting over the dining and bar areas. Similarly, spotlights can be directed to a small performance space at the back of the pub for entertainment.

"We initially retained a local food vendor to collaborate on the design of Tommy's and create a menu," explained Matthews. "With its lively sports memorabilia decor and greater variety of menu items than the cafeteria offers, the pub was an immediate hit. When we created a meal exchange program with the cafeteria, however, the students really flocked to Tommy's, which is open throughout the day and evening. The existing space and the food and beverage service handled the additional students very well." In warm weather, students also enjoy socializing and dining on the patio that opens off the pub.

While Dean Matthews says that the two-year project, including feasibility study, program development, design and construction, went smoothly - the building was unoc-

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cupied at the time, so construction was not disruptive - Harold Gauthier ('00), who was President of the Student Senate that spearheaded the project, recalls some challenges along the way.

"The space just wasn't big enough for all the things we wanted to put into it," said Gauthier. "Our ideas of what should go into a student center changed numerous times and we eliminated some of them. One question was what programs would draw future students into the space. We didn't want to make the mistake of incorporating ideas that would be dated in a few years or even months."

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—Harold Gauthier '00

To ensure that the Center would encompass the needs of the entire student body, Gauthier and other members of the Senate met with student leaders from special interest groups, fraternities, sororities and athletic teams. Among these groups were freshmen and sophomores, who continue to steward the Center's mission today now that

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(Left) The ground floor previously housed changing rooms and a dance studio which offered a design challenge with its low floor-to-ceiling space.

(Below) On the newly designed ground floor, Tommy's, a pub complete with a game room, was conceived as an appropriate use of the space that would not be compromised by the relatively low ceilings. The pub provides an alternative to downtown nightlife and offers a different kind of hangout space from Centre Court.

Gauthier and the other upperclassmen have graduated. "New students were able to add their own touches, and I think this kept the Center current in its programming," he said. "Seeing the building transformed from an empty shell to a thriving campus destination made me realize that we had created something that left the University a better place."

Returning to campus recently, Gauthier said he was struck by how well the building continues to accommodate many different activities. "The students are limited only by their imagination in terms of programming," he said. "I am also impressed by how the administration and faculty have embraced the building." Dean Matthews agrees.

"Hansen Center is a catalyst for fostering a greater sense of community and offering the students a place they can truly call their own," he said. "Since the building opened, the students have taken great ownership of Hansen Center. By collaborating with administrators and the architect in designing the interior space, they ensured the student facility's future role as a social and recreational center on campus that would reflect the essence of Illinois Wesleyan University's culture and serve to strengthen the community as a whole today and in the future." ♦

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Tom Kearns, AIA, is a Principal and Chair of the Education Practice Group at Shepley Bulfinch Richardson & Abbott, a national architecture firm based in Boston. He has designed campus centers, dining halls, residence halls, libraries and other facilities for educational institutions. In addition to Illinois Wesleyan University, his clients include Rollins College, Johns Hopkins University, Agnes Scott College, Philadelphia University, and Duke University. He received his Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Architecture from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and is a member of the Boston Society of Architects. He presents regularly at professional conferences, and his articles have appeared in *College Planning & Management* and the Association of College Unions International's *Bulletin*.

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About IWU

Illinois Wesleyan University is an independent, co-educational, undergraduate university founded in 1850. It consists of 51 buildings on 79 acres near Bloomington, Indiana. IWU has a full-time enrollment of nearly 2,100.

Kiplinger's Personal Finance Magazine ranks IWU 12th among 1,600 private colleges in delivering quality education at an affordable price.