



Render by courtesy of Omni Architects

A Seamless Experience

Furnishing NKU's New Student Dining Facilities

Christine Beitenhaus

Northern Kentucky University (NKU) in Highland Heights, KY, has been experiencing an increase in construction activity on campus. One building in particular has been part of the campus's master plan and in the works for a while. In order to create space not only for the current students enrolled at NKU, but also to account for the future of the growing student body, a new student union was sorely needed. The University Center,

opened in 1977, can no longer sufficiently serve the larger student body and the activities normally planned in the space. The new student union will include student-centered offices such as the Student Involvement Center and Student Affairs offices, meeting rooms and student lounges, and 30,000 sq. ft. for new student dining facilities. The Student Center will remain open, but will house other student affairs offices and the university's bookstore.

Ricca Newmark Design was chosen to work in conjunction with Omni Architects

and Mary Lee Schott, interior designer for NKU, in creating this new space. Charles Kessler, AIA, Lenny D. Condenzio, FCSI, and Sandra Blissard were part of the design team from Ricca Newmark Design. Omni and NKU had a specific vision of a classic-contemporary style that would stand the test of time for the life of the building, and this final design evolved from a partnership between NKU and those working on the design team. Charles Kessler, Principal with Ricca Newmark Design, called it classical architecture with a "newer

contemporary twist.” Mary Lee Schott described the style as a contextual aesthetic that was drawn from the direction the campus is heading.

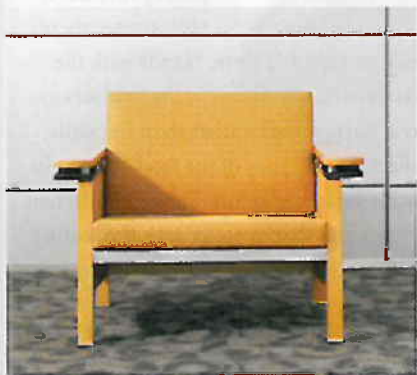
NKU’s new student union will serve as a connector building to the rest of the campus — a hub for students who commute and live on campus. The need for larger dining space lead the designers and NKU to “look outside the cafeteria box,” according to Lenny Condenzio, principal with Ricca Newmark Design. Functional needs for the space were taken into consideration first, along with the need for students to be comfortable and needs based on the maintenance for the space. “It’s important to include all the constituents and have

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them weigh in — from the people who will be cleaning up to the ones who will be serving the food,” stated Schott. Foodservice, the director of Buildings Services, and even students had input in the furnishing of the space. After discussion of options based on NKU’s classic-contemporary aesthetic and maintenance needs, NKU settled on

a “seamless experience,” according to Kessler.

Ricca Newmark Design has been creating a total dining experience for universities for more than five years, although it can sometimes be a hard idea to sell. Designers may have very set ideas of how a cafeteria should appear, stated Condenzio. “They look at the dining room as a whole separate component from the server,” he explained. “Most places you look through a set of six-ft. doors from the dining room, and that’s foodservice.” NKU’s dining and server areas will be a restaurant-style space with platforms integrated into the seating. “Most of the food preparation is happening in front of the customer so they



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get a strong message of freshness,” Condenzio commented. “It looks great.”

Visible from the student union’s atrium, the dining facility has different furnished atmospheres based on purpose (group dining, a quiet area, etc.). “The dining room has different areas but it is simple and clean, very effective,” said Sandra Blissard, part of Ricca Newmark Design’s Interior Design studio. “You don’t

want a lot of chaotic elements in this type of space.” Areas for higher traffic and higher noise are closer to the food venues and more visible from the naturally lit atrium; the seating is primarily chairs, with some banquette-style options. Areas for smaller groups have regular- and large-size tables towards the middle of the dining area. Quiet seating for private eating and studying is placed away from the high energy of the food venues. This area, in the back of the dining space, offers soft seating and banquette-style seating. The Terrace dining room will have higher-style

furnishings to “set it off from the every day use,” according to Schott. This closed-off area won’t be private, but will be reservable.

Decisions about the vision for what and how to serve were significant steps in the planning process. Menu-specific platforms could be a problem for the university in the future. The design team decided to forgo cuisine-based platforms and equipment in favor of platforms that are process-based.

Platforms were designed with equipment to reflect the type of cooking occurring: baking in one, grilling and sautéing for another, even cold food storage. Designing and equipping the platforms with an eye to the future allows NKU to make changes in their menu down the road but still maintain the set-up of the platforms. Condenzio, who was responsible for planning out the

Blissard observed that she tries to select furnishings made from sustainable or recycled materials, including carpet that will be recycled by the manufacturer. Green can often be part of an aesthetic, she added. “Classic architecture is green because it does not have to be replaced so often,” stated Blissard. She stressed using durable materials that would last, which was re-

flected in the choice of furnishings for NKU — classic architectural pieces are accented by contemporary type pieces. Blissard explained that durable materials include hardwood, metal, and plastic laminate furnishings. She also said that high-performance upholstery should pass the test of durability with at least 50,000 rubs. Her take on classic architectural pieces are ones that have stood the test of time, not only aesthetically but also in durability. Unique contemporary furniture, with simplicity of



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equipment and foodservice needs, tried to use Energy Star-rated pieces as much as possible. “We chose the best possible water- and energy-saving warewashing equipment available at the time of specification,” he added.

NKU is very cognitive of green issues, and furniture and other materials, like carpeting, were also chosen with their environmental impact in mind. Sandra

construction and form, blends with the standard classic pieces in the foodservice area. Furnishings, rather than the walls, reflect the vibrancy of the food stations in a wide variety of colors. Tables of different heights and shapes along with the seating choices add practicality and contemporary style with visual interest.

While NKU decided on a classic-contemporary aesthetic for their new

construction, trends in furnishings for college dining facilities are not easily predicted. Kessler observed that instead of trends, furnishings are more often “dictated by the language of the architecture of the facility.” As with NKU, the furnishings chosen by the design team are influenced by what experience the client wants to bring to those using the facility rather than what might be touted as the latest trend. Schott concurred with this statement. “We tried to be practical, so cleanability was one of the focuses,” she said. “For example, there is solid vinyl seating on the banquettes, more interesting fabric on the backs, and hardwood bases for warmth.” It should be com-

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fortable, but not too comfortable that students hang around all day. Schott felt the furnishings reflect the practical needs of those working in the space but are still fun and create a visual impact.

Students won't get to use the new dining facilities or the classic-contemporary furnishing until next year. Construction and

testing of the facility will be ongoing until an estimated opening in the fall of 2008. **CEM**

Christine Beitenhaus is an Ohio-based freelance writer with experience in educational and architectural topics.