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Davis Center Emerges As UVM's Centerpiece

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Superlatives don't quite capture the Dudley H. Davis Center, the University of Vermont's mammoth new landmark at the top of Main Street celebrating its opening today.

The building is pretty big -- 186,000 square feet, about the size of four football fields -- but it's not the biggest on the UVM campus (Given Health Sciences, Patrick Gym and Waterman are all larger in area).

The building is pretty green -- built largely with local and recycled materials, and with an ambitious design to hold down energy and water use -- but just how green will depend in part on how the building performs once it has been operation for a while. The new residential complex on University Heights, which opened last fall, lays claim for now to the UVM title of greenest -- at least in the eyes of the U.S. Green Building Council, which lays out a hierarchy of demanding standards in its certification program called LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design).

The Davis Center does max out in one respect: cost. At \$61 million, its project expense is the highest UVM has undertaken. Its opening marks a milestone in the longstanding campaign of President Dan Fogel to raise UVM's national profile as a "green university" and to enhance its appeal to prospective students.

Building's mission

Befitting these lofty ambitions, this is a building with a mission -- or at least, a mission statement: "The Davis Center is student-focused, complements the academic mission of the university, celebrates and supports social justice, and aims to be the nation's premier community-centered environmental college union."

With respect to social justice, there's a "Diversity and Equity Unit" lounge, there's a pledge to embrace a diversity of activities and performers, and there's a "gender-neutral bathroom" on each floor.

Yes, there are men's and women's bathrooms, too, and one of the more interesting environmental touches can be found in the men's: flushless urinals. Thanks partly to these, Davis' water cost is projected about 40 percent lower than that of a standard building of comparable size. How do they work? These are urinals with a Web site, www.waterless.com, and a user can go there to find out whatever he wants to know. A user can even carry out this research at one of the Davis Center's very own computer kiosks.

Another novel environmental feature is the green roof -- not the peaked, slate roof that can be seen from Main Street atop the fourth floor, but a flat space to the west on the second level above the loading dock and the offices of the student newspaper and radio station. It's not fully green yet -- tall, decorative grasses were being planted Wednesday -- but when it is, it will mitigate some of the stormwater runoff as well as the greenhouse gas emissions.

As for emissions, the center doesn't really embrace motor vehicle traffic -- the bike racks outside the front entrance (21) outnumber the parking spaces (15) -- but then, the main patrons of this "student-centered" building aren't expected to drive there anyway. Bicycles and feet are the favored modes. Those who work up a sweat on their way over are invited to use the showers. There's one on each floor.

Then there are the "new food options," as they've been billed in the center's publicity materials: made-to-order tortilla wraps, Japanese, Indian and Mediterranean fare, along with old options such as soup and salad. There's a full-service bank, a computer-servicing depot and an expanded bookstore, all of which make the Davis Center a place not just to hang out (there are lounges with fireplaces), but to run a few errands. A pub on the first floor will serve beer and wine. Three Vermont-based coffee companies have outlets around the building.

The third floor accommodates the UVM Student Life department and student organizations. All of these were previously housed in Billings, the stately old H.H. Richardson building that previously served as the student center. Most of Billings has a rather bereft and forlorn look about it these days, but the second-level cafeteria will stay in business, and the third level will eventually come back to life as part of UVM's library system. That's fitting because Billings was originally built to be a library.

Of the center's \$61 million cost, \$7 million came in gifts and pledges from the family and friends of the building's namesake, a member of the UVM Class of 1943 and a prominent banker and UVM benefactor who died in 2004. Other donations totaled \$3 million; \$10 million came from student fees; and \$41 million was bonded.

LEED certification

About \$230,000 of the overall cost went toward the computer modeling and documentation requirements of the LEED program, which was launched in 2000 and has certified 942 building projects globally, including six in Vermont. To receive a LEED certification, a project has to accumulate a certain number of credits from among an array of "sustainability" criteria. Using regional materials produced within a radius of 500 miles (in the center's case, about 65 percent of the materials used in construction), maximizing daylight, minimizing energy use and landfill waste, promoting alternative forms of transportation -- all help build the case for LEED status. UVM is pursuing LEED certification for the Davis Center in keeping with the university's green building policy.

As president of a self-styled "green university," Fogel has said, "It's essential that we walk the walk, that we not only create green buildings, but promote an understanding of how they work," and how they contribute to UVM's commitment to address the climate-change crisis. Plans call for the Davis Center itself to become a "teaching tool," with a monitor showing a graphic display of the building's real-time water and electricity use, amount of daylight, number of people in the building, and so on.

Wednesday afternoon, seniors Alex Estey and Laura Ivins were sitting with two friends in the Davis Center's first-floor lounge.

"It's definitely a lot better as a student center than Billings ever was," Estey said.

Ivins looked up into the cavernous four-story atrium.

"I feel small and insignificant," she said. "I'm still adjusting. It's very large."