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Cat's Meow

By Kevin O'Connor
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BURLINGTON — The University of Vermont calls its new \$61 million Dudley H. Davis student center "the largest and most ambitious building" in its history, a brick beacon that will serve as the school's "front door."

But what about its grass-covered "green roof" and gender-neutral bathrooms?

The Main Street monolith — opening officially two weeks from today — will feature a smorgasbord of dining options ranging from salsa and sushi to Bruegger's Bagels to Ben & Jerry's, as well as a pub, bookstore, bank, copy center, convenience and computer stores and an 850-person ballroom.

It also has an official mission statement promising that each of its four floors "celebrates and supports social justice and aims to be the nation's premier environmental college union."

That means the 186,000-square-foot center not only is equipped to use just half the energy consumed by similar-sized structures (the "green roof" will mitigate outside temperatures and storm-water runoff), but also extols peace and human rights through art, exhibits and, in addition to men's and women's bathrooms, gender-neutral facilities for transgender students.

"The Davis Center will transform the university experience for all of our community members," says Kate Strotmeyer, the center's marketing coordinator.

Nationally, colleges and universities are building new structures at a record pace — according to industry figures, spending more than \$14.5 billion on new construction in 2005 alone. Some plans are to keep up with the Joneses. Others are to keep their children from enrolling elsewhere.

UVM's new building is a far cry from its old nearby Billings student center, built as a library almost 125 years ago. One recent study found that only 29 percent of the school's 8,500 students entered Billings daily, compared with 84 percent of University of New Hampshire students who frequented their own center. Another survey showed an "overwhelming majority" of UVM students felt their campus lacked a true central gathering space.

And so the school has spent the past decade soliciting designs and dollars for a new building, named for the late Merchants Bank president Dudley H. Davis, a 1943 alumnus whose family and friends donated \$7 million to the project. With the center set to open officially Aug. 26 (the day before the start of fall classes), the university is promoting what the new space is — and isn't.

By placing the center on land that previously held the 57-year-old Carrigan Dairy Science Building

(its programs have moved to a new addition at the Marsh Life Sciences Building), the university is "not consuming new green space," its publicity says.

When students feared the center would resemble a strip development, the school announced the building would not be a "mini mall," adding "any rumors you may have heard about a Gap or an Abercrombie & Fitch in the Davis Center are not, and never were, true."

Instead, the first floor will house a local bank, convenience store, copy center, electronics and computer store, a student-run Vermont products shop, information booth, game lounge and Brennan's Pub and Bistro (named after alumni benefactors Robert and Carolyn Brennan, not retired Catamounts basketball coach Tom Brennan) with almost 200 seats, a stage and locally produced beer and wine for patrons 21 or older.

The second floor will feature Indian, Japanese and Mexican food (the latter from the alumni-owned New World Tortilla of Burlington) and a homegrown menu made from produce and other local products from farmers in the Vermont Fresh Network. The floor also includes a dining terrace, the textbook department of the UVM Bookstore and a landscaped "green" side roof.

The third floor contains the rest of the UVM Bookstore, a connected cafe with a fireplace, and offices and meeting rooms for student organizations.

The fourth floor holds the 850-person Grand Maple Ballroom with a view of the Green Mountains, a smaller ballroom overlooking Lake Champlain, and several conference rooms.

The center, designed by Pittsburgh-based WTW Architects and Burlington's Truex Cullins & Partners, is promoting its eco-friendliness by seeking certification from the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program.

The school aims to cut the center's use of electricity, heating and cooling by 52 percent and water by 41 percent by outfitting it with computerized energy and lighting control systems, flushless urinals and automatic faucets, and carbon dioxide sensors that turn off lights, heat and air conditioning when rooms are empty.

(Believers and skeptics can check a first-floor display of measuring devices to see how much energy and water the building is consuming at any moment.)

Contractors from William A. Berry & Son Inc. of Massachusetts asked to use materials produced within a 500-mile radius of the university, have incorporated maple from Shelburne, slate from Fair Haven, bricks from Highgate and "green roof" soil from Burlington's Intervale. They also have reused or recycled at least half of all construction waste, starting with 90 percent of the old Carrigan building.

The center faces south to take advantage of sunlight. It features a radiant heat system under its loading dock to eliminate the need for road salt. And it includes more than 100 bike racks to promote less polluting transportation. (The gender-neutral bathrooms each contain a shower for cyclists and joggers.)

And that's just the environmental checklist. The center also has a full page of "social justice goals," which include:

Buying Vermont produce and selling "fair trade" coffee grown by farmers paid good wages.

Naming the bookstore's café for 1877 alumnus George Washington Henderson, the first African-American admitted to the national Phi Beta Kappa honor society.

Designing the building with full accessibility to wheelchairs and a hearing-aid amplification system in major meeting spaces.

Display cases will spotlight the almost 700 alumni who have served in the Peace Corps, as well as the two who have won Nobel Peace Prizes (Jody Williams, 1972 graduate and founding coordinator of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, and John McGill, 1978 College of Medicine graduate and president of Doctors Without Borders).

Other areas will hold an "Americans Who Tell the Truth" portrait display (subjects include Williams, Cesar Chavez and Malcolm X), a 20-foot-long "student-driven social justice mural" and an exhibit on the history of UVM student activism — including two takeovers of the Waterman administration building.

"There have been some historic changes from those experiences," says Strotmeyer, pointing to the school's adoption of its current "Common Ground" goals after one protest.

The center is connected to dorms across Main Street by a newly renovated underground pedestrian tunnel. A second phase of the project, yet to be scheduled, will add a 600-seat performing arts theater and a bridge to the school's Bailey/Howe Library.

Planners have surveyed students and faculty for their opinions on everything from menu choices to the make of chairs. After an advertised "tush test" of dozen different seats, participants chose the faux-leather swivel "Integra Rendezvous," the soft, nap-suitable "Weiland Scroll" and the table-armed "National Reno." They'll sit beside a set of vintage stools from the old UVM Dairy Bar, housed in the Carrigan building from 1950 to 1995.

Strotmeyer hopes the chairs will give students one more reason to settle into the new center.

"We're working to make this building a special place."