



UBC Life Building

by NATALIE BRUCKNER



The Old Student Union Building (Old SUB) at the heart of the University of British Columbia (UBC) campus has been given a new lease of life with a \$29-million renovation. It makes sense then that the building should be renamed UBC Life Building.

“The original building dates back to 1968 and was funded by the Alma Mater Society. Over the years various components have been added, but the building was in need of modernization,” says John Metras, associate VP, facilities at UBC. And so, when the Alma Mater Society moved out and into The Nest building just to the south, it was the perfect opportunity to breathe new life into the Old SUB.

Phase 1 of the renewal project was fairly extensive, but nothing that UBC – Infrastructure Development and the team couldn’t handle. “We have a long history of taking older buildings and doing full renewals to give them another 40 to 50 years of life,” says Metras.

Under the project scope was the renewal of the base building systems and seismic upgrade work, replacement of the roof, the addition of a range of

new student services on the concourse level (including a wellness centre and a refreshed food services area), and the inclusion of swing dry labs and classrooms on the second floor.

Back in 2014, architects Perkins+Will had developed a comprehensive design proposal to transform the Old SUB into the UBC Life Building and in 2016 was engaged to complete Phase 1 of the project. “Our design process began with archival research in recognition of the building’s significance in the history of the campus. A Statement of Significance was developed to form key guiding principles for design development,” explains Rufina Wu, architect at Perkins+Will.

Those guiding principles focussed on creating an engaging hub; designing for change; and the imaginative use of colour.

“UBC Life Building is an engaging hub for student services and wellness, and the main concourse is a major thoroughfare, but more importantly, it acts as a ‘living room’ for student hangout, social space, informal learning areas, waiting lounges for student services,

and other special programming,” says Wu. “Area rugs of different sizes define a range of different scaled living rooms, while modular furniture pieces were selected as an invitation for students to reconfigure to suit different needs.”

For the colour palette, Perkins+Will took the original grey Brutalist palette and livened it up – taking inspiration from the gradient of copper patina on the existing roofs that are very visible on the level 2 courtyard. “The consistent application of this palette – from interior finishes, furniture upholstery, to branding – gives UBC Life Building a unique identity on campus.”

Paying homage to the traditional building was an essential part of the renovation and gently touched upon in many areas. “The existing waffle slab is a character-defining element that we wanted to respect and feature. Our selection of ceiling finish [expanded metal mesh] and lighting design reflect this attitude,” says Wu.

The new central core of the building is now clad with vertical wood panels, and this use of wood introduced a much needed sense of warmth to the interiors.

The addition of swing space was also extremely important to this project and to the campus as a whole, and as Metras says, makes a “very vibrant addition to UBC Life Building.”

The old ballroom has been converted into a 294-seat teaching theatre that is also suitable as swing space for future projects where large theatres would be temporarily taken out of the classroom inventory.

Wu adds that level 2 is currently used as an academic swing space – one which will be utilized by various departments and user groups as they await renovations and upgrades of their spaces. “Interior fit-outs of high-turnover spaces generate a significant amount of construction waste. An important consideration for the design was to minimize construction waste throughout future iterations of the swing space.”

A flexible plywood wall system with exposed fasteners allow the partitions to be reconfigured with minimal waste and a continuous structural header makes it easy to cut new openings into the partitions.

As the original building was often described as “dark, dreary, and depressing,” priority was given to student’s access to daylight and views through the creation of a new central core that features gender-neutral washrooms and other back-of-house areas.

White walls, a new polished concrete floor, the removal of the lower ceiling to expose the waffle slab of the second level, and the clever use of glass also helped brighten up the space.

The electrical systems, including power distribution, lighting, security,

and data were almost completely renewed through the course of the project. “A new outdoor unit substation was provided to increase the capacity to the building and to replace the aging main distribution equipment. All the lighting in the building was replaced with energy efficient LED lighting and occupancy controls added resulting in over 16 percent lighting power density reduction over the already stringent ASHRAE 90.1-2010 standard. WSP coordinated with UBC IT services and UBC secure access to modernize the communication and security infrastructure for the facility,” says Andy Tashiro, senior project manager from WSP who worked alongside Kit Mun Chan, the lead electrical engineer.

As with any renovation of this kind, there were some unknown challenges, including more asbestos in the building than had originally been anticipated and lead paint on some of the roof joists, however, the team was able to remove the hazardous material safely. “The asbestos was definitely the largest surprise we encountered. The crews worked tirelessly to ensure the building was clean and safe,” says Steve Penner, project manager, Bird Construction.

Metras says he is extremely happy with the result, and that the project on the whole went smoothly. “It’s a wonderful improvement on the Old SUB building,” he says, to which Tashiro adds, “This project has literally managed to breathe new life into this building. With myself and Kit Mun both being UBC alumni who had frequented the Old SUB building many times during our university days, it is great to not only see this change but be a part of this project.”

UBC, with help from a fabulous team of Perkins+Will, Bird Construction Company, RJC Engineers, Integral Group, and WSP, has once again created an innovative space to help maintain an excellent learning environment. **A**

LOCATION
6138 Student Union Boulevard, Vancouver, B.C.

OWNER/DEVELOPER
UBC - Infrastructure Development

PROJECT MANAGER
UBC Properties Trust

ARCHITECT
Perkins+Will

CONSTRUCTION MANAGER
Bird Construction Company

STRUCTURAL CONSULTANT
RJC Engineers

MECHANICAL CONSULTANT
Integral Group

ELECTRICAL CONSULTANT
WSP

TOTAL SIZE
205,000 square feet

TOTAL COST
\$29 million (Phase 1)