

K-State Student Union: Celebration and Controversy!

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As K-Staters return to their Student Union this fall, they will enter a building that opened its doors 50 years ago in 1956. Although a relatively new building considering the first structure on campus was built in 1873 (Farm Machinery Hall, razed in 1963), the union as a concept was discussed in the early 1920s in conjunction with the building of Memorial Stadium, but dropped due to lack of funds. In 1938, 76% of the ballots cast by students on the issue of a union supported a \$5.00 per semester fee beginning in 1941 for the purpose of constructing a student union. Also that year the Board of Regents approved locating a union south of Engineering Hall, now Seaton Hall. World War II postponed the process.



Union under construction

Two barracks were obtained in 1947 and placed in an area that is now the south Union parking lot to give students a place to snack and socialize. However, the means by which to make a new structure a reality remained in limbo until 1951 when President James McCain made a union a top priority in new building construction. This was followed by the formation of a [Union Governing Board](#) in 1953 and an increase in the student fee to \$12.50 in 1954 to continue the financial commitment made by the

students 16 years earlier. Designed by [Charles Marshall, Sr.](#), the State Architect and a 1927 graduate of K-State, the \$1.65 million, 110,000 square foot facility opened on March 8, 1956. [The Four Lads](#), nationally known recording artists, played the first dance, and [12 O'clock High](#) starring Gregory Peck was the first movie shown, with tickets costing 25 cents.

Lost in the celebration of the Union's historical milestone this spring was the fact that the architectural design that was announced in the early 1950s was not popular among many architecture students and several faculty because it continued to replicate the designs of the past (they were not opposed to having a union, only the design). A pamphlet that circulated on campus and articles in the Collegian during the fall of 1951 said as much. In response, [Merrill A. Durland](#), dean of engineering and architecture, informed his faculty that it was improper for any of them to publicly criticize the college or the state architect who was responsible for the design. The circumstances surrounding the administration's reaction to the disapproval of the building's design caused many to believe intellectual and academic freedom were being challenged. The situation abated, however,

when President James McCain assured everyone that Durland, as well as Paul Weigel, head of architecture, had no intention of curtailing freedom of speech.

Ironically, in the spring of 1952 it was learned that four of the architects who criticized the union design would not be allowed to return in the fall. While three of them held temporary appointments, assistant professor Earl Layman, who was at the end of his probationary period, was not retained. The circumstances seemed to indicate that intellectual freedom was in jeopardy at K-State. However, in the long run the controversy improved relations between the administration, faculty, and students because the unfortunate incident had a positive impact by emphasizing the importance of academic freedom on campus. Nonetheless, improvements in the climate did not have time to materialize before students and faculty brought Frank Lloyd Wright to speak at K-State a few months later. He chided K-State and its architecture by stating, “Habituation is the death of imagination...That’s what’s ugly about this town—the habit started, and you can’t get rid of it.”



In spite of this bumpy beginning, the design of the building remained unchanged, the Union was constructed, and its programs and services grew along with the student population. A 40,000 foot expansion was completed in 1963 and the 14th anniversary of the Union in 1970 coincided with the opening of a second addition that included a bookstore and Forum Hall.

Over 80 years after a union was first given serious consideration, it is estimated that over 10,000 people frequent the Union on a daily basis. Happy 50th anniversary K-State Student Union!

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Sources in the University Archives used for this Keepsake include: Kansas State University: A Quest for Identity by James Carey; “Rediscovering K-State’s Past: The Student Union Case” by Philip Meyer (Class of ’52); From Concept to Creation: The History and Memories of Your K-State Student Union; photograph collection; and newspaper articles and ephemera found in the Vertical File-Union.