

LOCAL

# Ex-powerhouse transformed into Beloit College student center

By **BARRY ADAMS** Associated Press | **FEBRUARY 22, 2020 — 12:05AM**

BELOIT, Wis. — Empty coal hoppers with fresh coats of black paint loom above along with the worn overhead crane from Pawling & Harnischfeger that was installed decades ago.

The circular steel machines used to crush coal into powder have been retrofitted into seating while the hulking pipes of the former intake system used to draw water from the adjacent Rock River provide the ultimate conversation piece for those using the nearby pool tables or waiting their turn for the batting cages.

There's a swimming pool, fitness center, 160-seat auditorium, study areas, a cafe and fourth-floor event space for 200 people. An elevated indoor track for walking and running rims the facility while a 17,000-square-foot, glass-enclosed field house with artificial turf is scheduled to open in May.

Students centers aren't supposed to look like this. Neither are decommissioned power plants.

But a \$38 million collaborative project by Beloit College has used donations from alumni and the community, a gift from Alliant Energy and the inspiration and design work from a world renowned architectural firm to save a piece of this city's history and create a one-of-a-kind amenity for the school and its 1,100 students, the Wisconsin State Journal reported.

"From the very outset this has been both a project that was going to be enormously valuable to the college community and the city of Beloit," said Scott Bierman, Beloit College's president. "This project, at its core, is fundamentally a student center and for those reasons we expect that prospective students and their families will play close attention to a college that has devoted this much energy and resources to improving the quality of their experience."

## Industrial heritage

Colleges and universities throughout the country have invested billions of dollars into improved facilities over the past 20 years in an effort to attract students to their campuses. The projects can include modern dorms, expanded food services, music halls, event centers, sports facilities, student unions and enhanced outdoor spaces. The need for more amenities at Beloit College and the shuttered powerhouse on the edge of campus were serendipitous.

Many power plants that have ceased operations end up being razed to make way for public green space. And that was the plan for the former Wisconsin Power & Light steam-powered, coal-fired power plant that since the early 1900s has been a fixture at the bottom of the hill just below the college. The powerhouse stopped generating electricity in 2005 and the facility was shuttered by Alliant in 2010.

But when the college began exploring options for a fitness center, it began discussions with Alliant to see if the powerhouse could be an option. A deal was struck in 2014 that gave the college three years to raise the money for the project, which turned out to be \$28 million in donations and another \$10 million in state and federal historic preservation and new market tax credits.

The funds include money for the first five years of operations. No student fees will be used and the project is being done without the college taking on debt. A new 150-foot-long steel pedestrian bridge spans Pleasant Street and connects the main college campus with the new student center.

The 120,000-square-foot project required that a pair of 30 megawatt turbines and two 6-story boilers be removed but the smoke stack, the most visible and familiar, piece of the powerhouse remains. It rises 100 feet above the roof line but is now dormant. There are no plans for its removal.

"It's a symbol," said Dan Schooff, manager of the project and chief of staff and secretary of the college. "Its an echo of our industrial heritage."

#### Changing Beloit

The powerhouse turned student center, which fully opened this month, is just south of Riverside Park and just up the river from the Ironworks Campus, a project by Ken and Diane Hendricks that turned the former home of the Beloit Corporation that shuttered in 1999 into a 24-acre hub of offices, manufacturing, small businesses and a YMCA.

Beloit's downtown is thriving with new housing, small businesses, restaurants and events. A new ballpark is in the works for the city's minor league baseball team, the former Angel Museum is being converted to a visitor center along with office and event space and Amazon is building a \$105 million fulfillment center expected to create 500 jobs.

The powerhouse project adds to the continued renaissance of the city but also fills a need for the college that was founded in 1846, two years before Wisconsin achieved statehood. The school has not had a dedicated student union and its field house, home to an indoor track and some fitness equipment, is in a World War II-era airplane hangar but will be demolished after the new field house opens. The Sportscenter, home to the school's basketball and volleyball facility, will remain.

"We felt like we were kind of land locked. Where were we going to build a nice big space like everybody else was doing?" said Cecil Youngblood, the school's dean of students and chief diversity officer who has been with the college for 22 years. "There's history here. It's different. (The powerhouse student center is) not this cookie cutter thing you see all over the place."

#### International attention

The construction of the power plant began in 1907 followed by multiple expansions over the years including in 1917, 1920 and 1925, according to the Wisconsin Historical Society, which placed the facility on the state register of historic places in 2017. What was dubbed the Blackhawk Generating Station, and is now the main portion of the complex, was constructed between 1945 and 1949 to address pent-up demand and fuel the post-World War II boom in construction and industrial development, according to the Historical Society.

Converting the powerhouse into a student center while retaining history was assigned to Studio Gang, an architectural firm in Chicago founded by Jeanne Gang. Her firm's work includes high rises in Chicago, San Francisco and Paris, and music, art and cultural centers in New York, Baltimore, Chicago, Memphis and Taiwan. In 2019, the studio completed the design of the 2.2 million-square-foot O'Hare Global Terminal, scheduled for completion in 2028.

In 2018, Studio Gang's design of the Beloit powerhouse received the top prize at the World Architecture Festival. The award was based on future projects that take on issues like climate change, energy saving and carbon emissions, water use, aging populations and health issues, reusable materials, smart cities, building technology, cultural identity, ethics and power and justice. The powerhouse project, which includes LEED certification and geothermal systems, also "reanimated a once tarnished river edge to a new center focused around community, health and wellness," Anke Meyer, one of the judges of the competition wrote.

For Bierman, who fancies ties and socks with turtles in homage to nearby Turtle Creek, he's hoping to grow enrollment at the college, which is known for its liberal arts programs and the Logan Museum of Anthropology, which was established in 1894 and

now holds nearly 300,000 archaeological and ethnological objects from around the world. The Powerhouse will serve as another draw and is much more expansive than just a fitness center Bierman first envisioned after shortly coming to Beloit in 2009.

"One of the miracles of this building is the design element that Studio Gang brought to it. It turned our thinking upside down in how the spaces in this building could be used," Bierman said. "It's breathtaking to me. This thing is 100 times better than I ever conceived."

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