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UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO

Revitalized Field House gains new life; former arena holds state-of-the-art classrooms

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Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin rocked there.

Simon & Garfunkel harmonized within its walls.

And it's where The Temptations brought Motown to T-town.

The newly revamped Memorial Field House looks nearly the same from the outside, but inside, the 77-year-old building has a completely new look as a result of \$27 million in renovations.

Memorial Field House, which once hosted big-name musicians as well as hoards of basketball fans on game days, has been revamped into the newest state-of-the-art classroom building on the University of Toledo's main campus.

It looks almost the same on the outside as it did back then, but inside is another story.

"We never compromised the original architecture," said Chuck Lehnert, UT's vice president for facilities and construction. "What we did is almost erected a new building inside an existing building."

When it was built in 1931, the field house had a portable, elevated basketball court and dirt floors.

As a result of the \$27 million renovation, there are 54 classrooms, 70 offices, a 250-seat auditorium, terrazzo floor, and a skylight.

"It certainly is different," said Bob Nichols, who coached UT basketball from 1965 to 1987 and holds the record for the most wins in the Mid-American Conference.

"But I'm very happy and I'm sure that the fellas that were involved with that building are happy to see they have preserved it."

He has fond memories of the field house, when people got dressed up to go to games and the whole community was Rocket fans.

"You looked forward to playing a game there, and the fans were so close to the floor," he said. "You could hear the talking by the players and referee, and you could almost feel the contact."

Keeping that history was key for UT. There was talk at one time of tearing down the historic building — the second built on campus following University Hall — or maybe turning it into a skating rink.

Charles Lehnert, UT's vice president for facilities and construction, said the renovated field house is essentially a new building inside of an old building.

What UT officials chose to do was insert a second and third floor, growing the 100,000-square-foot structure to 154,000 square feet, and filling it with learning spaces.

The main entrance, and most of the building for that matter, pays homage to Toledo's glass industry heritage with a wall of colored and clear glass pieced together being the first thing you see when you walk in.

And what they're calling "Academic Way," the hallway into the main "Town Square," will be laced with images of the building's storied past.

That town square is something to see.

The huge skylight at the building's peak allows the large open area to be flooded with sunlight. A glass-encased elevator and the grand staircase in the center gives access to the second and third floors, parts of which are visible from below.

The Memorial Field House was built in 1931 and hosted numerous events in addition to UT basketball.

The natural light helps make the field house the first Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design silver building on campus, a certification from the U.S. Building Council that recognizes "green" structures.

UT recycled everything from the former interior, even grinding up the concrete for reuse.

And each room is equipped with motion sensors to detect when a room is occupied. That allows the automatic adjustment of lights and temperature.

The structure also houses the campus' chilled water plant, which keeps things cool.

"We took a building from 1931 that was part of the university tradition and gave it an upgrade," Mr. Lehnert said.

Keeping an industrial style helped retain the history while minimizing extra work.

Original beams in the rafters remain visible, especially in the third-floor loft area that will serve as an educational incubator for professors to develop new teaching methods.

The university's English and foreign language departments are anxious to move into their new homes on the first and second floors.

Sara Lundquist, chairman of the English department now in University Hall, has "weaseled" her way into the building each month to check the progress.

"I saw it when it was dark and smelly, and just a wreck of its former self," she said. "One could not imagine the kind of renovation it would take to turn it into a classroom building."

The field house had been vacant for at least 20 years before the renovation began in July, 2007, with the demolition of the old interior. The new construction began in December.

The last basketball game there was March 6, 1976. That's the year Centennial Hall, now Savage Arena, was built.

"There really is something special about renovation as opposed to a brand-new building," Ms. Lundquist said. "It really is in some ways both the past and future."

A grand-opening celebration will be held today for the university community. It's part of the annual President's Backyard Barbecue from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., with a formal program at 12:30.

Since they don't have hamburgers and hot dogs for all of Toledo, the university is planning a community-wide celebration of the building after the homecoming parade Oct. 4.

Lancelot Thompson, a retired UT vice president for student affairs and a retired chemistry professor, is ready to be wowed.

He worked at the university from 1958 to 1998 and has seen the construction workers flow in and out of the building, but he hasn't been inside.

"I remember it was the only place we had on campus, so we had everything there," he said.

Turning it into a student and faculty space was the perfect choice, Mr. Thompson said.

"I hear it's very nice and that I'm in for a treat," he said.

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