

Advocacy News

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Generosity to support construction of a major academic building on the UW campus has historic preservation consequences

In mid-September, UW-Madison announced a major financial contribution designed to fill a significant academic need. Graduates John and Tashia Morgridge are donating the majority of funds for a new 300,000 square foot, seven-story home for the School of Computer, Data, and Information Sciences (CDIS). The building has an estimated cost of \$225 million, all of which is to be funded by private donations. It is to be constructed on University Avenue, on the 1200 block just after Charter Street and just before the block containing the Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery.



The announcement reflects an increase by a factor of ten in the number of computer science majors over the last decade. That increase doesn't even include the new data sciences major created a year ago. The new building will also help cement the inflection of the campus toward the goal of preparing students to enter the nation's workforce in high-demand areas.

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Construction is planned to begin in early 2023 with the goal of having the building in operation by the end of 2024. The fact that the new School of CDIS is funded by private donations permits the highly compressed schedule.

The 1200 block of University Avenue bounded by West Johnson Street, North Charter, and North Orchard



Photo of the block from across the street by Kurt Stege.

There are three existing buildings on this block, all visible from University Avenue, beginning with the back of the Psychology Building (which fronts Charter and Johnson), the Service Building (1910) at 1217 University Ave., and what was long called the Old Heating Plant (1908) but is now referred to as the Service Building – Annex at 1227 University Ave.

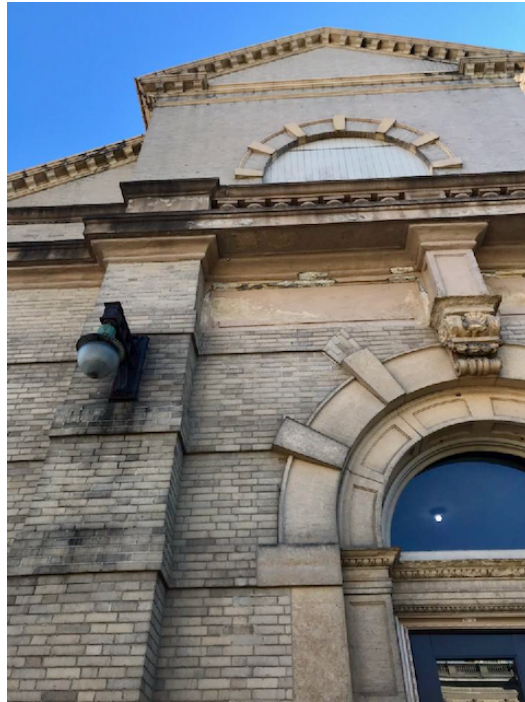
The entire block has long been identified for redevelopment in the campus Master Plan, which is typically updated every ten years. The most recent plan, issued in 2015, called for the demolition of all three buildings on the block between 2023 and 2029, followed by a single building constructed as phase 2 of the Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery sometime between 2029 and 2038.

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According to the initial proposal recently announced by the Office of the Chancellor, the new School of CDIS building would be constructed on those portions of the block occupied by the Old Heating Plant, the Service Building, and surface parking. It would leave the Psychology Building undisturbed.

Old Heating Plant (1908)¹

This imposing building was designed by university architect Arthur Peabody in consultation with Philadelphia architects Laird and Cret in the Neo-Classical Revival style.² It has a footprint of 86 feet by 130 feet, not including the chimney, and began service on January 1, 1909. Architect Peabody described the design as “follow[ing] the outlines and mass of a Basilica.”



Old Heating Plant by Kurt Stege

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¹ The descriptions of both the Old Heating Plant and the Service Building summarize material found in The Buildings of the University of Wisconsin, by Jim Feldman (1997), which is available in its entirety on line at <https://search.library.wisc.edu/digital/AHR5KYL44F7DU85>. See pages 110 and 125. The volume includes numerous vintage photos.

² The original central heating station on campus, built in 1888 to service the buildings on Bascom Hill, is now commonly referred to as Radio Hall.

Its original red tile roof and skylights have been removed, but the current building, primarily constructed of a light brick, still includes numerous sandstone elements. The brick, which nearly matches the color of the sandstone, is consistent with the brick used in other major buildings in the immediate area, including Chamberlin Hall (1905 with numerous additions), Sterling Hall (1917), and Wisconsin General Hospital (1924).

The visibility of the large building was punctuated by a 250-foot chimney with a spiraling band of darker brick. The chimney was the tallest structure in Madison at the time, and it served as an excellent vantage point for subsequent birds-eye view photos of Madison. The spiral added to the apparent height when viewed from the base. The chimney was removed in 1990 as a precaution against collapse.

The building's use as a coal-fired heating plant ended in 1959 with the completion of the nearby Charter Street Heating Plant.

The Old Heating Plant has been deemed eligible for designation on the National Register. Preliminary Evaluation of Buildings and Structures for Eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places, University of Wisconsin-Madison, September 2009.

Service Building (1910)

This four-story structure was initially designed by university architect Peabody as a relatively plain and functional flat-roofed building to serve as storage space for the university's physical plant and to house various trade shops. A year after it was completed, the first floor was said to be "filled with cement to the amount of about 20 [rail] cars." Fortunately, the brick of the original building matched that of the Heating Plant next door. When a major expansion of the Service Building became necessary in the mid-1920s, Peabody dramatically modified its appearance by adding a red tile gabled roof, skylights, and numerous details so that it carefully and attractively mimicked the design of the Heating Plant. Its current dimensions are 63 feet by 138 feet, plus a centered two-story projection.

The Service Building is on the Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory.

Prospects: If not preservation or adaptation, then salvage.

These are buildings that were designed with ornamentation as well as functionality in mind. They bear little similarity to structures that would be built now to perform the same functions.

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Undoubtedly, both buildings could be adapted for some other use or could continue to be used as they are currently in order to avoid construction of one or more new service buildings elsewhere on campus.

Re-use of the two buildings for the purpose of housing portions of a School for Computer, Data, and Information Science would require an ability to design that is far distant from my capability.

No doubt there is a strong demand for learning opportunities in these disciplines. Private funding for such a school seems to be available and the university has, for decades, identified these two buildings as expendable.

Let's at least fully explore the prospect for salvaging as much of these buildings as is realistically possible rather than merely placing the results of demolition in a landfill. Salvage should be explored with an eye towards re-using the material in any new structure in the same location or recycling the building material. The steel, the stone, the tile roof, and the brick are the most obvious candidates for recycling or re-use. Who knows what other valuable materials might be present on or in the two buildings? It may be that the university has already begun work with the School of CDIS building design team on a major effort in this regard.

Towards furthering the salvage and recycling goals, I have contacted the campus Office of Sustainability in an effort to ensure they are fully considered.

By Kurt Stege