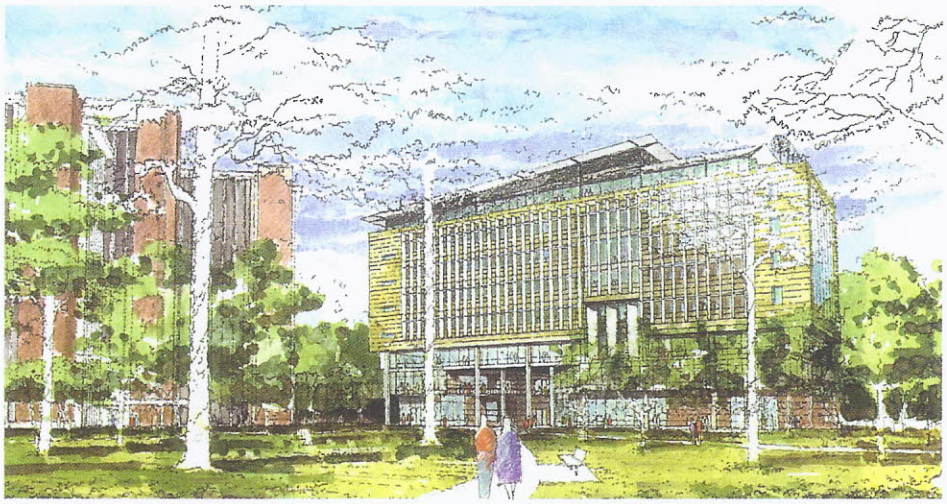
Transformation: Part II

UT Houston's reasons, approaches and expectations for its greening efforts.

BY PENNY S. BONDA, FASID

The greening of an institution isn't an easy process, especially one as large as a university, and especially one in Texas, known more for valuing oilmen than environmentalists. However, such an improbable effort is happening on the Houston campus of the University of Texas. As reported in the last issue of this magazine, an ambitious initiative is underway at UT to establish a model health sciences university for the 21st century with sustainability as one of its priorities. We promised to keep you abreast of their progress; this report is a continuation of the story.



The east façade of the Nursing and Biomedical Sciences Building in its park-like setting will feature student amenities such as a two-story bookstore/coffee shop.

The most visible indicator of the greening efforts happening on the UT Houston campus is the planning, design and construction of the Nursing Biomedical Science Building, the newest addition to the Health Science Center complex. This 190,000-square foot building will be home for the School of Nursing, the School of Applied Health Sciences and most student services. However, the message is not about the design project or the facility, but rather how an institution begins to include environmental strategies in its core business. It's about the university's reasons, approaches and expectations.

Leading UT's team is John Porretto, a vice president at the school and an ardent believer of walking the talk. "We are breaking new ground in our thinking about the university's campus," he states. "If anyone should have facilities that inspire and promote well-being, it should be an academic health center where we teach prevention and health promotion. Yet many of our buildings are unhealthy."

Porretto believes that this project will be both useful and didactic, that its influence will spread to other parts of the university. "I have a strong feeling that if we are less wasteful in terms of money and people, and with our responses to the natural world in which we live, that's probably the best marketing we can do. We send a message to the private sector where we get some of our philanthropy, but also to our foundations, potential students and their families, that they will not only get a good educational experience for their dollar, but will also demonstrate an operation that is lean, responsive and respectful of the environment."

The forward progress of this project received a huge boost following a successful presentation in January to the Board of Regents by the design team. As one participant put it, "Things got approved that one might not expect. This is Texas, after all, and energy efficiency isn't high on anyone's list of priorities." The timing couldn't have been better though with the current problems of deregulation in California and the recent increases in both electric and gas prices in Texas. In this climate it would be hard for anyone, even if they felt otherwise, to come out against the ideas put forth in the presentations, including an initial projected savings of one-quarter million dollars per year in energy costs.

The schematic presentation by the design team of Berkebile, Nelson, Immenschuh, McDowell Architects (BNIM) of Kansas City, MO, and Lake/Flato Architects of San Antonio, TX, crossed its first hurdle by gaining acceptance, in principle, from the Board of Regents and the university leaders. However, the architects' and the university's larger job was to bring along the users. To build this community connection, Bob Berkebile and David Lake led a town hall meeting. Realizing that the building needs to answer the needs of multiple user groups—doctors, nurses, patients, researchers, students and visitors—they structured the meeting to carefully listen to and assure each constituency of their willingness to work with their concerns.

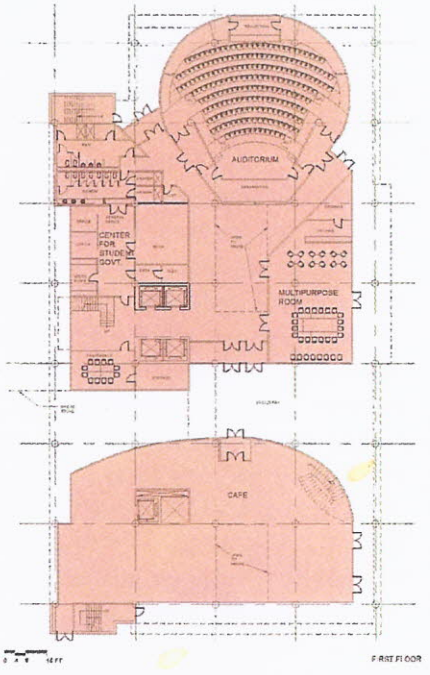
Prior facility strategies haven't always

been well planned, according to Rives Taylor, a university architect and campus planner at UT. Often department requirements were assessed as though each was freestanding, resulting in overstated space needs. But by taking an integrated inside-out approach, Taylor said the design team fashioned a space plan that reduced the total area of the building while giving each department more than they expected. This methodology also helped in bridging the gap between the program and the budget. Escalating costs in the Houston area and the inability to adjust the budget upward necessitated finding smarter ways to accomplish the project's goals. Doing everything they could to avoid unacceptable compromises, they have made the facility more responsive to the master plan's needs by removing the fluff. For example, administrative areas that were encumbering the budget were eliminated, resulting in a first class academic facility that benefits first the students and then the faculty.

Porretto used the town hall meeting to introduce the link between human health and worker productivity. Berkebile quoted recent studies showing a 13- to15-percent productivity improvement resulting from better environmental conditions. When asked to further explain, the architect responded, "There is a way to create a positive environment to begin with rather than just stuffing you where you can be stuffed." By setting out to deliver a new benchmark in healthy buildings, certain design priorities were highlighted: flexibility; abundant daylighting; privacy and security; and the provision of wide-open public spaces with amenities for all to enjoy. Set right next to a park, the building lends itself to some pleasantries that the architects can use to create that so-called "third place" between home and work that has been a successful marketing strategy for Starbucks and others. The dream is to have just such a spot at the school that students feel represents the place where they get their education and training, but also feel so good about that they're not rushing out. Planned, for example, is an herbal labyrinth.

Porretto believes there's a lifetime of goals here and feels learning should flow across the organization. "Our people are being exposed to all of the things we're doing in the design, construction and operations of our buildings, things that can be utilized as they think about how they live in their homes. We hope to involve them and influence them greatly through our town hall meetings, forums and groups coming together on their own."

Porretto feels extremely positive about the progress of this project. He admits it has been a strenuous journey. He thanks his staff for keeping the project and its sustainable goals alive. Very frustrated by an often cumbersome process, he confesses, "There were many points along the way where it would have been much, much easier for all of us to say the hell with it, let's just build this damn building and move on." Luckily John Porretto is a tenacious man, and the Nursing and Biomedical Sciences Building is moving on—to its next phase. @



Special use spaces dominate the ground floor of the building.

A typical floor plan establishes the priority given to daylighting in the building's design. In addition to the light atriums, private offices are pulled away from the perimeter walls to allow the majority of users to enjoy connectivity with the outdoors.