

VILAS HALL



Fig. 1. Vilas Hall, taken from Chadbourne Hall, 1975. [Series 9/2, Vilas,jf-92]

Vilas Communication Hall was built in 1969 to house speech, journalism, theatre-drama and WHA radio and television. It is named for the family of William Freeman Vilas, whose estate provided last-minute fund to advance the project. It was not formally completed until 1974.

At the regents meeting on April 4, 1964, the regents discussed the advantages of building the communication arts building at 600 North Park Street. They included on site parking, and the construction of single story auditoriums into the steep grade. Apparently the site had long been assumed to "belong" to the communication arts building. An informal building committee worked on the design for such a building as early as 1957. The facilities for journalism (the Wisconsin High School), drama (the Memorial Union), and broadcast (Radio Hall), were long since obsolete and inadequate.¹

By summer of 1965 the University had decided that the undergraduate library should be built at 600 North Park, and that another site should be chosen for the communication arts project. Among the sites examined were the corners of Lake and Langdon Streets, Lake Street and University Avenue. In September 1965 the regents voted that the 800 block of University Avenue be approved as the site for the Communication Arts Building, to include Journalism, Radio-Television, and speech. This site had the advantages of being close to the new Elvehjem Arts Center, and the ability to provide space for the

new Humanities complex. Additionally it was served by existing public parking, and would serve as a semipublic site for theatre productions put on for city residents. The budget for the project was estimated to be \$7.5 million. By December 1965 the estimate had risen to \$8.3 million.²

The building program as prepared by the University in January 1966, heavily emphasized the pedestrian traffic aspects of the plan, calling for pedestrian overpasses on Park, University Avenue and Johnson Street. In March 1966 the state approved the site, and allotted \$130,000 for plans, and appointed architectural firm J. J. Flad to the project.³

In December 1966 the regents voted to approve the concept of the Communication Arts Building, and to authorize the preparation of preliminary plans with a budget of \$9.62 million to be divided between \$7.12 million of state funds and \$2.5 million of gift and grant funds. The financing was already a thorny issue, with the state suggesting deletions to the building, and an increase in the University's share. Only the University pedestrian overpass remained as a definite part of the pedestrian traffic plan. Planning with architects J. J. Flad and Associates began in March 1966 and went on through 1967. The regent's approved preliminary plans in September 1967. Throughout this period, the University's relationship with the state in the person of its State Building Commission was at a low ebb. The University's architect told chancellor Fleming that: "I believe that there is a deliberate attempt by the [State] Bureau of Engineering to scuttle the project." On several occasions, actions by the state require that the University and its architects halt work on the project. Most of this problem appears to have been related to the financing of the building.⁴

In February 1968, faced with estimates well over the approved budgets, the planners deleted the proscenium theatre from the plans, allowing the budget to be reduced by \$1 million. The regents approved this action at their February 1968 meeting. The state building commission in March 1968 approved the preliminary plans, with a budget of \$9.625 million. In November 1968 the regents approved the final plans. The regents were told that the land in the 800 block of University Avenue had not been acquired by the University, and that it was part of the Urban Renewal Project. This land status caused delays during 1969, since the Madison Redevelopment Authority did not produce clear title to the land as promised until June 1969.⁵

In August 1969 the regents voted to approve the funding for the project at a total of \$9.42 million, with 8.82 million in state funds and \$600,000 in grants. But two months later, the regents were informed by president Harrington that bids had again come in over budget, and that redesign would allow building costs to escalate, the delay would cause the loss of federal funds, and that because of the very high priority given to the Communication Arts Building, he recommended that the offer of the William F. Vilas Trust Estate to donate the sum of \$1.2 million toward the project be accepted. The regents agreed and the Vilas gift was accepted. Part of this agreement was that the Vilas name would be associated with the building.⁶

With the funding finally settled by the Vilas gift, the regents awarded construction contracts on October 22, 1969. The general contract went to Orville. E. Madsen and Son of Minneapolis, for \$5.55 million. Total costs were \$10.73 million, with the funds coming from the state (\$9.1 million); federal grants (\$500,000), the Vilas Trust (\$1.2 million). Groundbreaking took place in October 1969.⁷

In 1970, the regents voted that the Communication Arts Building be named "Vilas Communication Hall". Professor Karver Puestow indicated that he had led a campaign to name the building for former president Glenn Frank, and that this name had the support of then president E. B. Fred, but that the shortage of funds required the grant from the Vilas estate which came with the stipulation of the Vilas name.⁸

On August 19, 1971, the Vilas Communications Hall was "topped out", a traditional ceremony when a tall building reaches its highest point. At that time occupancy was scheduled for February 1972. After two years of construction, the first occupants (the Daily Cardinal and the Compass The-

atre) began to move into the building in early August 1972. The entire communications arts department, the school of journalism, and WHA radio and television moved into the new building by the fall of 1972. A partial dedication was held on May 12, 1973. The first theatrical production was on October 11, 1972 and featured the University Players presentation of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in the experimental theatre. The formal dedication of the completed building was held September 20, 1974, with Edwin Newman (class of 1940) as guest speaker.⁹

The building fills the west half of the block bounded by University Avenue and Dayton Streets, from Park Street to Murray Street. Murray Street was closed between University and Dayton to provide parking for the building. It is a seven level central core (with one level below ground), surrounded by theatre and studio wings. The central core contains offices, conference rooms, labs, storage and loading docks. A fourth floor pedestrian area connects by overpass to the Humanities building on the north side of University Avenue. Student publications are housed in the northwest wing of the building. The three story south wing contains television studios on floors one and two, and classrooms on the third floor. The northeast wing contains the Mitchell theatre and the experimental theatre. The proscenium theatre, deleted from the original plans was to have been built in the southeast corner, and may still be built there at some future date. The entire building is 152 feet square and is sheathed in face brick and precast concrete trim. A mural by art professor James Watrous entitled "Freedom of Communication" adorns the North wall of the building.

- 1) *Regent's Minutes*, April, 4, 1964;
- 2) *Regent's Minutes*, September 24, 1965, December 10, 1965.
- 3) *Regent's Minutes*, March 4, 1966, exhibit B; Building Program Communication Arts, January 5, 1966, Vilas Hall Archives subject file; Agency Request for State Building Commission Action, December 14, 1965, Postweiler to Lorenz, March 11, 1966, series 24/9/3 box 5.
- 4) *Regent's Minutes*, December 9, 1966 and exhibit E, September 15, 1967; Sites to Fleming, April 17, 1967, series 24/9/3 box 8; Sites also says: "The Bureau of Engineering has done some very questionable things that must be explained or exposed."
- 5) *Regent's Minutes*, February 16, 1968, March 15, 1968. Vilas Hall dedicatory program, Archives Vilas Hall subject file.
- 6) *Regent's Minutes*, August 22, 1969, October 17, 1969 and Exhibit B; Haberman to Uhl, May 22, 1970, series 24/9/2-1 box 13 Building Committee chairman Haberman refers to naming the building Vilas Communications Building by saying "It seems highly desirable that we memorialize the Vilas name in this instance because the funds we received from the Vilas estate literally 'saved' our building".
- 7) *Regent's Minutes*, October 22, 1969, exhibit I.
- 8) *Regent's Minutes*, On June 12, 1970; Undated unsigned note in the Archives' Vilas Hall subject file. Proscenium Theatre Program Statement, Archives' Vilas Hall subject file.
- 9) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, November 1971 p. 12, November 1974, p. 18; *Wisconsin State Journal*, August 2, 1972, October 12, 1972, May 12, 1973; Vilas Communication Hall dedicatory program, September 20, 1974, Archives' Vilas Hall subject file.