

WISCONSIN CENTER



Fig. 1. The Wisconsin Center, February 1997. The red gym is at the left. The Center's entrance is near the bottom, and the auditorium at the top right.[Del Brown Photo, AP-75]

The Wisconsin Center was built with donated funds to provide a "roof for the Wisconsin Idea". It was finished in 1958 and donated to the University by the University of Wisconsin Foundation.

The University of Wisconsin Foundation, an organization to channel donations and gifts to the University, was founded in 1945. In 1947, with the centennial of the University approaching, the Foundation decided as its first big project to build a home for adult education programs; then scattered through classrooms and temporary buildings in a haphazard and unorganized manner. At the earliest meetings it was decided that the Foundation would erect and donate the building.

In November 1949, architects Foeller, Schober, Berners Safford & Jahn of Green Bay presented the first of many plans for the center in November 1949. They proposed to erect a \$4.5 million 4 story building that would have filled the block from the red gym to Lake Street, and from Langdon Street to the lake. They intended that the red gym, the gym annex, and several frat houses would be demolished for the project. The plan called for 64 hotel rooms, full kitchen and dining facilities, a 600 seat auditorium, and an underground tunnel to the union. It was on the basis of these plans that serious fund raising began in 1950. It was clear within a few months that the scale of the building would have to be reduced.¹

The most serious issue to be resolved was that of location. The earliest meeting of the University of Wisconsin Foundation assume that the center would be located at Lake and Langdon, The Foundation and the University investigated other locations for the center. These included Breese and

University and Picnic Point, finally it was decided that the original location had been the best.

As planning progressed, the size of the building was drastically reduced. Among the features eliminated were the hotel rooms and dining facilities. Much of the appeal of the Lake and Langdon site was that the memorial union could provide these facilities; in fact there were plans made (but never executed) to add a five story hotel wing to the northeast side of the union. Parking was also seen as a major problem at all studied sites for the Wisconsin Center, but it was hoped that the area between the union and the red gym recently purchased by the University of Wisconsin Foundation (from the YMCA) would provide a location for a parking structure. By late summer 1955 the plans were advanced to the point that the University had the gymnasium annex, and the old YMCA building razed, evicted the tenants of the condemned frat (Phi Delta Theta) house on the site, and advertised for construction bids. Estimated cost was now \$2.2 million. In November 1955, the J. L. Simmons Company of Chicago was selected as general contractor.²

Groundbreaking ceremonies were held at the site on September 29, 1956. At this time the Foundation was about \$400,000 short of the estimated total cost. Construction proceeded without incident and ahead of schedule through the mild winter of 1956, and spring of 1957.³

The cornerstone ceremony was held on May 18, 1957, with speeches by Frank Birch, governor Oscar Rennebohm, and president Fred. The cornerstone contains the state constitution, bylaws of the Wisconsin Foundation, and an explanation of the University "Sifting and Winnowing" motto. At this time it was expected that the building would be ready in the spring of 1958.⁴

At the dedication ceremony held on April 11, 1958, the building was formally presented by the University of Wisconsin Foundation as a gift to the University of Wisconsin. The \$2.4 million gift was the largest ever at that time. Presentation speakers included Frank Birch, and University president E. B. Fred. Bronze plaques, honoring Frank J. Sensenbrenner, Herbert Kohler, and Frank Holt, were unveiled. The "roof for the Wisconsin Idea" had become reality. Significantly, the Wisconsin Center shares its block with the Memorial Union, another center of University life built with gifts.⁵

The reinforced concrete building faced with brick is a squarish 'S' shape, with the 82 by 210 foot three story main section running north to south, with a lobby protruding west from the south end, and an 236 seat auditorium (since remodelled and reduced) protruding east from the north end. There are no hotel rooms; Lowell Hall on Langdon Street is used as a guest house. Food is catered from the kitchens at the memorial union. The principal function of the Center is meeting rooms, and there are seventeen on the three floors of the main section, most in constant use by University seminars, short courses and guest lectures. Permanent and travelling art exhibits adorn the walls and fill the lounge. The building and its operation are under the control of the University Extension.

The building is so heavily used that there are plans now underway for a 1997 major expansion. Two floors will be added to the center section to house "long distance education", classes by satellite feeds, cable hookups, etc. On the east side a four story section will envelope the current auditorium to provide, larger halls and more office space. The issues of inadequate parking, catered food, an undersized auditorium, are all a legacy of the planning of the original building, and are still among the problem areas for the facility.⁶

1) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, June 1949, p. 9, June 1950, p. 10, April 1953, p. 12, October 1955.

2) The demolition of the gymnasium annex was made possible by the finishing of plans for the Camp Randall memorial practice building, which took the place of the annex. *Daily Cardinal*, December 6, 1951; *Executive Committee Minutes*, August 12, 1955; Regent's Minutes, May 8, 1954.

3) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, November 1956, p. 5; *Daily Cardinal*, September 28, 1956.

4) *Daily Cardinal*, May 7, 1957, May 21, 1957; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, June 1957, p. 7, May 1957, p. 9.

5) *Daily Cardinal*, April 16, 1958; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, March 1958; *Milwaukee Journal*, April 11, 1958;

6) *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, June 1958; *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 24, 1959, April 28, 1973; Paul Tierney, interview fall 1994.