





The pavilion in the woods

A dull dining facility at the University of Connecticut has been transformed into an airy, welcoming space for students to meet as well as eat, Sue Holaday reports

A beautiful glass-walled addition described as a “pavilion in the woods,” McMahon Hall, the dining facility that has been situated at the heart of the University of Connecticut campus for over 50 years, received a \$9m facelift last year. It has been expanded to increase seating from 374 to 530 and the style of service completely changed.

The project is in the same building that houses students from around the world in the school’s International Center and Global House (Learning Communities). Director of dining services C Dennis Pierce says it revitalised what he describes as “an antiquated stainless steel dining facility”.

The goal was to increase capacity while bringing the kitchen out into the servery, allowing interaction between students and culinary staff. The 19,000 sq ft project included both renovation and a striking 5,000 sq ft addition with a striking curved shape on the wooded sloped site,

plus new connections to the dorms.

“We wanted to take production and bring it into the servery with international items and recipes from home,” says Pierce. Previously, when prospective students and parents visited the campus, they were toured through the dining area with four large air conditioning units. “The units were very ugly,” he recalls.

Today, the vibrant, contemporary, LEED Gold-certified renovation offers a glimpse at the future of college and university dining, with a host of stations set up to serve multiple functions. Each

“People in foodservice have an important role in a college. They’re people the kids see and can connect with every day”



station has its own cooking equipment and refrigeration.

In a major change to the culture, the size of plates was reduced to 10 inches, dramatically cutting waste. Students are able to refill the plates as often as they wish.”

The location between two dorms serving international students prompted an international theme for the menus.

“These kids know about food,” says Pierce. “They are into sustainable practices. Of the last four projects we’ve done, this was unique and probably got the most exposure.”

With the school’s increasingly diverse population on the Storrs campus, dining services drew from a large “international array of menu selections,” he adds. The menu uses “home-cooked recipes” and seeks to meet those students’ >

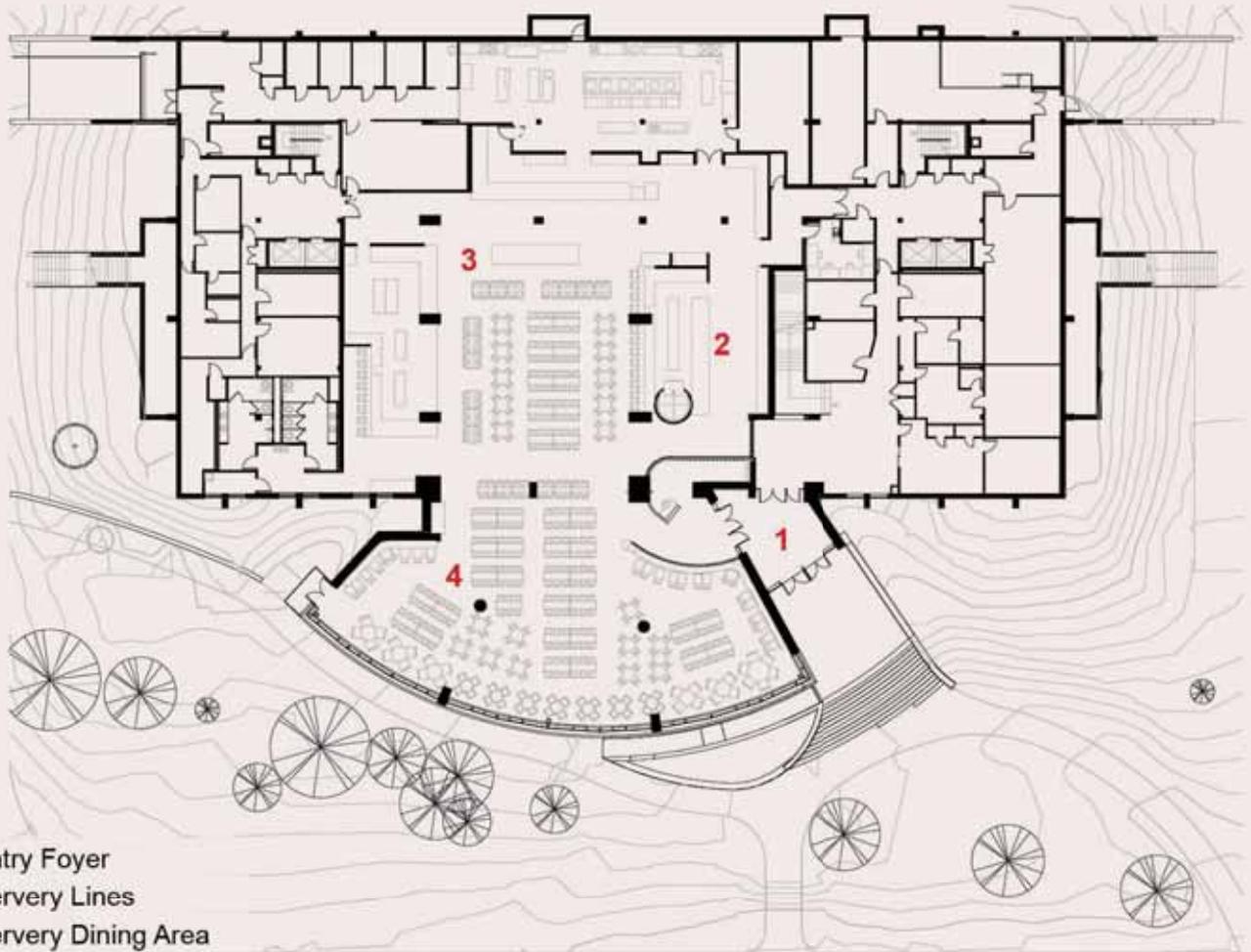
B BRIEFING

19,000 sq ft

Total area covered by the renovation

\$9m

Total cost of the project



1. Entry Foyer
2. Servery Lines
3. Servery Dining Area
4. Expanded Dining Area



needs as well as educating others about new dishes.

“Flexibility,” says FCSI associate Kevin Sullivan, of Colburn & Guyette, the project’s consultant, “was very important. They wanted the stations to be able to do something different every day. A big Wood Stone oven with flames on both sides is stationed near the entrance. They wanted that station to be a stone oven platform rather than a pizza station. It does pizza, pastas, roasted meats and more. We put the tandoori ovens for naan there, too. It’s an ‘all you care to eat’ concept.”

A station with four large woks is used for stir-fries rather than specifically Asian >

530

Number of seats in the newly-expanded facility, up from 374

10 inches

Size dining plates have been reduced to in an effort to reduce food waste



fare. The only stations not changing to the smaller plates are the deli and salad bar where students choose a variety of dishes. Equipment costs for the project were in the range of \$1.1m.

The seating area offers a combination of lounge and café-style seats as well as a living room-style area where students can gather to network.

A great deal of under-counter refrigeration was needed for each station and was “tucked anywhere we could find space,” Sullivan recalls.

In the original layout, the salad bar and deli were large draws. Students were allowed to make their own sandwiches and toast them on a panini grill. In the new servery, pre-made sandwiches were added, heated in TurboChef ovens.

Also popular is the Breakfast Bar. Cereal in small individual boxes is lined up above the counter and hot oatmeal, grits and waffles are also available as well as items from a small bakery.

A gluten-free area has its own toaster and refrigerator.

Cambridge architects Bruner/Cott and Prellwitz Chilinski Associates (PCA) did the initial plan and renovations, respectively. At BVH, the consulting engineers, project manager Ilona Prosal worked with the landscape consultants



to make sure the trees around McMahon Hall were not disturbed by the construction.

“We provided the new HVAC unit as well as sprinklers, electrical support and the design of exhaust systems,” she says.

The challenge, she found, was the existing building tucked between two dormitory towers. Some existing systems needed to be worked around and made code compliant and safe.

“We were also involved with doing water-efficient fixtures in the bathrooms, emergency lighting and fire alarms. All lighting was automated with control on a time clock and we had daylight dimming on the fixtures along the exterior glass wall of the addition,” she says. ■



DINING BECOMES A MULTI-PURPOSE ACTIVITY

Wendy Prellwitz, co-founder and director of Prellwitz Chilinski Associates, Cambridge, MA, looks at student dining as more than just the activity of eating a meal.

“We talked about the dining hall and its social role. Before, the old building did not make you want to stay there. But now it can be used as a third place, besides home and work, where you can get together with friends.

“People in foodservice have an important role in a college. They’re people the kids see and can connect with every day. We looked at different types of spaces and the counter, which would foster those connections. This encourages that.

“We wanted the display kitchen - ‘perch, dine and linger’ - with counter seats high enough for quick bites and also regular height seats as in a restaurant, banquettes and bigger round tables around the perimeter against the glass, with lounge-height seating choices. We didn’t want it to look like a food court.”

The addition, a building between two dormitories, was designed as a counterpoint to blocky brick structures with “gently curving glass accents”.

The old structure was “incredibly basic - vinyl floors, white walls, clunky wooden chairs.” Now, interiors are on display with dark mullions framing two-story-high windows and echoing the line of trees outside to create what Prellwitz calls “a transparent interface with the outside.”

Additionally, the glass curtain wall and the new space create a contemporary social/dining magnet on the campus, drawing students to gather, socialise, dine and even study in the many different seating options.