Glass walls, laptop stations, gallery may make center a place where students want to be

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The floors are covered in sawdust, the doors are made from spray-painted planks, and a few of the walls are still exposed to summer showers.

On Monday afternoon, about 170 crew members performed everything from basic plumbing to the installation of a glass wall system. Although it is still difficult to imagine the University of Louisiana at Lafayette’s new Student Union as a lively building filled with students, professors and alumni, one thing is clear. This isn’t your grandma’s student union.

What was once a dimly lit building has been transformed into an airy space surrounded by walls of glass that display live oaks from the front and Cypress Lake in the back. What was once a space for errands — picking up Scantrons and bluebooks at the university bookstore, reloading money onto a Cajun Card, grabbing dinner at the university’s main dining hall — is being transformed into a place where students want to be.

QUICK FACTS

1969
- Original building construction began: April 1969
- Original building completion: March 1971
- Original building square footage: 130,000
- Original building cost: $3.4 million
- Funded through: Student self-imposed fee

2012 ... and beyond
- Building remodel began: December 2012
- Expected completion: January 2015
- Remodeled building square footage: 158,000
- Remodel cost: $40 million
- Funded through: Student self-imposed fee

Source: Bill Crist, UL facilities manager, and louisiana.edu

WHAT’S GOING IN THERE?

The student union will be the home to several offices, departments and recreational areas, including:
- Administration
- Ballroom
- University bookstore
- Cajun card
- Circulation
- Conference
- Dean of students/student affairs
- Student center
- Food services
- Greek affairs
- International affairs
- Lounge areas
- Retail
- Student Government Association
- Student Leadership Council
- Student organizations
- Support
- Bayou Bijou Theatre
- Union offices
- University Program Council

Source: louisiana.edu

View an exclusive video tour of the student union construction at thetheadvertiser.com.
The old union was not very aesthetically pleasing,” said Jordan Daigle, vice president of UL’s Student Government Association. “It wasn’t the prettiest place to hang out, and there wasn’t a whole lot of seating. It wasn’t a place to congregate.”

Daigle, a senior studying political science, admits she didn’t spend much time in the old union. She expects that she and other students will spend much more time in the new building, which is scheduled to be up and running in January — in time for Daigle’s final semester of school.

The $40 million renovation and expansion project is being headed by Jack Craft of Lemoine Co. and paid for by two student-assessed fees.

“The project has been extremely challenging,” Craft said during a Monday tour. “I think it’s a rewarding project that is going to serve the faculty, staff, students, everyone for years to come.”

Craft said his niece attends the university, and through her, he has experienced some of the excitement.

Daigle and Craft’s niece are both excited to see improved dining facilities, which will be available in the form of a buffet-style, traditional cafeteria called Café de Lafayette and a number of smaller cafes that include McAllister’s Deli, Simply To-Go, Sidelines and a coffee shop.

The new union will be full of interesting nooks and crannies, including an art gallery, laptop workstations and president’s dining area.

“There are a lot of unique features to the building,” Craft said. “There are some intricate features that have gone in throughout.”

In addition to being a spot for students and supporters of the university to gather, the union will also be home to many of UL’s offices.

Work began on the huge renovation project in December 2012, with everything but the bookstore, main ballroom and a small movie theater being torn down.

The renovation and expansion project will expand the union from 128,000 square feet to about 158,000 square feet, but perhaps more exciting than the added space is the layout.

The union will be located closer to McKinley Street and farther from Cypress Lake, allowing for a large courtyard between the union and the swamp.

Although Lemoine Co. has a contract for the project through Jan. 10, Craft says he expects the construction to be completed in November.

That gives the university more than enough time to move in furniture and decor in time for the spring semester, Craft said.

To limit the amount of time students would be without their student union, the building has been constructed in four phases, said Bill Crist, UL’s facilities manager.

The section nearest to University Avenue that will hold the main cafeteria is in the final phase of construction, while the section nearest to St. Mary Boulevard that will hold the ballrooms and theater is the least complete and will not be closed in until October or November.

Although there is still work left to be done in every phase of the union, the interior is taking shape and the end is in sight.

“My favorite part is going to be the completion,” Craft said with a laugh.

“If I just have to like have a small part of taking something that was nothing when I got here and then it comes to fruition and you can see the result of everyone’s hard work.”