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# Reforming Recreation

Rob Whitehead

*Iowa State University*, [rwhitehd@iastate.edu](mailto:rwhitehd@iastate.edu)

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# Reforming Recreation

## **Abstract**

A college campus is always in motion, and its students are rarely still. In this surrogate village, certain buildings have only a particular set of uses and users, so students are constantly moving around to find the various places, spaces, and faces that offer them the knowledge, rest, sustenance, and entertainment they need—ideally a little bit of each, conveniently offered in various locations, throughout their day.

## **Disciplines**

Architectural History and Criticism

## **Comments**

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# reforming recreation

Iowa State's new student recreation building is centered on campus quality of life.

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Supportive campus designers seek to enhance student quality of life by giving an architectural expression to these needs, and sometimes, when the program, location, and experiential qualities are right, a building becomes more than just the sum of its requisite parts and evolves into a central component of the student experience and campus identity.

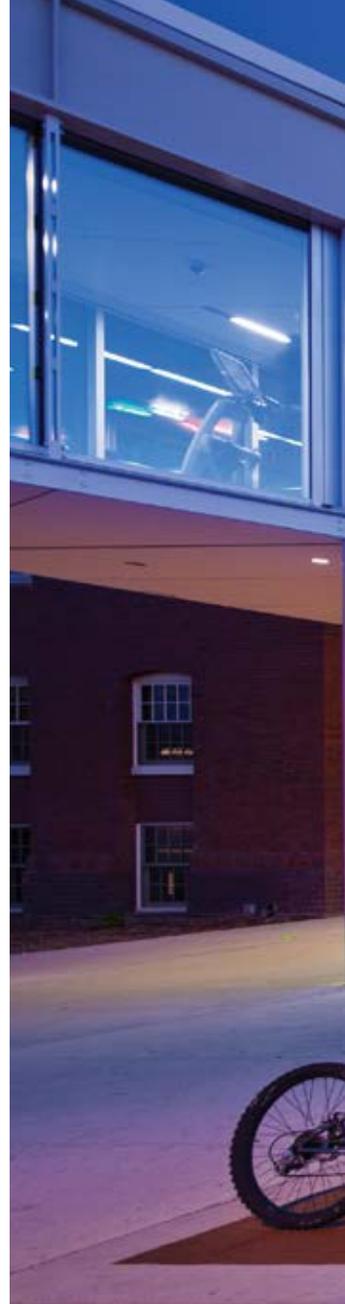
Traditionally, student unions have been the main places on campus to find such a diversity of activities and participants, but over the last 30 years, recreational centers have emerged as an important alternative gathering space—albeit one that now literally encourages students to stay moving. These facilities are more than just places for play—they help inspire and educate students in an

effort to instill important lessons about healthy living habits and wellness.

According to Jeff Schaub, AIA, project architect for RDG, “An active and thriving student recreation center is the very life blood in any contemporary college setting. It is a predominant building of importance and is frequently the first stop on prospective student tours. We believe that it is, in fact, one of the most important quality-of-life facilities on a campus.”

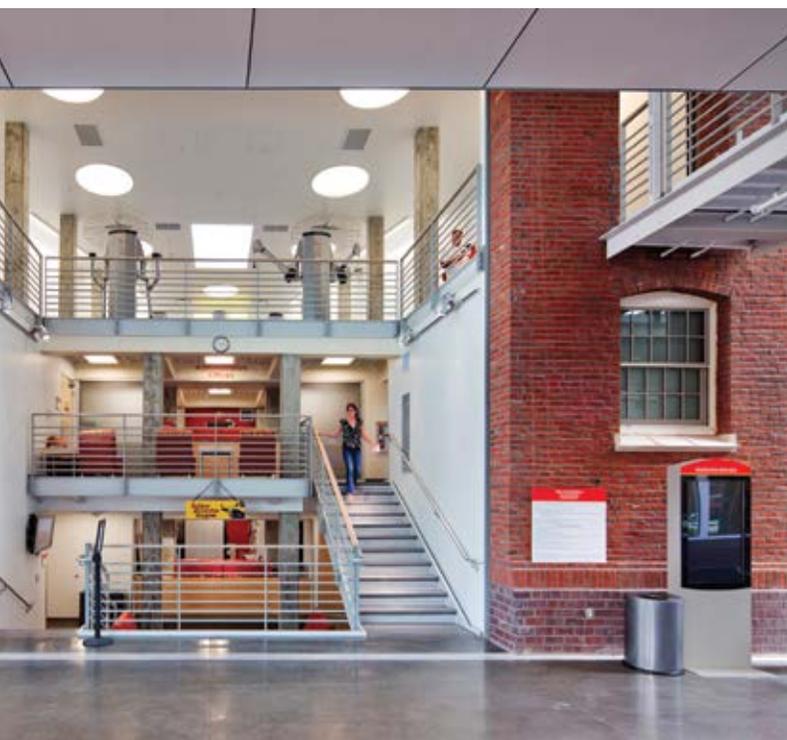
The rising importance of recreation centers on collegiate campuses mirrors many larger societal interests in healthy lifestyles and active entertainment options. Additionally, as a result of the coinciding climbs in both tuitions and enrollments, the perception of students as both participants in, and consumers of, their learning and living environments now influences the design and use of many campus buildings. Simply put, students want a great rec center.

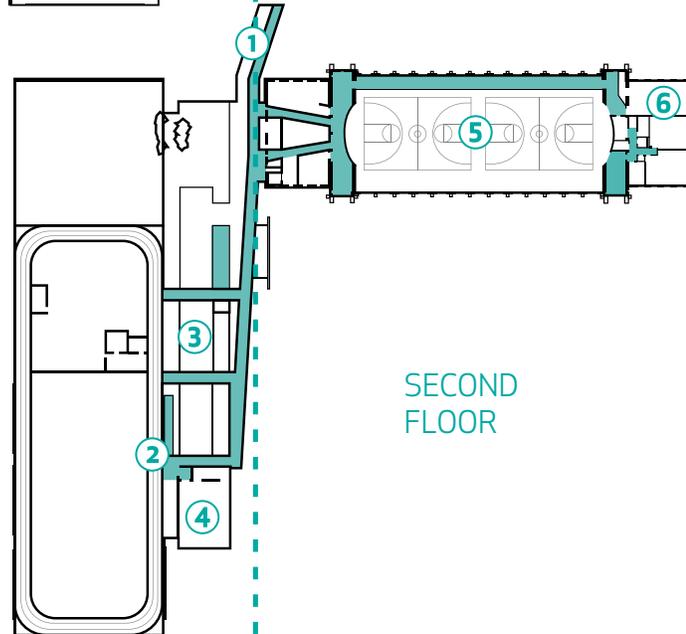
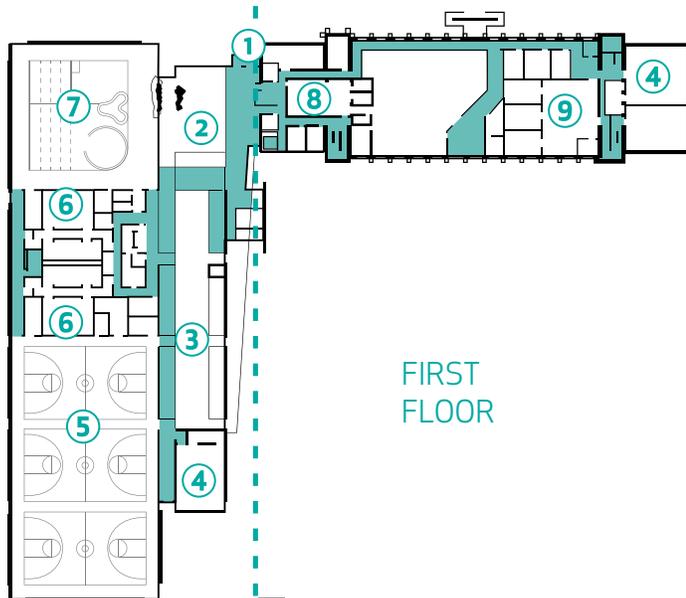
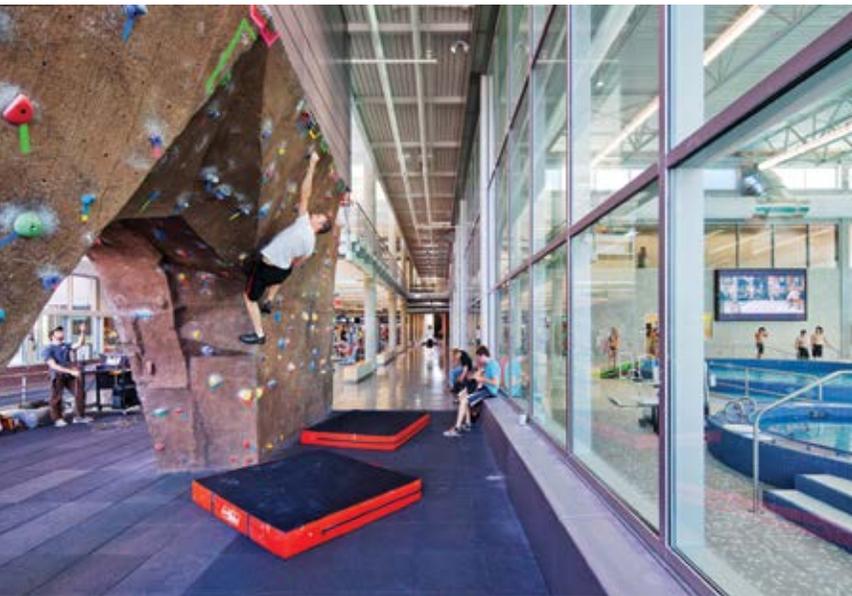
Not having a contemporary recreation center adjacent to Friley Hall, Iowa State's largest dormitory housing complex, had not been ideal. While still functional, the nearby historical State Gym and outdated Beyer Hall paled in size, usage, and amenities compared to the east campus's





The building massing and material choices help make the entry sequence into the building, inviting, exciting, and easily understood. **Bottom Left:** A portion of the old State Gym facade is opened up to the main entry location, serving as a symbolic and functional connection between the new and old buildings. **Bottom Right:** This light-filled skywalk space is used for more than just a connection between buildings; it is a consistently active exercise space where students can see out, and in turn, also be seen.





ADDITION

RENOVATION

The floor plans show the clear arrangement of spaces. Large-volume recreational spaces (both new and old) are placed on either side of the central atrium circulation space.

- First Floor** 1. Main Entry 2. Climbing Wall 3. Cardio/Weight Area 4. Multipurpose Activity Area 5. Gymnasium 6. Locker Rooms 7. Recreational Pool 8. Outdoor Recreation 9. Club Sports  
**Second Floor** 1. Skywalk to Beyer Hall 2. Jogging Track 3. Cardio/Weight Area 4. Multipurpose Activity Area 5. Gymnasium 6. Fitness Suite

**Upper Left:** A variety of recreational options are opened up to each other in the large, light-filled atrium. **Above:** The interior of natatorium space shows how large-scale recreational activities can occur alongside the more casual and social facility users.



Lied Recreation Center. Happily for Iowa State University, this problem fueled a student-led and sponsored referendum to improve and consolidate the recreational facilities on the western side of campus.

As one might expect from one of the nation's most experienced campus recreational facility design specialists, RDG's proposed design scheme was organizationally effective: The three project components (the original 1913 State Gym, Beyer Hall, and the new addition to State Gym) would all be connected to act as one recreation facility.

The building's large-scale gymnasium and natatorium spaces were aligned and arranged along the western portion of the site, leaving an experientially interesting and spatially complex series of open workout rooms running along the eastern portion of the building. These new open spaces become the "connective tissue" that ties all of the buildings together through a multistory glass atrium and an enclosed glass skywalk that extends outside the building, across a busy campus street, over to Beyer Hall. Importantly, this scheme consolidates a single point

of entry for all three buildings, linking them internally, and creating a clearly articulated architectural identity for the recreational complex.

One result of student involvement in newer recreation buildings is the seemingly paradoxical desire to have stringently dimensioned and proportioned workout spaces (e.g., a basketball court, a running track, etc.) alongside much more open and flexible spaces. To help cultivate healthy lifestyle wellness and exercise choices, ISU Recreation Services wanted to provide students with plenty of choices.

Interestingly, however, these choices still needed to be desirable and functional, so finding ways to better connect the body in space, both as a physical act of interaction and as a means of perception and enjoyment, was a profound challenge. “Creating a spatially dynamic interior allows students to visually ‘shop’ the recreation programs and stimulates their participation. The building needs to evoke a sense of student-centered ambiance that is very different than an academic hall,” says Schaub.

RDG looked for ways to enhance the qualities of the architectural spaces beyond their bare essentials—the qualities of light, material, and color provided throughout the building are nearly as varied as the activities they contain. In fact, although the new addition looks simple in plan, it becomes complex with several open interactive spaces that offer a variety of choices for recreational activities.

Although the overall project is massive in scale, covering more than 163,000 gross square feet of new and remodeled area, the building is easily navigated and understood. This may be a result of the memorable iconic features such as the elevated running track, the undulating climbing walls in the atrium, or the gigantic video scoreboard television in the pool. Perhaps it is also in thanks to the large-scale windows throughout the building that look out to the rest of campus. This relative transparency of the building allows for a high degree of

natural daylighting to occur throughout the building. This not only helps to stimulate the users in exercising, but it makes recreation a highly social event by allowing students to see and be seen by their peers. Importantly, daylighting also helps to reduce energy usage and supports the larger sustainability goals of the campus and student body.

This well-designed recreation center has dramatically reinforced the mission of the ISU Recreation Services while creating an epicenter for student involvement in social and physical activity. It has brought new life to two older facilities and inspired a massive new influx of student activity. Remarkably, ISU Rec Services estimates that nearly 80% of the total ISU population has used the building between 2012 and 2013.

Ultimately, educational environments should provide opportunities for students to grow as individuals while nurturing an awareness of their importance to a larger collective society—architectural design certainly has a role in encouraging these opportunities. Currently we look for recreation centers to provide opportunities for students to practice teaming, leadership, and collaboration skills while pushing themselves to be motivated, disciplined, and healthy. Sometimes on campus, it’s just fun to keep moving.

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*Rob Whitehead, AIA, is an assistant professor at Iowa State University Department of Architecture and frequent contributor to Iowa Architect magazine.*





**Left:** The distinctly contemporary expression of the facades for new recreation spaces combines a diverse set of architectural expressions and materials in an attempt to respond to environmental and contextual cues. **Lower Left:** The clear arrangement of structure, light, and volume of the beautifully renovated interior of the original 1913 State Gym. **Lower Right:** An up-close view of the new guardrails shows how basic considerations of code compliance and structural support can be combined to create aesthetically interesting and carefully detailed railing designs.

