

(BUILDING)

CAMPUS

# Build It and They Will Leave

SOME FAILED MOUNT OREAD MONUMENTS MIGHT HAVE BEEN DELIGHTFUL. MOST WERE BLUEPRINTS FOR VISUAL DISASTER.

By Chris Lazzarino

UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES



25-STORY HUMANITIES TOWER

In our memories, the campus landscape is fixed, defined by our time in this special place. But beyond the mental images, outside in the hot summer sun and brittle winter wind, Mount Oread mutates each working day. Every such change is born as an idea; though our alma mater is a place where all ideas are exalted, we can be thankful that not all ideas are embraced.

The visual discomfort of squat Wescoe Hall is nothing compared with what almost was: a 25-story tower that would have been the tallest building in Kansas, burdening our boulevard with a colossus whose kindred cousins are much more at home in downtown Chicago.

"It would have been like a huge sun-

dial," now-retired University architect Allen Wiechert told the University Daily Kansan in 1993. "We could have put big marks on Jayhawk Boulevard to let people know what time it was."

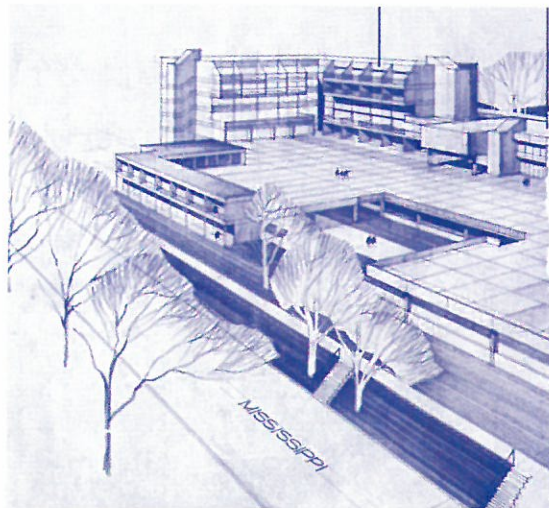
Across Oread Avenue from the Adams Alumni Center, earthmovers are scraping away dirt to make space for a new parking garage. Back in the late 1970s, plans were drawn up to use that chunk of campus for a 110,000-square-foot "Continuing Education Demonstration Center," complete with hotel, residential living, staff offices and conference rooms.

Those of us who enjoy idle afternoons at Potter Lake might also have enjoyed the sound of music on the hillside, had a 1960 proposal for a lakeside amphitheatre

been approved. Plans drawn up by the University's landscape architect included redwood bleachers on a terraced hillside west of Potter and a shoreline beautified by a low stone wall and wrought-iron rail. Al Thomas' proposal also called for removal of some trees to emphasize the glorious view of the Kaw River Valley.

"The areas around Potter Lake have long held an attraction for nature lovers, the small group enjoying a picnic, students who are searching for resource material in the biological sciences, and wandering lovers," Thomas wrote in a memo dated Dec. 9, 1960. "The University has long needed a larger and more permanent outdoor theatre, and no more magnificent setting could be provided than the slope west of Potter Lake."

Thomas' poetic vision was never more than that. Though he suggested the work be done in three stages over an indefinite period, he estimated total cost between \$200,000 and \$350,000.





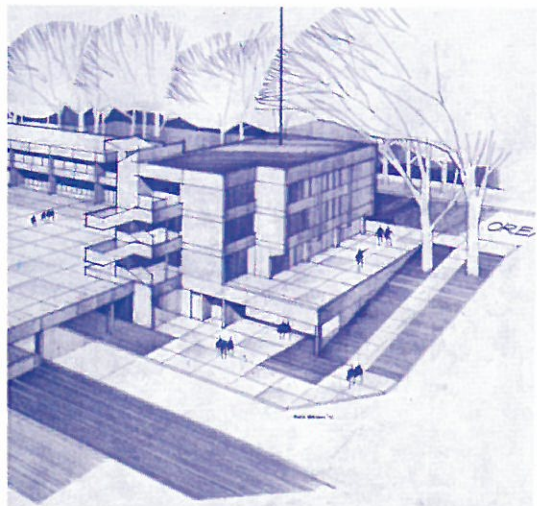
WALLY EMPERSON

SOLAR CLOCK

There have been plans, in various stages of development, for a Korean War memorial. Sadly, no such tribute has materialized, but shed no tears for the ill-fated “Photovoltaic Clock Tower,” a mid-1980s proposal for Wescoe Beach that would have offered the solar-powered timepiece denied us when the 25-story sundial was scrapped.

Organizers offered a contest to design the clock tower; the winning entry, worth \$100 to its student creator, was a 45-foot rectangular rise of “yellow-tinted cement.” One of the disregarded proposals, gleefully playing on the Wescoe Beach theme, was for a lifeguard tower, with the guard’s umbrella serving as the solar collector.

The happy side of less-than-limitless

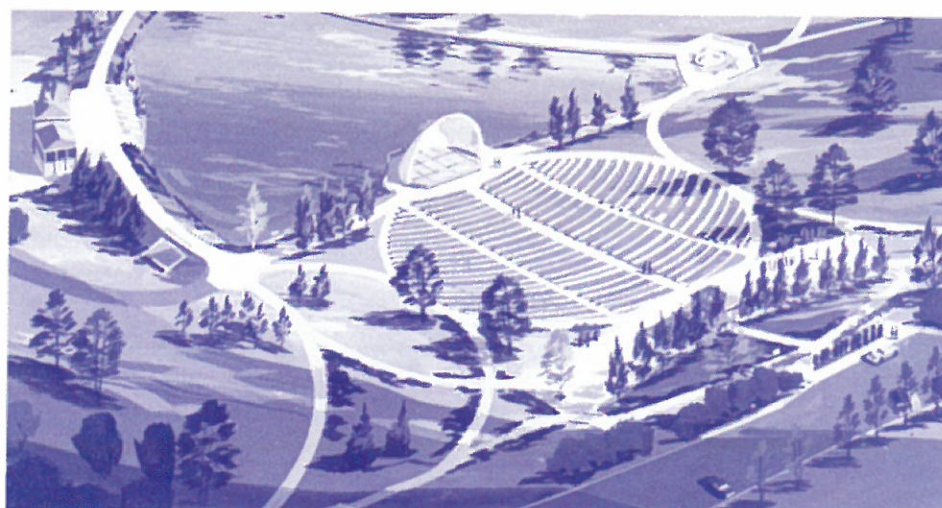


CONTINUING EDUCATION COMPLEX

resources is that it’s easy to say no. The winning entry’s \$115,000 price tag found no funding, and the project died a pauper.

Such was the eventual fate of the “KU Skyscraper,” as it was heralded in the University Daily Kansan of Nov. 20, 1967. Contrary to current myth, what we now know as Wescoe Hall is not a stubby version of the tower that never was.

Designs unveiled Nov. 19, 1967, were for an L-shaped classroom building of five stories, with an office tower rising another



UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

POTTER LAKE AMPHITHEATRE

20 stories. But construction bids came in at \$7 million, about \$1.2 million more than anticipated, so 10 stories were sliced. The building’s redesign happened to coincide with a leap in construction costs; even with 10 stories lopped off, the 1968 incarnation carried the same \$7 million price tag. Again the Kansas Board of Regents hesitated, and this time a \$2 million federal grant expired.

The University was left with \$200,000 worth of worthless blueprints and a bald spot on the boulevard where two fine old buildings, the original versions of Robinson Gymnasium and Haworth Hall, had been razed. New architects were not selected for another year, while the lack of classroom space meant all undergraduates had to take Saturday classes.

Plans for the current Wescoe Hall finally were revealed in late 1969. Wiechert, still relatively new on the job at the time, says he unsuccessfully tried to convince administrators that the concrete

fortress needed a fifth floor to alter its roofline, creating “different massing and scale.” But even at four stories, the homely home of the humanities would cost about \$8 million—\$1 million more than its 25-story proposed predecessor—and still the University had only \$6 million to spend.

An extra \$2.5 million was generated by students, who were asked to take the unprecedented step of funding an academic building. The \$7.50-a-semester fee approved by Student Senate in February

1970 was voted down 2-1 in a campuswide referendum, but the students’ votes amounted only to an opinion. The fee stuck. It was later reduced to \$2.50, yet remained an expense borne by KU students until 1982.

Wescoe Hall, our unfortunate landmark that is, opened in August 1973. The Daily Kansan’s appropriately sedate coverage of the dedication—14 paragraphs wrapped around an announcement of an award-winning microbiology research paper—included an accounting of money spent, the building’s troubled history and snippets of dignitaries’ remarks.

Described with unflattering bluntness as “this humanities building,” Wescoe Hall was deemed a “valuable and needed academic facility.” Nowhere to be found in coverage of the debut was a word offering any hint at beauty, grace or elegance.

Not even a photograph.