

# OLD CHEMISTRY RENOVATION

By Alyssa Werner

**A**s the university welcomed students to campus this fall, a new addition of chain link fences and whirring construction equipment awaited the thousands of students walking, biking, and skating down the mall.

The mall, a beautiful stretch of green grass at the heart of the university, culminates in the Historic District, a 33-acre patch of campus housing 17 historic buildings built between 1891 and 1937.

One of these, affectionately known as the “Old Chemistry Building,” has been home to the Department of Chemistry (now merged with Biochemistry) since it was built in 1936. It is being renovated to update the building to better serve current and future students, research groups, and research services.

The unique look and red-tile roof of the Chemistry building make it easy to spot on a stroll down the mall. Designed in the Italian Romanesque Revival Style by architect Roy Place, it features arch and

column architectural details as well as “pueblo deco” panels in the classic red brick.

The building’s position on the National Register of Historical Places also means it comes with many interesting details. Scott Dreisbach, the Facilities Manager for the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry (CBC), described just a few. For instance, the building is home to a first-floor closet that was once used as a Pharmacy Storeroom. Over the years, the frosted glass lost much of its lettering and now reads ‘ARM TOP ROOM’—a peculiar detail of the building that no one ever questioned and was particularly puzzling to Dreisbach until his discovery that the building was once shared with the College of Pharmacy.

Chemistry Building, 1936.



Photo courtesy of UA Arizona Business Affairs, Planning, Design, & Construction

Another such story stems from the 1980s, where graffiti that said “BOBBY SANDS LIVES” was spray painted to the side of the northeast entrance. Bobby Sands, an imprisoned IRA activist whose goal was to unite Ireland, died in 1981 in a hunger strike. Removal was attempted by sandblasting, which ironically preserved the moment in history on the



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building forever. It is still visible on the facade from the mall, above the lower level windows.

Throughout the changing times of the last 85 years, the Old Chemistry building has seen generations of students. Dreisbach expressed this sentiment perfectly when asked about his favorite aspect of the building: “I’ve always loved the wooden stairwell banisters,” he said, “It’s hard for me to touch them and not think of all the excited, scared, brilliant, nervous, and confident hands that also touched them over the decades.”

As part of the University of Arizona’s Historic District, preservation of the beautiful building is a top priority, but so are the changing needs of the students. Consequently, in May of this year, a \$42M renovation project began.

Sundt Construction, Inc., the company that originally constructed the Chemistry



South side addition artist's rendition. At left is the historic section of the Chemistry Building; at right is "The Commons"—a new facility dedicated to collaborative learning and research.

Building in 1936, is back on campus to take on the renovation project.

The University's team for Planning, Design, & Construction states that the building will be revamped and repurposed into an innovative teaching hub and modern research building. Here evidence-based teaching strategies (collaboration, inclusive practices, and

active learning) will result in increased student learning, engagement, and development of workplace-relevant skills, and cutting-edge research can be performed. The renovation, currently set to be completed in December of 2022, also includes accessibility and building code updates.

Several key features are set to bring new life to the Chemistry Building. The first is a south side three-story addition that will hold new classrooms and offices, as well as the machine shop and a space for nuclear magnetic resonance

imaging spectroscopy instruments. Additionally, the center courtyard will be turned into a state-of-the-art Learning Center. CBC will occupy about a third of the finished building, with the rest being dedicated to high-tech classrooms.

It will feature a new, accessible, grand entrance at the mall level on the north side. This north mezzanine entrance will create a lobby area that will retain the look of the historic building and create a new space for future students to come together.

At the University of Arizona, history and innovation continue to share a beautiful and thriving campus, and the renovation of the Old Chemistry Building will be no exception. In a combination of preserved history and modern teaching spaces, the building will bring new life to the Department and the University as a whole.

For now, students, staff, and faculty will make their way past the chain link fences that mark the start of a new era in the Old Chem building. And we will be eagerly awaiting the completion of the project that will preserve the history of the University while valuing learning and collaboration of the generations that will pass through the halls in the years to come.

Visit the UA News story about the groundbreaking ceremony for the renovation: [bit.ly/oldchem](http://bit.ly/oldchem)

