

Overlooking the quadrangle of green space in the heart of campus, Pembina Hall has been a central part of the University of Alberta since 1914. Along with its sister structures Athabasca and Assiniboia, the former residence has weathered the changing campus. During Pembina's illustrious career as a dormitory, the building housed victims of the influenza epidemic in 1918, injured

Royal Canadian Air Force soldiers during World War II, as well as thousands of undergraduate and graduate students. Threatened with demolition in 1974 and a fire in 1999, the structure now serves as academic space. Upon entering the stately building, the oak walls and marble floors evoke a time before the University landscape was filled with laptop-toting students or corporate sponsorship.

The halls, they are a-changin'

Grads pine for new home as Pembina makes shift to office space

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Photos by Andrew Rurak

If Pembina Hall's walls could talk, they'd relate almost a century of late-night study sessions, early morning treks to class, gossip, heartbreak and scandals. Traditionally home to female students, Pembina Hall became a coed residence primarily for mature students in 1974. And although the historic building is still listed on the online U of A campus map as "mature students' residence," students haven't called it home since they were evicted in August 2005 so that the building could be turned into office space. It's now home to the Faculty of Native Studies, and renovations are in progress to accommodate the Department of East Asian Studies and the Canadian Institute for Ukrainian Studies in the coming months.

According to Kristie Baillie, in charge of recruitment and external relations for the Faculty of Native Studies, renovations to Pembina Hall are almost complete and "not too much was done in terms of changing the fit of the building." Native Studies moved into the first and second floors of Pembina in August 2006.

University Architect Len Rodrigues describes the Pembina renovations as a "pretty standard project." There was no cooling or natural ventilation, and an elevator had to be installed to ensure universal access. Renovations included installing lighting, creating the front reception area and painting. The building was also abated for asbestos.

When the motion was first approved to convert Pembina Hall to academic space, the focus was on moving the departments in as soon as possible. What followed was a year of construction. Rodrigues explained the perceived delay occurred because it took time to assess what needed to be done, prepare requests for proposals and select contractors. He called the process "time consuming" and stressed that opening Pembina as office space in the fall of 2005 was never feasible.

"The intent was to get work underway," he states.

Rodrigues notes further that until gaining access to Pembina Hall after students moved out, it wasn't known what changes were necessary. The Pembina assessment required "walking through every part [of the building], which would have been an intrusion on residents."

The first and second floor renovation project took roughly twelve months and renovations on the other floor are ongoing, even as Native Studies occupies the building. Rodrigues couldn't confirm when the building would be ready for the Department of East Asian Studies and the Canadian Institute for Ukrainian Studies.

"The major issue is not to disrupt our friends who are in the building," he says.

While the character of Pembina Hall remains, what once were residence rooms now provide office spaces to the 30 employees working on the first two floors. Closets conveniently hide filing cabinets and the large windows offer the perfect view of campus.

The building offers new opportunities for Native Studies students and professors alike. The faculty now has adequate room for a boardroom, an elders/student lounge and classroom space for the Cree language program. A visitor wouldn't realize that computer labs were once laundry rooms.

While the University Administration is celebrating the installation of the Faculty of Native Studies in its new, permanent home, it wasn't too long ago that Pembina Hall was literally a home to many.

PhD student Andrea Dalton has fond memories of living in Pembina, describing it as "a wonderfully insulated community."

"The beauty of Pembina Hall was that it had the perfect design for residence community building. Everyone congregated in the central hall, and it was impossible not to know people," recalls Dalton, who lived there during the 2004/05 school year.

Dalton feels the benefits of a graduate student residence went beyond the convenient location. "Getting to know people from other departments is so invaluable for grad students," she noted, explaining that this social interaction gave her "an awareness of what goes on at this university in graduate and research work."

In March 2005, students living in Pembina Hall protested the unexpected announcement that the building would be converted the following September. Current residents had already received confirmation notices from Residence Services that there was a room available for them that fall.

Residents upset about the proposed closure began a counterstrike and gathered a petition of 1500 signatures. Their protest culminated in a presentation made to the Facilities Development Committee (FDC) of the General Faculties Council on 22 April, 2005. With three student representatives on the committee voting against it, the decision wasn't unanimous, but the FDC approved a motion to convert Pembina Hall into academic space.

"It makes sense from the University's perspective," says Alan Gill, who was at the April 22 meeting and is currently undergraduate representative on the FDC. "The problem I had with Pembina was that they did it on such short notice. It could have been handled better."

"The biggest tragedy isn't so much that we lost that specific space. It's that grad students don't have anything now," Dalton added.

While graduate students are currently eligible for residence room in Newton Place, HUB, Michener Park and East Campus Village, many graduate student choose not to live amongst undergraduates.

Christel Dahlberg, a first-year Masters student, lives in HUB. While she's pleased with her apartment she feels a sense of graduate community is missing. A graduate residence, she says, would offer "a wider circle of friends doing the same sort of work in different fields."

"The sad thing is that we're really isolated in our own department. I might have a lot in common with someone in Medieval History, but it's really difficult meeting other people in other disciplines," she comments.

MA student Tiffany O'Hearn also expresses concerns. "The University should really look into having more accessible housing that reduces the stress of moving. With so many programs being a year or two, it would be a big advantage to offer housing if they're hoping to attract students from across the country," she says.

Rodrigues suggests the northeast area of campus is the "obvious place" for a graduate residence. "We're seriously looking into building a grad residence sooner than later," he adds, noting that first the University needs to research development in that area.

Dalton agrees that having a residence community for graduate students is crucial if the U of A intends to continue expanding its graduate programs.

"The value of Pembina Hall as a draw for grad students should not be underestimated," she added.

Pembina Hall's conversion is part of a larger issue on campus that has seen academic departments scrambling for office and administrative space. Graduate students across disciplines feel the effects as they share crowded offices.

Rodrigues suggested that while expanding the core campus isn't possible, downtown development will help with the problem.

"There is a huge issue with space. We don't have enough to meet faculties teaching and research needs. There is considerable shortfall," he says. "Enterprise Square will help the backfill and free up some space on campus."

