

BATES COLLEGE

THE THRILL OF THE CHASE

(HALL, THAT IS)

BY DOUG HUBLEY



PHOTO COURTESY BATES COLLEGE

Bates College's Chase Hall is beloved, iconic, historic, but user-friendly? Well, probably not, thanks to unwelcoming entrances and a confounding interior layout that involved nine floor levels and multiple additions, all stitched together by a labyrinth of corridors and stairways. A plan is now in motion, however, to address these challenges. In May 2022, Bates closed Chase and began a substantial renovation involving as much as half of the building's floor space, as well as a systems upgrade and plenty of cosmetic work. This will be the sixth addition or substantial renovation in the building's 102-year history, according to the project announcement.

Surprises During Construction

About five months into the yearlong renovation of Chase Hall, Project Manager Kristi Mynhier said that the undertaking had turned an important corner. The first phase of construction, she pointed out, was dominated by demolition and by the abatement of hazardous materials. Those processes uncovered conditions that necessitated changes of plan and unforeseen work, including additional demo and abatement. Every construction project has its surprises, but they've abounded in Chase, for a variety of reasons. Now the demo and abatement days are done, fundamentally changing the course of the renovation. "We've finally [transitioned] from being reactive, while we discovered and uncovered, to being proactive," said Mynhier. "That's probably the most crucial part of a project, when you can start to look forward and plan properly, rather than consistently discovering new things and having to pivot. That's where you start to get good progress."

One of the last of several surprises that lent the Chase project such a thrill-ride quality appeared in September. Wooden floors in the building are supported by joists whose ends rest in notches in the interior brick wall. Demolition in Chase Hall Lounge, though, revealed that the ends of a number of joists overhead had been sawed off, denying them contact with the joist pockets in the brick. The precise motivation for removing the joist ends isn't known, but that work was done adjacent to windows. It's believed that incoming moisture, whether because the window units failed or someone failed to close them, rotted the joists.

To compensate for the lost support, the cut ends were fastened together with additional pieces of lumber, serving as ledger boards. These in turn were attached to the brick wall, but this arrangement didn't provide

the same quality of support as the original construction. That change created some saggy spots on the second floor, but baseboard heaters concealed the cause of the droopiness until their removal during demo.

The fix, Mynhier explained, entailed removing interior brick where joist pockets once were, connecting the truncated joist ends to the exterior layer of brick with metal "ties," and then rebuilding the interior wall. (In cross-section, the wall in question consists of a double exterior layer and a single interior layer, separated by an air gap.) She said that "It's probably been about a month from initial discovery of the problem to having the engineer look at it, bringing the abatement contractor back to do the Chase Lounge ceiling, and then having the engineer finalize the plan" for repair.

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Whack-A-Mole Responses

The discovery of the need for joist remediation shows how the whack-a-mole nature of exigency response in the Chase project has caused some shuffling of timetables. As Campus Construction Update reported in September, the amount of effort going into mechanical, electrical, plumbing (MEP) infrastructure would be doubled from the original plan. That began around the beginning of November, as workers on the first floor started to complement those who had been busy upstairs for a few weeks previously. “In the next month you’ll see the overhead mechanical work continue,” Mynhier explained—“mechanical” referring largely but not exclusively to HVAC. “That’s really our critical path for the entire job.”

“Also, to minimize the impact to the schedule,” she adds, “we’ve started

framing everywhere”—meaning that the metal and wooden studs that hold walls up are being erected and, in effect, making floor plans visible. “That allows the in-wall [MEP] rough-ins to continue and allows us to at least get board on the walls.”

In fact, placing wallboard is well underway on the second floor, whose layout will be the least altered by the renovation. On the first floor, the former lobby and Purposeful Work area is a forest of metal studs and two-by-fours that will ultimately coalesce into the largest unified office space that Purposeful Work has enjoyed thus far. On the ground level, the first few studs for Student Affairs offices have appeared in the former College Store retail area. “In December floor coverings will begin on the second floor,” Mynhier said; this effort will mark the start of finish work.

The Grand Central Stair

In December, too, assembly of a new Chase landmark began: what the project team refers to, variously, as the grand or central stair. “All of the wood is on site for the stair treads and landings, and the steel [for structural support] is on its way,” reported Mynhier.

Sited near the Office of Intercultural Education, which will return to its old quarters in Chase at renovation’s end, a new elevator shaft will form the core of a staircase that rises from the ground floor and tops out at the OIE level. From there, a nearby stairway original to the building serves the second floor. At the other end of Chase, near Carnegie Science, a current elevator and a new set of stairs will also terminate at the second floor.

Handy to the existing Campus Avenue entrance near Muskie Archives, the central stair will constitute one of

the main arteries through Chase. It will touch four building levels—ground floor; the Residence Life and Health Education area a half-level up, near the loading dock; the first floor; and the OIE floor, another half-level higher. A fun fact for readers, if not for the renovation team, is that Chase Hall, with its two additions, is a three-story building that will still contain nine discrete floor levels, even with the renovations.

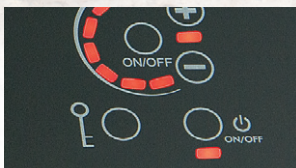
The central stair will be built in the area behind Chase Hall Lounge that Campus Construction Updates previously referred to as an “abyss” created by removing two big sections of concrete floor slab. Now visible at the bottom of that gulf are a square depression that will provide a base for the elevator, along with a pattern of holes where steel columns will be set to hold up the stairway and new floor slabs.

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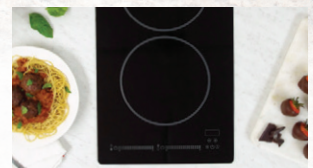
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Meanwhile, we learned more about the building's other main artery, which will begin where it always has—the Campus Avenue entrance near the Kenison Gate—but will otherwise give visitors an experience nearly as new as what the central stair has in store. The definitive differences lie at the street entrance itself. For one thing, entry to Chase will now occur a bit below ground level, via a ramp descending from the sidewalk. The entry will lead to a lobby sited approximately where, back in the day, students used to find P.O. boxes and the College Store.

But a change more dramatic than the ramp involves the three-story former staircase just inside the door: The stairs are gone—they won't be back—and that space instead will be a sort of atrium spilling light on people as they come and go. Additionally, glass interior walls will bring daylight more deeply into the building. In fact, on the first and second levels, floor space will be extended into the atrium. "It becomes more of a viewing area and a welcoming walk-in," said Mynhier. Those who enter Chase through the atrium will find a variety of new and old stairways and elevators to choose from. In a sense, the central stair will take

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on the role of the stairs that are now gone from the atrium—that is, a consolidated means of accessing different levels of the building. Other recent progress includes placement of retaining walls flanking the path of the forthcoming entrance ramp, along with the laying of foundations for two wing walls that will line the sidewalk. A pre-cast concrete drainage system will be installed along the Campus Avenue facade in the next couple of weeks.

Reinvigorating Chase Hall

A project goal is to reinvigorate Chase as a student resource that will be busy twenty-four hours a day. Built as a campus social center, the hall retains that identity, but there was a period when several of its student-focused functions moved elsewhere—Commons in 2008, and Post and Print, first to Lane Hall and then, in 2016, to the new Kalperis Hall along with the College Store. Chase remained busy

after dark with student activities, such as events in the former dining hall, and student organizations like the Student newspaper and the Outing Club, but the building became a little too quiet during the day. “We took a look at the campus to figure out, with all these functions being separated, how could we reinvigorate Chase,” explains Pam Wichroski, Bates’ director of capital planning and construction. “That was when we recreated the [current] vision for Chase, which was to have more student-focused programs in the building to make it more active and viable twenty-four hours.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Doug Hubley is a writer and musician living in Portland, Maine. Formerly a staff writer at Bates College and now retired, he continues to write *Campus Construction Update* for the College.

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