



A studied success

Indiana University's project to reconfigure foodservice at Read Hall had fallen through once already. But as Sue Holaday found out, some fresh thinking from a new team of consultants resulted in a solution that eventually pleased everyone

Take one haunted residence hall, a difficult architectural configuration and up to 11,000 students requiring meal plans on campus – that just about sums up the range of challenges in the project that awaited foodservice consultants at Indiana University late last year.

The project – an ambitious renovation of the university's near 60-year-old co-ed residence Read

Hall – came onto the radar of Indianapolis-based Reitano Design Group last autumn when a previous attempt to update the facility with another company was halted.

The five-member team was headed up by principal Scott Reitano FCSI. He recalls: "We got called in late on a project with a masterplan, and had to design and be out for bid in two months. The architect said it was for three concepts. We listened

to the client, thought it through and proposed four concepts."

Read Hall (which had originally been built as Smithwood Hall in 1955) has four wings in a cruciform arrangement, supported by about 20 load-bearing columns. The goal was to reshape the flow and improve circulation of customers around the building. Getting a handle on what to do about those columns was the biggest challenge. "We had to win

over an architectural team in a very tight time frame,” says Reitano.

“There were at least 15 columns in the main space we had to deal with, and all were essential to keeping the wings of the building together. A lot of the columns in the building towered three, four or five feet above us. We figured out how to make them part of the design. They are functional and now they seem like part of the party. They’re not going anywhere. Structural always wins over foodservice.”

Before Reitano started work, the dining venues were very dark, and there was wood panelling in the lobby – perhaps lending some credence to the legends of two different ghosts of

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long-deceased students. The plan was for the foodservice space to be made bright and open thanks to a new ramp and stair system. A 3ft grade difference between the lobby and the entry columns was to be eliminated. Now, there is lots of glass and open space. As Indiana University liked natural material such as limestone, VPS Architecture used plenty of it, and accented the venue with glass tiles.

The existing foodservice options – El Bistro, Hoosiers Den and Bueno’s – needed a complete rethink. Says Reitano: “The primary foodservice facility, El Bistro, was located in the cellar and needed to be moved upstairs.”

And despite the fact the equipment package for the project was just \$350,000, meaning many pieces of original equipment were kept, Reitano was convinced that the space “begged for four concepts” instead of the three originally requested.

So, Reitano added a coffee shop, Cream & Crimson, to the masterplan. It would serve breakfast early in the day and be open late at night. “We had fun putting Cream & Crimson together,” he says.

Reitano’s bold thinking is surely the product of his diverse

background in various aspects of foodservice, which started 29 years ago with a post at Hobart Corp, followed by many years as a manufacturer’s rep.

He’d been the president of a six-state rep firm when his wife became pregnant. “I decided there was no way I would miss watching this little person grow up,” he recalls. That’s when he started in consultancy. “I took over my late friend’s consulting firm and decided we needed to follow the food.” The move paid off: recently, Reitano’s team was honoured at NAFEM by *Foodservice Equipment Reports* for foodservice consultancy excellence.

Although the foodservice team and VPS Architecture worked very well on Read Hall, the project wasn’t without a few unforeseen hurdles. VPS project manager Charline Buentel recalls mechanical and electrical and plumbing lines were discovered “like spaghetti under the floors. It was a challenging to re-route them”.

She adds: “We had to slightly modify pathways for drains or reposition handwashing sinks. But there weren’t that many hurdles, so we were fortunate to get it to come together.”

MAIN KITCHEN



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The renovation project brought big changes to Read Hall's back of house (BOH), explains Department of Dining director Sandra Fowler. "We lost about a third of the old BOH because there was a lot of demolition. The building is X-shaped, and to get from one part to another was difficult on the first floor. We opened it up. The renovation left us with prep space and dishwashing (for pots and pans, as disposables are used for dining). A second renovation phase will include a test kitchen and catering space."

The approval process, too, had its ups and downs. "Getting everyone on board with the area that had to be relocated took some work," says Fowler. "Scott closed the old El Bistro downstairs around Thanksgiving and relocated it on schedule in early January. Now we are getting three or four hundred more students a day, and I expect that will grow when the Hoosier Den reopens."

Fowler's department works closely with the student association's Meal Plan Committee. "They sample new recipes and give us a lot of input. It's a great way to get feedback and they take their assignments seriously."

As well they might: the university, Fowler adds, has 42,000 students with 10,000 to 11,000 on meal plans, outlining the enormity of the changes that took place. "When we moved El Bistro upstairs, Bueno's also changed. We went from serving deli and Mexican and pastries to a presentation station which has great flexibility with a rotating menu."

As part of the renovation, Fowler says: "We got new gas equipment, charbroilers and Turbo Chef. Our presentations piece, Fire & Ice, is a cook station with gas burners like a wok and a refrigerated shelf for vegetables. We have something like this in other dorm locations, but it was new for Read Hall. This went very well and we've been very pleased. You learn so much when you do a renovation project."

Fowler already views the project as a success, noting that sales have increased by 30% since the renovations. The tight time frame (late November to early January) and the challenges presented by the columns, along with the approval process, made for "interesting" moments, she recalls. But the students, she says, like the results and "higher sales are the best feedback we can get".



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Cream & Crimson, she adds, is now popular at breakfast and serves until midnight. In the autumn it will extend its hours to 2am, offering a non-alcoholic late night alternative for students.

The transformation of Read Hall came to completion a few days early: the new spaces use the hall's four signature dorm colours, plus crimson and cream in the cafe. The new El Bistro has become a place where the students from each of the four dorm towers can intermingle and network, lounge, study, eat or meet up with friends. It now adjoins the Hoosier Den, a space that will have meeting facilities, a stage, and a venue for students to use as a gathering spot when it reopens this summer.

Hard work," Reitano says, "is what got us here and we're not taking our foot off the gas any time soon. The client wanted to come back and play with us again, which was good."

"It was fun, interesting and Scott was easy to work with," Fowler concurs. "We are currently doing another project."

Buente agrees with Reitano, who found the most satisfying part of the

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project was walking in on 12 January and seeing the project completed. She says: "It's exciting to walk in and see the students lined up to sit in spaces we created.

"It was gratifying to see the whole facility open up and circulation flow well."

As for the mysterious ghosts – both women who died under strange circumstances, one who's believed to wander around calling out residents' names and another believed to take a tumble down some stairs once a year on the anniversary of her death – Reitano did not encounter them throughout the project. Perhaps in the end, the shift in the lobby and dining areas from dark and dreary to bright and vibrant has enticed them both to leave the premises. ■



DESIGN SCOPE

For any foodservice project, from the development stage onwards, it's vital that the team working on it - operator, consultant, architect, interior designer and equipment manufacturers alike - are all on the same page from the outset.

When Indiana University sought LEED silver certification for its renovation of the 1950's Read Hall Center, the plan was to create a 'living room' for the larger southeast campus

neighbourhood, an effort that turned out to be much like untangling a knotted ball of yarn.

With no main first floor entrance to the structure, which had four wings, the circulation patterns were confusing and prohibited easy access.

Instead of expanding the structure or building something new to replace it, the University took the sustainable route, doing a project in several phases, which continue this year.

Transformation and impact

Sarah Schuler, president of VP Architects and principal-in-charge of the design team, calls the effort to open the flow between the wings "a substantial transformation with a profound impact on the neighbourhood."

Now the University has foodservice venues adjacent to a major circulation path and students from the wings and other living facilities can congregate, study and enjoy

the foodservice venues.

"It really supports the students and helps them learn outside the classroom," says Schuler.

The result of the collaborative approach from the team involved at Read Hall speaks volumes for communicating effectively and ensuring that everyone stays in the loop throughout the project. It ensures that project creep is avoided and the operator is happy with the end result.