

The Buildings of Dalhousie University

Dalplex

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Address: 6260 South St.

Start Date: October 1976

Completion Date:
1979

Architect: Leslie R. Fairn; J. G. Sykes

Renovation
Date(s):

Contractor: Fraser-Brace Maritimes Limited



Dalplex Model, c1976-1979

Building History

Dalhousie's Physical Education, Recreation and Athletic Centre - commonly known as the "Dalplex" - was built in the midst of a controversy more heated than the reception of any other campus building. Dalhousie had pieced together seven acres of land below South Street, that were zoned for institutional or recreational use. Announcing its plans for an athletic centre at a community meeting in August 1973, Dalhousie was surprised to be met with hostile opposition. Residents were concerned with what the large building would do to the cityscape and to property values, and some questioned why a \$5 million athletic building was taking precedence over academic needs such as library collection development, lab refurbishing, and overcrowded classes.



Dalplex Construction - Aerial View, 1977

But Dalhousie's athletics weaknesses were in need of addressing too. The Studley Gymnasium had been built in 1932 when the student population was 900; by 1973 it was 7500. The Bachelor of Physical Education was established in 1966, and by 1970 graduate work had developed. In 1973 Dalhousie had the worst physical education, recreation and sports facilities for a university of its size anywhere in North America. A brand new complex would boost the School of Physical Education, benefit varsity programs and intramurals as well as provide community programming. The Dalhousie Student Council voted 15 to 1 (with four abstentions) in favour of the athletic complex.



Dalplex, 1980

Following Dalhousie's initial announcement, a protracted battle waged over its right to put the athletics centre on the site it had chosen. The Committee of Concerned Dal Area Residents (CDAR) was formed, and 85% of residents in neighbourhoods surrounding Dalhousie signed a petition against the athletics centre. Halifax City Council rezoned the land from institutional to residential in November 1973 and Dalhousie was effectively stalled. Those on the university side pointed out to residents that they might prefer a recreation centre to a high rise building or low-income housing. Dalhousie continued behind-the-scenes research with its lawyers. The university then appealed the City Council decision to the Provincial Planning Board, which ordered Council to reverse the zoning change. Council appealed to the Nova Scotia Supreme Court

and then to the Supreme Court of Canada, but rulings stood firm in Dalhousie's favour. Thus Dalhousie won permission to build its athletic complex, though at the cost of serious damage to its public relations.

Construction of the building that came to be called the Dalplex began in October 1976, with blasting of the underground ironstone beginning at 8 am, Monday to Friday. The architect for Dalplex was Leslie R. Fairn, who had designed the Henry Hicks building and the Killam library. University planner J.G. Sykes also played a leading role. The building was to be as low and as large as possible without using pillars. Sykes risked a never-before-used steel roof sustained by compressed air.

Major fundraising for the Dalplex began in October 1977. Because of the delay, inflation had caused the estimate to climb from \$5 million to \$10 million; the end cost of the building was \$12 million. The provincial and federal governments were helping with 70 percent of this amount. In September 1978, \$2.3 million had been raised. The Dalhousie Student Union extended its mortgage on the SUB in order to contribute \$350,000.

With no predominant donor, the new athletics centre opened as the Dalplex on October 19, 1979. 12,000 visitors took in the Olympic-sized pool, squash and racquetball courts and towering 35 foot roof.

Within months the roof caved in under a heavy snowfall that was followed by rain. The person responsible for monitoring the roof's air pressure was in the basement at the time and unaware of the rain. But when the pressure was adjusted to compensate, the roof came back up to its normal place, much to the relief of Sykes and President Hicks!

In 1981 Dalplex won Athletic Purchasing and Facilities' merit award as one of the most outstanding new athletics buildings in North America. Ironically, Dalplex proved to be an asset to the community, a noted selling point for real estate in the area. It features a 1/6 mile indoor running track, two hardwood playing courts, a Fun Zone play area, squash, racquetball, table tennis, fitness areas, Cybex weight training equipment, a golf driving cage, two indoor climbing walls and dry heat saunas.

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Dalplex - Aerial Shot, n.d.



Dalplex - Field House, n.d.



Dalplex - Pool spectators area, n.d.

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