

School of Architecture

PARK BLOCKS: A SCIENCE CENTER THAT REPRESENTS PSU'S DIVERSE CAMPUS

By *Cristina Rojas* November 11, 2022  Share



Science Building 1 will begin a transformation into the new Vernier Science Center this fall.

A SCIENCE CENTER THAT REFLECTS PSU'S DIVERSE CAMPUS

The brutalist-style fortress that is Science Building 1 has long been a sore sight on Portland State's campus. So much so that a group of alumni from the Class of '69 Biology Club—among the first students to move into the then-new building—recently reunited and shared that it was as uninviting and oppressive back then as it is today. One even joked that it was brutal to its core.

Beginning this fall, the 55-year-old concrete building is set to undergo a dramatic renovation into the Vernier Science Center, a warm, welcoming, dynamic place for science teaching, learning, and collaboration, where all students feel like they belong and can see a future for themselves in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields.

“We see this as an opportunity to ensure our buildings expressly reflect our present and current values,” said Todd Rosenstiel, dean of PSU's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and a biology professor.

Gone will be the dimly lit hallways and outdated classrooms and labs. In their place will be light-filled spaces featuring wood and colors inspired by nature, state-of-the-art teaching labs, study nooks with views of native plants, and perhaps most importantly, a hub of culturally informed spaces designed to support students from groups that have historically been excluded from STEM fields.

PSU is home to Oregon's most diverse STEM student population—at least half identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC)—so it was only fitting that the design process center their voices.

An advisory council made up of students of color—including those who identify as LGBTQIA+ and disabled—offered critical insights during meetings with Bora Architects and campus planners. Indigenous faculty and students advised the project team on incorporating Indigenous perspectives into the design. And, as part of a series of dialogue sessions, more than two dozen BIPOC faculty, staff, alumni, and community members shared stories and insights into how built environments and campus spaces shaped their own educational journeys and college experiences for better or worse.

The architects listened. The building design that emerged supports the need students have to see themselves and their cultures represented and supported in the space. “The most important thing is to provide ways to support and give these students an environment where they can actually thrive,” said Michael Tingley, principal at Bora Architects.

On the entry level, the building will extend outward, creating space for study areas, gathering spaces, and family lounges along the perimeter. Outside, there will be a ring of deep planters filled with native species, which will help to soften the building, connect students to nature, and provide a buffer from the gazes of passersby. The plants will also serve as a teaching resource for Indigenous Nations Studies and biology classes.

The second floor will house the STEM Equity Hub, a suite of program-specific and shared spaces that provide critical support and activities for students from historically excluded and underrepresented groups in STEM. A career center will connect students with paid internships, undergraduate research experiences, and one-on-one support with career navigators. The suite will also house an Indigenous kitchen and classroom, gathering area, and Indigenous library that supports an expanded curriculum and practice of Indigenous Traditional Ecological & Cultural Knowledge (ITECK) at PSU. To learn how you can support this project, contact the PSU Foundation at (503) 725-3526.