North entry to the Physical Education Complex (PEC)

South entry to the Physical Education Complex (PEC)
"A window in the northeast wall of the pool provides for observation from an enclosure outside the pool and permits instructors to videotape individual performance. Chemical control of the pool water is computerized."

"Large triangular deck spaces at three corners of the pool serve as instruction areas, as staging platforms for water shows, or as recreation areas, as staging platforms for water shows, or as recreation areas. These and the balcony at the east end of the pool accommodate spectators for swimming meets and water shows."

"The Support Matrix"

"Between the field house and the pool is a two-story matrix of support space for the entire Physical Education Complex. The top floor contains the main entrance, the lobby, eight faculty offices, three classrooms, and a wrestling or self-defense room."

"The lower level consists of men’s and women’s locker rooms, dressing rooms, showers and other facilities for both athletic teams and physical-education participants. There are also men’s and women’s saunas, a weight room for physical conditioning, a training room, faculty dressing rooms, a golf driving range, equipment rooms and various maintenance and utility areas."

Size of facility – The Physical Education Complex (PEC) was designed with 86,860 gross sq. ft. and 71,262 net sq. ft.

Construction of the PEC began in October 1968 and was completed in November 1971.

Initial Cost – The architect initially projected a cost of $2,000,000. However, the final cost, which included all fees, landscaping, furniture and equipment was $2,600,000.

Architect – The principal architectural designer for construction of the PEC was Walter Netsch of Skidmore Owings and Merrill of Chicago, IL. SOM’s architectural project manager was James Olson and the firm’s structural engineer for this project was Charles Duster.

General Contractor – The general contractor for the construction of the PEC was Gilbert Builders, Inc. of Iowa Falls, IA.

Renovations – Aside from partitioning the locker rooms to accommodate greater ease of use by women, the replacement of the Tartan floor covering, and adding office space in the support matrix, very little renovation work has been done in the PEC.
Assignment of Space in the PEC

Space allocations in the Physical Education Complex are indicated in these drawings, in which the left side is oriented toward the north (Tenth Avenue). Details of the space utilization are provided inside this folder. The upper drawing shows all of the first level. The lower drawing shows part of the upper level, including the second story of the support matrix.

The large rectangle is the field house (297 feet long, 120 feet wide, and 25 feet high). In it are the north and south gymnasiums, with the smaller “island” gymnasium in the center. A 220-yard track is laid out next to the walls.

The other major area is the swimming pool, in a chamber 35 feet high. The two channels in the cross-shaped pool are 46 feet wide, with the north-south channel being 25 yards long and the east-west channel 25 meters long.

Between the two major areas is the two-story support matrix. The lower level contains a weight room, equipment and locker rooms, men’s and women’s saunas, dressing rooms, showers, and other facilities. In the upper level are classrooms, faculty offices, the wrestling and self-defense room, and a large lobby into which both the main entrances lead.

PHOTOGRAPHY: Balthazar Korab, Roger W. McMullin, and Carl Voss

NOTE: This brochure is printed on paper made of 100 per cent recycled fiber.
COMMENTS -

In the early years of Grinnell College, indoor physical education facilities took place in basements of classroom buildings and occasionally rented space such as that located in the local armory. In the late 1890s a gymnasium (Rand Gymnasium for Women) was built for the use of the College’s women. Shortly thereafter, the College constructed a gymnasium for men. As was the case with most private colleges in those days, neither of these buildings was very impressive or imposing as far as its offering a wide variety of physical educational activity space was concerned.

In 1941, Grinnell built a substantial gymnasium facility (see Darby Gymnasium) for men. The advent of the new building made available to the women’s program in physical education the gymnasium that had been built originally for men. Although the men’s gymnasium was an excellent facility for men’s varsity basketball, it provided only limited use for the other men’s athletic endeavors. It was not intended to be a general recreational facility for the College. Indoor track facilities were non-existent at the College. A very short and dusty cinder track on which runners trained for the outdoor season was improvised in the basement of the women’s gym. The College’s first swimming pool was built in 1926 when very difficult financial conditions greatly limited the quality of the facility. Thus, only men’s basketball enjoyed adequate facilities for indoor varsity athletic activity. Intercollegiate athletic competition for women did not move to a position of significance until the early 1970s.

From the time of his arrival in 1955, President Howard Bowen was strongly oriented toward recreational physical activity for both women and men students although he was not a strong advocate of liberal arts colleges emphasizing varsity intercollegiate athletic competition. In 1964 at Bowen’s request, the architectural firm of Loebl, Schlossman and Bennett (later responsible for the 1965 renovation of the Hall of Science) presented to the Board of Trustees preliminary sketches for a new recreational gymnasium and swimming pool. The Board considered the report and the sketches but took no action on the proposal from President Bowen to fund the project.

In late March 1964, President Bowen submitted his resignation as Grinnell’s President effective July 1 of 1964. He resigned from Grinnell to accept the presidency of the State University of Iowa in Iowa City.

In September of 1965 Glenn H. Leggett was appointed as the eighth President of Grinnell College. In February of 1966, Leggett presented an address entitled “The First Half-year With A New President,” in which he stated “We need desperately to improve our recreational facilities – certainly the addition of a new swimming pool and a very large recreational gymnasium or field house.” He added that he preferred a field house that would serve both the recreational needs as well as the intercollegiate athletic competitive needs of Grinnell’s men and women.

In November 1966, President Leggett requested that the Board of Trustees authorize the administration to apply to the Higher Education Facilities Commission Title I program for a grant to aid in meeting the cost of a new physical education complex. The Board approved the request but stated that the cost of the facility should not exceed $2,750,000 and that preliminary
architectural plans must be drawn that would satisfy the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees.

Critics of the plan to construct a PEC stated the belief that other needs, such as renovation of ARH, Carnegie and Goodnow should stand higher on the priority list than should a physical education facility. In response, President Leggett stated that the College was “more likely to receive federal funds for the PEC project than for classroom building renovations because Grinnell’s classroom space per student is much greater than that at other colleges in our region. However, its physical education facilities are much poorer in terms of space per student than that of the other schools with whom Grinnell will have to compete for the funds.”

In January 1967, the administration submitted to the Iowa Higher Education Facilities Commission a proposal for an IHEFC grant of $530,000 to help fund the proposed physical education complex.

Several architectural consultants were invited to submit conceptual sketches for the new facility. A number of different building arrangements were considered. However, an arrangement of two connected buildings, one housing a large multi-use gymnasium and one housing a large swimming pool was favored by most people involved in the decision-making process. Walter Netsch, the Principal Architect from the Chicago firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill who had designed Burling Library, The Fine Arts Building, the College Forum and Norris Residence Hall, was retained to produce more refined sketches in accord with the concept of the two-building complex.

In February 1967, the Iowa Higher Education Facilities Commission recommended to the U. S. Office of Higher Education that it fund a grant of $537,100 to Grinnell College to be applied toward the cost of the proposed building. The Grinnell Board of Trustees approved payment from the College’s endowment all funds in excess of the Title I Grant necessary to construct the building should the College receive the grant.

At the same time, the Board of Trustees authorized the administration to apply to the Office of Education for a thirty-year $840,000 loan (at 3% interest) to support the construction of the PEC. The Board stated that the College would provide funds for the remainder of the cost of the complex from other grants, gifts and endowment.

In May 1967, Walter Netsch presented to the Grinnell Board more specific sketches of the two-wing building. He estimated that the two structures plus the connecting link would cost approximately $2,000,000. The Board expressed enthusiastic support for the concepts presented by Netsch. It then authorized President Leggett to retain SOM as the architectural firm for the design of the PEC. Leggett appointed SOM to design the complex and stated that the firm should target August 1969 as the completion date for the project.

John Pfitsch, Athletic Director and Chair of the Department of Men’s Physical Education was placed in charge of coordinating the planning for the building with the staffs of the men’s and
women's physical education departments. Anna Wack, Chair of the Department of Women's Physical Education was also deeply involved in the planning process for the new complex.

John Pfitsch also helped raise money for the project. Among his travels to seek gifts for the complex was a trip to Washington, D.C. during which he met with Phillip Des Marais, Assistant Deputy Secretary of Special Education with the U.S. Department of Education. Serendipitously, Marais had, as a close friend and mentor, Harry Hopkins, the illustrious Grinnell alumnus who had held many high positions in the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt during the 1930s and who served as special assistant to Roosevelt during World War II. After talking at length with Pfitsch, Des Marais became quite sympathetic with Grinnell's needs and aided the College in obtaining the $540,000 grant from the HEFC for the construction of the complex.

Early in 1968, Grinnell received official notice that it had been awarded a grant in support of the PEC construction project for $537,100 from the Department of Education through the Iowa HEFC.

In mid-March of 1968 the Executive Committee of the Board approved SOM's drawings and specifications for the PEC and instructed the President to initiate construction of the structure immediately. Following the meeting of the Executive Committee, the administration invited bids from several general-contracting firms for construction of the PEC.

The most attractive bid was received from Gilbert Builders, Inc. from Iowa Falls, IA. Gilbert's bid for the general contract was $2,158,250. Construction of the PEC was to begin the first week of October 1968. The Higher Education Facilities Grant had stipulated that construction of the project must have begun by October 23, 1968 or the grant would be withdrawn. At the time of the initiation of construction, the architect and the general contractor projected that the building would be completed in June 1970.

In summary, the PEC project was financed by a grant of $537,100 from the IHEF Commission, a loan of $943,000 from the U.S. Office of Education Title III Program, while the remainder of the funds for the $2,600,000 project came from grants and gifts from alumni, foundations, corporations and other donors.

Although Gilbert Builders, Inc. had initially projected that the PEC construction project would be completed by June 1970, that was far from reality. The PEC was not available for any use until August 27, 1971, fifteen months after the projected occupancy date. Even then, the entire building was not available for use until late in the fall of 1971.

The reasons for the delays in construction were many. Throughout the majority of the project, the workers were plagued by inclement weather. The site selected for the building had an unexpectedly high water table. This contributed to two significant problems. First, excavation of the site for the partially sunken buildings was made almost impossible due to poor drainage and the resultant accumulation of heavy mud from the inclement weather. Second, the instability of the substrate upon which the heavy walls were to be placed required the sinking of more than eighty caissons which were three feet in diameter and fifty to seventy feet deep with bell-shaped
bases. The caissons were required in order to provide a stable platform upon which to place the
calls and main structure of the gymnasium.

Next, the huge laminated wood beams that supported the roof over a very long span (in some
instances 150°) of open space were very difficult to lift into place. Several cranes with booms of
increasing lengths were brought to the job before an appropriate machine and operator that could
accomplish the task was found.

Further, the surface selected for the floor of the gymnasium portion of the building was to be a
slab-on-grade covered with a new product by the name of “Tartan Flooring” which was produced
by Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing (3M) from Minneapolis. 3M would not release its
“Tartan” for installation until a complex drainage system was in place below the slab-on-grade.
Of course, installation of the drainage system increased the time necessary for construction.

Next, it became clear that a project of the size and complexity of the PEC had drained the local
labor market and the general contractor was not able to retain enough electricians to keep the
final stages of the project moving properly.

Gilbert Builders, Inc. charged that SOM had caused so many delays that they (the general
contractor) could not possibly have met the schedule originally agreed to.

To add to the problems, the mechanical sub-contractor ultimately sued the general contractor and
the College for $96,000 in “increased costs that it (the mechanical contractor) suffered due to
excessive delays in construction.” The College did not receive a judgement ordering it to pay any
of the damages that might have been awarded.

In the final analysis, the problems with the completion of the building were attributable in great
part to the fact that Gilbert Builders, Inc. was not a large enough firm to have taken on a job of
the magnitude of the PEC. Of course, the problems listed above also contributed to Gilbert
Builders, Inc.’s inability to meet its time schedule obligation. Unfortunately, the Gilbert firm
reportedly went out of business immediately after dealing with these problems.

These problems significantly increased the College’s costs for the project. The project for which
Walter Netsch, in May 1967, had projected a total cost of $2,000,000, ultimately cost
$2,600,000. Both figures included all fees, construction costs, landscaping costs, equipment costs
and furnishing costs. The final cost represented an overrun of 30%, a very high figure even when
the adverse conditions experienced in construction are taken into account.

Mention should be made concerning the role played by Dale Hawn in the construction of the
PEC. At the time of initiation of construction of the structure, Hawn, who was a trained
construction engineer and who was also well-experienced in supervising major construction
projects, was appointed to the position of Director of Grinnell’s Physical Plant. Hawn had not
been involved in the oversight of the PEC project in the early stages of its construction.
However, as the delays continued, he was called upon to apply his experience and knowledge of
engineering to help break the stasis that had developed and which was holding up the completion
of the project. He ultimately assumed technical oversight of the project for the College in addition to fulfilling the demands of his position as Director of the Physical Plant. Fortunately for the College, Hawn was able to move the project off dead center and it was completed in November of 1971, eighteen months beyond the time scheduled by the architects and the general contractor.

When the PEC became available for use, Athletic Director John Pfitsch recommended to the administration that residents of the Grinnell community be given access to the complex during periods of time when use by the College’s students and faculty was low. Pfitsch had been, in great part, responsible for the multi-purpose concept in the design of the facility and believed that it should be used as much as possible. Many members of the local community responded very positively by using the PEC regularly. Through the years, the combination of the large size of the PEC, the size of the student body and the size of the community have been appropriate for a successful shared experience that is rarely found in other college locations within the U. S. During the last thirty years, both the field house and the swimming pool have been a great addition to the community recreational offerings. The availability of the swimming pool has made possible a program for varsity swimming for both boys and girls of Grinnell High School.

At the dedication of the PEC, President Leggett stated “Any institution designed to provide education in a large and liberal atmosphere must have resources and opportunities for keeping the whole being of each of its students renewed and refreshed through continuous and intelligent physical activities. A live, lean feeling body adds a special vibrancy to the operations of the developing mind.”

An interesting apocryphal story developed around the opening of the PEC and continued throughout its first ten to twelve years. The story believed by many members of the Grinnell community was that the government grant, which provided part of the funding for the construction of the PEC, required that the College allow regular community use of the facility. Such was not the case. The College initially invited the community to use the facilities in the PEC because of a deep interest of the College’s Department of Physical Education, Athletic Director Pfitsch, and the administration in helping the Grinnell community avail itself of this fine recreational opportunity. These altruistic motives on the part of the College did not quiet the criticism that the administration received regularly when the pool or the gymnasium was closed for necessary maintenance.

Initial use of the PEC by the College’s students developed more slowly than had been anticipated. Eight years after the facility was opened, Athletic Director Pfitsch stated in the Scarlet and Black that he was disappointed with the number of students who voluntarily were using the facility. At that time, he estimated that, outside of utilization of the PEC for varsity athletic activities and physical education classes, less than ten percent of the student body was using the PEC regularly. However, in the last twenty years, the increased interest of young people in physical fitness has greatly increased the number of student users of the facility.

College faculty and staff use of the PEC has always occurred at a fairly high level. In fact, the facility has been one of the positive influences in interesting faculty and staff in coming to the
College. Such has also been the case within the local community as far as hiring has been concerned.

Prior to the opening of the PEC, the men’s and women’s physical education departments were separate entities which were housed separately in Darby Gymnasium and the Women’s Gymnasium. At the time of the opening of the PEC, the two departments were joined into a single Department of Physical Education. At approximately the same time, an interest in intercollegiate women’s athletics was building at Grinnell as well as in most liberal arts colleges in the U.S. The PEC had been designed with the idea in mind of accommodating programs in both men’s and women’s intercollegiate athletics. One of the features of the facility was the centrally located “island gymnasium” that was to be devoted to women’s basketball. Shortly after the opening of the PEC, Grinnell initiated the development of a significant program in women’s intercollegiate athletics. The advent and rapid growth of women’s athletics required modification of locker room space to accommodate Grinnell’s women intercollegiate athletes. At the present time, the College participates in intercollegiate varsity athletic competition in ten women’s and ten men’s sports.

The PEC was a great addition for the College’s intercollegiate athletic programs as well. It provided those programs with a new indoor 220-yard track which the College had not had before. It also provided a swimming pool that was magnitudes of quality better than its predecessor had been. In addition, the PEC provided four tennis courts that could be used by the tennis teams for practice and for matches with visiting teams in inclement weather, new weight training space and equipment, an athletic training room, and much better equipment storage space than had been available. Although the PEC provided a new complete basketball court with a maple floor, it was only used by the women’s basketball program for a brief time before that program moved to Darby Gymnasium to share basketball facility therein with the men’s basketball program. Three large rooms were also available for meeting physical education classes.

The PEC also offered opportunities for many types of recreational activities such as handball, racquetball, squash, tennis, basketball, swimming, weight training, jogging, martial arts, for the casual users of the facility.

In 1985, the College renovated a large central room in the support matrix area of the PEC to serve as trophy room for the Honor G, alumni use and as a tribute to the Chicago cubs. Funds for the creation of the “Cubs Room” were provided by long-term trustee, Joseph Rosenfield. Rosenfield, had been the principal minority stockholder in the Chicago Cubs’ organization. He was required to liquidate his stock along with other private individuals who held stock in the organization when P. K. Wrigley sold the Chicago Cubs to the Chicago Tribune. He contributed his profits from the sale of his stock to the construction of the Cubs Room. Rosenfield was among several hundred in attendance at the dedication ceremony of the Cubs Room at which baseball Hall of Fame member and continuing contributor to the Cubs organization, Ernie Banks, was the featured speaker.

In 1991, the Board of Trustees approved a recommendation that the gymnasium (field house) area of the PEC be named after John Pfitsch, long-term teacher, coach, Department Chair and Athletic
Director at the College. At that time and in honor of Pfitsch, a fund drive was undertaken in honor of Pfitsch and those funds were used to replace the twenty-year-old Tartan floor covering in the gymnasium.

In 1996 the Board of Trustees approved a recommendation that the swimming pool portion of the PEC be named after Raymond Obermiller, swimming and diving coach at the College from 1966 to 1998. Obermiller’s teams won more conference and NCAA titles than any other coach in the of any sport in the College’s history.

In recent years, a significant amount of weight training equipment has been placed in the island gymnasium for the benefit of casual users as well as for the benefit of participants in the College’s intercollegiate athletic programs.

Grinnell College’s PEC has served its students and the community of Grinnell well in its thirty years of existence at the College. During the early stages of planning and construction the PEC was occasionally referred to as “Pfischt’s Folly.” However, Pfitsch’s concept of a multi-use facility for the College’s needs has proven to be dead right. In a climate where weather that is not conducive to outside sports activities more than fifty percent of the time, the PEC has provided a wonderful outlet for people, young and old, to relieve stress, have fun and stay fit. For this, the College owes Glenn Leggett, John Pfitsch and Anna Wack a debt of gratitude.

At the present time, the College is considering several options for improving its indoor intercollegiate athletic and recreational physical facilities. Some people support the demolition of the PEC and replacing it with a more all-encompassing facility elsewhere on campus. Others advocate adding to and renovating the existing structure by modifying or adding to it to adapt to new needs. Creating a totally new building is always an attractive option. Critics of replacement of the PEC advocate that financially, the most prudent course would be to adaptively modify and add to the current structure. The middle-aged building is reasonably sound structurally. I would not hazard a guess concerning the probable outcome of such considerations. However, I believe that one thing is a certainty. When one considers the rate of change in the interests of young people over time as well as the rate of change that occurs in the evolution of athletic programs, it is likely that any new structure developed for today’s students and programs will seem at least as unsatisfactory in twenty five to thirty years as the PEC seems to its users today.

Waldo Walker
May 2001