Keywords: College Union, University Union, student involvement, Brutalist architecture, student publications.

Abstract: Today at Cal Poly we make use of our Julian A. McPhee University Union building every day. Home to on-campus student resources such as the Multicultural Center, Gender Equity Center, Pride Center and ASI Craft Center, our UU is a place that provides unity for people of all different groups. Our UU also accommodates a bowling alley, a Chase Bank, Starbucks, a frozen yogurt shop—among other take-out restaurants, as commercial means to produce revenue so the building can sustain itself financially. The UU at Cal Poly is also used as a study space for students or a place to meet with peers and faculty recreationally. Understanding how Cal Poly students are making use of the UU deems further investigation to the historical roots of the building. Student involvement within the planning and organizing of our UU, formally known as the College Union, created and influenced how it became as the building did today. Looking at factors, such as the history of College Union goals across college campuses in America, as well as the architectural style the College Union was used in the design, may also demonstrate contributing elements we see today in our Union building at Cal Poly.

Introduction

The College Union, a building to many known as “the living room of the campus,” customarily provides a physical space for students and faculty members to engage in recreational and leisurely activities, while also fostering a community atmosphere throughout the campus. As Porter Butts explained in his book, *The College Union Idea*, “a fundamental responsibility of the college union is the education of tastes by exposure…inciting activities (social, mental, emotional, physical) in the environments which promote the appetite for participation.” At Cal Poly, we use our version of this building, currently known as the Julian A. McPhee University Union, every day. Our UU is a place where students can come together to meet up and study in the lounges, gather for a game of bowling, indulge in a serving of frozen yogurt or make use of the campus resources, such as the Multicultural Center, Pride Center, Gender Equity Center and the ASI Craft Center. Along with these services, our UU is also a place which generates commercial

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income from the extension of partnered companies, such as Yogurt Creation, Starbucks, Mustang Station and Chase Bank (among others), creating profits that go towards funding all the resources of the building. The importance of constructing a college union brings the possibility of organizing an establishment where students are exposed to an environment as they are encouraged to grow in different areas in their life. This then begs the question, what was campus life like for students and faculty members on campus before the final construction of Cal Poly’s college union in 1971? In this paper, I will explore the historical roots of the College Union at Cal Poly, focusing on the external and internal forces of student involvement that mutually impacted and contributed to the final construction of the building.

**Historiography**

While students started getting more involved with the technical planning of the proposed college union, beginning in the mid 1950s (about 20 years before its actual construction), other members of the Cal Poly community were also active with the architectural planning of the building. One prominent contributor is the distinguished San Francisco-based architect, Joseph Esherick. He was selected by a panel of students and faculty members over 98 other architects to ultimately create the architectural designs for what would be the College Union building at Cal Poly.³ In a documented transcript, discussing his early visit to Cal Poly and how he would design our College Union building, Esherick explained, “I started out with certain basic schematic ideas derived from watching how people moved around the campus…what appealed to me was the idea of having a building that had all sorts of informal, casual ways of coming through.”⁴ The design of a college union building on campus requires easy to locate entrances to allow students

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and faculty members to feel like they are welcomed to enter the building. This follows Robert M. Rouzer’s and his co-author’s idea that “a college union is the campus leader in building community,”\textsuperscript{5} while also being a place of openness and unity amongst students and faculty members on campus.

**Student Involvement and the Impact Created**

The growing trend of constructing college union buildings on college campuses in the post-war years in America flourished out of the idea that the establishment of these buildings will bring a community environment throughout the college. When this idea reached Cal Poly during the time of more serious consideration, students were the ones to push proposals into fruition. Due to the great student involvement with the college union at Cal Poly, the building was ultimately impacted from the contributions made. Emphasizing this notion, Robert M. Rouzer and co-authors add, “the historical roots of college unions are grounded in student involvement and recreation.”\textsuperscript{6} In many of the planning and proposal phases, the students at Cal Poly were involved at the center of it all. From requesting fellow students to submit their ideas, desires, and opinions regarding Cal Poly’s proposed college union to the campus newspaper, to sending two students to a conference in hopes of gaining deeper knowledge about the importance of the college union building, as well as displaying student designed college union miniature building models, and opening up student polls to help determine the official professional architect who will create the designs of the college union, these actions can be seen as contributing factors to the final construction of the building at Cal Poly.\textsuperscript{7} Another notion to consider is that the students

\textsuperscript{5} Rouzer, et al., 3.
\textsuperscript{6} Rouzer, et al., 3.
at Cal Poly were an active factor of generating revenue for funds which went towards the college union. Income from the El Corral bookstore was stored away to only go towards the college union in a reserve, and the campus was made aware of this. Additionally, there was a $16.00 college union building student fee implemented in the Fall quarter of 1966 which required all students to pay in order to create more funds for the construction of the building.8 Before the college union could start construction, a majority vote made by students about the student fee needed to “receive a two-thirds majority for passage.”9 Students took this project seriously, understanding how important and useful a building like this would be on campus to create the environment of unity and community that the campus of Cal Poly was lacking at the time.

The Unique History of Cal Poly’s College Union

According to a student article published in the Mustang Daily in 1971, the idea of building a college union at Cal Poly had been proposed since the 1900s.10 After World War II, more serious proposals for the construction of the building were given consideration, as student rates were rapidly growing due to the implementation of the G.I. Bill.11 During this time, students at Cal Poly were beginning to become more heavily involved with starting the plans for the proposed college union. The creation of student ran organizations, such as the College Union Planning Committee, the College Union Committee and the College Union Board, allowed for the student body opinions and wishes to be shared with others on campus, as well as with Administration. Each committee also elected student officers that were then funded to attend the annual Conference of the Association of the College Unions, which brought greater awareness to

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8 “Student charges increase next fall,” El Mustang 28, no. 15, 11 January 1966, 1.
10 Jayne Ure, “College Union Dreams Comes True,” Mustang Daily 33, no. 92, 4 March 1971, 4.
the goals of building a college union on campus, as well as allowing the students to express their perspectives on the building.\textsuperscript{12} The students that traveled to the conference then brought relevant information to Cal Poly and shared it. Senior architecture students were assigned projects to design college union models for Cal Poly using the proposed programs given to them by their professors.\textsuperscript{13} Not only did this notion affirm our “Learn By Doing” motto, but this also brought a different perspective of considering the proposed college union, it being a building to foster unity within the campus, but also to be seen as a place for architectural acknowledgement. Indeed, students’ active involvement with the college union impacted campus culture at Cal Poly.

**A Brief History of College Unions**

What is the origin story behind these legendary college campus buildings? The first college unions were built in the early 1800s at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in England.\textsuperscript{14} The initial intentions for these early college unions were to be places for men to form debating clubs,\textsuperscript{15} showcasing the elitist academic status amongst these higher education institutions. This message of creating a space for a men’s club traveled to America at Harvard University where they attempted to “imitate the idea”\textsuperscript{16} that was being practiced back in Europe. As Porter Butts explains, “American colleges at the turn of the century saw in the British unions an element needed in American education.”\textsuperscript{17} The idea of constructing a physical space for students to participate in the exchange of stimulating discussions appealed to higher education

\begin{footnotes}
\item[13] Togawa, 1.
\item[15] Butts, 11.
\item[17] Butts, 11.
\end{footnotes}
institutions because this exercised and expressed the knowledge students learned in classrooms. The first official college union building in America was Houston Hall at the University of Pennsylvania in 1896. Excerpted from a catalogue from the University of Pennsylvania in 1896, “The purpose of Houston Hall is to provide for all the students of the various departments a place where all may meet on common ground; and to furnish them with every available facility for passing their leisure hours in harmless recreation and amusement.”\(^{18}\) The Houston Hall college union shifted away from the idea of it being a place only for the men’s debate club and adopted the community building aspect we experience at our UU today.

As America was impacted and left to recover after World War I and the Great Depression, the status of the college union building on college campuses was also socially and financially impacted. The construction of the building across campuses was put to a halt due to funds going towards other imperative needs of the colleges. After World War II, more colleges began constructing college unions, now implementing a new value and goal of the building: “the making of effective citizens.”\(^{19}\) The initial college union ideals shifted from once being a place for men’s debate clubs, to a place where students are encouraged to adopt the traits of a model citizen by the time of culmination from exposure to recreational activities with peers and faculty. Leadership opportunities in student government positions opened up for students to participate in, allowing them to gain experience in other roles that are not exercised inside the classroom but still contribute to the vital traits as an admirable citizen in society. Due to the college union holding the reputation of being “the living room of the campus”, as well as “the heart of the campus”,\(^{20}\) recreational activities are emphasized in community building for students and faculty.

\(^{18}\) Butts, 10.
\(^{19}\) Butts, 89.
\(^{20}\) Rouzer, et al., 3.
members. Mara Dahlgren and co-authors add, “community building not only cultivates learning experiences but also provides students with support so…[students] feel like they belong and matter to the institution (Tinto, 2001)”.

These goals that were shared from constructing the college union building at Cal Poly were very appealing to students. An article in the El Mustang, written by student Chuck Smith elaborates, “in all its processes, [the college union] encourages self-directed activity, giving maximum opportunity for self-realization and for growth in individual social competency and group effectiveness. Its goal is the development of person as well as intellects.”

There was a strong importance for every student to understand the goals of the college union building and how it would contribute to campus life at Cal Poly. This led to the active student involvement in planning for the building, which can be recognized in the history of our University Union building at Cal Poly.

**Brutalism Architecture and the College Union**

A factor to consider regarding college unions, is how the architecture may influence how the campus engages with the building. As Loren J. Rullman and co-authors explain, “the relationship between a space and its users is not solely a product of the architecture, yet the physical framework of a campus and the design of its facilities play a role in the human experiences.”

The University Union here at Cal Poly can be observed as organizing a welcoming and inviting space for students and faculty members to easily move through. The original architectural designs for Cal Poly’s University Union were designed in 1968, adopting the architectural style called Brutalism within the designs. The term brutalism originated from “a

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French expression- *beton brut*—meaning rough or raw concrete—the material characteristic that is so typical of this style of architecture.”

Emerging after World War II, this architectural style can be seen as reflecting societal fears, as Helene Sroat further adds, “It has been interpreted as a sort of bomb shelter architecture…[and] the need for strong shelter.”

This brutalist style was also favored by architects and Cal Poly administration at the time due to lower costs of the materials being used, such as reinforced concrete and cement. The UU’s brutalist style enhances the idea of how humans may interact with its physical environment. Today we may see a bulky gray building with exposed concrete and sharp protruding angles, but by shifting our perspectives to an architectural viewpoint we may notice all the different entrances our UU has. This provides the welcoming feeling that can support the community atmosphere that students were wanting to create with the building of the college union on campus.

**Pioneers in Student Involvement: 1950s**

The first wave of student involvement at Cal Poly with the planning of the college union building arose in the 1950s. More discussion and urge for a college union proposal began to develop amongst more students as the campus of Cal Poly started to grow in attendance rates. The need and desire for a college union became a circulating idea around campus among the student body, especially observed in the student publication newspaper, the *El Mustang*. In March of 1954, student Frank Tours published an article in the *El Mustang* asking the all-male campus…

…do you know what a College Union is- has anyone asked you if YOU want a College Union building? Do YOU spend any time thinking about that building- wondering when it will be constructed- or what it will consist of? … In the event

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25 Sroat, 1.
that some of you men have an idea of what YOU would like to see in the future Cal Poly College Union…bring it to the EL Mustang office. We’ll route some to Blue Key [fraternity] and start the ball rolling…  

The importance of being an informed student of the objectives of a college union building at Cal Poly can be seen from this article. Since this building will include services for students to use, direct outreach of student’s ideas to be included was in need.

Another early account of student engagement involves two Cal Poly students traveling to Logan, Utah, to attend the annual Association of College Unions conference in October of 1955, funded by the Student Affairs Council (SAC). As student Bob Flood reported in the *El Mustang*, “Don Walker and Ray Werner returned from a conference…as a step toward the eventual reality of a permanent student union on the Cal Poly campus, or improvements of the existing program…At Logan, Werner and Walker toured the student union at Utah State…” As a result of our students traveling to a college campus which already has the college union building, they were able to share their experience with the Cal Poly student body. Other types of college union student participation involve the Blue Key fraternity and senior Cal Poly students. As the promotion for the college union was buzzing at Cal Poly, Blue Key fraternity was playing a major role in creating a “temporary college union” building. The space that was renovated for the temporary building was originally the Hillcrest Dormitory, which was housing for male students. Being known as the “skid-row of dorms” may provide understanding to why the

26 Tours, 1,6.
27 Flood, 1.
28 California Polytechnic State University, 1957 *El Rodeo Yearbook*, (Monrovia, CA: The Yearbook House, 1957), 93. http://digital.lib.calpoly.edu/rekl23238?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=8744f969a1d9590281da&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=1
dorm was constructed over instead of using a different space on campus. Additionally, a student’s written concern in the *El Mustang* in 1947 stated that the road “leading up to Hillcrest way is in sad shape. There are a lot of ruts knee-deep to a tall giraffe.” 29, which was located where Grand Avenue is today. Starting in February of 1955, the Blue Key fraternity began renovation. As seen in Figure 1, the Hillcrest Lounge, “Temporary College Union”, was designed with an open setting to facilitate student engagement, an early goal of the college unions and an idea that can be seen in our current UU at Cal Poly.

Senior architecture students created the building plans, senior electrical engineering students worked on the electrical needs within the building, and senior air conditioning students were in charge of the flooring committee. 30 Funds for the renovation were collected from a college union fundraiser Blue Key fraternity conducted in the spring of 1944, and the students involved with

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30 “Hillcrest Will Soon Be Temporary College Union,” 1.
the renovation did not receive any payments, as the funds went directly into the building. 31 Direct hands-on student participation, as well as enhancement of Cal Poly’s “Learn By Doing” philosophy, was exhibited from this project. It was stated in *El Mustang* that “many students queried feel that revamping of Hillcrest is definitely a step in the right direction toward the ultimate goal of having a real College Union”.32 The temporary college union building was then used as a place for speakers, club meetings, as well as an early space for students to come together with “…newspapers and magazines have already been procured for the remodeled building. Also, the prospects of free television are constantly getting better”33, showing example uses of what the building will become. Although the final building was not finished until almost 20 years after, the active participation students were involved created a lasting impact for the future campus. Student involvement with the college union expressed in the 1950s decade at Cal Poly created the foundation for future ones to build upon.

**The Decade of Decision Making: 1960s**

Moving into the 1960s, more students at Cal Poly were heavily involved with the planning of the college union. The 1950s left the campus with the physical structure of a temporary college union, a gradual step closer to an official college union building. Additionally, during this decade females were now readmitted as students at Cal Poly in 1956, after not being able to attend for about 30 years, which created more students to partake in the participation with the proposed college union.34 The topic of the building was a circulating subject throughout campus as seen in the *El Mustang*. In May of 1964, 18 senior standing architectural engineering

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31 “Hillcrest Will Soon Be Temporary College Union,” 6.
32 “Hillcrest Will Soon Be Temporary College Union,” 6.
33 “Progress As Planned’ Status Of Temporary College Union,” *El Mustang* 15, no. 18, 11 March 1955, 1.
34 “Coeducation Time-Turning Event,” *El Mustang* 17, no.1, 18 September 1956, 1.
students “[were] responsible for the construction and design of six models [30 x 36 inches] of a proposed College Union Building for this campus”. 35 Students used the provided B-2 programs from their professors, which accounts for the goal of 12,000 student attendance and technicalities needed and facilities of what would be built in the real college union.36 The finished projects were put on display across campus for students to get a familiar idea to what the proposed college union building at Cal Poly may look like. As Wesley Ward, instructor of Architectural Engineering adds, “it is not the intention of this project to provide a substitute for the professional services of an architect. A private architect will be chosen when it has been decided by the student body…” 37 This notion not only asserts student involvement with the college union, but also emphasizes our “Learn By Doing” motto, by allowing students to create college union projects with a direct hands on approach, displaying a pattern that can also be seen in the previous decade and student involvement. On January 21, 1965, the architecture firm, Joseph Esherick and Associates, were appointed to officially create the designs for the college union at Cal Poly. The San Francisco-based architect was selected out of 98 other contenders by “professional American Institute of Architects (AIA) consultants …two students, Mac Dyer and Joanne Campbell, also aided in the final decision…the final three names were submitted to the board with the Esherick firm receiving the highest recommendation from the college President Julian McPhee”.38 The student participation was expressed in a way which was active involvement with the voting of the official architect for the future college union building. This shows the importance of student’s opinion and their role in the planning of the building, being that the final construction will be used by students themselves. Throughout the decade of the

36 Togawa, 1.
38 “3.5 Million C.U. Building Goes To S.F. Architect,” 1.
1960s, student involvement with the proposed college union was exercised by hands on participation and with the addition of female students now attending Cal Poly, even more of students were ready to explore ways in which they could get involved for making this proposed desired building a reality on campus.

**The Final Construction: 1970s**

As the 1970s approached, the students at Cal Poly were very close to finally acquiring their long-awaited college union building on campus. Totaling at four years of construction and $4.24 million dollars, the completed building at Cal Poly was opened to the campus on March 6, 1971. The college union consisted of 106,000 square feet, while accommodating a bowling alley, pool tables, a craft shop, Burger Bar, a photography lab, and the ASI offices on the bottom floor. The second floor includes student lounges, meeting rooms, and the multi-purpose room. The ideas of adding an ice cream parlor and a barber shop were already being proposed. As seen in Figure 1, one of the front entrance views of the completed college union building in 1971 at Cal Poly.

![Figure 1: Students walk in front of the newly added college union building on the Cal Poly campus in 1971. Does this look familiar to the view of the University Union we have today? “College Union faith realized,” Mustang Daily 33, no. 95, 9 March 1971: 1. http://digitalcommons.calpoly.](image)

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39 Ure, 4.
In an article published in March of 1971, President Robert E. Kennedy recognized the “legal responsibilities of the College Union are administrated, by a fifteen member College Union Board of Governors, composed of ten students and five non-students”\textsuperscript{40}, which helped contribute to financial responsibilities and decisions within the college union planning. A 1964 article published in \textit{El Mustang} adds, “according to [Douglas] Gerard [College Building Coordinator], the student voice will be a ‘major controlling factor’ in the policies and programs of the board.”\textsuperscript{41} Seven years prior to the final construction of the college union building, students were already beginning to be appointed as contributing voices towards the building. Also, it was decided that “the board will handle such matters as the buying of furniture, what hours the building will be open to the public, and who will have priority on using the facilities of the building.”\textsuperscript{42} The student participation highlighted in these examples show that students were not only involved with the designing and constructing of the college union, such as the Blue Key Fraternity group was, but also on the financial, as well as the facility, sides of planning in the completed college union building.

**Conclusion**

Today at Cal Poly, our University Union is in use every day; it being a space which is home to recreational, as well as commercial facilities for students, faculty and also visitors. On the current ASI website our UU is described as “the gathering place for the Cal Poly community, the University Union is the home to campus activities, quality services and unique programs.”\textsuperscript{43} Comparing student values during the time of construction to now, areas in social etiquette have

\textsuperscript{40} “College Union faith realized,” \textit{Mustang Daily} 33, no. 95, 9 March 1971, 1.
\textsuperscript{41} “Governing Board Will Run College Union Building,” \textit{El Mustang} 26, no. 43, 22 May 1964, 1.
\textsuperscript{42} “Governing Board Will Run College Union Building,” 1.
shifted due to the readily available technological devices we have today. But as for the initial intentions of the college union building, being a place to foster a space of unity for students, this goal is very much still in practice today by students. Additionally, our building is now home to new student resources which were not included in the original designs, such as the Gender Equity Center, the Pride Center, and the Multicultural Center. Inherently, these resources are open for anyone on campus to use but typically they are most embraced by students who directly need the provided services offered, which may create a sense of division among students. This action can be observed as contrasting the original ideas of the college union and its emphasis of unity and community building. But, this notion may also be observed as a new way of creating unity in our UU, which still supports the goals of early college unions due to the facilities offered by contributing to the feeling of inclusion for students and their values within the Cal Poly community.

Students at Cal Poly can be considered a significant role in contributing towards planning and organizing the final construction of the college union building due to their active involvement. The college union building being “Cal Poly’s living room where both new and old friends will meet and where will be informal exchange of ideas among students and between students and faculty”\textsuperscript{44} is truly the space that builds community and brings a feeling of unity throughout the campus. This idea could be reasoning to why students started to get involved with the planning and organizing for such a place for as long as they did. As past students reached graduation and new students started their first quarters, the idea of a proposed college union at Cal Poly remained as a constant area of heavy participation. Essentially, the college union

\textsuperscript{44} “California State Polytechnic College Bulletin,” July, 1968, College Bulletin: Catalog Issue, 24. \url{http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/catalogs/67/}
building can be seen as place created by students, for students. At Cal Poly, the great student involvement added to the community building aspect of the building, with students understanding that this space is created for to bring all students of different majors, interests, passions, and backgrounds together for engagement in a neutral and comfortable setting outside of the classroom.

Figure 1: Shown on the left is our current University Union lower level floor plan. On the right displays the upper level.

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