Utah State University Moab’s New Building—an Example of Resiliency & Community Impact

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After 20 years in the making, Utah State University (USU) Moab's new building is finally here!

Utah State's presence in Moab began more than 50 years ago as a room where people could take classes. As community demand increased, the university started renting additional spaces in a building in downtown Moab. They later purchased the facility that housed these rented rooms and bought a second building in the office complex. Although USU utilized this space for years, the community desired a learning environment built for higher education.

"Largely, the motivation [to build a new building] came from the community," said Lianna Etchberger, USU Moab's associate vice president. "This has been a 20-year process…we're the last regional campus to get our own nice, new building."

With $5 million promised from Utah State University's President Noelle Cockett, the community came together and began fundraising.

"The community basically said, 'we want this,' and rounded up the funds," said Etchberger. "But that's really hard to do in this little, tiny town where there are 6,000 people."

Through many generous donors, new market credit funding, and grant money for the solar array, Utah State University Moab raised the needed funds to create the first building on their campus. Because the budget was tight and they wanted to offer a variety of programs, they maximized each square foot.

One example is their health professions lab, which Etchberger describes as their "Wizard of Oz" room. There were four programs that each needed labs that simulated real-world environments.
However, they couldn’t create individual spaces for each program because of budget constraints, so they got creative.

"I thought, how about if we just [use] this one room?" said Etchberger. "If you’re facing this corner, it looks like a pharmacy. But then if you spin around and look at this other corner, it looks like a [surgery technician] room."

This ingenious solution provided USU Moab with the space to offer various health professions programs and helped them maintain their budget. The strategic use of each square foot is a hallmark of this project.

The building was designed for utmost flexibility, from the three-bed nursing room that can be converted into a regular classroom to a science lab, which can broadcast a class.

"Every room in the building is built for a multi-use function," said Allen Walters, superintendent with Hogan & Associates Construction. "You might have a class in it one day and then have something with the native Navajo community in the same room."

In conjunction with creating multi-use spaces, the team created a comfortable, inviting, and collaborative environment.

"I really wanted to have a lot of intentional collisions between people," said Etchberger. "The Peter Lawson Confluence Atrium…is the heart of the building."

It connects to the academic wing, extension area, learning facilities, and offices. As the core of the building, it features tall, open spaces full of natural light and furniture for students, faculty, and staff to gather and work together.

**SUSTAINABILITY**

Coupled with creating collaborative, highly functional spaces, Utah State University Moab designed and constructed a new learning environment that doesn’t use Moab’s natural resources like fossil fuels. In addition to meeting Utah State University’s LEED Silver standard, the team created a Net Zero building—the first on any USU campus. The rural, undeveloped site presented challenges and opportunities to meet Utah State’s energy efficiency goals. One challenge included achieving the required LEED points because much of the typical infrastructure you’d find in an urban area, like public transit, isn’t present.

On the other hand, having an empty site meant the team could purposefully place the building on the cliff-surrounded land to harness the sun’s energy to power the facility. To achieve this, MHTN oriented the building to face south with a large, flat roof over the south patio and classrooms. This design provides shade during the summer creating a lovely outdoor space while allowing sunlight to warm the building during the winter months.

"Because the project site was essentially unused and a wild, native landscape," said Darrah Jakab, design architect with MHTN Architects. "A big driving factor for the design was to make it feel integrated and embedded in the landscape."

Ryan Wallace, design architect with MHTN, describes the parking lot as "high performance." It’s home to three major sustainability features: 71 geothermal wells to provide ground-source heating and cooling, a large solar array atop parking canopies, and ribbon curbing, which returns rainwater to the on-site soil.
Repurposing rainwater is vital because Moab only receives seven inches of rain per year, so the team created catch basins that double as planter areas to keep water on campus. They also designed the garden to feature trees that meet permaculture standards. The result is landscaping that supports the community it serves.

"[We were] trying to make the landscape be a part of the environment," said Joe Milillo, project manager with MHTN. "Rather than taking all the stormwater and all the rainwater and sending it underground to the city system, we're keeping it on-site to feed life."

Solar energy is harnessed through the parking canopies’ photovoltaic array, which generates as much power as the building uses. To further achieve Net Zero, they didn’t install a gas line at the project site. Instead, ground-source heating and cooling meet the building’s energy, heating, and cooling needs.

"USU Moab will set a new standard not just for Utah State, but also for construction. If you can achieve Net Zero in Moab, in a remote area, you can do it anywhere," said Ross Cox, estimating manager with Hogan & Associates Construction. "Construction, in general, can achieve it with the right approach and the right amount of funds."

COMMUNITY IMPACT

In addition to proving what’s possible with energy-efficient design in a remote area, USU Moab hopes to provide greater access to higher education in the region. One experience that caused Etchberger to reflect on this was when she attended Grand County High School’s Senior Night, where seniors were awarded scholarships. She noticed only 35 out of more than 100 students received an award at the event. And she wondered, what about the other 75 students? Because of this, one of USU Moab’s goals is to help more local high school students explore post-secondary education opportunities.

"[We] want to go into that high school and talk to those kids and make sure that every one of them is thinking about their life after high school," said Etchberger.

This new building is a safe space for prospective students to visualize and consider college or technical training as viable avenues.

"It could change generations," said Walters. "They'll be able to start aiming differently. This [building offers] programs they didn't have [access to] before."
This facility will also be an epicenter for community training and gathering. USU Moab envisions the facility having a purpose for everyone in the community, from degreed and technical programs to community learning opportunities offered by USU Extension. Further, USU’s statewide campuses give students, and community members access to campus benefits from dedicated advisors, faculty members, and staff to events in the building.

"We also have events…right there in [the] community," said Noelle Cockett, Utah State University’s president. "So it’s not only to bring education but also to bring all the other attributes of a campus to that community."

Because of these efforts, USU Moab will act as an economic strengthener. Students have the option to be trained and stay in Moab as skilled employees. And as the economy is bolstered, it will have a multi-generational effect, allowing individuals to better themselves, their families, and the community.

"Having people trained locally and stay locally is critical," said JD Forbush, Vice President, project director, and project manager with Hogan & Associates Construction. "You can turn a town into a ghost town if everybody has to leave and stay away. But if you can keep all of that local, they will stay and keep the local economy flourishing."

As USU Moab looks to the future, President Cockett feels "it will only be a matter of time before something more would be added to [USU Moab's] campus." One area USU has recently invested in is public land management, and they also received funding for apprenticeship programs in electrical, construction, and plumbing. If these programs grow, USU will look into further expanding the campus.

"It’s not, we will build it, and they will come," said Cockett. "It’s if they come, we will build."

Arriving at the point of having a dedicated academic space has been a long journey for USU Moab’s community. Etchberger describes this first building on the campus as a "seed."

"People will start looking at this differently," said Etchberger. "Oh, there’s already a building. What could the next one be?"