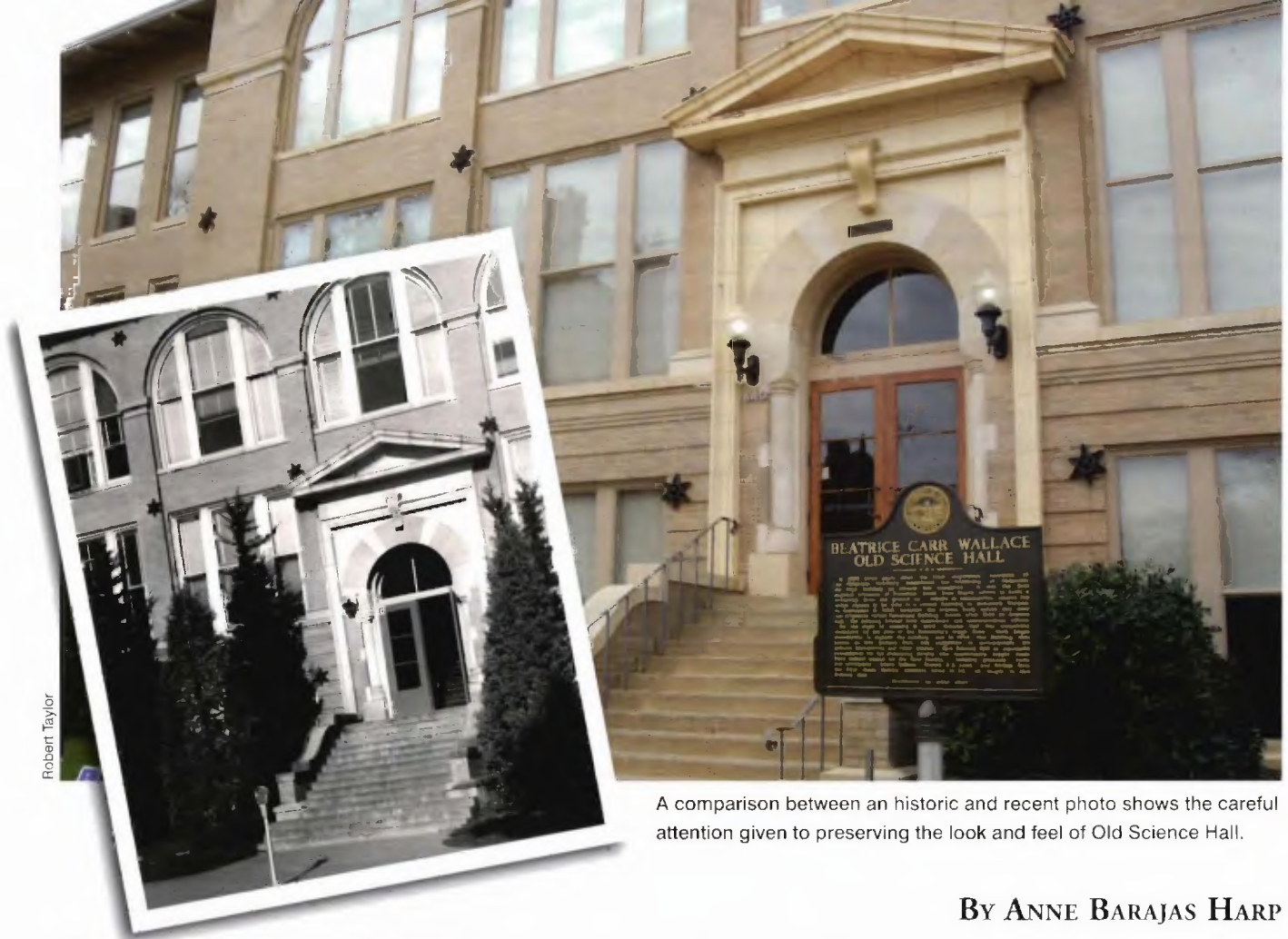




Old Science Hall in the mid-1920s.

*Its exterior looks the same only better,
but inside, historic Old Science Hall
has undergone an amazing transformation.*

Makeover for a Gracious Lady



A comparison between an historic and recent photo shows the careful attention given to preserving the look and feel of Old Science Hall.

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY, Old Science Hall has perched on the arc of Parrington Oval like a graying lady schoolteacher whose quiet, unassuming presence belies the fire and devotion that formed a university in Oklahoma Territory.

Now the 1904 building whose existence played a role in keeping the University of Oklahoma in Norman has been given a new lease on life and is enjoying a bevy of appreciative admirers.

The recently renamed Beatrice Carr Wallace Old Science Hall reopened this fall following a two-year, \$5.9 million renovation that upgraded OU's oldest building for the 21st century. Among the changes were life safety, climate control and aesthetic improvements, as well as a 6,600-square-foot addition that includes the building's first elevator.

The renovation posed a challenge—balancing today's needs with preserving a relic of the University's earliest history, says Michael Moorman, director of OU's Architectural and Engineering Services.

"We felt a responsibility to do things as

gently as possible; we did them as subtly as we could," Moorman says. To that end, Old Science kept its high interior ceilings with exposed mechanicals. Old transom windows and their hardware were saved, and colors were selected to be as historically accurate as possible. The exterior limestone still is visible where the new addition joins the original building, and new brickwork was chosen to blend in seamlessly.

Moorman says that OU President David L. Boren was very interested in maintaining the charm and atmosphere of Old Science. "It was intentional that the building preserves its schoolhouse scale and feel," he adds.

This particular schoolhouse has a little-known but important connection to OU history.

AT THE BEGINNING OF 1903, THE OU campus consisted of two large buildings, a gymnasium and a few wooden outbuildings. One of the buildings was a beautiful, Renaissance structure called University Hall, which was still under construction on the site where Evans Hall

sits today. OU's original structure, then called Science Hall, dated to 1894 and sat to the northwest of University Hall. At one time, it served as the only classroom and administration building, but had been retrofitted with laboratories to become Science Hall.

Then on the night of January 6, 1903, fire struck, and Science Hall burned to the ground within hours. Students and faculty bravely carried out precious furniture, papers, student grades, microscopes and even future OU President James Buchanan's desk with its valuable books and maps.

When the smoke cleared, it was discovered that the University's entire 8,000-volume library was lost. If OU's administration had not moved quickly, the entire University might have been lost as well—at least to Norman.

In *The Sooner Story: Ninety Years at the University of Oklahoma, 1890-1980*, authors Charles F. Long and Carolyn G. Hart reveal that other communities were keenly interested in hosting the state university. The fact that OU was struggling to provide classroom space—in fact, renting

downtown buildings—just made their argument more valid. The city of Kingfisher even offered to reimburse Norman the \$10,000 it had provided to build the first building.

“OKLAHOMA CITY AND OTHER cities also were taking an interest, but before the issue could be joined, a new building was under construction, and Norman

Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History—also was housed there.

Those same rooms now are home to a variety of OU programs. On the third floor, where geology collections and the museum once resided, students learn the art of storytelling through OU’s Film and Video Studies program. Their offices also are headquarters to the International Society for Cinema and Media Studies,

the program to host such events as a recent lecture by Oklahoma’s “Four Sheets to the Wind” filmmaker Sterlin Harjo, who was the first Native American recipient of the prestigious U.S. Artists Fellowship.

The theatre arts also have benefited from the Old Science renovation. OU’s School of Drama has its offices in the building, along with two of the University’s six performance spaces. Both



Film and Video Studies students, from left, Virginia Duke, Philip Jecty and Jensen Cass enjoy the remodeled space and digital editing bays, as does Sarah Denton, right, who oversees the FVS vast film library.



Millie Audas, director of Education Abroad, center, welcomes students of all nations to her new offices. From left are Mylene Marchat, Sarah Shutts, Danny Scipion and Dami Adesoye.

was permanently established as the home of the University of Oklahoma,” the authors wrote.

The building under construction was eventually to be known as Old Science Hall. President Boyd invested \$30,000 of insurance money from the destroyed building in a new facility that would bolster the University’s academic standing. Early class catalogs detail “Science Hall” as featuring geological, chemical, biological and pharmaceutical laboratories, office space, lecture rooms, an incubator room and cold storage. The University’s fledgling natural history museum—which decades later would evolve into the Sam

which is the largest film studies organization in the world, says Andrew S. Horton, Jeanne H. Smith Professor of Film and Video Studies.

WITH THAT ORGANIZATION comes literally thousands of DVDs and materials for conferences—all of which had to be carried up three flights of wooden stairs before the renovation.

“It was tough,” Horton admits, adding that his program also gained extra offices, a classroom and a conference area through the rehab. Technology upgrades included a state-of-the-art editing bay and projection equipment. Seating for 40 will allow

are on Old Science’s lower level, where laboratories originally were located. The previously updated E. Frank Gilson Theatre, which is used for on-stage teaching and to showcase student-directed productions, received additional touch-ups. But the Lab Theatre’s proscenium space was completely redone. A sloped floor was leveled, while new theatre seating on risers and a new control room were installed. The removal of a suspended ceiling allowed new lighting to be added.

“It feels like the classiest urban loft with a theatre in it. It’s just amazing,” says Tom Huston Orr, the James Garner Chair, director of the School of Drama

and producer of University Theatre.

Orr says the Lab Theatre is OU's oldest performing space and the source of many happy memories for alumni he visits across the nation. "The common denominator for them is the Lab Theatre," he says.

Orr maintains that the Lab Theatre legacy has an impact on current students as well. "For actors, storytellers, to be

soil. Their OU experience begins when they walk through the front door of Old Science.

"Students can't believe the beauty of the University," she says, explaining that students frequently comment on the campus' landscaping and architecture. But before the renovation, she acknowledged their next impression was of a building that had seen much better days.

she considers to be the very best view of campus—simply by looking out her window, across the green grass of Parrington Oval toward the statue of President George Lynn Cross and Evans Hall.

"Now, the whole environment is very calming. The renovation is beautiful and was done with such good taste," Audas says. "To walk into this place is to feel good, to feel calm."

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The renovation of Old Science Hall has revitalized Lab Theatre, OU's oldest performing art space. Director of the School of Drama Tom Orr, in red, uses the space for classes, workshops and performances.

able to share the same space with those who came before them and to know the heritage of that space is really quite unique."

OU'S NEWEST STUDENTS ALSO are benefiting from the Old Science renovation. The first floor, which in 1904 was home to labs, an incubator room and cold storage, now contains OU's International Student Services and Education Abroad.

Director Millie Audas says Old Science's location is ideal. Her office is the first stop for many international students, who often come straight from the airport, where they first set foot on American

"It was beautiful outside, but inside it was old in every sense," Audas remembers.

Although the common areas featured large, impressive murals by artists Louise Jones and Dan Kiacz, Audas' office—like all those in Old Science—was heated by cast-iron radiators and cooled by window air conditioners. Even the restrooms were in poor shape and offered only cold water.

All that has changed dramatically. The restrooms are new, the radiators and window units have been banished to the trash pile. Audas can show students from more than 100 countries around the globe what

EDITOR'S NOTE: The building was officially renamed Beatrice Carr Wallace Old Science Hall in 2006 to recognize the generosity of a major scholarship endowment established by Dallas couple Ray and Beatrice Carr Wallace. Incidentally, Old Science's next-door neighbor, University Hall, under construction when OU's first building burned in 1903, also burned to the ground in 1907 while being spruced up for Oklahoma's statehood. That building's original foundation today forms the terrace wall surrounding Evans Hall.

Anne Barajas Harp is a freelance writer living in Norman.