

STEPPING OUT OF THE TOWERS' SHADOWS

OU SAYS GOODBYE TO ADAMS CENTER AND WELCOMES
A NEW GENERATION OF RESIDENTIAL HOUSING.

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

SUSAN WISE KIRCHNER remembers the giddy excitement of being the first person ever to move into Adams Center's 401 Tower 3 in 1964. She hears the harmonies of the Righteous Brothers spilling down the hall, visualizes the moment she met her future husband by letting him take a cut in the cafeteria line, and recalls basement parties where girls sat on folding chairs waiting for boys to ask them to dance.

In May, Kirchner, OU '68 Education, stood with children and grandchildren who had also made the residence hall their home over six decades and watched as demolition of the four 12-story towers began, marking a new chapter in the University of Oklahoma's history.

Adams Center is making way for two five-story residence halls that will house a combined 1,147 freshman students and open by fall 2026. A second phase of demolition and construction will replace Walker Tower with three new residence halls by fall 2031.

"It feels like yesterday that I was here myself," OU President Joseph Harroz Jr. told more than 100 people who, like Kirchner, gathered at a ceremony to bid farewell to Adams Center. The president lived in Johnson Tower as an OU freshman in 1985.

That collective experience "changed us in ways that are fundamental to who we are. It's a moment in time that endures and attaches to us in a way that is really special," Harroz said, before turning his attention to the future. "Our new facilities will meet the needs of students today and tomorrow, and they are remarkably exciting."

Contemporary facilities will help OU compete with peer universities for outstanding students, says ShaRhonda Maclin, the assistant vice president for OU Student Affairs and associate dean of students who oversees OU Housing and Residence Life.

"We have an opportunity to meet our students where they are," she says. "This generation wants privacy, they want their own bathrooms, and community looks very different to them."

Plans for the new residence halls

highlight flexibility and choice: semi-suite rooms for two or four students sharing bathrooms or single-occupancy rooms with private baths. Buildings will have storm shelters that double as event space.

The design team solicited student input, says Brian Holderread, OU's vice president for campus operations. "Students wanted lots of natural light and room details like large windowsills, more storage and a larger vanity space. We also are placing sinks outside bathrooms so they can be used separately."

Affordability was another focal point, and one that planners took seriously. "We believe this is a good, middle-of-the-road option that gives students an opportunity to have something fresh and innovative without a premium price," Holderread says.

The north residence hall in phase one will feature a coffee shop, with the south hall offering a convenience store. Each of the buildings will have a slightly different decor and personality, Maclin says. "Students will be able to choose which one feels more like 'my type of home.'"



Giant chunks of concrete and wire remain from Adams Center.



Demolition begins in May 2023.



Two modern, five-story residence halls will open on the site of Adams Center in fall 2026.



Family and friends of Johnson Tower namesake Edward Johnson gather during Adams Center's 1964 dedication.



Three generations of the Wise family lived in Adams, including Tucker, Krista and David Wise and Susan Wise Kirchner.

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—SHARHONDA MACLIN

She adds that the smaller scale of the buildings will make it easier to meet people and form friendships. “Five stories versus 12 and 500 beds per building versus 1,200 allows it to be more intimate. It’s my hope that students get a chance to have a ‘big university, small community’ experience.”

Smaller-sized residence halls mean closer contact between students and their resident advisers. “The ratio of advisers to residents will be 1-42 in the new buildings, whereas they have been 1-70 in the towers,” Maclin explains.

Student needs were considered outside the residence halls, as well. When completed, the new quad will border a shared lawn that lines up with both OU’s north and

south ovals. The lawn—already christened “the housing oval”—will become a central hub for student life.

“It will be the road to Dale Hall,” Maclin says. “Students will encounter each other on the housing oval daily. It also will be the site for large-scale, outdoor events and programs.”

She dreams of including big-draw amenities like outdoor wellness equipment. “We’re hoping the oval will become a young-adult playground for students,” Maclin says, adding that the much-beloved swings from Adams/Walker Mall may make a return.

Susan Wise Kirchner has fond memories of pushing her grandchildren on those swings during game-day visits to Adams Center.

“I would tell them, ‘This is where your grandma and grandpa lived, where your mom and dad lived,’” she says. Her son, David Wise, OU ’91 BA Economics, and daughter, Amy Wise Harrell, OU ’94 BFA Vocal Music, lived in Adams Center their freshman year, as did grandson Tucker Wise, who graduated from OU in May. “We’re all about OU, and we’re all about legacy.”

Kirchner shares stories about what it was like to live in Adams when it was OU’s first co-ed residence hall. She describes a world of strict 9 p.m. curfews, mandatory study hours, and towers assigned by gender. Students could get in trouble just for riding the wrong elevator.

“Can you imagine it today?” she laughs. “Still, I met so many people from all walks of life. Living in Adams helped me grow and mature.”

When it came time for son David to pick an OU residence hall in 1987, he says there was really no choice. “I never considered another option. Adams was part of my family’s OU history.”

Also living in Adams Center that year was longtime acquaintance Krista Morton, ’91 BA Economics. Both were members of OU’s President’s Leadership Class. “Adams is where our friendship really took off,” Wise says of his wife of 29 years. “It was the beginning of our relationship.”

“As a college freshman choosing a residence hall, you’re thinking, ‘Which is the best dorm,’ or ‘Who has the best rooms?’ But the things you don’t think about are unexpected connections that have life-long impact.”

Today, David and Krista Wise help incoming students build their own OU connections by hosting recruitment events at their home near Austin, Texas. Wise understands the need for Adams Center to be reduced to bricks and memories that will last a lifetime.

“I’m very excited for OU to be making a big step forward with new residence halls that will be attractive to prospective students,” he says. “Even though we’re sad to see a part of our family history go, it’s definitely time for something improved and more in line with where OU is now.”

His mother agrees, then proudly shares that her youngest grandson, Woods Harrell, entered OU as a freshman in August. He will live in Headington Hall.

“We’ll start a new tradition,” Kirchner says. 📍

Anne Barajas Harp is editor of Sooner Magazine.

(To purchase a brick/room plate commemorating your time at Adams Center, visit <https://bit.ly/AdamsKeepsake>. To learn more about the capital campaign to build OU’s new residence halls, contact Kristen Lazalier, OU Foundation senior director of principal gifts, at 405/310-4883 or klazalier@ou.edu.)

