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Developing a New Approach

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By Mark Watt | Photos by Jim Maguire

As the training ground for thousands of physicians, pharmacists, public health officials and health care researchers over the past 40 years, Northeast Ohio Medical University (NEOMED) has had a significant influence on the health of the region – not just economically, but also quite literally. Through its innovative instruction and groundbreaking research initiatives, the public state university has worked to improve the quality of medical care on a local, regional and even global level. And yet, until recently, passersby would be forgiven for missing the school’s campus as they drove past along Route 44 in Rootstown.

“The university was originally somewhat hidden and off the beaten path,” says John Wray, NEOMED’s vice president of administration and finance. “It was set back quite a distance from the road. Most people driving by probably didn’t even notice us.”

Over the past several years, that scenery has certainly changed. A series of construction projects totaling over \$160 million has doubled the size of the school’s campus, greatly expanding its amenities for students, faculty, staff and the surrounding community. First to open was the 80,000-square-

foot Research and Graduate Education Building in the summer of 2013, followed soon after by the school’s first-ever on-campus residential development, called The Village at NEOMED and offering 350 rooms within a trio of buildings (see full story, *Properties*, December 2013).

This fall marks the completion of the campus master plan’s ambitious third phase: the \$85 million, 177,000-square-foot NEOMED Education & Wellness Center (or NEW Center), made possible through a public-private partnership with Akron-based Signet Development. Designed by TC

Architects with The Ruhlin Company acting as Construction Manager at Risk, the three-story building is situated front and center on the eastern edge of campus, acting as the lively new entry to the university.

Inside, the NEW Center is several things at once. It’s an academic building, a conference/event space and a medically supervised fitness and wellness facility, soon to be augmented with a pharmacy and physicians’ offices that will be available to area residents. The building also functions as a student center and social gathering space.



CENTERING ATTENTION At the core of the facility is a 9,550-square-foot atrium that serves as a student center, lobby and pre-function space for special events. “We wanted an atmosphere that feels like you’re outside,” says NEOMED Vice President of Administration and Finance John Wray. “It’s open and airy, but through careful design it also feels very comfortable.”

“The Education & Wellness Center is truly the new face of our campus,” Wray says. “In recent years, there’s been an overall shift in the healthcare world. Instead of focusing primarily on medical treatment, there’s been a movement to adopt a more comprehensive approach to wellness through encouraging healthy lifestyle choices.”

The NEW Center embodies that philosophy, Wray says.

“Because of that, this building is the pinnacle of the campus expansion, and by opening the front door to the community, it has really changed the university’s presence in the area,” he says.

Building the NEW Center

Construction for the NEW Center began in December 2012 and was completed within 17 months, says Brian

Snyder, project manager with Ruhlin Construction. The team tackled extensive infrastructure work early on, with the installation of new sewer, water, electrical and stormwater systems – nearly \$13 million in total. This included about \$500,000 to shift the sanitary system from one end of the property to another.

“Everything was literally redone to set us up for the next 25 years, which will allow us to continue to build and expand our research facilities,” Wray says.

The team broke ground on the new facility in March 2013.

“We worked with TC Architects from the early phases onward, which was critical with a project of this size and scope,” Snyder says. “Rather than emails and RFIs [requests for information], we sat down together to work through the

details. We designed to the Guaranteed Maximum Price, gave them perimeters to work within and then it was a matter of execution on our part.”

Through this process, the team was able to identify critical items like 84-foot-long trusses in the conference center ceilings and beams, used to support the third floor, which are only produced twice a year, he says.

“Hitting those production dates was crucial,” Snyder says. “We ordered the steel package before we even knew what the rest of the building looked like.”

The tight coordination allowed for a number of cost savings measures, says Don Rife, AIA, NCARB, LEED AP, director of business development with Ruhlin. For instance, the property slopes down six feet from west to east – and the design took advantage of this site condi-



GREATER HEIGHTS The NEW Center, which faces Route 44, is the latest step in a multi-phase, \$160 million master plan that has doubled the size of the medical school's campus in Rootstown.

tion when planning the tiered seating of a lecture hall within the building.

"Through clever design, we didn't have to spend the money on sitework to raise the floor up six feet," Rife says. "That was the result of using the creative mind power of the team."

Designed for many users, uses

Mixed-use health and wellness centers are not a new concept to TC Architects, notes Partner Susan Allen, AIA, ASID, LEED AP BD+C. Over the past 20 years, the firm has designed numerous facilities that combine retail fitness center operations with medical offices, taking advantage of synergies such as exercise rooms where physical therapy patients and wellness center members work out side by side.

As NEOMED began developing its master plan in 2010 under the leadership of President Dr. Jay Gershen, that proven health and wellness center concept became an effective starting point for planning a new mixed-use facility.

"[The NEW Center] pushes the model forward by incorporating educational and conference center pieces," says Todd Westover, AIA, LEED AP BD+C, partner with TC Architects.

Those numerous components presented a design challenge: how best to

take advantage of overlap between a range of user groups, notes Mark Corr, president and COO of Signet Enterprises.

"The building would be used by many different types of individuals, all with their own unique needs, from students to business executives to senior citizens," he says. "The hope was that it would feel inviting to everyone at once and really open its arms to the community."

The design strategy begins on the

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John Wray
NEOMED

exterior with a subtle but colorful variety of metal panels, two tones of brick veneer and large expanses of glass. The mix of materials visually breaks up the building's sizeable mass and creates a welcoming entry.

"We wanted to bring the architectural vocabulary of the campus away from its

original, very brown, 1970s look and make a statement that would last for a long time here," Westover says.

Inside of the structure, the layout is designed for easy navigation – a challenge with its numerous and diverse uses.

"John [Wray] had a vision that he wanted a grand atrium at the center of the building with the rest of the programming spinning off from that," Westover says. "From an architect's perspective, NEOMED was great because they kept asking for more: bigger, better, more excitement, more 'wow.'"

The result is a vast 52-foot-high, 9,550-square-foot atrium at the core of the NEW Center with clerestory windows and vertical glass on high walls to take advantage of natural light. Acting simultaneously as a student center, lobby and pre-function space for special events, the area is serviced by an activity-based babysitting center, a student lounge with ping-pong and pool tables, and two public eateries, the Bistro and Erie Island Coffee House.

Creating a welcoming environment, seating areas are arranged in clusters and placed amid interior landscaping with both living plants and artificial trees.

"We wanted an atmosphere that feels like you're outside," Wray says. "It's open

Photo by Russ Otto

HEALTHY ADDITIONS Amenities cater to students and the surrounding community alike. Sequoia Wellness is a medically integrated fitness center with pools (top), an exercise floor (middle) and more. Nearby, the conference facility (bottom) hosts a range of events, such as corporate gatherings, community meetings and weddings.

and airy, but through careful design it also feels very comfortable.”

Surrounding this central hub are the various programming components across three floors:

Sequoia Wellness

Located on the first floor is Sequoia Wellness, a 25,000-square-foot medically integrated fitness and wellness center managed and operated by Integrated Wellness Partners (IWP), a subsidiary of Signet Enterprises. Staffed by degreed wellness professionals, medical experts and nutritionists, the center offers comprehensive wellness services for its users, from dietary advice to personal training.

Right-sized to service students and outside users, the center includes a fitness floor with a range of workout equipment and a climbing wall, plus a free weight area. The facility features a lap pool, whirlpool and warm-water therapy pool, a gymnasium with three basketball hoops and several classrooms that accommodate yoga, kickboxing and other group exercise sessions.

Locker rooms are equipped with steam rooms, saunas and wood locker areas, with towel and linen service provided.

“We were going for a high-end, country club/spa feel,” says Mat Miller, executive director of the NEW Center.

According to Wray, the wellness center has gotten off to a strong start with almost 600 community members so far, plus about 1,000 members from within NEOMED.

Conference and Event Center

The university has hosted countless special events over the years in its Ralph Regula Conference and Event Center, an existing meeting space on campus that was starting to show its age. In developing the NEW Center, NEOMED recognized an opportunity to upgrade its conference center/special event offerings with a modernized space for up to 500 guests.

The relocated Conference and Event Center resides on the second floor of the



Photo by Mark Watt



new facility and is designed to accommodate a wide range of functions, from community meetings and corporate gatherings to weddings and other personal events. The center includes the 8,000-square-foot Grand Ballroom and the 4,000-square-foot University Hall nearby. Both are furnished with smart lighting and audio-visual systems, plus accordion-style folding walls which can be used to divide rooms into smaller spaces.

The entire western wall of the Grand Ballroom is covered with floor-to-ceiling windows, offering wide-open views of campus. “To have natural light like that in a ballroom is pretty unique,” Allen says, noting that daylight control is provided by sets of sheer and room-darkening electronic shades.

Servicing the conference center is a back-of-house area with a commercial kitchen. “The kitchen is used for the Bistro and another restaurant on campus, but it can also be used for catered events,” Miller says. “It’s a huge upgrade for the university and it allows us to serve anywhere from two to 800 guests.”

A pre-function space for the Conference and Event Center opens to the grand atrium. “As we’ve seen at numerous events held here already, the natural response is for individuals to come out of the conference area and experience the entire building,” Miller says.

Meeting rooms

Also on the second floor are four conference rooms, used by internal and

external groups, which are placed along the southern side of the atrium and incorporate floor-to-ceiling walls of glass.

Nearby, a new boardroom for the university features state-of-the-art technology, including motorized shades, smart lighting, two 90-inch monitors and a videoconferencing system.

“It’s very adaptive with tables and chairs that are moveable for a variety of uses,” Wray says. “The layout and technology are a vast improvement over anything we’ve had before.”

Design in this space and elsewhere within the building incorporates metal panels and clouds with angles that match some of the features on the exterior of the building, notes Westover.

“The idea was that the design is integrated all the way through,” he says.

Bio-Med Science Academy

In 2012, a forward-thinking public high school called Bio-Med Science Academy opened on the NEOMED campus, focusing on a curriculum of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, plus medicine (STEM+M). The academy operated out of temporary, borrowed spaces across campus for the first two school years, with a goal to open a permanent home within the NEW Center upon completion.

The school now resides in a dedicated space encompassing the entire, 30,000-square-foot third floor, accessed by a secure elevator. Designed to accommodate about 400 students and 30

NEW SCHOOL APPROACH The facility’s third floor houses Bio-Med Science Academy, a STEM+M high school that offers non-traditional learning in a creatively designed, collaboration-friendly environment.

faculty members, the school incorporates a shared, public space at its center with classrooms ringing the perimeter to take advantage of open views to outside. Educational spaces include full engineering, chemistry and biology labs, as well as a teleconferencing-enabled classroom.

One of 10 high schools in the state within the Ohio STEM Learning Network, the Bio-Med Science Academy embraces a mastery academic program where areas of study – such as math, foreign languages and science – often are merged together and the emphasis is on problem-solving.

“This is not an honors college,” Wray emphasizes. “The idea is that students will be selected through a lottery system, so the students will be represented across all skill levels.”

Interior design elements are unique, colorful and playful, with contemporary furniture throughout.

“It’s a nontraditional learning environment and the school was designed to take advantage of that,” Westover says, pointing to bubble-shaped, wall-mounted dry erase marker boards where instructors and students can jot down ideas. “Here, anywhere can be a classroom, whether it’s a hallway, a classroom or an open student meeting area.”

Academic areas

The facility expands educational spaces for NEOMED students as well. This includes a new, 6,205-square-foot auditorium with tiered seating for up to 355 occupants. The versatile, state-of-the-art space can accommodate PowerPoint presentations, panel discussions and occasionally even special movie nights with a projection screen that’s 56 feet wide by 24 feet tall.

“It’s essentially a drive-in movie theater screen,” says Westover.

A 4,150-square-foot pre-function space, called the NEOMED Lobby, doubles as a new formal entry to the university’s existing admissions area and academic offices, situated in an existing, attached administrative building. Overlooking this area are a dozen second-floor classrooms above the auditorium.



SITE SOLUTION Design of a new lecture hall considered the existing topography by arranging tiered seating along a sloping site. “Through clever design, we didn’t have to spend the money on sitework to raise the floor up six feet,” says Don Rife, of The Ruhlin Company.

Just outside, work is wrapping up on a new landscaped courtyard on the NEW Center’s southwestern corner.

Primary care, pharmacy and more

Still to come at the NEW Center is a 7,000-square-foot health center scheduled to open in early 2015. Occupying a portion of the first floor, the facility will offer comprehensive primary care, non-emergency walk-in care, pharmacy consultation, physical therapy and lab services. Operated by Summa Health System, of Akron, the medical facility will additionally serve as a training center for NEOMED students.

“This is a big deal,” Corr says. “Not only does this create a valuable resource to the community in Rootstown here, but it also gives students an opportunity to take what they’re learning in the classroom and take it into a medical office for real-world experience.”

Also set to open next year on the first floor is a NEOMED affiliate called Pharmacy Innovations LLC, founded by the university’s College of Pharmacy. Pharmacy Innovations will provide over-the-counter and prescription products, plus vaccine

administration, telemedicine services and educational programs.

Looking even further ahead, NEOMED is now moving toward a fourth phase of construction: building a new, 40,000-square-foot medical office building to be physically linked to the northeast corner of the NEW Center.

“Our board of executives has recently authorized President Gershen to engage a developer for [its] construction,” Wray says. “This has been a part of our plan from the beginning and it’s an integral component to this overall project.”

When completed, the medical office building will likely include additional primary care physicians’ offices, a possible dental clinic and educational spaces, he says.

Celebrating success

NEOMED celebrated the opening of the NEW Center with a dedication ceremony in early October. The university is already overwhelmed with the success of the project, Wray says.

“It’s been everything we’ve expected and more,” he says. “We wanted to create a place where people want to come and I think we’ve done that. It’s transformative.”

Corr says the word “transformative” can’t be overused in describing the latest campus addition. “NEOMED has not only opened the doors to the community, but also to strategic partnerships with corporate and healthcare partners who have committed outside capital,” he says. “Those relationships [with Signet, its subsidiaries and Summa Health System] have allowed the university to really expand its mission here and deliver valuable resources to the surrounding community.”

Rife credits effective partnerships for the project’s success – as well as decisive decision-making from NEOMED leadership.

“One of the things that really surprised me about this project was the clarity of vision from John Wray and Dr. Gershen, and how fast the project came to fruition, from an idea to a finished product,” he says. “They had an idea and went out and found a way to get it done. The speed and the efficiency to get the dream to become a reality was amazing.” **P**

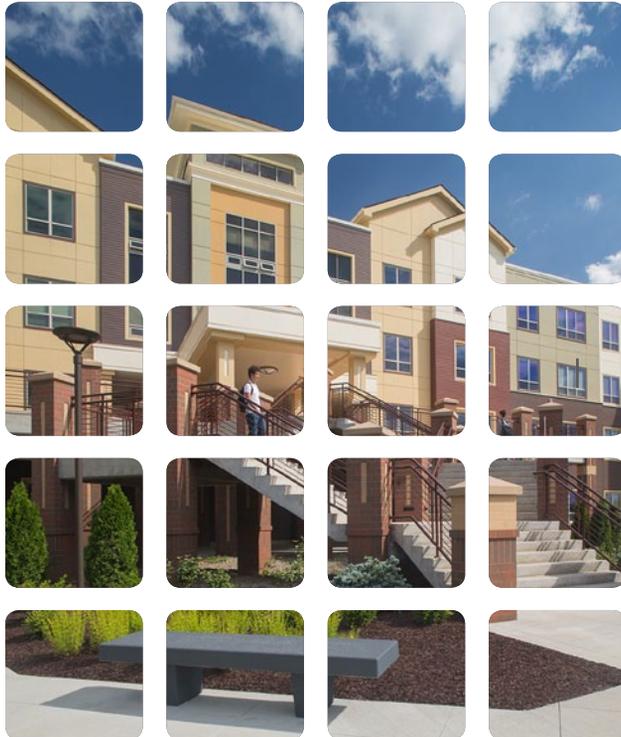
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The experience at Sequoia Wellness is unlike any other in Portage County. At our comprehensive facility, we are focused on promoting whole-person health and complete well-being for each member.

Our personalized care also sets us apart. An expert team of degreed and certified wellness professionals collaborates to create a program specifically designed for you needs. Some benefits of our multi-disciplinary approach include:

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- Weight control and enhanced body composition
- Healthier bones, muscles and joints
- Increased flexibility, muscle strength and endurance
- Increased cardiovascular fitness
- Lower Blood Pressure and reduced stress
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