

Up in Smoke

A brief history of the Powerplant



Whither the Powerplant? Well, it's still standing in the same place as it has since 1919, but it's a question that a lot of people might be asking themselves now that campus is bustling back to life.

Venture over to the double doors east of the Engineering building, and you'll find them locked tight—the latest measure taken by the SU to curb the losses the 'Plant has racked up.

If you've been on campus for more than two or three years, you've probably had at least one memorable night drinking Jäger Bombs in the dingy bar, only to stumble around campus at 2am and be chased by campus 5-0.

If you're a new student, however, you're probably not lucky enough to have enjoyed evenings—or afternoons, for that matter—of debauchery resulting from partaking in a few wobbly-pops while lounging around campus.

No matter how long your tenure on campus has been, the legacy of the 'Plant is an interesting one. One of the original buildings on campus, it's seen an immense amount of changes to its interior over the years. From housing classrooms and generating power to killing brain cells and creating memorable nights on the town, and finally to costing the SU hundreds of thousands of dollars, this is a brief timeline of the building known officially today as The Old Powerplant.

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Photo by Mike Otto

1919: The Powerplant opens as—you guessed it—a powerplant following World War I. Aside from generating heat and electricity for the six other buildings on campus (those being the Arts Building, Assiniboia, Pembina, and Athabasca Halls, South Lab, and the now-defunct North Lab), the space is used for third- and fourth-year electrical engineering students' lectures and labs. The Faculty of Extension and a nutrition lab also have space in the building.

1937: A *Gateway* article from 15 January offers a glimpse inside the building: its furnaces are powered by 30–60 tons of coal each day to provide sufficient electricity and heat for campus. The generators can each produce 100 kilowatts and turn at a rate of 518rpm, making them some of the most powerful in western Canada.

1945: The Powerplant doubles in size, adding much of the office space occupied today by the Graduate Students' Association, Fine Arts labs, and the Aboriginal Student Council.

1986: Still under the control of the GSA, the 'Plant opens its doors to all patrons in September, leaving only a small lounge known as the TV Room (the space currently occupied by Dewey's Lounge) for use exclusively by grad students. This decision is made after the Powerplant lounge still hasn't turned a profit since its inception in 1978.

1978: The Graduate Students' Association (GSA) takes over the Powerplant building and begins renovations to turn it into a restaurant, lounge, and recreation facility. The plan is to have the restaurant open for the public during the day, then close the space to all but graduate students and their guests at night. The bar's exclusivity makes it a hot-spot for all students—if an undergraduate actually makes it in, such a feat is lauded by his or her peers. Renovation costs are estimated at \$873 000.

1959: The current heating facility on the southwest edge of campus, near the Jubilee auditorium, opens, generating the heat needed for an expanding campus and therefore lessening the need for the old Powerplant. The building continues to be used for office space and engineering classes.

1991: Following regained interest in the Powerplant as a live music venue, an inspection by a fire marshal results in a warning to the GSA to keep the amount of patrons present in the bar in check. As such, long lineups often develop as bouncers keep a close tab on how many partygoers are let in. This leaves many customers—primarily graduate students—disgruntled by the lack of access to the space.

1991: At the 9 September GSA Council meeting, a motion is carried to turn the current TV Room into a new grad-students-only lounge. Three proposals are considered, with the most ambitious and costly plan—one which would see the construction of a loft and floor-to-ceiling wall that separates the new lounge from the rest of the Powerplant—winning out.

1992: After costs for the renovations balloon to \$90 000, the GSA's new bar opens as the North Powerplant Lounge—colloquially known as the "backroom lounge" due to its somewhat isolated location from the rest of the 'Plant.

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