



An interview with Director Ed Steinfeld on the Watson Institute's expansion project.

Watson Institute: What is the main purpose of the new building?

Ed Steinfeld: From the start, the idea behind the design was that if we are serious about inclusion—of different kinds of people, students, faculty, visitors, perspectives, concentrations—the physical space has to reflect that. The current buildings [at 111 Thayer Street and 59 Charlesfield] are beautiful, but they don't represent the entirety of who and what we are. The new building project is an opportunity for us to redefine and create our space. At its core, it is about public space.

WI: What do you mean by “public?”

ES: I mean space that is not “owned.” I mean a commons, a space that is shared by all. Or, to refer back to Ancient Greece, an agora—a central public gathering place. A place where all people, no matter who they are and whether or not they're connected to Watson, are welcome. A place where anyone can walk in, grab a cup of coffee and sit around and chat or do work. My hope is that people will be bumping into people and all kind of conversations will begin. To me that's what learning is fundamentally about. I don't care where one is in the formal Watson hierarchy, or what program or concentration one's in; everyone bears knowledge and experience.

WI: How will the design of the building reflect that vision?

ES: There will be a wide-open, multilevel space in the middle of the building. In addition to this central space's daily informal use, we'll occasionally hold large gatherings there as well, for speakers or panels we don't want to convene in a lecture hall—which has its own kinds of hierarchies and inflexibilities. People will be able to stand on different levels and look down into the space and watch what's happening.

WI: What other kinds of space will the new building contain?

ES: In addition to lots of sitting areas that will feel private, there will be small meeting rooms where four to five people can gather to study, or talk, or Skype. These will be glassed in, so they'll be simultaneously open and acoustically private. Finally, we're experimenting with the “hoteling” approach by including some reservation-based offices.

WI: Who will be housed in the new building?

ES: Our growing regional programs, our postdoctoral fellows, some of our academic programs, and visitors.

WI: Does the new building change how the existing one, at 111 Thayer, will be used?

ES: Not really. That building is beautiful, but more of a quiet work space for faculty and administrative staff. That won't change. And we will continue to make full use of the Joukowsky Forum, McKinney, and the Kim Koo Library.

WI: How will the new building relate to the ones around it?

ES: I see the building as part of a larger organic whole. It's designed to work with 59 Charlesfield and 111 Thayer, as well as with buildings Brown might build nearby in the future. We're going to make the entryway of 111 Thayer a pathway into the quad and create entryways from Brook and Charlesfield streets. We're putting lots of time and resources into landscaping to tie them together, and we plan to feature lots of art in all the buildings, too. We want to encourage people to flow through the buildings.

WI: How do you see this building's role on the larger Brown campus?

ES: I hope it will be a gateway to the campus. But also I hope people passing through it will stop a while and see what's going on. I want it to be a destination for people who are interested in international and public affairs, and even those who don't think they are. It's our academic mission to include as many voices as possible. I want my biggest problem to be that the building is too noisy and there are way too many people using it. If I had that problem, it wouldn't be a problem.

--Sarah Baldwin