

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)



After a change of plans for a new building, the Urban Environmental Lab will be left in place on Angell Street.

Brain building reverse a boon to UEL

By: Ben Schreckinger and Ellen Cushing

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The Corporation's decision this weekend not to pursue construction of a new brain science building has provided a reprieve for the Urban Environmental Lab, which sits on the lot that had been designated for the new structure.

President Ruth Simmons wrote in an e-mail to the Brown community Saturday that given the University's current financial situation, the Corporation has "endorsed efforts to explore renovation of existing buildings" instead of pursuing new construction.

"It's great that we're going to be able to stay in this building and keep the garden," Administrative Manager for the Center of Environmental Studies Patti Caton '92 MA'02 said Monday.

Caton, who said she had collected signatures to save the Lab, said the building is the most energy-efficient one on campus. Students had also mounted a campaign against building the so-called "Mind, Brain, Behavior" building on the property, posting signs on campus.

Like Caton, Professor Emeritus Harold Ward, who helped found the Center for Environmental Studies now housed in the UEL, reacted positively to the Corporation's decision.

"I am pleased that the potential for conflict between (brain science building) interests and environmental faculty and students has been eliminated," Ward wrote in an e-mail to The Herald. He wrote that this decision removed the "immediate threat to the UEL."

Caton said the garden in front of the UEL provides a space for members of the Providence community to garden on Angell Street. A proposed future location for the Lab on Cushing Street could not have accommodated the garden.

For advocates of the UEL - located in a 19th-century carriage house - the University's financial woes have a silver lining.

"This economic slowdown gives everybody time to reconsider the best possible use of space," said Senior Lecturer in Environmental Studies Caroline Karp.

The Providence Preservation Society placed the UEL on its Most Endangered Properties List last year.

When The Herald spoke with PPS Director of Preservation Services Sara Emmenecker '04 last July, she said the Society was concerned about losing historic College Hill buildings to new construction projects.

"We saw them as significant, not only as historic structures from the 19th century but as providing a historic context of the residential area that once existed," Emmenecker said.

The University looked into having the house moved to another campus location, rather than demolishing it, but resistance to the move created uncertainty around the Lab's fate, The Herald reported.

One faculty member working at the UEL said she was glad the building will be preserved.

Karp said people in the environmental studies community prefer to "make the best possible use" of existing buildings before tearing them down and starting over.

"We're delighted to be here," she said. "It's a lovely building. There's a community around this building."

Catherine Pearson '08, a research assistant at the Center for Environmental Studies and research fellow with Rhode Island Sea Grant College said she felt the UEL's warm environment facilitated collaboration between staff and students.

While those interviewed said the UEL's position is secure for the time being, the Center for Environmental Studies still has other housing concerns. Only seven faculty members have offices at the UEL, with others located in J. Walter Wilson and MacMillan Hall, according to Karp. The physical diffusion hinders collaboration, she said.

In his e-mail, Ward suggested the possibility of revisiting a proposal to give the environmental studies department space in a house adjacent to the UEL.

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