

Bryce revisited: 168-acre acquisition will serve UA student growth

BY KATIE SHEPHERD (HTTP://CW.UA.EDU:80/STAFF/KATIE-SHEPHERD) | Published 9 hours ago | Updated 8 hours ago
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The University has plans to renovate Bryce to meet the needs of the department of theatre and dance. CW | Pete Pajor

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In the coming years, the historic Bryce Hospital will undergo some changes in its typical residents.

The University of Alabama bought the 168 acres surrounding the 150-year-old building in 2010 to make way for the recent influx of students.

University of Alabama planner Dan Wolfe said having the land was essential for the size of the University's student population.

"Over time, we've acquired some of their outlying land as we continue to grow," Wolfe said. "But that 168-acre parcel was really critical to our future expansion needs at the University as we continue to grow in enrollment."

Wolfe said not only will the land serve the University's current needs, but it also provides potential for continued growth.

"From a planning standpoint, having an additional 168 acres to work with is just amazing," he said. "And as we've gone from 19,000 to now over 36,000 students, we have definitely grown and expanded, and that 168 acres is going to give us flexibility for years to come."

Wolfe said the University plans to utilize the newly-acquired property by demolishing select portions of the existing building to construct facilities for the department of theatre and dance. In addition, the University plans to build a new large classroom building on the west end of the property.

Though the structure of Bryce Hospital has changed repeatedly over the century and a half it has been in existence, its most current form consists of a main building with three wards, or wings, on either side. Wolfe said one of the first steps that the University plans to take with the property is to demolish the two outermost wings.

"We want to do this for a couple reasons. One is they're in bad condition," Wolfe said. "The second reason is that it's a more efficient land use for us to take that third wing on each side off. So there will be the Bryce main building, and then two wings on each side."

At September's Board of Trustees meeting, the Board approved a budget increase for the demolition from \$3,807,344 to \$4,479,994, which will cover the removal of the outermost sections of the east and west wings and additions that were made to the front and middle wings of the Bryce Main Building in 1948.

Wolfe said the University then plans to renovate parts of the building to meet the needs of the department of theatre and dance.

"There's lots of their buildings that we are going to keep and renovate, particularly the Bryce Main Building, which will be kind of the focal point of the whole project," he said. "Our vision there is to build a new performing arts center on the back and move theatre and dance into the Bryce Main Building from Rowand Johnson."

William Teague, chair of the department of theatre and dance, said no one is completely sure what will happen to Rowand Johnson once the theatre department vacates the building, but its location will cause it to be prime real estate.

“Who actually ends up here, I have no idea,” Teague said.

Teague said the budget for the new theatre and performing arts center on the historic Bryce property is still in flux, but it is close to \$80 million.

This budget will go to creating a new drama theatre, dance theatre and a flexible, three-story theatre space, Teague said.

According to Teague, the new drama theatre will seat 450. This is in contrast to the University’s current largest theatre, Morgan Auditorium, which seats 425. The flexible theatre space will seat between 250 and 260. This is in comparison to the Allen Bales Theatre, which seats only 149. In addition, the new dance theatre will seat 305.

Teague said these theaters will also feature new, up-to-date lighting and sound technologies.

“We think it’s going to be a great viewing experience for the audience,” he said.

Additionally, Wolfe said that with the increase in out-of-state students comes the need for necessary accommodations. Because of this, Bryce will soon have a visitor center and museum to document the history of the University and the history of mental health in Alabama.

According to Wolfe, in order to provide transportation through that area of campus, the University has received a \$15 million grant from the Alabama Department of Transportation to construct a road through Bryce. The road will extend from 5th Avenue by the softball stadium all the way through Bryce to Hackberry Lane behind Shelby Hall. Additionally, a new connector road will run from the extension of Jack Warner Parkway with a new signalized intersection.

“That will give us another means of egress to get off campus,” Wolfe said. “The road will probably be completed before the new classroom building is done.”

The new classroom building, Wolfe said, will be mostly lecture hall and large classroom space, with room for about 2,000 students.

“We have a lot of small classrooms on campus, but we need more large auditorium-type classrooms, so that’s what this building will be,” Wolfe said. “The main focus of this building will be to provide large academic space.”

Wolfe said the projected date of completion for the new classroom building is a year and a half to two years, though future expansions on the property are to be expected.

“People ask me all the time, ‘When will Bryce be finished?’ and the real answer is: It’ll never be finished,” Wolfe said. “It will always be a part of the fabric of our campus and we will use it as needed. But just having it there to be able to do that with is absolutely critical to our future growth.”

Alabama Department of Mental Health Historian Steve Davis said, as the University continues to grow it is vital that plans are made to protect Bryce Hospital’s vibrant history.

Despite all the changes, Davis said he is pleased with the University’s effort to maintain the historical

significance of the property.

“I think that’s amazingly important,” he said. “There’s a great deal of history that Bryce had and that the University can be proud of, especially in the teamwork that we’ve shown to keep that.”

Davis said that because the University of Alabama was established in 1831 and Bryce Hospital, former Alabama Insane Hospital, opened in 1860, the history of the two is completely intertwined.

This history goes all the way back to the first superintendent of Bryce, Peter Bryce himself. Davis said, Amelia Gayle Gorgas and her husband, Josiah, lived at Bryce with Peter Bryce and his wife, Ellen.

“Peter Bryce died in 1892 but Mrs. Bryce and Amelia Gayle Gorgas remained friends throughout their lifetime,” Davis said.

Davis said his theory is that Amelia Gayle Gorgas and Ellen Bryce planted the magnolia trees that are found on the Bryce property today.

Wolfe said the University will leave the green space surrounding the buildings intact in order to maintain the beauty of the area.

“If you look at the whole front part of Bryce, our intent is to leave that natural and opened, and what we would call Peter Bryce Park,” he said.

Davis said that he is happy with the University’s effort to maintain the foliage in the area.

“One of the things that I’m happiest about is that the University is going to keep the integrity of the green space and the trees,” he said. “Even with the sidewalks, they’re making sure they don’t take any of the trees down as they go through.”

Additionally, Davis, who is also a member of the Bryce Historical Preservation Committee, said that though the best thing that could have happened is that the University was able to save the entire building, he is also satisfied with the care the University is taking to be cautious of the history of Bryce.

“When they first started this project, one of the first places they came was to the Bryce Hospital Preservation Committee to talk to us,” Davis said. “I just think that was a tremendous act of good will from the University.”

Wolfe said that it is the University’s intent to be as careful as possible to maintain the historical integrity of the property.

“As a new owner, we will be very sensitive to the history of Bryce in lots of ways. We will be respectful to the land and we will be respectful to the buildings,” Wolfe said.

With the sale of the historic Bryce campus, Davis said that the Department of Mental Health was able to build an entirely new building for Bryce Hospital that now accommodates their roughly 260 patients.

“I don’t think Mental Health could have ever got the funding to build this nice of a building without the sale of the land,” Davis said.

Davis said that the Department of Mental Health's sale of the land to the University of Alabama was the best option for both parties.

"Honestly, it's kind of a win-win," he said. "We've got this huge campus over there that we had to upkeep but we didn't use much of it. The University, of course, is getting more and more students and needed more ability to expand, so it made perfect sense."

Wolfe said that now that the University owns the 168 acres that was previously the historic Bryce Hospital, the possibilities for expansion are seemingly endless.

"We are so excited about having that property," he said. "The opportunity that it provides to us for growth and to be able to do things and shift things and move things. It's just a tremendous asset to the University of Alabama."