

‘New’ Bloomington High opened in 1959

Although it may be hard to believe, the current Bloomington High School is nearly six decades old. The school opened back in the fall of 1959, a mid-century modernist beauty symbolizing the jet age optimism and promise of postwar America.

Yet as the “new” Bloomington High’s price tag topped \$3.66 million (the equivalent of nearly \$31 million in inflation-adjusted 2018 dollars), the district found itself—smack in the middle of construction no less—scrambling to raise additional funds in order to complete and open the school.

The previous high school, located on the 500 block of East Washington Street, opened in 1917. The two schools—old and new Bloomington High—represented a revolutionary shift in American education as administrators sought to escape the confines of the urban grid and congested older neighborhoods for open spaces and suburban-like settings more suitable to the sprawling footprints of modern school “campuses.”

Accordingly, in March 1948, the Board of Education purchased a 39.7 acre site known as the Grassfield tract with the expectation that it would become the future home to a new high school. Situated between Empire Street on the north, Towanda Avenue on the east, Locust Street on the south and Colton Avenue on the west, this site made perfect sense. The sloping, undeveloped acreage provided ample space for classroom expansion, additional athletic fields, and, this being the golden age of the American teenager’s love affair with the automobile, parking. In addition, the school’s football field was already located immediately south across Locust Street, where it had been for some two decades.

By the mid-1950s, with the postwar baby boom well underway, Bloomington’s schools were bursting at the seams. On Sept. 20, 1955, district voters approved a \$2.9 million bond issue to pay for both new schools and new additions to existing schools. For many Bloomington residents, consolidating the junior high classes (then scattered at Bent, Irving, and Washington schools) into the old East Washington Street building was as eagerly anticipated as the construction of the new high school.

Two prominent Bloomington architectural firms, Lundeen and Hilfinger, and Schaeffer, Wilson and Evans, were involved in the development of new Bloomington High. In addition, A. Richard Williams, University of Illinois professor of architecture, served as the project’s lead designer. Williams, who grew up in the Twin Cities (his father was an accounting professor at Illinois State Normal University), was a visionary modernist. He played a leading role in several of the

finer postwar buildings in the area, including Bloomington Federal Savings and Loan Association (opened in 1957, and now part of the Government Center).

School officials rightly boasted that the architects took “full advantage of the natural beauty of the site.” The original two-story classroom building faces Locust Street from the highest point on the rolling tract. An attractive 12½ foot overhang runs the length of this building. To its northeast a one-story wing contained the cafeteria, music and band rooms, shop classes and a garage.

When it opened in 1959, Bloomington High School was an exemplar of International style architecture. Many of its design elements, such as the flat roof, large expanse of windows, metal casements, slender columns and an absence of architectural embellishments, are hallmarks of mid-century modernism. Perhaps the school’s most striking feature remains the gymnasium’s “scaloped” cantilevered trusses extending from the east and west walls.

For its part, The Pantagraph called the planned high school the “Lyceum of Bloomington students to come—not a palace but certainly no livery stable.”

“Cautious optimism” marked the high school’s groundbreaking ceremony of Aug 20, 1957. The cautiousness came from community leaders well aware that there were insufficient funds to complete construction. The district had around \$2.67 million available for a school projected to cost an additional \$500,000 or more.

Part of the problem involved the inherent difficulties districts faced confronting ever-larger baby boom enrollments. At the same time, inflation, especially when it came to construction costs, took an increasingly bigger bite out of capital budgets. But more than anything, the district’s shortfall was due to an Illinois Department of Revenue decision to fix the tax multiplier at a point that increased county assessed valuations at a lower-than-expected rate, meaning that in the latter half of the 1950s, Bloomington schools had fewer dollars than anticipated coming into district coffers.

“It’s not going to be easy to provide adequate schools,” State Sen. David Davis IV told those gathered at the groundbreaking, “and it’s going to squeeze my pocketbook and your pocketbook.”

Given these fiscal realities, school officials felt they had little choice but to call a second bond referendum, with this one asking voters for another \$590,000, or enough to complete the high school.

Architect Edgar Lundeen defended the school in the face of accusations among disgruntled taxpayers that the new building was too expensive and extravagant. For instance, Lundeen noted

that the gymnasium's cantilevered trusses, contrary to grumbling among some penny-pinching residents, did not add additional costs to the project. And in other instances of presumed profligacy, the architects were simply following instructions guided by public input and set by school officials, such as building a state-of-the-art auditorium separate from the gymnasium.

Fortunately, the October 1958 referendum passed with relative ease—4,576 to 2,460. Not surprisingly, the bond issue proved most popular on the high-growth east side where support ran 3 to 1 or higher. With sufficient funds to complete construction, Bloomington High School welcomed its first students on Sept. 9, 1959.

In 1967, district voters approved a \$5.3 million bond referendum, with about \$3.1 million of that set aside to double the size of the existing high school. New additions included the south gymnasium and an area vocational center.

Over the years, Bloomington High School has undergone further remodeling projects and expansions. Most recently, with a planned fine arts addition, local architect Russel Francois has ensured that his design work remains mindful of Richard Williams' original architectural vision.

Unfortunately, not all past work has served the school well, architecturally speaking. For instance, the south gymnasium, which opened in 1970, is a utilitarian, boxy brick rectangle that stands as a conspicuous mismatch to Williams' airy modernism. The south gymnasium also obstructs the view of the original gym and part of the original classroom wing. A drive down Locust Street once offered the impressive vista of a sleek and shiny school of the future perched on a rise and surrounded by open expanse.

The school's mid-century modern sparkle is still there, it's just harder to see and appreciate.