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Stage XVI: SUNY Brockport's Award-Winning Disaster

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HST 390
Dr. O'Brien
May 9, 2001
The housing of students has been a lingering issue at both SUNY Brockport and colleges nationwide. Some prefer to live on-campus, some would rather live away from campus. Why do some college students choose to live on-campus? A 1996 study by Darrell Luzzo and Anthony McDonald showed that students reside on-campus for five major reasons. The two most frequent reasons were found to be convenience and independence, with the former referring to "advantages associated with living close to the university," and the latter to "the opportunity for an increase in freedom." "External sources of motivation," the third reason, encompasses safety, cost, and parental recommendations. The fourth factor leading students to choose dormitories over off-campus apartments is "social development," an opportunity to make new friends, party, and "have the whole college experience." The fifth, and least frequent reason students live on-campus, is academics. According to the study, this broad category refers to "scholarship requirements... (and) the opportunity for involvement in academic activities."¹

The ideal college housing community would be a combination of the benefits of on and off-campus living. A situation blending the convenience, academic, safety, and cost benefits of on-campus living with the independence and isolation of residing off-campus would be most attractive to prospective students. The 1970's and 1980's saw SUNY Brockport experiment with a dormitory complex that attempted to combine these positive aspects of life on and off campus.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, SUNY Brockport experienced a need for

additional dormitory space because of an enrollment boom. The student population of the college grew nearly threefold, from 1,954 students in 1960, to 5,573 in 1969. Additionally, the possibility of the school becoming one of SUNY's university centers created a further need for on-campus housing. With this need in mind, in 1969, "a task force on student living was held...(resulting in) the idea for an apartment-type dormitory." This idea became a reality when the Stage XVI apartment complex opened at SUNY Brockport in the fall semester of 1973.

Upon completion, the $6.01 million dollar complex consisted of nineteen apartment buildings to house students, and one "community building" in the center of the complex to be used for recreational purposes. Stage XVI contained "12 one-bedroom, 226 two-bedroom, and 72 three-bedroom apartments," designed to house approximately 1,000 students. Located west of the college's main campus (near the present-day BC1 parking lot), Stage XVI offered its residents the isolation and freedom of off-campus apartment living at rates established by school officials.


4 "Stage 16 wins award," The Stylus, 7 March 1974, 8.


7 "Married student housing difficult to find, Stage XVI to lessen plight somewhat," The Stylus, 27 February 1973, 4.

8 "Housing priorities recommended for stage XVI," The Stylus, 11 October 1972, 6.
Faced with a high demand for rooms at the new complex, school President Albert Brown formed an “On-Campus Housing Committee.” This group was assigned the task of determining which students would have the first chance to occupy the new buildings. It was decided that students who had been living on-campus would be given the first opportunity to secure a room at Stage XVI. Full time students who had been living off-campus were considered secondary priorities in terms of claiming rooms.  

Just months after opening, Stage XVI received national attention when it won an award given at the College and University Architectural Competition. Stage, which was the winner among “over 50 plans (nationwide),” took the honor for the nation’s “best college living quarters structure.” The new apartment complex received further praise from the First Federal Design Assembly for “design performance in response to human needs.” Both alleviating SUNY Brockport’s need for additional on-campus housing and receiving positive recognition in architectural circles nationwide, it appeared as though Stage XVI would be a remarkable success. 

While the college accepted all praise for the apartment complex, many problems emerged at Stage, making the award an afterthought. Both financial and time constraints faced during construction of the complex contributed to its eventual failure. 

Presumably in an effort to save money, the college employed a somewhat odd method in constructing Stage XVI. SUNY Brockport announced a set amount of money it would devote to the buildings, and allowed contractors to design a complex that fit the

9 “Housing priorities recommended for stage XVI,” The Stylus, 11 October 1972, 6. 

10 “Stage 16 wins award,” The Stylus, 7 March 1974, 8.
cost, rather than designing a complex and then accepting bids. In time, the resulting structures proved to be too poorly designed to survive the harsh winters of Western New York. Also contributing to the eventual architectural problems of Stage may have been a rush to finish the buildings as soon as possible, culminating in errors that could have been corrected if proper time had been allotted.

The first disaster to strike Stage XVI was a flood in the Spring of 1974, just months after the complex opened. According to a 1986 study by the New York State Dormitory Authority, the apartments were located at "an area generally regarded as the low elevation of the campus." When Brockport received high amounts of rainfall in the spring of 1974, Stage "created a dam, stopping the natural subterranean flow of water from the south." A poorly constructed drainage system caused the apartments to fill with water at ground levels. An article in the Stylus claimed that the water "stretched almost to the second level," completely immersing all objects on the ground floor of the community center building. Forced to take action to prevent flooding in future years, the college approved a plan that formed "a large interceptor ditch (for water flowing toward Stage)," which would direct the flow of water around the complex rather than through it. The re-directed water would then drain into a temporary "discharge pond in the area

11 "Stage 16 wins award," The Stylus, 7 March 1974, 8.

12 Interview with Fred Harrington, 2 April 2001.


14 "Flood control project underway," The Stylus, 3 October 1974, 5.

Plumbing became an issue at Stage XVI in the fall of 1974 when students residing in buildings eighty-seven, eighty-eight, and eighty-nine of the complex found water "bubbling out of their toilets, sinks, and bathtubs." While the water backed-up into apartments, the college blamed the problem on residents dumping grease into their sinks, causing a blockage in the water pipelines. Despite the contradicting reports of campus officials, it appeared as though the problem was caused by errors in constructing water pipelines. Rather than occurring in scattered buildings throughout the Stage complex, the back-ups were found in three buildings in close proximity. Had students pouring grease into their drains been the only problem, the water back-ups would likely have occurred in all of Stage's buildings.

It did not take long to prove that the buildings themselves would not be able to survive the harsh winter months of the region. In the Spring semester of 1975, The Stylus reported that the outer doors of the Stage XVI buildings were again warping, bending far enough that they often "could no longer keep out rain and snow," let alone prevent the flow of cold air from the outdoors. When Stage opened, the outer doors of the buildings consisted of "wood...with a mineral-like core." After these doors warped in their first winter at Stage, they were replaced by doors made of wood with metal centers. Unfortunately, the second set of doors also showed signs of warping in their first winter, and the problem of doors warping at Stage XVI continued throughout the existence of

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16 "Flood control project underway," The Stylus, 3 October 1974, 5.

17 "Stage's bowl overfloweth," The Stylus, 21 November 1974, 2.
the buildings. Eventually, exterior doors of "hollow metal" were used in an effort to prevent warping.

Also contributing to the long-term failure of the Stage XVI complex were numerous oversights in construction, notably the outer walls of the buildings. The walls were constructed of CORE-TEN steel, a special material that would eventually give Stage XVI its nickname, "Rusty Village." The steel panels were intentionally designed to oxidize, under "the impression that rust would give it an aesthetic affect." The appearance created was a dark rust color that was not only ugly, but "inconsistent with...a largely red brick and concrete campus." In addition to the unappealing look of the panels, the steel exterior caused problems within the buildings. Instead of insulating the buildings in the winter, the steel would conduct cold air into the buildings. In times of warmer weather, the steel would act again cause problems by conducting hot air into the apartments. Condensation was also a problem with the steel walls in the winter. When the warm air from inside reacted with the cold air from outside the wall, the steel would "sweat." This resulting moisture damaged the already thin layer of insulation between the outer and inner walls, leading to complaints of drafty apartments. The cold, drafty apartments would, in turn, drive up the college's energy costs during the winter.

18 “Stage XVI doors warping...again,” The Stylus, 13 February 1975, 3.
19 Biggie, 6.
21 “Stage XVI: would you live there?,” The Stylus, 6 October 1982, 10.
22 Biggie, 8.
months.\textsuperscript{23}

While the exterior paneling caused many problems for the buildings, there were also construction oversights outside the buildings that aggravated Stage residents. The metal supports for the catwalks on the upper levels of apartments began to buckle within a year of the complex opening. Residents complained that the hand railings within the catwalks were built dangerously low, to the point where Brockport's winter weather could contribute to a person slipping and falling. The metal bindings on the stairs at Stage XVI were also said to be slippery. When snow covered these steps during the winter months, rock salt melted the snow and ice, but at the same time left the stairs wet and slippery. The salt also contributed to rusting of the stairs, a problem that would require a major renovation in the 1980's.\textsuperscript{24}

The location of Stage XVI proved to be a problem as soon as the complex opened. Why was the complex built where it was? According to SUNY Brockport Capital Projects Coordinator Fred Harrington, there were very few realistic places to build Stage XVI. One possible area, the empty space between the present-day Drake Library and Cooper Hall was unavailable, as preliminary plans were underway to construct another science building there. By the time it was learned that the building would not be erected, Stage had been completed. The athletic fields immediately west of the present-day Allen Administration Building were not a suitable option either, as they were seen as pivotal to understanding Brockport's reputation as an excellent Physical Education

\textsuperscript{23} Harrington Interview.

\textsuperscript{24} "Stage XVI, problems, problems, problems," \textit{The Stylus}, 31 October 1974, 5.
institute. However, the relatively distant location of Stage XVI was somewhat intentional. An isolated dormitory complex contributed greatly to the perception the college was trying to create, that Stage was off-campus style housing which happened to be located on-campus.

Nonetheless, the location of Stage represented a problem for the college and its residents. In 1973, the college and residents looked into ways of providing transportation between Stage and the campus to avoid the long walk through harsh winter conditions. While the college looked into the option of buying or renting busses to transport students, the residents of the complex explored another idea, leasing vans from a local rental agency. Both plans failed to materialize, and transportation remained a problem at Stage until the school bought vans for a shuttle-bus service, beginning in November of 1975. One stop covered Stage XVI, where students were given the opportunity to ride at a rate of four dollars for twenty rides.

The distant location of Stage XVI also had a hand in numerous security issues over the years, beginning in the opening year of the complex. Each Stage XVI apartment was equipped with an alarm after a rash of burglaries struck the complex. All residents were also equipped with an Allen Wrench to lock windows both in the front and back of their apartments.

25 Harrington Interview.

26 "Transportation need for Stage XVI," The Stylus, 15 November 1973, 2.

27 "Shuttle-busses on the way," The Stylus, 18 September 1975, 3.

28 "Stage XVI to become burglar proof," The Stylus, 15 November 1973, 2.
Another area of complaint in the early years of the complex was the security of the pathway connecting Stage XVI and New Campus Drive. Described as "dark and uncomfortable to walk through at night," students residing at Stage wished for both added lighting for the pathway, and within the complex itself. Complicating the pathway problem for the college was the adjacent Penn Central Line railroad. Students were forced to cross the tracks while walking from Stage to campus. While the company did not enforce trespassing laws violated by students crossing the tracks, it refused to build a "grade crossing" on the basis that it was bankrupt and could not afford one.

SUNY Brockport's reaction to these problems was most certainly reactive rather than active. Instead of having a railroad crossing built prior to the completion of Stage XVI, the college ignored the problem and continued with construction despite the safety concerns involved. Understandably, the college acted quickly in taking flood prevention measures after the disaster in 1974. The shuttle-bus system, instead of being worked out before Stage opened, remained a dream until late in 1975. The lighting problem of the complex and pathway was one issue the college was particularly slow to react to. Though The Stylus printed multiple articles in the 70's concerning the poor lighting, it was not until 1979 that significant action was taken. Throughout Stage old incandescent light bulbs were replaced with both mercury and sodium bulbs. The new bulbs were more energy efficient and cheaper than those they replaced. At the same time, the power of the lighting system was said to have increased two hundred

29 "Security increased for Stage," The Stylus, 6 October 1976, 3.
While the college eventually did respond to the lighting problem at Stage XVI, as the 1980's arrived a careful look at the complex would reveal one of two things. Either the college was not active enough in making improvements to the apartments, or there were simply too many errors to correct. An October 1982 issue of The Stylus brought to light the failures of Stage. Citing specific student complaints, the story showed that while Stage was clearly deteriorating, major problems within the apartments were being overlooked or ignored by the college. There were complaints of broken stoves, faulty lights, inadequate ventilation, excessive mold, and crumbling ceiling tiles. There was also a report of a hole in the floor of an apartment bathroom which would periodically make life miserable for the residents living directly below it. These problems were compounded by what was described as “a severe reduction in maintenance staff,” allegedly due to a lack of state funding. All too often it appeared as though nobody was willing to take the blame for the failures of the Stage XVI experiment.

Malfunctions were not limited to the items provided for the Stage residents. In March of 1985 an electrical fire caused little damage within a Stage apartment, but was nonetheless an issue when it was learned that a “switchboard malfunction” gave the fire department the wrong room number for the location of the fire. While the switchboard

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30 "‘Lollypops’ expensive,” The Stylus, 19 October 1979, 3.

31 “Stage XVI: would you live there?,“ The Stylus, 6 October 1982, 10.
error created only a six-minute delay, it was symbolic of the problems of Stage XVI, as SUNY Brockport again reacted in a reactionary manner. Instead of running tests to find problems before they caused damage, the college hesitated, risking disaster.

The switchboard malfunction was far from the only problem the college encountered at Stage in the 1980’s. The complex suffered from a cockroach infestation, topped off by what students perceived as inadequate notice (13 hours) for fumigation evacuation procedures. The plumbing system at Stage again became a center of criticism when students in the ground floor of building 73 awoke to “approximately two inches of (raw sewage covering their floor.” Again, the college drew the wrath of its students for handling the situation poorly, taking nearly two months to reimburse students for damages suffered in the incident. The embarrassing moments at Stage continued, perhaps none as humiliating as the fiasco that occurred in the Spring of 1987 when The Stylus reported the master key to Stage had been lost for three weeks. While they knew the key was missing, mysteriously, college officials never informed the residents of the apartments. These events, coupled with the physical deterioration of its buildings, would eventually convince school officials to close Stage XVI.

32 “Switchboard malfunction at Stage XVI repaired, fire results in action taken,” The Stylus, 17 April 1985, 8.

33 “Stage ridden with cockroaches,” The Stylus, 2 October 1985, 1.

34 “Stage XVI students wake up to two inches of ‘sewage’ in apartments,” The Stylus, 7 September 1988, 3.

35 “Stage XVI residents receive restitution for flood damages,” The Stylus, 26 October 1988, 2.

36 “Stage XVI master key missing; situation resolved,” The Stylus, 25 March 1987, 3.
In the 1980's housing demand for Stage XVI apartments had declined. In addition to the likely word-of-mouth stories about the horrors of living at the complex, the fact remained that SUNY Brockport's enrollment dropped from 11,996 in 1975 to 7,162 in 1984. By 1984, use of the entire complex was no longer necessary, and six apartment buildings were closed down to "conserve energy." The empty units of Stage created a dilemma for the college. Shutting down buildings because a lack of residents created a void in generating revenue. Because it was not financially feasible to pay for a dormitory that was not in turn making money to pay off its debt, the college considered renting out empty apartments to locally based businesses. Unfortunately for the school, it was determined that the $4.7 million price tag to renovate the buildings was too steep, and the idea was eventually abandoned.

In 1986, the New York State Dormitory Authority conducted a "feasibility study" on Stage XVI. The Biggie Shaflucas architectural firm was hired to determine if the apartment complex should be renovated or abandoned. The study found that the complex would only last "a few more years" if problems with exterior walls, windows, doors, and roofs were not corrected. Because many of the components making up the apartments were obsolete or no longer being manufactured, "a complete repair," cost was estimated at $6.2 million. Within this "complete repair," additional renovations were considered.

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38 "Stage XVI demand stays same, ideas discussed," The Stylus, 12 December 1984, 2.

39 "College considers renting Stage XVI spaces to businesses," The Stylus, 3 December 1986, 1.
called for, including adding more insulation to walls and roofs of the apartments in use. Additionally, a complete removal of the steel exterior walls was deemed necessary to significantly extend the life of Stage XVI. However, despite their findings, the architectural company could not make a "recommendation to save or abandon" because they were not aware of the financial situation and enrollment projections of the college.40

What options did SUNY Brockport have in this matter? In the fall of 1988 college President John E. Van de Wetering wrote a letter to the State University of New York outlining the choices the college had concerning Stage XVI. Among the options were to close Stage down permanently, rebuild the complex, or to make patchwork repairs, keeping the buildings open for a short period of time. Other options quickly disposed of included building new apartment-style dormitories to the immediate west of the administration building, and constructing new apartments in the heart of the campus. Two more specific plans were detailed by Van de Wetering, one with the intention of holding Stage together briefly, and one that intended to keep Stage in use for twenty more years. The first plan, looking to extend the life of Stage just five years called for "replacing the (deteriorating) stair towers and balconies" of the complex as well as the designation of money for a vaguely-described "exterior and interior repair." The cost of the five-year plan was estimated at $1.8 million. The twenty-year plan consisted of "replacing windows...roofs...and exterior metal walls" at an expense of just under $4 million.41 The college opted to take the path of the five-year plan.

40 Biggie, 2.

During the final days of Stage XVI the complex could best be described as a ghost town. Continuing the policy of condensing Stage residents into as few buildings as possible, the college housed only 240 students in the Spring of 1991. This number of students represented just less than twenty-five percent of the original capacity of Stage. Upon the end of the 1990-1991 school year, the complex was officially closed and subsequently demolished.42

Long after the Stage facility had been destroyed it remained a financial burden for the college. When the complex built in the early 1970's it was financed to be paid for far beyond its closing date of 1991. The added costs of previous renovations and demolition brought SUNY Brockport's Stage XVI debt to $8.6 million as the 1996-1997 fiscal year concluded.43 What emerged from this debt was a struggle over who would pay for it, the college, or the SUNY system. Brockport claimed Stage was not the fault of the college, but rather of shoddy construction. The college felt this was reason enough to "receive total relief from SUNY." Brockport officials feared that, without Stage to produce revenue, they would have to increase dorm rates approximately "$375 per student per year." Raising on-campus housing rates would, the college argued, create "a downward spiral" with more students choosing not to attend the school. This scenario would force the college to raise housing prices even more to cover the debt burden.44 SUNY officials disagreed, arguing that allowing Brockport to be relieved of debt for Stage

42 "Stage Residents Left Out in the Cold," The Stylus, 6 February 1991, 3.
43 Post, Jeffrey D. "Memo to Ed Kumar and Lou Spiro," 16 December 1996.
would cause other SUNY schools to "report deficiencies or obsolescences and request a debt service waiver." 45

After a series of proposals and counter-proposals, an agreement was finally reached. As a result of the settlement, SUNY would absorb $4.4 million, roughly half the debt still remaining from the construction, renovation, and demolition of Stage. 46 The college received additional front-loaded aid when SUNY agreed to temporarily relieve Brockport of a combined $250,000 debt "in the 1998-1999 and 1999-2000 fiscal years." The money saved initially, designated to be repaid in full in the 2008-2009 fiscal year 47, allowed the college "to maintain a financially sound residence hall program" into the 21st century. 48

What legacy does Stage XVI leave on the history of the college? While flawed because of its distance from campus, the apartment complex offered an alternative mode of living for students that combined the positive aspects of on and off-campus housing for eighteen years. Unfortunately, instead of being remembered as such, Stage is thought of as a disaster. The failed complex represents a devastating combination of poor planning, construction, and maintenance. A decade after closing, the apartments are not looked back on as an innovative technique in student housing, but rather as an epic mistake the college is still paying for.

Still, many questions are left concerning Stage. Ultimately, who should take the responsibility for its failure, the construction company that built it, the college that allowed them to, or the Dormitory Authority supplying the initial money to pay for it? In hindsight, was the idea for a six million dollar dormitory facility a wise idea, especially when it was built partially on the premise that SUNY Brockport’s enrollment would skyrocket the school into university center status? Did the college legitimately try to maintain the deteriorating buildings in the 1980’s, or were funds allocated elsewhere knowing that repairing Stage would be a futile effort?

The most important questions regarding the failed complex concern the students today. To what degree is the college’s current student body influenced by the Stage XVI debacle? The debt left by the demolished dormitories eventually prevents the college from fixing existing problems on campus because of financial constraints. Most importantly, has the college been forced to increase student fees to pay for the debt on Stage? Asking current students to pay for a mistake the college made thirty years ago would most certainly be unfair, and uncovering this possibility would likely negatively impact student satisfaction with the administration of SUNY Brockport.
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