

The Buildings of Dalhousie University

Killam Library

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Address: 6225 University Av.

Start Date: 1966

Completion Date: 1971

Architect: Leslie R. Fairn

Renovation Date(s):
1996; 2002

Contractor: Fraser-Brace
Maritimes Limited

Building History



Killam Memorial Library - Exterior,
n.d.



Killam Memorial Library - Interior -
Staircase, n.d.

By 1960 Dalhousie's Macdonald Memorial Library had become exceedingly small and inadequate. The stack space was far too limited to hold the collection of 175,000 volumes, and the Reading Room was crowded beyond capacity, with enrolment expected to grow continuously in coming years. These limitations stunted the growth of Dalhousie's collection and prevented the school's progress as a premier institution; its library ranked only ninth in Canada. A campus development plan in the mid-1960s resulted in recognition that the University Library fulfilled a crucial role and that a new building was greatly needed to improve space and resources.

In 1965 this need became possible with the \$30 million bequest of Dorothy Killam. Both she and her husband, Izaak Walton Killam, had received honorary doctorates from Dalhousie. When he died in 1955 his widow inherited a large fortune which she quickly doubled. Dorothy Killam wanted their fortune to remain in Canada, to support Nova Scotia and to enhance Canadian education, particularly in science, medicine and engineering. When she died in 1965 Dalhousie received 32% of her fortune; the Killam Trust funds were then the largest gift ever given to Dalhousie.

Architect Leslie R. Fairn was hired to design the new building, which was contracted to Fraser-Brace Maritimes Limited. New University Librarian Louis G. Vagianos worked with great persistence and enthusiasm to plan a library that would serve Humanities and Social Sciences students and strengthen the quality of education at Dal. The Killam Memorial Library would exemplify a reinvigorated vision of the university library as a single, continuous operating unit centred around provision of public services.

Construction on the Killam Memorial Library began in 1966. After usual delays, it was completed in 1971 at a final cost of \$7.3 million. Eighty percent of this came from a provincial self-liquidating loan. The Library officially opened on March 11, 1971. Guests and speakers at the Special Convocation included: the Reverend D.S. MacDougall; President Henry Hicks; contractor Fred Waye; architect Leslie R. Fairn; Board of Governors Chairman Donald McInnes; Director of Communications Services Louis Vagianos; and President of the MacMillan Company, John Morgan Gray.



A photograph of the Architects Model of the Izaak Killam Memorial Library.
n.d.

The 230,000 square foot building was designed to accommodate 8000 undergraduate and graduate students, a faculty of 750 and library staff of 130, by 1980. With a capacity for one million books (though the collection at the time numbered just over 300,000), it was equipped with conference rooms, reading areas, telex equipment, "public typing rooms" and a "conduit structure" wiring each room to the Computer Centre in the basement (Gazette January 18, 1968). The McMechan Auditorium was named after Archibald McMechan, an English professor from 1889 to 1933, and librarian from 1906 to 1931. The open courtyard was the principle source of light and was intended to improve traffic patterns and make better use of space. The design attempted to be inherently flexible so that the library would be adaptable to future changes in computer and communications technology. "The Killam," as it came to be known, won a design award in 1971 from the Nova Scotia Association of Architects.

Finished cost-effectively in pre-cast concrete similar to the Arts Centre, the Killam exemplified modern architectural and decorating features. It was President Henry Hicks, a skilled cabinetmaker in his spare time, who pushed for the use of Brazilian rosewood in the interior, adding an "expensive feeling" as the Chronicle Herald reported. Arts and Science Dean Basil Cooke, a geologist, recommended the micaceous slate tiles for the floors on the ground level.

Because the extra stack space was not yet needed, the fourth and fifth floors of the library originally housed departmental offices: at first, Classics, German, English, Education and Romance Languages, and by the 1980s, the Mathematics, Statistics and Computing Science department. The University Archives moved to its present location on the fifth floor in the early 1970s; when the Science collection was moved from the closing Macdonald Library, the stack space on the fourth floor was also filled up. Since the building's opening, the School of Library and Information Studies has been on the third floor. Special Collections has at various times been on the ground, second and (presently) fifth floors. Today the east side of the ground floor is occupied by Student Services offices and International Students and Exchange Services.

In 1996 a glass roof was added to the Killam courtyard, and the stone was restored after years of being salted during the winter. Year round greenery and a Second Cup coffee shop were added, and the ventilation and lighting systems underwent long-needed improvements. Then, in 2002, the first floor of the library was remodeled to house the new Learning Commons. A \$1.2 million project, the Commons is a hi-tech research and work centre for students, with 160 well-equipped computer workstations, support services, offices and group meeting rooms.

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