**Integrated Simplicity**

The GEP is an important (and highly visible) first step in the University’s commitment to reduce its carbon footprint: their facility master plan calls for a 20% carbon reduction by year 2020, as well as to be 100% coal-free by 2025. The GEP building, which collects and then distributes the energy of more than 300 geothermal wells, is an example of the University acting as responsible steward of its bucolic 2,100 acre campus and 188 buildings.

The new Geothermal Energy Plant sits like a glowing crystal amongst the stone and brick buildings that it serves. Built as the cornerstone of a campus-wide commitment to responsible energy management and environmental stewardship, its primary function is to showcase the cutting edge geo-thermal systems within. Located amidst three new dormitories and a new dining facility the GEP comfortably integrates itself within this context, subtly drawing attention to the systems within.

The exterior and interior of the building work together to thoughtfully display its contents and to engage the community in a sustainable design conversation. The large expanse of glazing and the carefully calibrated fenestration afford key views into the building providing a “jewel box display-case” for the pumps and water treatment equipment. The open stair and mezzanine afford dramatic views of the piping and equipment.

The planar design and restrained masonry detailing of the building’s exterior recall the minimalist horizontal stone of Walter Netsch’s iconic Art Museum, also located on the Western Campus, with subtle transitions in color and tone marking the three primary masses as they step down toward the residential halls.

The siting of the building engages the student with a welcoming “front porch”. The planted green roof of the porch is held aloft on thin round columns and offers a covered path to the intramural soccer fields. Aligning with the columns and mullions are rain-chains that add a further layer to the vertical screen of the front façade, while the planter’s river-stone and indigenous grasses recall the nearby lakes and wetlands.

Smaller elements encourage the community to engage with the building at a more personal level: planters that double as outdoor seating provide a pause point for a view of the inner workings of the GEP, smaller punched openings at eye level provide unique views into the space; and the softly curving masonry screen walls, now covered in an evergreen ivy, face the intramural fields and offer a comfortable shady spot to sit and watch games.

A vegetated roof and carefully calibrated over-hangs shade the substantial glazing (offering sufficient glare-free day-lighting that all but eliminates the need for artificial lighting) further minimizing the ecological footprint of the facility.

Since the buildings dedication its educational mission has expanded beyond the university, having been adopted by area schools as a favorite destination for “green” field trips.