

# History of West Hall

## Welcome to the “New” West Hall

After 25 months of extensive renovations, West Hall reopened its doors in February 2003 to its original long-time tenants—the students of AUB.

West Hall was named in honor of Robert Haldane West (1862-1906), an American who arrived in Beirut fresh from Princeton at the age of 21. The various positions he filled during his 23 years of service to the Syrian Protestant College (SPC) between 1883 and his untimely death in 1906 show remarkable versatility. Beginning as a staff member, he soon became professor of astronomy and mathematics, then director of the Lee Observatory, principal of the Preparatory Department, treasurer of the College, and finally dean of the School of Arts and Sciences. Over the years, he taught moral philosophy, ethics, science, geography, mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and logic. Robert West was so admired by his colleagues and students that the young staff members who drew up plans for the large student center in 1906 decided to name it in his honor.

Student clubs and societies, along with the Offices of Student Affairs and Financial Aid, moved back “home” after spending more than two years living in makeshift accommodations scattered all over campus. Fittingly, it reopened on February 24, 2003, just 89 years to the day after it first opened in 1914.

Walking into the main hall, you immediately notice how the first floor's immaculate new paint and shiny, patterned stone floors set off the familiar grand staircase leading up to the second floor. Behind the stairs is a totally refreshed Auditorium B with the newly configured Office of Student Affairs and other administrative offices to the left in the east wing. As in the past, the west end of the ground floor is entirely taken up by the Common Room, open all day for casual student lounging and socializing—and for more formal exhibitions.

Along the wide upper balcony on the second floor is space for serving coffee and refreshments during theater intermissions. To the east is the renovated Lecture Hall, with a moveable partition and bright red amphitheater-style seating. But the jewel of the second floor is the totally refurbished theater, the Suhail R. Bathish Auditorium, made possible by a generous donation of \$440,000 from the family of the 1959 engineering graduate whose name it now carries.

To access the third floor, the visitor can take the new elevator, installed primarily for the disabled, or a new free-hanging marble staircase leading to a complex of offices and rooms for student clubs and societies, conferences and meetings. In contrast to the muted maroon and off-white décor of the first and second floors, a rich blue dominates the third floor.

The main attraction of the fourth floor, a new addition to the building, is a huge room illuminated by a large skylight. The room affords more than enough space for table tennis, aerobics, and dancing. Completing the facilities on that floor are several meeting rooms bordering a small atrium that opens to the sky.

The new basement of the building harbors the offices of the university yearbook Campus, a music room, photography darkrooms, and a large room for martial arts.

Since its formal opening ceremonies, West Hall has been swarming with activity. Poster boards and stands ranged in front of the wide front terrace advertise lectures by visiting novelists and politicians, the performance of a locally written version of "Waiting for Godot," the student a cappella group Mouth Music, a film series, Day of the Land celebrations, concerts, film shows, acting workshops, drama-production auditions, and anti-war demonstrations. Students are busy selling tickets and food, painting posters, and passing out flyers and brochures. And as of this writing, the 16th Annual Islamic Book Fair was drawing hundreds of visitors each day to the Common Room.

Requests to reserve the new lecture rooms and auditorium flood the office of the director of student activities. "In less than two weeks after the reopening," Dean of Student Affairs Maroun Kisirwani reported, "West Hall witnessed two receptions, three cultural exhibitions, and six public lectures. Children from orphanages in Beirut enjoyed a long day of fun, meals, and entertainment offered by the Education Students Society."

These activities are part of a pattern that has been maintained through its history in all circumstances. During World War II, London actors came out to entertain the British troops; and during the dark years of the Lebanese civil war, in 1977, a group of students, faculty, and friends mounted a production of the operetta composed by history professor Kamal Salibi, "The Marchioness of Saden Saden," which had first been performed in West Hall in 1954.

Social, cultural, and political activities remained high on the list of West Hall events throughout the years. As student clubs sought to reach out into the community, debates, lectures, and exhibitions became increasingly oriented toward issues of intellectual and public concern. International celebrities frequently appeared on the auditorium stage. In the 1960s, a reading by the popular post-Stalin Russian poet Yevgeni Yevtushenko packed the auditorium to overflowing, as did an informal discussion in 1998 with Palestinian spokesperson Hanan Ashrawi, herself an English literature graduate of AUB (BA '68; MA '70).

Even today, students as well as faculty and administrators recognize the "uplifting" force of the West Hall experience. At the rededication ceremony, Dean of Student Affairs Maroun Kisirwani said, "West Hall comes next to academic programs in fostering values and in developing students' personalities and in preparing them to face the hurdles of life." The importance of friendship figures frequently in reflections on the West Hall experience. Assistant Dean of Student Affairs Talal Nizameddin agreed, saying, "West Hall represents a history of creativity, talent, performance, and hot political debate among AUB students...It is a place where students can socialize and make new friends."

And President Waterbury, in his official address, expressed the hope that West Hall would be "a crucible for friendships across all lines and barriers that have sometimes plagued Lebanese and Arab society, but, failing friendship, I hope it will be a crucible for mutual respect."

Judging from the spirited activity in the building since it reopened, West Hall has indeed

resumed its role as the “heart” of AUB.

(Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from Al-Kulliyeh, March 14, 1914, pp. 125-139. This is an edited version of the original article.)

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