

These Walls: OSU Medical Center

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The OSU Medical Center in downtown Tulsa.
(Photo by Rip Stell)

TULSA – For those intrigued by architectural or construction history, few places satisfy like hospitals.

Public schools come close, simply because their buildings also tend to retain much of their original form over generations, but such properties rarely demonstrate the active growth history often visible in long-standing hospitals. Like tree rings, these layers also give intriguing signs of each addition's well-being.

By Oklahoma standards, what's now home to the OSU Medical Center boasts a long heritage of health care use. Built in multiple phases across multiple decades, each segment of the old Oklahoma Osteopathic Hospital met a specific need, only to see that shift or evolve into

something else. The fact that so much of the structure remains active speaks volumes of its durability, and the administration's adaptive resources.

The site's history of healing dates back to 1916, when the four-story, 17,000-square-foot Oklahoma Hospital opened at Ninth Street and Jackson Avenue. That stout brick structure served as successor to the original Tulsa Hospital and Nurses Training School, which opened a decade before.

Oklahoma Hospital would endure a troubled history, passing under various different operators before suffering a 1943 foreclosure. But that opened a door for Tulsa's osteopaths.

Dr. C.D. Heasley started Tulsa's first osteopathic hospital in 1924, as recorded in the 1994 book *Dreams, Challenge and Change, A History of Oklahoma Osteopathic Hospital and Tulsa Regional Medical Center*. The city's swelling population soon outstripped the 10-bed Tulsa Clinic Hospital, leading Heasley to launch the 25-bed Tulsa Osteopathic Hospital in 1927.

Demand took another leap with America's entry into World War II. Since the U.S. Army denied osteopaths the right to provide medical service, many remained home to handle surging patient loads. Dr. John W. Orman organized a group to buy the old Oklahoma Hospital for \$35,000 – a tenth of its one-time appraised value. They then launched a \$125,000 renovation to open the Oklahoma Osteopathic Hospital.

OOH faced financial challenges from its start. For almost two decades each physician paid a \$5 fee for every patient admitted. But demand remained strong. The hospital delivered 215 babies in its first five months. By 1948 its annual births totaled 670, while its patient load hit 1,030.

Facing health care inflation and heightened competition, hospital leaders responded with three decades of construction. A 1955 addition more than doubled the facility's size while adding air conditioning throughout the complex, a first for Tulsa. Within five years a \$1.2 million project doubled its size again, giving the 87,000-square-foot OOH seven surgical operating rooms, two recovery rooms, and some nifty innovations.

A \$2.5 million, 73,000-square-foot expansion in 1966 provided new laboratories and X-ray and emergency room facilities for the 300-bed hospital. Then the adaptive reuse began. Finished in 1975, the \$12 million West Tower added 200 new beds as it dropped 65 obsolete

ones. Two years later the hospital opened its cath lab and added dialysis and tomography scanning.

A \$44 million bond issue followed, fueling construction of three 1980s buildings, demolition of the original Oklahoma Hospital structure and the addition of an old Southwest Airlines parking garage. These brought welcome improvements, from OOH's pretty "solarium lobby" to the 553-bed hospital's 32 new intensive care and cardiac care units, but they came with a revenue burden heightened by a key response to rising inflation, 1984's short-lived Health Accords health maintenance organization. In just four years that program compiled millions in losses that handicapped hospital earnings and undercut its bond payment abilities.

Although reorganized and renamed the Tulsa Regional Medical Center – marking still another response to market competition – the hospital never recovered from those burdens. Within the next two decades its ownership changed hands four times. Now held by a city trust, Chief Executive Jan Slater has led OSU Medical Center into three renovation and construction phases in that continuing quest to revitalize the hospital's image and revenue streams while regaining profitability.

From outdated ceiling heights and corridor widths to wall placement and floor strengths, that multi-era building throws up some challenges to those efforts. Much of that – like the ancient boiler and lighting systems – OSU Medical Center's already tackled. Other projects lie ahead. But for all its aging issues, the structure also offers some period charms, such as extensive terrazzo flooring, and a vibrant history. And as OSU's already demonstrated through renovations of the Wound Care, Emergency and Interventional Radiology departments, the existing structure remains adaptable to creative changes.

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