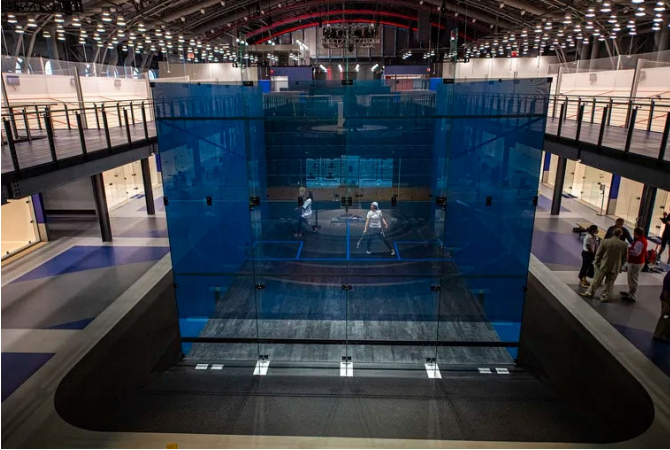


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DuBois Stewart (left) and Kat Burgos, from the SquashSmarts program, play in the glass court at the center of the new Arlen Specter US Squash Center. The facility was inserted into a historic armory on 33rd Street, near the Drexel University campus. JOSE F. MORENO / Staff Photographer



After acquiring the historic armory from the state, Drexel University completely renovated the Classical Revival facade and restored the windows, which had been bricked up. The building is now the home of the US Squash's Specter Center

Philly squash elite convert historic armory to public courts, hoping to democratize a prep-school sport.

US Squash has created a country club setting for Philadelphia school kids, while finding a lively use for a dowdy historic building.

By Inga Saffron | Columnist
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Ever since America's first national squash association was founded in Philadelphia (or, more precisely, Bala Cynwyd) in 1904, the sport has been played largely by a small and privileged set — “by whites, wearing whites,” in the words of Penn's squash director, Jack Wyant. Students from exclusive private schools were inculcated into the game as if it were a secret society. Many went on to hone their skills in the fast-moving racket game at elite colleges and pricey membership-only clubs, where they developed relationships with fellow players that opened doors professionally and further cemented their social rank.

It's a lot to ask a single building to change such a deeply inbred culture, but that is exactly what US Squash is trying to do with its new sports facility in Powelton Village. The organization, which had abandoned Philadelphia for New York a dozen years ago, decided to return to the city after Drexel University offered the group space in a historic armory on North 33rd Street. Along with providing the national team with training courts and a camera-ready showplace for international tournaments, US Squash quickly realized the venue could help expand and democratize the sport.

So, yes, there are two rows of pristine, white-walled squash courts nestled under the soaring roof of the old drill hall, designed in 1916 for the National Guard squadron founded by Benjamin Franklin. But there are also classrooms where Philadelphia kids can participate in an intensive mentoring program centered around squash and spa-like locker rooms available for use by Philadelphia's school district teams. The Specter Center — named in honor of the late U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter, an avid squash player — is also offering free access to the neighborhood's low-income residents and affordably priced memberships for everyone else.

The pandemic complicated construction, but the facility is now far enough along to welcome players. In October, it will host the U.S. Open, an event that could bring hundreds of squash fans to Philadelphia. Even before the work was fully done, the city's Preservation Alliance bestowed one of its annual awards on US Squash for overseeing the \$35 million interior renovation. It's no wonder. The Classical Revival building hasn't looked this good in more than a century.

Philadelphia has dozens of large, unwieldy, legacy buildings like the armory, so that happy outcome was far from assured when Drexel acquired it from the state



SquashSmarts Domingo Tejada, left, and DuBois Stewart play at the Arlen Specter US Squash Center courts.

in 2008. The trapezoidal structure was designed by Philip H. Johnson, an early-20th-century architect notorious for his connections with Philadelphia's party bosses. The armory gradually became less functional, and the National Guard stopped using the main drill hall decades ago. By the 1990s, the building could have easily been mistaken for a garage. Its once-elegant arched windows had been bricked up, making the interior dreary and uninviting. Drexel had temporarily converted the armory for basketball, but its real estate-savvy president, John Fry, felt the building had more potential.



This is how the armory at 32nd and Lancaster looked in 2010, shortly after Drexel University acquired it from the National Guard. It used the building as a gym and concert hall before leasing Squadron Calvary's former building to US Squash.

Fry, it turns out, is also a squash fanatic, as well as the former chair of US Squash's board, and he urged the organization to consider the building for its new headquarters. US Squash, which had been trying for years to raise the sport's profile and diversify its membership, had hoped to build a tournament venue with public courts in New York, similar to the National Tennis Center in Queens, but had given up on finding an affordable site. Because the armory is in the West Philadelphia Promise Zone, a high-poverty area, Fry

argued that the building would allow US Squash to achieve both goals at a much lower cost. Very soon, several big Philadelphia donors, including Shanin Specter, a successful lawyer, squash player, and son of Arlen Specter, were backing the project.

Once US Squash agreed to lease the building, Drexel was able to address the exterior. Pooling \$6 million of its own money and \$6 million from the state, the university hired Kelly Maiello Architects to scour the stained brick facade and restore the windows. Torrents of natural light now pour in the soaring drill hall.

Last year, SquashSmarts provided intensive tutoring for 369 students [and] plans to double.

The old building turned out to be perfect for squash, which requires courts with 18-foot walls. Because the armory's roof is supported by a metal truss, similar to those found on railroad bridges, there are no columns chopping up the immense room. It was a simple matter for EwingCole Architects, which did the concept design, to lay out the 20 courts. Van Potteiger, the architect who completed the interior, celebrated the roof trusses by tracing the curved sections in programmable lights. As the colors change, the sweeping lights energize the space and suggest the movement of players pinging around the courts. It may sound a bit Vegas-y, but the effect is quite subtle.



Ned Edwards, a former top-ranked player who is now the head of the Specter Center, boasts that "there is nothing like this in the world." While I had never set foot on a squash court before — paddleball was my sport — a squash-playing friend confirmed that it is a magical place for a game, "like playing in a cathedral." Because direct sunlight can interfere with play, most squash courts are in windowless spaces, often in basements. EwingCole arranged the courts to keep the glare at a minimum. If the light does get too intense, automated shades can be lowered to block the sun. Making the Specter Center a nice place to play and keeping membership prices low are key to increasing

the sport's popularity, Edwards told me. Since squash is an indoor game, kids can't just head over to the local park to play on a public court the way they can with tennis or paddleball. Nearly all squash facilities are private and charge hefty fees.

"Squash is fairly saddled as an exclusive sport," Edwards acknowledged. "If squash does not become broadly accessible, it won't be sustainable."

That's where the community outreach comes in. Since settling in Philadelphia, the organization has helped the school district and SquashSmarts set up a squash league — among the first urban leagues in the country, Edwards said. Ten schools now compete on Specter Center courts, and others are expected to join them. US Squash also set aside a portion of the armory for an after-school program called SquashSmarts, which was founded 20 years ago at Drexel. Last year, SquashSmarts provided intensive tutoring for 369 students at its two locations, and director Stephen Gregg said the group plans to double the number of participants.



Thoboki Mohola, right, plays his mother, Metja Moholo, both from South Africa) at the Arlen Specter US Squash Center courts

US Squash used to be single-mindedly focused on producing champions, Gregg noted, but now the goal is "to help the students become the best versions of themselves." To that end, donors secured \$1.2 million in college scholarships last year for the program's participants. They also raised \$200,000 to help their families get through the pandemic, and squash-playing lawyers have been mobilized to fight eviction orders.

The students, and their families, also get free memberships and squash lessons. "We want the community to feel this is their center," Edwards said. At a time when so many city rec centers are shuttered, that makes the Specter Center an important refuge.

What's nice about the armory's interior renovation is that it preserves the rough-and-ready spirit of the old drill hall even while incorporating the kind of amenities you might find in a country club facility. A

glass-walled competition court stands in the center of the space, surrounded by bleacher seating. Because the ceiling is so high, the architects were able to insert a mezzanine. Instead of completely filling the space with a new floor, they designed an industrial-style catwalk that retains the sense of openness. The catwalk also overlooks the courts, allowing fans to watch the games from above.

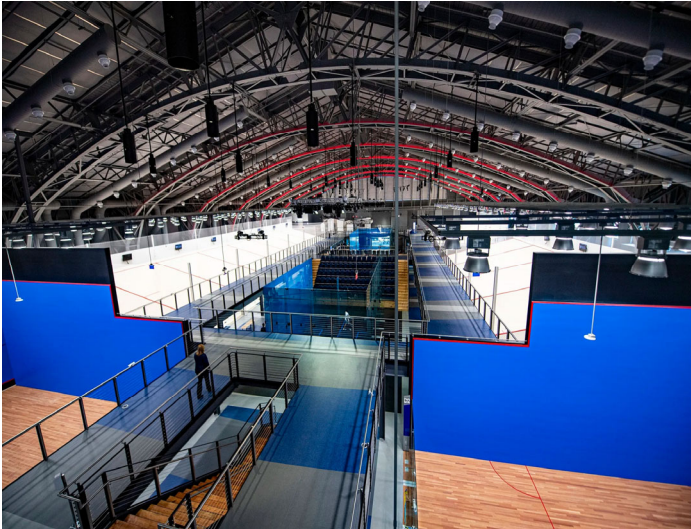


With the opening of the Specter Center, Philadelphia now has a wealth of squash facilities. Drexel maintains two university courts in its gym on Market Street. And Penn just overhauled its squash facility, a few blocks south on 33rd Street. That project, elegantly designed by EwingCole, features sculptural, maple-clad bleacher seating at its center and a similar array of metal catwalks. But, in contrast to Drexel, Penn jacked up the price of its public memberships after construction, sending many players scurrying to the Specter Center.

Edwards' dream is to see squash become an Olympic sport, perhaps in 2028. If that happens, Philadelphia just might have some contenders ready to compete.



The Arlen Specter US Squash Center *JOSE F. MORENO / Philadelphia Inquirer Staff Photographer*



From the catwalks that crisscross US Squash's new Specter Center, located in a historic armory on 33rd Street, you can see all 20 squash courts.

