

Narration: The Urban Environmental Lab is a beloved house at the center of Brown's campus. To get inside, you first have to walk through a vibrant community garden. Through the front doors is the cozy student lounge. Look to your left and you'll see the classroom and off to the right, just around the corner, is the kitchen that's almost always stocked with free food. The greenhouse is in the back past the couches in the student lounge and, if you climb up the ladder on the second floor, you can make your way onto a small balcony on the roof, right next to the solar panels. This is the UEL and it is threatened with demolition in the near future. Members of the UEL community reminisce about their favorite memories and what that the UEL means to them.

Hi my name is

Emma Bouton, Brendan George, Christie Ledingham, Lauren Manus, Thomas Culver, Bailey McLaughlin, Logan, Erin Donnellan, Harry August, Angelica, Emma Kurihara, Jeanne Loewenstein, Jon Gerwartzman, Alicia Milhouse, Kurt Teichert, Emma Illick-Frank, William Klimpert

I am a

sophomore, senior, local business owner and East Side resident for decades, staff member with the Office of Energy and Environmental Initiatives under Facilities, freshman, junior, the academic program manager for the Institute at Brown for Environment and Society, a senior lecturer in the Environmental Studies program here at Brown

and I'm studying

environmental studies, international relations, development studies and economics, environmental science, biophysics with a focus on plants, economics and biology

What the UEL Means

Bailey: Wow what does the UEL mean to me?

Brendan: The UEL means everything to me. The UEL is definitely my home, not even my home away from home on campus, it really is my first home.

Kurt: It's a representation of who I am and what I do.

Thomas: It houses environmental studies classes and faculty but it's clearly so much more than that. It also houses a lot of student activities. There's an active bike shop in the basement

Logan: In addition to being a part of the ES department, there's a lot of community partnerships so there's the community garden outside and the African Alliance keeps a lot of their seedlings in the greenhouse and it's also the home for a number of other clubs like Bikes@Brown and Native Americans at Brown. The UEL's kind of like an unofficial hub for a lot of things.

Alicia: For me, it was a great way to practice and to teach my children about urban agriculture and sustainability and it was a great way to meet people from all over the world. I've met people from Cambodia, from India, from England and that's what the true nature of what a community garden is.

Kurt: It's been a gathering place for outside community groups, members of different NGOs, Energize Rhode Island, the Environment Council of Rhode Island. It is this physical center for environmental action on the campus. Many of the students that come in and out of the building and use it aren't Environmental Studies concentrators but might be involved in the campus environmental stewardship program or might be involved in some local or even international issues.

Thomas: and I think the fact that it houses so many different things means that it kind of becomes this special awesome space where everything kind of gets blended together into this one larger community where you get people, students, faculty, community members, who all come together to advocate for environmental stuff as one group. It's pretty awesome.

Jeanne: I really love the fact that this is a student project and you can feel the love that was put into this building.

The building was originally a carriage house. Students work with faculty to convert this old carriage house into a center for Environmental Studies. This happened in the mid to late 70s, when you could get away with doing things like that. So there were students up on the roof, they went in and did a lot of work, I mean they put the greenhouse on there. And even in the beginning, students would live on the upstairs so like my office here used to be someone's bedroom. I mean I even had an alumni come by at one point and said "I used to sleep in your office."

Kurt: It's a historic building and has seen all these different uses. The best example of that is the wooden floor. As you walk across and you just hear that resonating in the building, you look at some of the different scratches and grooves in it, it just represents things that have happened here. There's a point where you can go down the stairs down into the basement and you can actually see the outline where the previous staircase went down so those types of representations of history in the fabric of the building are a key thing for me.

Jeanne: It's almost hard to put into words. I'm someone who really likes history and likes buildings that you can see the craft in them. I mean around Providence there's a lot of these old shipbuilder houses and there's something there. It's almost like someone doing a sculpture and you can see where their hands have been and their fingerprints are a little bit a part of it. I feel like that's here and it almost has a bit of a sanctuary feeling to it.

Alicia: It's catharting. It's my go to place for healing and tranquility and peace and interaction with other members of the community, the Brown community, the East Side community.

Emma I-F: I was talking to Jeanne, Jeanne was telling me all these incredible stories, and then she said "People just fall in love with the UEL because it's kind of like your mom making you soup. You can get a fancier dinner somewhere else but that soup makes you feel fuzzy and warm and at home." For students who are away from home, it's really nice to have this building that has a kitchen, that you can just print things there, you can leave your stuff there. It's a home away from home. I think that's really what appeals to students the most.

Will: If I broke down the UEL in my mind into just what it is to me, it's a lounge-y sofa area and a kitchen and that kind of helps foster this community vibe so it feels like we're just living this environmental life together.

Thomas: You could be hanging out in the common spaces of the UEL and you can run into people who are doing awesome work from all walks of life. Studying international relations we have our own academic space the Watson but nobody hangs out in the Watson. If I'm sitting in the UEL I can have an awesome conversation about carbon pricing or dogs or anything with Kurt Teichert who's walking down the stairs. There's just something about the space-that's really conducive for that kind of collaboration and community.

Emma K.: I've actually introduced a few people to the UEL this year and I think they've kind of seen how nice it can be. I know-Jeanne's always coming around with free food, which people appreciated a lot.

Christie: I love the fact that I can come in at any time of day and just see a welcoming face. It's always a bright spot in my day.

Angelica: I find that it's this central campus hub that I can come to. No matter how I'm feeling it'll make me feel really good and really happy.

Favorite Memories of the UEL

Bailey: My favorite memories here, let me think.

Will: Woah oh man hmm let me think about that for a sec.

Emma I-F: I have so many positive memories. I love the UEL, oh love it.

Brendan: We had a zucchini party in the kitchen of the UEL. There was a plot from the community garden right outside the UEL that had these overgrown zucchinis that the owner wasn't going to use

Lauren: They were probably about 5 pounds each and about over a foot long

Brendan: So we were given permission to have at the zucchinis and it was too much for any one person to consume.

Lauren: We didn't really know what to do with the zucchini

Brendan: so we decided that we were gonna throw a party to celebrate these zucchinis and use it as an excuse for gathering so on a Saturday afternoon, people from all different years, people who weren't Environmental Studies concentrators, parents visiting their children came into the kitchen

Lauren: and we carved the zucchini into different sculptures

Brendan: we made them into instruments

Lauren: then we made latkes out of zucchini

Brendan: and fried them and we ate them and we smushed them and we threw them and it was a whole mess and it was beautiful.

Jeanne: Just the other day we had a bird come in and I was trying to help get it out and I'm very gently reaching down and getting my hand around it and I can feel its soft feathers and then it pops up, bounces off my head, and goes out a window and I thought it was hilarious and I just thought it was the coolest thing.

And some times we've had little squirrels, oh I love this one. We had some chocolates out in the hallway and a squirrel, a very ambitious squirrel, came into the building and discovered the chocolates, got into the bag, had some chocolates, and then thought 'This seems like a good place to move in to.' So then it started bringing nuts in and putting them in Kurt's plant, almost like it was payment for this chocolates. So it took a little bit to find it and then I see it coming out of Kurt's office like it clearly just put a nut in there and it looks at me like "oh no!" and then runs off. But I just thought that was hilarious. I think it's great that little critters come in, I mean I love that, I love that feeling.

Will: One thing I love about the UEL that I haven't bought up is weird but I love how unofficial it feels. So I don't go in the basement a lot cuz it's kind of, you know, it's a basement, it's like a basement of a house. I have stuff piled up in the corner of this basement and I just walk in and again every now and then and you know it's kinda dirty and it's kinda spider-webby in some portions of it, particularly where I happen to put my stuff. And there's just like things piled every which place and it just highlights that this isn't just a place where people come to learn, this is a place where people live and interact with each other and this is a place where people make things happen because it's a lot of things that are happening that are stored down there and I like that. So that's my weird little plug for the UEL basement.

The Future of the UEL

Logan: So the future of the UEL is really in question.

Jon: The UEL is currently slated to be demolished to make space for the new performing arts center, the UEL along with the four buildings surrounding it and the parking lot right off of The Walk.

Logan: And while a performing arts center is definitely necessary on the campus, it's really sad and sort of heartbreaking that a building that I love so much and that has meant so much historically to Brown and the ES Department is just going to be torn down.

Alicia: I pray that Brown will consider relocating, reallocating the same setup somewhere. It does so much for the neighborhood and it's visually beautiful, it's a healing oasis in the midst of a bustling small city.

Being a gardener without a lot of space on my property to garden, I'd hope I'd be able to matriculate myself into another community garden but it's very challenging. Waiting lists can be anywhere from 1 year to 3 years so it would be very difficult. And that's just me so we have 24 other gardeners who face the same fate.

Jeanne: I really really hope that people in power will reconsider taking this building away because I think it's very special and it's not just a building, for a lot of people it's become a home and I'm not sure that any other space on campus can really provide that.

Harry: My biggest concern is less about the physical characteristics of the UEL, there's probably another garage somewhere that Bikes@Brown can take over but, it's more of just whether Bikes@Brown will still be located with the Facilities internship and with the Environmental Studies classrooms and my advisor's office and I'm just worried that sure we might have on paper the exact same space somewhere else but that the network of environmental efforts will be lost.

Logan: I want to preserve the community first because that's really what's most important, that we still have this space where we can have this fun and spontaneous relaxed conversation and hangout with professors and that kind of thing so hopefully that can be preserved in some way, whether that's preserving the actual building or having a new building and a new space like that.

Jon: There haven't been really any official updates to the status of the UEL yet. But there have been kind of rumors the environmental studies program probably has new space in Arnold Hall, which is the old Bio building. One hallway in a larger building wouldn't have the same sort of porous feeling, it wouldn't have the same sort of central location that the UEL does, but that doesn't mean it couldn't become a homey sort of place.

Kurt: The key to this building and what makes it special is the people and the interactions in it. We can recreate and enhance and even strengthen the kind of community we have everywhere that we might be just because it is about the people more than glass and wood. Don't just hope that we keep a strong community no matter what the space, make it happen, alright? Be active participants in the community and make sure that we maintain it.