Photo Credit: AJ Brown Imaging

Legat Architects and Schuler Shook recently collaborated on the Bartlett Performing Arts School at Moline High School in Moline, Ill.

Photo Credit: AJ Brown Imaging

Schools are the community centers of the future; therefore, their performance venues need to operate at a professional level, which is clearly evident at the Bartlett Performing Arts School.

Trends in Performance Art Space Design

By Lisa Kopochinski

A major factor when designing and building a standout performing art space is how it will accommodate both the community and the school.

Much has changed in the past decade with school construction and design. When it comes to the design of performing art spaces, the trend being seen right now are big advances in technology and inclusion.

"Stage designers can now use LED, digital projection and digital audio control to create incredibly exciting productions," said Todd Hensley, a partner with Schuler Shook, an international design firm that has earned a reputation for theater planning and architectural lighting design.

"Our designs must embed this technology into the building's infrastructure and make it easy to access and use. And, as we advance in inclusive design, performing art spaces ensure that everyone is welcome to the event—whether in the audience, backstage or onstage."

Added Robin Randall, principal and director of PreK-12 Education for Legat Architects,

"It is critical to find the right partners—including theater design consultants, acoustical engineers, and MEP engineers—that understand the collaborative design process. Schools are the community centers of the future, and their performance venues need to operate at a professional level."

Legat Architects and Schuler Shook recently collaborated on the Bartlett Performing Arts School at Moline High School in Moline, Ill.. The school's existing theater was designed as a large lecture hall with poor acoustics and a lack of intimacy.

"The transformation of the house included reshaping the seating and acoustics to create a performance space where every seat has an intimate relationship to the stage," explained Randall. "The previous lobby was more of an enlarged hallway providing access for the high school patrons. The new lobby includes a living room-like area that welcomes the community with a unique graphic and comfortable seating."

Factors to Consider

Carmen Wyckoff, AIA, LEED, AP is a principal at DLR Group. She says one major factor when designing and building a standout performing art space is how it will accommodate both the community and the school.

"The key to different user groups is to understand how often, and how easily, the space needs to be transformed between educational use and community use. The first question [to ask] is how much staff will be available for rentals. If rentals will likely be run by nonprofits and volunteers, the systems need to function on a single button, ensuring easily set controls. For example, a person should be able to hit a preset that says "lecture," and it will automatically turn on the right lights, microphones and speakers."

Another factor for every nonprofit performing arts space is a challenging budget.

"At DLR Group, we have architects specializing in cultural and performing arts facilities who help us be good stewards of our clients' money," said Wyckoff. "It really all starts with the programming. If the school is expecting a great deal of lectures and film, the support systems look much different than they would for live drama productions. We craft a priority list based on how the auditorium will be used most often and ensure that the money spent truly supports the programming goals."

Andrea Ramos, project director for McCarthy Building Companies, Southwest Regional Education Services Team, agreed.

"When we are building a standout performing arts space, some of the top factors to consider include acoustics, ensuring it is built for both amplified sound, the spoken word and live performances. Ease of use is also important in a performing arts space that is also being used for instructional purposes. We need to ensure both expert and beginner level equipment are incorporated."

DLR Group and McCarthy worked together on the Combs Performing Arts Center in San Tan Valley, Ariz., a new 500-seat, 25,000-square-foot professional theater facility that was completed earlier this year.

"The Center was the final phase in a long-term master plan for the 2004 high school campus, to further their place as the heart of the San Tan Valley community," said Wyckoff.

"Since this performing arts center was entirely funded by bond dollars, community use of the space was imperative. The new performance art space has a pre-function lobby facing the Superstition mountains, including a large shaded outdoor space to the north. This area doubles as a pre-theater gathering area and a venue in its own right that can be rented by the community. It also includes a display gallery featuring the 2D art of the students."

The team also balanced a professional house space that could be rented with the needs of day-to-day education by creating a back-of-house where teaching occurs throughout the school day: a dance classroom, scene shop, costume area, dressing rooms and black box theater that doubles as the drama classroom.

Ramos said one of the largest challenges of this project was to create a professional theater on a school auditorium budget.

"The J.O. Combs Unified School District requested a warm wood look for the seats but, in the end, other priorities for student learning took budget precedence. Early in construction, the low-bidding subcontractor for the seats lost their installer in Arizona. This posed quite a problem for the team and schedule, but also an opportunity."

Photo Credit: Lawrence Anderson

HMC Architects of San Diego has designed many performing arts spaces, such as this one for Portola High School in Portola, Calif.

To overcome this challenge, DLR Group had already provided alpha test-group feedback with Hussey Seating on their new product line, the Quattro Art Series. Knowing that the durability of the seat base was proven despite the fact that the aesthetic design was still a work in progress, DLR Group and McCarthy reached out to the local Hussey dealer, Norcon, with an offer.

"Working together, McCarthy, DLR Group, Arcadis project management, Norcon and Hussey were able to work through some of the last design and manufacturing details," said Ramos.

"The end-users beta tested the chairs, the interior designers coordinated wood samples with the manufacturers in China, McCarthy and dealer collaborated on the installation, and the team together completed this all on time and on budget. Best of all, the school and community gained a truly professional, rich look with comfortable seating on a school budget. The team was even able to add additional items with the leftover budget, including outdoor benches and trees, and enhanced flooring in the dance room."

Flexibility is Key

HMC Architects of San Diego has designed many school projects—including performing arts spaces.

"When we are building a standout performing arts space, some of the top factors to consider include acoustics, ensuring it is built for both amplified sound, the spoken word and live performances."

— Andrea Ramos, McCarthy Building Companies

Photo Credit: Lawrence Anderson

Performing art spaces, such as this one at Portola High School, need to showcase performances ranging from speaking to dance to orchestra seating.

HMC Managing Principal Angel Hosband said performing art spaces today need to be flexible and not necessarily as formal as in the past.

"The stage needs to showcase performances ranging from speaking to dance to static orchestra seating. Acoustical treatments, audience locations and technology requirements differ for each performance, therefore requiring more flexibility."

She added that one must first understand the needs of the client and the users of the space.

"All spaces we have designed are slightly different because the occupants' function differently and have different priorities."

Other items to consider include how the buildings are sited; how the users will access the building; how the audience will access the building; what types of performances comprise the majority of the use (vocal, speaking, instrumental); and will the support spaces be used as teaching areas and other uses.

Hosband says most performing arts buildings on high school campuses have a budgetary restriction, which makes it difficult to design the minimal amenities a theater would need to function.

"This is the most challenging aspect to overcome. Above that, at the Portola High School Performing Arts Center in Portola, Calif.—a project we designed—its area on the site was limited in space. We had to design a very compact and intimate seating for an audience of 700, yet still function for multiple performances. And, since the center was located on a visible corner of the school, it had to have a large presence."

Ramos said the trend being seen is a greater focus placed on multi-use purposes.

"Not only do schools want a facility for their performances, but they want a hands-on teaching space that can be used for fine arts programs, including theater, music and dance."

Wyckoff said technology has, and will continue to change the course of performance art space design.

"[For instance], theater speakers can now live on the same network as IT, allowing speakers to be placed in more locations without expensive speaker cables and at minimal extra cost. This allows speakers to be in the lobby to create a 'cry room' for parents to calm their young children. It allows speakers to be in the dressing and make-up rooms for easier production. And, it allows the sound system to be managed from an iPad, letting teachers float around the space teaching as they control the sound system. This would not have been possible even five years ago!"

Another trend being seen is with rigging.

"We help our clients use motorized rigging by figuring out just the right number of rigging lines with planning the building's structure for expansion in the future," continued Wyckoff. "In order of priority, we like to plan automated line sets for heavy loads like electrics and backdrops. A simple backdrop will establish the scene look quickly and easily, even if it is a simple white cyclorama behind a lecture."

"We believe that we'll see even more desire for large, open, flexible theater spaces."

— Todd Hensley, Schuler Shook

What's Next?

As for what the near future holds, Ramos said, "I think that at the pace in which our technology continues to grow and becomes more accessible, we will see further enhancements to performing art spaces' components—particularly, as virtual reality and augmented reality experiences grow in popularity and affordability. I wouldn't be surprised if different features like these are more commonly brought into performing arts spaces, in order to keep audiences entertained."

Added Hensley of Schuler Shook, "Even with students' dedication to their 'virtual lives,' we continually see that people crave to draw together—in person—and tell one another their stories. Performing arts spaces will continue to react to this desire. They will provide an intimate and often flexible place—with space for everyone—and great tools for the storytellers. We believe that we'll see even more desire for large, open, flexible theater spaces. Then let the students literally set the stage."

CALENDAR

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