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Designing for education

Creating academic venues that meet the needs of different clients calls for an investigative and collaborative approach.

Designing successful creative spaces in an educational environment starts with asking the right questions in order to clearly understand the users’ needs and goals. Will the space primarily be used for learning or will it host professional performances as well? What departments will use it? Will it have non-arts users? Is the school a conservatory, training students toward professional arts careers? Will it introduce students to the arts by providing performance opportunities? Theatre Projects Consultants explores how answers to these questions (and many others) drive the design decisions that ultimately result in a space that is uniquely suited to meet each institution’s vision.

“We don’t just reflect back to what the school asks for in its brief,” says John Riddell, project manager for Theatre Projects. “We analyze it, ask questions and then offer a solution that encompasses what they’ve asked for, as well as what they need to achieve it.”

Theatre Projects works with its clients to prioritize their needs, helping them identify primary and secondary uses for the space based on the school’s curriculum and mission, which helps align needs with the developing design. “If they’re teaching mostly drama, but also want to do some dance, they might not need a dedicated dance space, but a drama theater with the capability to also work for dance might meet both needs,” says Riddell.

The other essential thing to remember when designing educational spaces is that first-time users are often untrained and inexperienced.

“New users, especially young users, will not read the manual before they operate the equipment; they’ll play first and ask questions later,” says Tom Lamming, stage engineer for Theatre Projects. “In educational theaters, we can’t make the same assumptions that we make in a professional environment — the actions of the user will be different. We have to design and specify equipment — especially mechanized equipment — with more safeguards.”

“Our responsibility is simple, yet invaluable,” explains John Runia, theater designer for Theatre Projects. “We’re a catalyst, bringing all the various users together and facilitating an understanding of everyone’s needs in order to shape the design.”

Spaces for arts training

In spaces intended for arts training, understanding a school’s arts curriculum is as important as evaluating the level of intensity dedicated to training students.

For example, the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London is a conservatory, training actors, musicians and technicians. Its curriculum focuses on music first and classical drama second. For the school’s new space, Milton Court, Theatre Projects designed a world-class concert hall that gives student musicians and technicians the opportunity to train in the same professional-level conditions they can expect to experience during their careers.

But, Riddell notes, “This kind of specialized training often benefits from different room forms to introduce students to the many types of activities they might encounter professionally.”
Main: Guildhall School of Music & Drama’s new concert hall

Insets: Drama rehearsal room and studio theater
Above/right: New Mexico State University’s Center for the Arts’ new and intimate theater has been designed not only to bring the audience closer to the performers, but to give students the opportunity to use industry-standard equipment in the safest possible setting.

That will help them to understand the nuances of the spaces they’ll be working in after graduation.” So in addition to the concert hall, Theatre Projects designed two smaller spaces – a drama theater, focusing on theater and the spoken word, and a flexible studio theater for rehearsals and experimental performances. Both can also accommodate musical performances that need more intimate space than the large concert hall.

The liberal arts program at New Mexico State University’s (NMSU) Center for the Arts in Las Cruces, New Mexico, wanted to encourage student designers and performers to take risks, but the university felt that its old facility – a small thrust theater with no fly space – restricted the school’s performance training and hampered efforts to expand its technical program.

NMSU’s arts curriculum concentrates on dramatic acting and musical theater, and also has the benefit of a professional acting company in residence. So Theatre Projects designed an intimate theater for the spoken word and musicals, with two sloping balconies, bringing the audience closer to the performers. Michael Ferguson, project manager for Theatre Projects, notes that the design team worked to extend creativity, safety and a supportive environment beyond the performing area. The new theater includes a full stagehouse with a contemporary counterweight rigging system, which gives students the chance to train on equipment common in the industry. “We want students to be able to operate everything in the safest environment possible – so the booths are bigger to hold full classes, and we used stairs backstage instead of straight ladders, which would require fall protection,” says Ferguson.

Cheltenham Ladies’ College in southwest England is committed to providing a very broad education for girls aged 11 to 18. The curriculum specifically encourages students to embrace things they are passionate about – from sports to intellectual pursuits and cultural activities. “It isn’t a conservatory,” Riddell says, “but the school wanted to support the arts really well with a great performance space for students.”

For the design of its new Parabola Arts Centre, the school wanted a space for drama that could also support occasional small musical ensembles. In response, Theatre Projects designed a practical room, primarily for the spoken word, with manually adjustable features that enable the prosenium theater to host music performances. Large enough for students to learn proper performance techniques such as voice projection, and with contemporary equipment to learn current technical production practices, the Parabola Arts Centre is still small enough to nurture student performers and technicians in a safe, intimate environment.
Main/above: The Parabola Arts Centre at Cheltenham Ladies’ College has been designed with manually adjustable features for both spoken word and musical performances

Spaces for global communities
Theatre Projects has seen an emerging trend among its educational clientele: schools with multiple international campuses. While the essentials are similar to other training programs, and the need to understand curricula and training intensity remains, Theatre Projects’ approach to international campuses includes paying close attention to consistency and familiarity of spaces for students and faculty.

Two models with differing needs are becoming apparent. The first is a university developing an international campus linked to its primary campus. The second is a charter school, usually primary- and secondary-level education, with campuses in multiple countries.

Globally oriented universities such as New York University (NYU) are at the forefront of the university model. NYU’s Abu Dhabi campus on Saadiyat Island (NYUAD) is the newest member of the NYU global network, which includes campuses in 13 countries. Curricula are designed to enable students and teachers to easily move throughout the network without leaving the university’s resources. The idea behind NYU’s global campuses is to mirror the diversity of the students and faculty, as well as fostering the ideal of the global citizen.

Theatre Projects is currently working as an independent advisor to NYU for the new theater at NYUAD. “We get to question, query, challenge and hold the design team to the brief,” says Tom Davis, associate project manager for Theatre Projects. Recognizing NYU’s emphasis on student training, Theatre Projects is making sure that the technical facilities are scaled appropriately to accommodate more people than usual. “They need to be able to take students to places where normally only one or two professionals would go. A whole class might need to go up to the roof, where a single rigger would usually work,” says Davis.

Davis continues, “Even our equipment purchases reflect the need for students and faculty members to seamlessly transition between international campuses. We want to give them a sound grounding in the equipment and technology, as well as safe operation, that they would see on other campuses in the NYU system – and, most importantly, when they graduate and work professionally.”

But innovative, globally based educational models aren’t limited to higher education. Avenues: The World School, a charter school based in New York City serving primary- and secondary-level students, plans to open campuses in most of the world’s major cities over the next 15 years. Avenues’ goal is to provide a single international school with multiple, integrated campuses connected by a shared curriculum.
Having a consistent pedagogy throughout all its campuses is important to Avenues, ensuring that students relocating with their families have a consistent education. When Avenues approached Theatre Projects about designing a theater space for its new campus in Beijing, it was clear that the design needed to be scalable to serve as a guide for future campuses, as well as customizable for the specific needs of the Beijing campus.

“There’s a template for an Avenues classroom, but the school was less sure about the template for an Avenues theater,” says Benton Delinger, project manager for Theatre Projects. “Our goal for this project was to provide a package of options to choose from throughout the system. The local architect in each country starts with the template scaled to the size appropriate to the location and then Theatre Projects provides advice tailored to the specific space being built. What’s important is that there is now a footprint and a common vocabulary throughout the school system.”

The space, now in design, will accommodate classes, assemblies, small music ensembles, school theater productions as well as local performing arts and event rentals. Students at Avenues Beijing will enjoy a space and equipment similar to what they can expect, not only at another Avenues campus, but also if they go on to study performing arts at university level.

**Spaces for interdisciplinary exploration**
High-tech, interactive laboratory spaces for exploration and research are at the leading edge of what’s new in educational performing arts buildings. In contrast to buildings designed for traditional arts departments, these spaces are intended to bring the arts into other areas of education. “These clients don’t want a traditional theater, they want to explore alternate, immersive educational environments,” says Jules Lauve, project manager, Theatre Projects.

When Northern Kentucky University in Highland Heights, Kentucky, was pursuing its most recent space, Griffin Hall, it was the College of Informatics behind the brief, not the College of Arts & Sciences. And it wanted a unique space – a digital auditorium where collaboration and flexibility were key and integrated technology could expand student and faculty creativity.

The challenge in designing experimental spaces is to avoid restricting how the space can be used. Theatre Projects’ solutions focus on providing infrastructure to support any possible setup. Griffin Hall was designed to bring together people from a range of disciplines – artists, musicians, doctors, scientists – to study information and communication in their broadest social context. Outfitted as a studio theater performance space, the main auditorium includes a large, integrated video wall and glassed-in breakout rooms around the balcony. The seats include removable, fold-down tables for laptop use and are on retractable telescoping platforms to create a flat-floor configuration.

“The multiple configurations and multiple uses in Griffin Hall permit exploring media, performance, collaboration and artistic statement...
It’s clear that the ‘education’ part of an educational performing arts space has a major impact on the final design. Success relies on the design team understanding who will be using the space and what the institution hopes to impart to its students. Conservatories – with experienced, pre-professional students – require professional-level facilities and equipment, often with multiple room types, to provide real-world surroundings. Teaching institutions require realistic facilities and extremely robust equipment to support less experienced students who may or may not make the arts into a career. Globally oriented schools – at every educational level – need facilities that are consistent throughout their systems. And experimental spaces belonging to schools at the cutting edge of technology, art and communication need rooms unconstrained by traditional models, allowing students and teachers the room to breathe, think and create.

“Every school wants its students to experience everything the arts can offer. In theater, that’s not just performing. It’s lighting and box office, front-of-house, marketing, costuming, stage-managing and all the stuff that’s not onstage. For every performer, there are 10 people behind them doing all the things that have to be done. With thoughtful design, we can expose students to all of that.”

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