

MID - ATLANTIC CONSTRUCTION – JULY 2004

THE TOWSON UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR THE ARTS GETS RE-ACQUAINTED TO THE CAMPUS

The design and construction team for the Towson University Center for the Arts is turning the center around to make a more inviting entrance

For the last 32 years, students at Towson University in Towson, Md., have been looking at the back of their fine arts building. That's because the 165,000-sq.-ft. facility is atop a 12-ft. hill on the west edge of campus and its main entrance faces Olser Drive rather than the campus. Change is coming, however. A \$52 million renovation and addition to Towson's Center for the Arts is turning the building around to face campus and creating an inviting entrance for students and faculty. The full project should be completed by fall 2006, although the major addition is scheduled for occupancy in fall 2005.

There are about 17,000 students attending Towson."It's a project that had just about every challenge possible," said Scott Butler, director of Wilson Butler Lodge Architects of Boston, which designed the project in a joint venture with Baltimore-based Design Collective Inc. The plan is to revamp the current building, which houses the university's College of Fine Arts and Communication, and also add 122,000 sq. ft. of new space. The original building, completed in 1972, is home to the music, art and theater departments. Once the renovation is complete, the dance department, which is currently located elsewhere on campus, will move into the building. About 1,100 students have declared a major in the College of Fine Arts and Communication.

"This is a multi-phased, multi-risk package," said Jim Carroll, project manager for the joint venture and a principal at Design Collective. Carroll was assigned to the project in November 2000 and design began early in 2001. The joint venture faced plenty of hurdles throughout the 24-month design process. "Because the building is phase-occupied construction, there were a number of bid packages, which is why it was such a long process," Carroll said.

Construction began early in 2003. Gilbane Building Co., Laurel, Md. is the construction manager. "There's been a fairly complex Chinese fire drill that needs to happen when a building is occupied," said David Mayhew, AIA, and director of architecture, engineering and construction at Towson University. "There are no other facilities to move existing programs into, and no other way to do construction." Mayhew added that because of the inevitable noise associated with construction, activities in the building, like music and dance classes, are being moved into temporary spaces. The building will remain open to students, faculty and the public throughout the process. An indoor atrium is central to the new facility. The design team is also excited about turning the building around to face campus. "We made a very clear connection from the campus entrance to the public entrance, so if you came through either door, you could find your way through the building to an indoor atrium," Butler said. In the past, students would need to enter through a back door and climb a flight of stairs to find their way to the central art gallery. Fire stairs were used to venture from one section of the building to another.





Over the years, the building has undergone minor modifications and renovations and now resembles more of a maze than an arts center. The new plan constructs an indoor road of sorts that acts as a spine for the building and spans three floors. All performance and display spaces will be constructed along circulation paths. By doing so, the departments will be able to display their finest work to each other and passers-by. Beyond the initial circulation, there is a secondary circulation that allows each department to have its own quarter for classrooms, practice space and offices. The existing 350-seat Main Stage Theater and 600-seat Concert Hall will be renovated. Each department will also gain additional space for public display. Three art galleries will be able to properly display and curate student art. There is a Thesis Gallery for MFA students, as well as the independently curated Holtzman and Asian galleries. The dance department gains a 75-seat studio theater, as well as practice studios. Music students will enjoy a new 160-seat Recital Hall. And theater students will acquire a flexible “black box” studio theater with movable seating for up to 200 guests. The studio theatre and recital hall will be connected by a recording studio. The team has needed to be frugal in every aspect of design, but that doesn’t mean this building is cheap. Double floors limit sound traveling from one space to another. Post-tension concrete construction is being used, rather than less expensive steel, for acoustic benefits and so the spaces don’t interfere with each other. In an attempt to stick to the budget, Mayhew said the team chose backstage amenities over audience amenities. “This is really a place for students to learn throughout the day,” he added. “The students who are here now are putting up with all the noise and construction, but when all is said and done, they will be graduated, but hopefully they will come back and enjoy it.” The building is on a tight site, which means trying to squeeze in such a large addition created some problems for the design team. The site also slopes three full stories from one side and back down a full story on the other. “We equated it to trying to build on the Acropolis, the highest point on campus,” Butler said. The spine transcends the hill inside through a series of grand staircases.

TEAM BOX

Owner: Towson University

Architect: Wilson Butler Lodge Inc., Boston with Design Collective, Baltimore, Md.

Structural Engineer: Delon Hampton and Associates, Washington, D.C. and Silver Spring, Md.

Mechanical and Electrical Engineer: Mueller Associates, Baltimore, Md.

Acoustical Consultant: Acoustic Dimensions, New Rochelle, N.Y.

Construction Manager: Gilbane Building Co., Laurel, Md.