

Performing Arts Center

Fulfilling Aesthetic & Technological Needs of a Diverse Community

*by Joanne Durante, freelance writer*

The Sequoia Union High School District, which serves the California communities of Menlo Park and Atherton, serves a diverse population that includes the children of Silicon Valley as well as the children of migrant workers who work in the surrounding orchards. Realizing the need for one that would provide a gathering place for the Menlo-Atherton students as well as the extended community, the District set out to create one that would embody and showcase the cultural, ecological, and technological realities of the district it would serve. It was envisioned as being at home in the surrounding landscape that is covered with many historic oak trees.

This being the only such facility in the region, there was a considerable incentive to provide superior performance technology, including world-class acoustic capabilities. Yet fiscal responsibility was also a priority, and the project could not be allowed to be financially extravagant. The school district divided the selection process into two stages. After issuing a Request for Proposal, the district narrowed the many contenders down to five architectural firms who were judged to be serious competitors that could be reasonably expected to fulfill the requirements of such a project. Each of the five firms was then commissioned to provide a complete and thorough design for the proposed project.

Of the five, the design provided by Hodgetts+Fung of Culver City, Calif., was chosen as best representing the aspirations of the district. One of the important factors in choosing this firm was how elegantly the design, developed by partners and co-designers Craig Hodgetts and Hsinming Fung, complemented the ambient landscape, rather than opposing it. Their plans called for a 31,000-square-foot, 65-foot-high building that was carefully

designed and landscaped to create a treehouse-like environment, and the impression it is following the contours of an already existing hillside.

According to Hodgetts, "A large part of our work is identifying an appropriate building vocabulary, in terms of its context. One important part of the context here is the many historic oak trees all through the area. It has a very rustic quality." He understood that the school district would want a warm, welcoming look for the facility, rather than, for example, the coolness of stainless steel. He explains, "We chose an oak tree vocabulary for the design, with branching steel struts that echo a surrounding landscape that is covered with historic oaks. Inside, that motif is repeated with laser cut panels of oak leaves." The panels actually cleverly serve to direct music up and out to the audience

According to Hodgetts, a copper roof would have been well-suited to the building's design, but copper was well beyond the district's budget. In his search for a reasonable alternative, he consulted with The Garland Company, Inc., Cleveland, Ohio. The locally based Garland representative, Ted Goyette, was able to provide a champagne-colored Garland R-Mer® Loc structural standing-seam roof system, which approaches the warmth and luster of the more expensive metal. The design, with its multi-directional alignments of the various roof planes, establishes a challenging aesthetic that is at once vibrant and serene. Hodgetts recalls, "Garland was very particular about details."

Goyette explains, "There were many exciting aspects to this project. The scaffolding was particularly challenging. We had to roof the lower planes before the top part, being very careful not to damage existing work. The directions of the standing seams and the geometries of the connecting planes created quite an involved math problem. But seeing it all come together smoothly, because everyone had done their jobs right, was deeply satisfying."

The facility is designed to accommodate a large variety of performance functions. The interior space features a 492-seat theater, a 150-capacity multi-use space, rehearsal and music rooms, and a glass-enclosed multi-use/cafeteria space. The theater includes an orchestra pit that can accommodate up to 80 musicians, a stagecraft workshop for production of scenery and props, and an orchestra lift to convert the stage for various types of productions.

To attain acoustical excellence, the architect collaborated with Paul Scarborough, one of the finest acoustic engineers in the world, to specify the particulars of the building's interior regarding sound. Scarborough, who heads Akustiks LLC, Norwalk, Conn., was a leading participant in renovations of Cleveland's Severance Hall and of the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Underscoring the success of this effort is the fact that, shortly after completion of the facility, several world-renowned performers began negotiating for the use of the Center to record their performances.

The Center is outfitted with numerous energy-efficient and sustainable features, such as a heating and ventilation system that permits only specific zones to be heated or cooled; an air-distribution system that cools from the bottom up, to avoid unnecessary cooling to the rooftop; the use of shaded glass and deep roof overhangs to reduce solar load on the building; and extra insulation to avoid heat loss during winter and heat gain in summer.

The Center has entered active and regular use by the district residents, even as it also seems to blend into the landscape. The District's website is richly populated with notices of events at the Center, even offering virtual tours of the facility, demonstrating the Performing Arts Center's success in fulfilling the aspirations of its designers and its community.

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