Two: ’62 CENTER FOR THEATRE AND DANCE, WILLIAMS COLLEGE
Williamstown, Massachusetts

William Rawn Associates carefully fit three theaters and a rehearsal space into the bucolic landscape of Williams College.

By Suzanne Stephens

In spite of the current obsession among intellectually leading colleges and universities with pouring money into sports facilities, some institutions, such as Williams College, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, are admirably bolstering their arts profiles. So, while New York City’s Columbia University boasts of a new $100 million campaign for athletic programs and facilities, Williams is competing for top students by building a $50 million performing arts center for theater and dance. The center’s lead donor, the New York investment banker Herbert A. Allen, Jr., wanted to make sure that his alma mater could effectively lure students of theater and dance away from urban educational institutions.

The ’62 Center for Theatre and Dance, named at Allen’s request, for his graduating class, was designed by William Rawn, FAIA, whose Boston-based firm conceived the much-acclaimed Seiji Ozawa Hall in Tanglewood, Massachusetts (1994).

Program

To consolidate its reputation as a performing arts center and accommodate the famed Williams Theatre Festival held in the summer, the college needed a complex of three theaters: MainStage, a proscenium-arched main theater that could seat 550; CenterStage, a black-box space that could hold about 150; plus the renovated Adams Memorial, a combination thrust/proscenium stage with 200 or so seats. In addition, it desired a large dance-rehearsal space and the requisite number of dressing rooms, teaching studios, plus a costume workshop, and faculty offices.

Solution

Since the center abuts the old 1941 Adams Memorial Theatre (designed by Gram and Ferguson), the 320-seat theater didn’t need to be built anew but was simply renovated for smaller performances. In designing the entire complex, Rawn wanted to keep the 126,000-square-foot facility from being too imposing in scale along Main Street. Here, older traditional...
A skylighted lobby (below) on the east facade, where the mural 'Carnival of Life' (1934–36), by set designer Herman Rosse, is on view, opens on to the CenterStage, a black-box theater. The 550-seat, proscenium-arched MainStage Theatre (opposite, top left), trimmed in ash, is entered by the ash-laundered lobby (opposite, bottom left). The renovated Adams Memorial Theatre (opposite, top right) features a thrust and proscenium stage.

1. Main lobby
2. MainStage Theatre
3. Adams Memorial Theatre
4. CenterStage Theatre
5. Lounge
6. Seminar room
7. Classrooms
8. Faculty offices
9. Scene shop
10. Upper lobby
11. Acting/voice studio
12. Dance rehearsal
13. Easter room
A 20-foot-high steel barn door rolls open between the east lobby (left) and the CenterStage Theatre so that students passing by can see what is going on inside. The theater itself (below left) is designed for various configurations. Along the north wall (background in photo) are three modular, steel-framed balconies, or godd jas, that can move forward for productions. The dance-rehearsal space (separate), bound by glass-and-steel walls, yields expansive views of the landscape.

buildings, including the faculty club and president’s house, adhered to the low-rise scale and New England character of the bucolic campus. So he let the main entrance jut forward over the south-facing front lawn in a wood-paneled glass pavilion. Since the MainsStage Theatre is used in the summer by the Williamstown Festival, the glass pavilion, shielded from the sun with ash-wood louvers, functions as the lobby for the theater. When the festival is in full swing, the aluminum-and-glass walls slide open, and the pavilion quickly converts to a front porch for theatergoers picnicking on the front lawn.

From the street, the steel-framed complex extends north on the 8.2-acre site, following a slope that gradually drops 12 feet in grade. The horseshoe-shaped main auditorium appears to be receding in curved walls of German Jura limestone; the 80-foot fly space over the stage doesn’t seem so bulky. Inside, the MainsStage’s auditorium is faced in quarter-sawn ash veneers. “We didn’t want the theater to have a heavy, dark look,” says Rawn. A hallway runs from the front of the center to the back, curving around the MainsStage to the sky-lighted midbuilding lobby, which opens onto the flexible black-box CenterStage theater. The internal path ends at the north entrance, where people arriving by car can park in the garage and enter the building. “There is no real back of the house,” says Rawn, pointing out that students can also cut through the building from the west entrance near the dining hall.

At the north end, the piece de résistance, a glass-walled rehearsal space, projects over the entrance to offer expansive views of the rolling hills. Sandra Burton, the director of the dance program at Williams, at first feared this would be distracting. “But now we love it,” she says.

Commentary
Compositionally, the architects had to bring together a number of theatrical spaces and their bulky masses without destroying the character of the campus. They did so with grace and aplomb. Each facade displays a different character, and the handling of the materials—limestone, glass, brick, and wood—mitigate potential problems of scale. The main theater is prominent without seeming too monumental; the east entrance to the CenterStage and the studies and offices is visible but not overwhelming, while the north elevation—a cubic series of floating rectangles in limestone, brick, and gray—creates an arrival point without that backdoor feeling. According to various reports, the center is functioning well. In time, the school will be able to determine how competitive it is in attracting city kids to its theater and dance programs. It’s off to a good start.■