



Hollins Faculty's Active Involvement Shapes New Visual Arts Center

Roanoke, Va. - When planning first began for the design and construction of Hollins University's new Richard Wetherill Visual Arts Center, the architects involved were given one simple directive: listen to the building's future inhabitants.

"Building a comprehensive visual arts center at a college or university with little or no input from those who will actually be using it can be disastrous," said Bill White, chair of Hollins' art department. "From the beginning, we made sure the architects and builders knew what our students, faculty and staff wanted."

Quite simply, what they wanted was a place where they could work, a multi-functional, spacious facility where offices, production areas, museum space and classrooms are all under one roof. Now, for the first time, studio art, art history, film and photography, and a world-class museum are all together in one place at Hollins.

"In this region, there aren't many buildings that combine a teaching facility with an art museum," said Jed Hammer, president of Martin Brothers Contractors, the Roanoke-based company that built the center. "This building is one of a kind. You get to work on a structure like this maybe once in your career."

For the architects and builders, the main challenge was how to seamlessly blend an existing facility with a new one and tie two structural systems together. The building already in place was Fishburn Library, which opened in 1955 and served Hollins until the completion of the Wyndham Robertson Library in 1999. Fortunately, the forethought of Fishburn's designers 50 years ago made constructing the center a lot easier.

"Fishburn Library has a huge poured-in-place concrete base that's like a tank," said Peter Ozolins of Blacksburg, who served as associate architect on the project. "It was built with the idea that additions to the facility might be needed in the future. That approach enabled us to add another story to the visual arts center."

The architects then designed a completely new section to join the existing space at the rear of the building, giving the center a total space of 58,000 square feet. In the

meantime, Ozolins said the old space was “stripped to the walls” to make way for a bold interior design that extends through the entire facility.

“The faculty envisioned the center with a look and design similar to a factory,” said Ozolins. “They wanted the focus placed on this being a working facility, so we gave it a very strong industrial aesthetic: concrete floors, unpainted concrete columns and an exposed ventilation system.”

Other touches enhance the center’s functionality. Long-lasting cork floors in several rooms absorb sound. Skylights in the ceiling on the third floor allow natural light to flood into the drawing and painting studios. A plein aire (“open air”) studio, also on the third floor, offers a large outdoor deck where art students can work.

At the same time, the architects and builders stressed cost-effective construction. Deck, steel and masonry were used to build the new visual arts center additions, for example. But, keeping the shell of Fishburn Library intact was at the core of this philosophy, as was salvaging many materials from that structure.

(Faculty and staff are doing their part by putting to good use the old Fishburn Library furniture in the visual arts center; the solidly-built tables and chairs have been refurbished and are utilized throughout the facility.)

“We were dedicated to making the best use of available resources while utilizing a design that minimizes maintenance,” explained Ozolins.

Low-maintenance is the hallmark of the dark gray cementitious panels that wrap the building’s new exterior sections and are their most striking aspect. The panels are also durable and long-lasting; similar materials were recently used when the University of Minnesota recently constructed its new visual arts center. But, the panels’ uniqueness presented an unexpected challenge.

“Only one company in the world, based in Switzerland, manufactures this type of panel,” said Hammer. “And only one company in the U.S. knew how to install it. However, before we could install the panels on the visual arts center, the U.S. company went out of business. Fortunately, the Swiss manufacturing company was willing to send people here to help us install the panels, and thus we were able to avert a problem.”

The Richard Wetherill Visual Arts Center has already caught the eye of at least one major university. White said that officials from Virginia Tech are planning a visit to

see the facility's design in anticipation of building a project of their own for the arts on their campus. While here, they will hear how a collaborative effort is the key ingredient.

“The heavy and constant involvement of the faculty in the process from start to finish is what I believe helped make our project so successful,” said White. “We had the support of senior administration and the board of trustees, too. All in all, it's a good way to work on such a specialized facility.”

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