

MCC theater gets \$3.85M upgrade

Facility at the campus in Brighton receives acoustical improvements

Of all places to be deemed acoustically dead, a theater should not be one of them.

That notion was the driving force behind a \$3.85 million, two-year renovation of Monroe Community College's Brighton campus theater. The theater holds 539 seats.

Today the theater can accommodate a wide range of activities—acoustically speaking—including theater performances, lectures and concerts, all without echoes.

Sound is crucial to the functionality of a space, said Rohit Agrawal, director of architectural services at Popli Design Group, the lead architecture firm on the project.

"From a performance standpoint, it wasn't a good space for doing any kind of theatrical performances," he said. "If you made any sound it would not reverberate, it would just die without reaching people. So it was a very quiet, dead space. The ability to be twice as loud as it previously had been, Agrawal said.

He and his team were tasked with retrofitting a new design to an old space with sound at the center of their work.

"The acoustical technology has come a long way," he said. "We didn't really do a lot of benchmarking with other projects; we knew this was a unique space."

Renovations started in May 2015, and the theater reopened on Jan. 20.

Monroe County provided capital project funding for the theater, which is matched by the State University of New York.

The county also provided project management through the planning, design and construction phases of the project, said Jason Kennedy, deputy director of environmental services for the county.

"The renovations resulted in a modernized, state-of-the-art space, including audiovisual, acoustic and lighting systems and new seating and accessibility that will serve the college and other users for the foreseeable future," Kennedy said. "The project was completed within budget and on schedule."

"The theater will serve as an MCC and community resource, hosting college and noncollege events."

MCC President Anne Kress said the renovation already has had an impact on both audience members and students.

"It is absolutely fantastic and amazing," she said. "I've been able to be in the theater since the renovation for three very distinct activities ... it was amazing. It's just been such a positive experience." Popli was "really dedicated to bringing us a theater that really lives up to our students' talents and allows them to see themselves in very different ways."

The renovation included a variety of im-

provements:

- motorized acoustical banners, which are movable panels in the back of the theater that change the acoustics of the space;
- new seating;
- improved video projection;
- a new sound system;
- an FM hearing assist system;
- a new theatrical dimming system;
- LED theatrical lighting fixtures;
- improved ventilation to reduce noise;
- an improved fire protection system; and
- a resurfaced stage floor.

"I think it (is) another extraordinary venue in the community," Kress said.

"We do obviously use it for ourselves, but through our campus events office we have a number of community groups who regularly rent out the theater and use it for their own productions, engagements or events. We've heard incredible, positive feedback from those groups about the quality of the facility."

The theater was also updated to comply with building code, including a sprinkler system, a carbon dioxide air sensor system and greater wheelchair accessibility.

"This was a facility that when it was created, probably back in the early '70s, was state-of-the-art at that time, so it was well overdue for a renovation," Kress said. "What we've been able to do in partnership with the folks who designed it, and spent every single day in there as a labor of love, is to create a new theater that's state-of-the-art for today ... for 2017."

Popli Design Group had six architects—four full time and two part time—assigned to the project.

Ideas like creating motorized acoustical banners that adapt to the space's events came out of feedback from the client, Agrawal said.

MCC helped Popli understand in great detail how the space is used, Agrawal said. He also credited the contractors on the team.

"This was a very exciting project for us," he said. "I have a huge amount of respect and understanding of their needs, and Monroe County and the college are absolutely fantastic clients. They give you good input that helps you shape the design."

"A lot of times as architects we can perform only to the level that our client engages us, so if you get good feedback, good input from our client, we can translate it to good design, and that's exactly what happened here."

New Jersey-based Ostergaard Acoustical Associates was hired to evaluate the space. The company did acoustical modeling and ray-trace analysis to help Popli make sure the space was able to support the multiple



Photo by Next Dimension Photography

Monroe Community College's newly renovated theater as seen from the stage. "Absolutely fantastic and amazing," says MCC President Anne Kress.



Photo by Next Dimension Photography

Technical upgrades at MCC's new theater include a new sound system, an FM hearing assist system, a new theatrical dimming system and improved video projection. Renovations at the Brighton campus facility began in 2015 and were completed early this year.

uses it would house.

The project was on time and on budget—important for a public institution such as MCC, Kress said.

Agrawal and Popli "brought this project in on time; they brought it in on budget," she said.

The challenge was the timing of the project, Agrawal said.

"What happened was by the time we were given the go-ahead it was almost April of 2015, and we had only six months to design it and do the construction documents, which was a very short period of time," he said. "And then the contractor had only seven or eight months to build it."

Changes that enhance the acoustics in the theater include wire mesh railings, a concrete floor, use of natural materials such as wood and seating that absorbs sounds made by people in the seats.

"As far as this project goes, it's a community resource," Agrawal said. "MCC has great involvement in the community. People can rent this space; people can have a lot of events here, so we think it's a great asset to our area. I'm not aware of any other theater in Rochester that has an acoustical variability function."

The design also includes 260 unique surfaces, meaning the varying geometry of each surface improves the theater's sound.

"The design—if I showed you a rendering from two years ago, the theater now looks exactly like that," Agrawal said. "This is exactly how we envisioned it. I'm going to say not even one light bulb is six inches lower than it should be—this project is like a Swiss watch."

The theater helps make students see the value in MCC, Kress said.

"It's also a selling point for the institution," she said. "It sends a very clear message about the kind of college (prospective students) would be going to that it has facilities like this. It says we care about the student and we know that this experience is going to be one of quality and excellence."

Along with Popli Design Group, local firms involved in the project include M/E Engineering P.C., Ravi Engineering & Land Surveying P.C., Holdsworth Klimowski Construction LLC, Blackmon-Farrell Electric Inc., Monroe Piping & Sheet Metal LLC and Pipitone Enterprises LLC.

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