

structurally
sound

INSIDE OUT



Photos by Barry Halkin Photography, courtesy of Spillman Farmer Architects

THE LAFAYETTE COLLEGE Arts Plaza in Easton, Pa., brings the indoors outside. The \$1.7-million, 7,000-sq.-ft space, designed by Spillman Farmer Architects, transforms a former auto-repair facility into a dynamic outdoor teaching space that responds to its natural environment and built context. Designed as an outdoor black box theater, the plaza hosts a wide variety of planned and spontaneous artistic endeavors, including performance art, visual art exhibits and small group musical performances.

“Unlike many urban developments, which are conceptualized as ‘infill’ of an existing context, the Arts Plaza is an urban ‘unfill’ project,” says Spillman Farmer design principal Joseph N. Biondo, AIA. “The existing building had solid walls that blocked the relationship between the site and the community. We removed these walls to create new types of connections in and around the site, bringing together the Easton community, the college, the natural environment, the streetscape and local history. These interactions encourage a focus on user experience, material richness, spatial transparency and sensory stimulation.”

At its core, the project is a distillation of the existing structure. The 29-ft-high facility’s concrete platform foundation and timber

frame, both salvaged and reused elements of the former building, are complemented by newly introduced masonry and steel. Inside the plaza, structural engineer Barry Isett and Associates calculated loads where the new steel armatures had to rest on the concrete floor, ensuring the structural integrity of the slab and the arched structure below. Tension rods were installed between the timbers to provide lateral stability for the existing structure, and the roof was removed to create an open trellis effect.

The project incorporates two cubic structural steel armatures, each draped with a veil of stainless steel mesh. The armatures, fabricated and erected by McGregor Industries, Inc., of Dunmore, Pa. (an AISC member/Certified fabricator/Advanced Certified Steel Erector), feature 32 tons of steel, mainly W8×28s structural steel members. These transparent, ghost-like structures complement the masonry monoliths and reflect the dimensions and rhythm of the windows of the adjacent Williams Visual Arts Building. The delicate details of the steel mesh, carefully lit at night and adorned with climbing vegetation, complete the forms and bring a natural softness to the hard-edged, industrial street front. This effect is reinforced in the winter, when ice and snow build up on the mesh. ■