CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC & DANCE

Meera Murali

Thesis submitted to the faculty of
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Architecture

In
Architecture

Scott Gartner (Committee Chair)
William Galloway
Paola Zellner Bassett

September 25 2015
Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: architecture, arts school, music dance conservatory, campus design, tectonics, form, materiality, architectural detail

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ABSTRACT

Like Art, Architecture has the potential to impact people. Art is often considered the process of consciously arranging elements in a way that appeals to the senses or emotions. Architecture can also be described similarly. However, the key difference between Art and Architecture is that while Art is pure personal expression, Architecture carries with it a certain accountability towards its immediate context and inhabitants. While a painting begins and ends on a canvas, Architecture cannot stop at a whim; it must transform from imagination to tangible reality.

This process brings with it a set of constraints imposed by structural, climatic, socio-economic aspects, construction methodologies and material properties, amongst others. These constraints call for fine-tuning of the design. The sophistication and elegance used to handle these constraints differentiate a "building" that poses as a mere visual sculpture in isolation, from "architecture" that evolves as a response to its context and people.

Matthew Frederick (2007) says, "being genuinely creative requires something different from conventional, authoritarian control: a loose velvet tether,". The "velvet tether" possibly represents the constraints that need to be navigated through, during the realization of the project. The central focus of this thesis is to explore how to address some of these constraints, through the design of a school campus for students of music and dance. The program includes practice, rehearsal and classroom spaces for music and dance, administrative spaces and a library. Themes explored as part of the design development process include architectural form, materiality and detailing.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks to my committee for their guidance and support in the exploration of this thesis project.

Eternal gratitude to my loving family without whose support I wouldn’t be here today.
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Introduction

It is often said that ‘writing about music is like dancing about architecture’. The connotation here is that writing, music, dance and architecture are all different languages of self-expression; it would be absurd to try and describe one language in another.

This, however, doesn't mean that music, dance and architecture cannot influence each other. Architecture can undoubtedly play a significant role in the delivery of these arts. The emotions evoked by a moving symphony can be amplified by the quality of the space it is experienced in. Just as a beautiful setting enhances the pleasure of watching a dazzling dance performance. After all, dance is ultimately about inhabiting the space with grace and movement. The reverse is also true: a space gains meaning from the way it is occupied and the activities that are housed in it.

Given that ambience can so deeply affect the perception of the art that’s housed within it, this brings us to questions such as: How do you create a space that inspires creativity? What would be an ideal music and dance campus? What would be unique to such a place compared to a regular school campus? What would comprise an architecture for the arts?
The first step was to imagine the kind of scenes and activities that would be part of the campus. This led to a series of initial sketches that broadly outlined the qualities of spaces that seemed characteristic of a conducive environment for such activities to thrive. Besides formal classrooms and rehearsal areas, there would be informal, flexible spaces that could easily lend themselves to various events from organized group choreographies and demos to impromptu dance-offs in the corridor; from fun spaces to hang out with peers, to quiet, private pockets of spaces for moments of self-reflection. Visual connectivity between multiple levels would allow for quiet observation by passers-by without intrusion. Natural light would wash different spaces differently thereby painting each with a unique ambience. All in all, these were spaces that would beautifully "stage" or "frame" the kind of vibrant atmosphere that would surround a campus filled with young musicians and dancers.

1 Preliminary sketches outlining early design goals
A COLONNADE

The project began to take shape with the design of a single line of columns. In the process of searching for a suitable architectural style, certain qualities associated with music and dance served as sources of inspiration. Rhythm and Movement were two such qualities that could translate well into the architectural language. The sense of movement is alluded to by the graceful lines of curve in the column's sculptural form, and rhythm by the act of repetition of the architectural elements.

2 Preliminary sketches exploring form of a colonnade.
**Evolution of the Structural System**

The fluidity of the form demanded the use of concrete as the prime structural material. What began as a set of colonnade holding up a flat roof grew, through the project, into a more refined version that addressed structural and material tendencies. The end result was a structural system comprised of a series of concrete double-vaults with volumes of material subtracted out, in order to let in natural light and allow visual lightness and delicacy.
The Context

Located in Crossroads Arts District near downtown Kansas City, Missouri, the project is set against a unique backdrop of vibrant and rich arts and culture. The neighborhood is home to numerous art galleries, visual artists, designers, architects, advertising agencies, local independent filmmakers, live music venues and one of the country’s largest remaining examples of Film Row District. Local events like ‘First Fridays’ and the annual ‘Crossroads Arts Festival’ bring to the scene, outdoor bands and performances, concert performances, short film screening and booths offering apparel by local designers, print media and carnival games.

This scope of the thesis project is loosely based on a proposal by The University of Missouri Kansas City (UMKC), to execute an expansive multi-decade plan for a “Downtown Campus of the Arts”. Phase 1 of UMKC’s plan involves moving the university’s conservatory of music and dance. Subsequent phases would involve moving other university-based arts programs to downtown as well.

The proposed site and broad program requirements laid down by UMKC have been taken as starting points for the thesis. The actual design of the project presented in this book has, therefore, been developed by the author as part of this thesis.
The Site

The proposed site is an entire city block directly opposite to the Kauffman Performing Arts Center in downtown Kansas City, bounded by 17th & 18th streets on the North & South and Broadway & Central streets on the East & West. As noted in UMKC’s project proposal, the location next to the Kauffman Center will likely provide an excellent ecosystem in which the students will create their careers. A campus close to the emerging cultural district could be mutually beneficial for UMKC and the entire region. Towards the south of the site lies a community garden called “18th Broadway Urban Garden” which is to be used for future phases of the UMKC project. In the interim, the park can serve as an extension of the campus and provide a green space for the students to enjoy and relax in.
The initial sketches made early on in the design process, represented ideas such as effective staging and framing of various activities, visual connectivity between multiple levels and an architectural style that reflects a sense of rhythm and movement. The spatial organization is aimed at allowing for such moments to occur in various parts of the project.

The main entrance leads to the central lobby that forms a key feature of the building. Natural light streams in from the ceiling high glass walk on the sides and skylights above, while weaving through the delicate concrete framework. The lobby serves not only as a transition space between multiple levels but also as a multipurpose space that can stage informal events. The stairway along the length of the lobby integrates exciting areas within itself. The space at the bottom of the stairs can then double as a stage area for informal events. Sliding folding doors allow the stage area to overflow onto the outdoor. Branching off from the central lobby are music/dance studio spaces, private practice rooms, classrooms, library and administrative spaces. Circulation through the building takes one through corridors that are lined by semi-enclosed pockets of small, private spaces with exciting areas and windows overlooking double-heighted music and dance studio spaces of lower levels.
The vaulted concrete structural system as seen in the lobby is extended to other parts of the building as well. Spatial enclosure is formed by wrapping the concrete frame with secondary materials as infill. The secondary materials include glass - steel curtain walls and cladding stained concrete for exterior walls and wood for interior partitions and flooring. Different interior spatial qualities and external elevations are attained for different spaces by varying the kind and degree of enclosure. While the lobby is treated with a grid infill between the concrete columns, the reverse is observed in the case of the foyer and administrative wings, i.e., the form of free-standing concrete columns in the middle of the overall space encased by glass curtain walls.
THE DETAILS

The question of how to deal with the junctions between different materials, components and finishes, is one that every architect encounters in every project. How the architect addresses it, is of utmost importance. Charles Gwathmey emphasizes this point when he said, “When two materials come together, brother, watch out!” No matter the extent of technological advancements, the statement still holds true. The care and sophistication with which the junctions are dealt with, is what differentiates refined high level architecture from the ordinary.
Mies van der Rohe’s famous dictum, “God is in the details”, concisely captures the essence of this crucial step in architectural design. An ingenious design concept alone will not suffice. Its success depends upon the quality of detailing. Depending upon how one treats the different surfaces, edges and lines, details have the power to enhance or diminish the effect of important design decisions: structural form, techniques of how the interaction of load and support is expressed, visual balance, symmetry or asymmetry, etc. Details are not just about simply making something work; they serve as opportunities to enhance the clarity with which an observer can perceive the building.

In keeping with the early design concept of allowing visual connectivity between multiple levels, the idea of ‘balconies’ overlooking the double-heighted studio spaces was explored. The intent was to create cozy pockets of semi-sheltered seating areas from where people can observe the proceedings of the studios below. The design went through many iterations while addressing the question of detailing out how different materials and finishes came together.
CONCLUSION

What does the building want to be?

This is arguably the most important and simultaneously the most elusive question, centric to the whole design process. While it may seem like a philosophical question, the answer to it deals with exploring very tangible aspects of design sensibility, material properties and construction methodology. The most successful architectural solutions are the ones that address this question elegantly. In such buildings, the existence and nature of each element is often validated by more than one reason. For instance, a column that branches off into multiple members as it meets the ceiling, fulfills not just the structural purpose of load distribution, but the lines, scale and proportions of its form are also informed by the tendencies of its material and the aesthetic judgement of its designer.

Hence, a wooden structure differs vastly from a concrete one. Concrete being a fluid material lends itself more easily to fluid and organic shapes compared to other materials. Wood on the other hand is rigid. The limited size of wooden studs or plates and the stacked, member-by-member nature of the construction leads to a specific architectural character intrinsic to wooden structures. Although, in theory, given the advances till date in the areas of material sciences and technology, one can feign almost any kind of external appearance regardless of the actual structure, such as, a steel frame structure cladded to look like brick masonry, or an RCC structure cladded with wooden panels. A successful architectural design solution, however, would be one that recognizes and embraces the core nature of the used materials, to create a structure that respects the climatic needs of the site, social needs of the context and the emotional needs of its people.
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