

Architecture



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The new Center for the Arts (above) at Thayer Academy in Braintree features a theater (below) that seats 560. It was designed by the Boston firm Eck | MacNeely Architects.

New center nods to a school's past

At Thayer Academy, arts building pays tribute to history

By Robert Campbell
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

BRAINTREE — Thayer Academy is a co-ed prep school for kids in grades 6 through 12. At first glance, you might not notice that many of its buildings are new. They fit quite comfortably into a campus that dates from 1877, the era of lavish Victorian architecture.

It's not only that the new buildings replicate the sloping roofs and red brick of the older Victorians. It's the little things, too. The brick, for instance, is sometimes laid in what's called Flemish bond, a rich traditional pattern that alternates exposed brick ends with sides. Elements like walls, corners, and supporting columns are satisfyingly thick and solid.

Thayer's architects even hoped to pave the entry drive in crushed stone — “so you could hear,” they say, “the sound of your feet or your tires.” Crushed stone would have made Thayer feel more like a country estate. Most of it, alas, got deleted from early designs because it's too hard to clear snow off crushed stone. Practical life has its demands.

The architects are Jeremiah Eck and Paul MacNeely of the Boston firm Eck | MacNeely Architects. What makes their work successful at Thayer, they think, is that they've got what you might call tenure. They've been working on Thayer since the 1980s, and so far they've done, they figure, maybe 20 commissions. They're the only architects Thayer uses.

“So often in institutions like this, there are just too many comings and goings,” says Eck. “Headmasters, business managers, trustees, architects, they keep changing. It's impossible to stick with a consistent vision. Every new building is someone else's baby. You need a leader. You need one strong vision over time.” He credits Thayer's head, Ted Koskores, with providing that kind of continuity.

Eck and MacNeely started at Thayer



with modest renovations, then moved up to a few additions. Now they've just completed a major new center for the arts. Its main feature is a theater that seats an audience of 560 beneath a handsome, forest-like ceiling of dark wood trusses.

Like all the firm's work at Thayer, the arts center doesn't literally copy the past. It employs traditional motifs, but

does so in a fresh way. You can see that it's a contemporary building, but you can also see that it's making a point of being polite to the past. Eck is contemptuous of architects who try to make each new building into a personal ego trip.

Eck and MacNeely are now involved in campus planning at Thayer, too. Working with landscape architect Rich-

ard Burck, they've reshaped a formerly characterless space into an open, welcoming quad, edged with new elm trees — elms being another nod to tradition (yes, they'll be resistant to Dutch elm disease).

Thayer is an example of one of the most frustrating tasks an architect can face. That's the problem of creating architecture for an old institution that will

please the traditionalists without alienating the modernists.

It's a conundrum that was best stated a few years back by a trustee at the University of Virginia — Thomas Jefferson's campus — who remarked: “What can we do? The students and alumni hate all the buildings the architecture professors like, and the architecture professors hate all the buildings the students and alumni like.”

Eck thinks the solution is what he calls “continuity of fabric.” (Fabric is architects' lingo for whatever gets built.) “It doesn't matter whether it's traditional or contemporary,” he says. “The best campus is one that has a certain consistency — a focus, a point of view. You should feel that it's intentional, not accidental. There should be one style language for the school, not a hodgepodge. That way, when you're on campus you feel you're somewhere recognizable. You're *there*, not somewhere else.”

Eck's the senior partner in the firm. Best known as an architect of private houses, he's published a couple of coffee-table books on his residential work, including “The Distinctive Home: A Vision of Timeless Design.”

Not so surprisingly, he takes Fridays off from the office in order to paint, mostly atmospheric landscapes. For a decade, he also ran a summer program at Harvard called Career Discovery, the purpose of which is to help students and others figure out whether they want to pursue a career in any of the design professions.

Eck's “timeless design” certainly isn't the only way to do a good campus. Sometimes a building that ruptures tradition can introduce a new energy. One thinks of Louis Kahn's library at Phillips Exeter, or Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center at Harvard.

But those guys were geniuses. For most architects and most schools, Eck's thoughtful, modest approach makes eminent sense — at least, if school politics permit it.

Globe architecture critic Robert Campbell can be reached at camglobe@aol.com.

CRITIC'S PICKS

VISUAL ARTS

TARA DONOVAN Last chance to see Donovan's spellbinding works using plastic buttons, toothpicks, plastic cups, and Mylar tape, among other forms of trash-in-the-making (right). *Through Jan. 4. Institute of Contemporary Art. 617-478-3103, www.ica.boston.org*

SARTORIAL SANCTUARY: CLOTHING AND TRADITION IN THE EASTERN ISLAMIC WORLD A beautiful skate through traditional men's and women's clothing in the Muslim world, from Indonesia to Morocco. *Through April 26. Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence. 401-454-6500, www.risdmuseum.org*

JON IMBER AND DEXTER LAZENBY Big abstract paintings employing loose, wristy brushstrokes by Jon Imber complement a superb series of richly colored, oddly leaning sculptures by Dexter Lazenby. *Through Jan. 10. Nielsen Gallery. 617-266-4835, www.nielsen-gallery.com*

ANDY WARHOL: POP POLITICS Last chance to see this interesting examination of Andy Warhol's engagement with politics, which turns out to have been as cynical and incisive as his interest in advertising. *Through Jan. 4. Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, N.H. 603-699-6144, www.currier.org*
SEBASTIAN SMEE



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CRITIC'S PICKS

CLASSICAL MUSIC

RAFAEL POPPER-KEIZER This busy cellist plays a prominent role in many local ensembles, but here he offers a solo recital with pianist Esther Ning Yau. The program includes music by Rossini, Chausson, Erkki-Sven Tüür, and Otar Taktakishvili. *Jan. 6 at 7 p.m., free, Weston Public Library. 781-893-3312 or www.westonlibrary.org*

MIDDAY ORGAN RECITAL King's Chapel continues its series of brief afternoon concerts with George Sargeant performing works by Bach, Buxtehude, Franck, and others. *Jan. 6 at 12:15 p.m., suggested donation \$3, King's Chapel, 58 Tremont St. 617-227-2155, www.kings-chapel.org*
JEREMY EICHLER