A Tree Saved in Brooklyn: WASA/Studio A designs an eco-friendly building for Pratt Institute

By Danine Alati • March 28, 2011

Designing a school for artists and architects is uniquely complex. Add in the requirement of constructing a green building in the midst of a tight urban site within a modest budget, and the design dilemma is compounded tenfold. However, when New York-based architecture firm WASA/Studio A was commissioned by Pratt Institute to design a new home for its Digital Arts department and bring under one roof student services and administrative offices, the design team was up to the challenge. WASA/Studio A partner-in-charge Jack Esterson led the design efforts on this project near and dear to his heart. Esterson not only attended Pratt, taught there, and served on its board of directors, but also has been a resident in the community for 40 years. “During the production of this building, people would stop me on the street to talk about the project,” he recalls. “It was very gratifying.”

As Pratt’s largest construction project ever, Myrtle Hall accommodates 160 undergraduate and graduate students pursuing degrees in digital animation and motion arts with gallery spaces, a state-of-the-art Digital Arts Lab, a green screen room, a soundproof audio recording booth for voice-overs and special sound effects, and administrative offices.

“Through a space-planning program, Pratt identified the need to build a new facility that would enable more effective delivery of its academic programs and provide more unified administrative support than its present facilities could offer,” says Pratt president Thomas F. Schutte. “Our end goal is for Myrtle Hall to serve as a physical manifestation of Pratt’s commitment to sustainable design education, to promote the revitalization of Myrtle Avenue, and to serve as a point of pride for the campus.
community and our neighbors as the first green building in the area."

According to Esterson, this project was designed to express design innovation, with a sense of transparency and connectiveness to campus. "The directive from the client was that Pratt is a design school, and the genius comes from the work," he says. The WASA team designed very pared down interiors with no extravagant materials. Polished concrete floors cover 95 percent of the facility with a clean palette of white, bamboo wood, and "eight shades of grey to reinforce different architectural elements," he notes. "The design is unpretentious; it's a vessel." Esterson found that he had to rein in the way he usually approaches design because, he admits, "I'm a colorist. It was new for me to use no color and only a neutral palette. But it was good for me. Because of lack of color and tonal neutrality, it challenged me to focus on form, sequence, and light."

Light became a driving force. The interior and exterior of this building are incredibly connected, with the exterior wall systems linked by a core atrium allowing natural light to penetrate through the narrow 75-ft.-wide by 230-ft.-long building. Myrtle Hall had to respond to two differing site conditions: the north side features a brick panel masonry wall with aluminum and windows, relating to the surrounding 19th century, mercantile brick architecture along Myrtle Avenue, while the glass curtainwall with aluminum sunscreens to the south gestures toward campus and allows for views and transparency. Although little artificial lighting is needed during the day, the designers employed a mix of natural and indirect artificial lighting to reduce glare and decrease energy consumption.

The client was adamant about constructing the most environmentally sustainable building possible within tight budget constraints, so the designers judiciously allocated dollars and painstakingly made eco-friendly design decisions. In the end, the 120,000-sq.-ft., six-story building achieved LEED Gold status, thanks to elements like the north-facing exterior wall designed for thermal performance; exterior sunshades to control daylight filtration with interior glazed partitions; lighting controls with daylight harvesting and occupancy sensors; a combination green roof with native plantings and a white roof to control storm water run-off; rooftop photovoltaic panels; high-efficiency heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning systems; and use of regional, recycled, and low-VOC materials. A number of green design features had to be eliminated due to cost, but Esterson fought for spending money on defining elements, like the interior glass wall, exterior envelope, and atrium. "The atrium is the heart and soul of the building; it's a social mixing ground," Esterson notes, stressing it was a necessary investment. Art galleries on the second and fourth floors of the atrium will showcase student, alumni, and faculty work; new work will be rotated into the space each fall.

"Flexibility of use is an important concept," Esterson says, adding that the WASA/Studio A team designed Myrtle Hall as a "swing building" with a high-level of flexibility built in to accommodate possible future relocation of different departments. But for now, the administrative offices and school of digital arts are quite content with their new digs, which students have said look like an art school or remind them of an artist's loft.

Client: Pratt Institute. Architect/interior designer: Wank Adams Slavin Associates LLP (WASA/Studio A); Jack Esterson, AIA, Partner-in-Charge; Gerald Ruck, WASA Project Manager; Sheldon Catarino, Project Manager (preceding Gerald Ruck); Ben Armas, James Belluardo, Hojoon Chung, Tony Daniels, Christina Danton, Hazel Ephron, Evan Greenberg, So Yeon Kim, Sarah Moylan, Giovanni Rabusin, Yen Wu Shih, Project Architects.Contractor: Triton Construction Company. Lighting consultant: Kugler Ning Lighting Design. Engineering: Lizardsos Engineering Associates (MEP Engineer); Rodney D. Gibble Consulting Engineers (Structural Engineer); Langan Engineering &

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