







# command performance

A little ingenuity can bring dance practice  
and performance space into correct alignment

by John Guinan



Looking at the top college dance programs in the country, you'll find relatively few with dedicated performance space in close proximity to the program's practice space.

Among the many quality U.S. dance programs, you'll find that most have a dedicated practice space but use the school's larger, shared performance hall. Smaller programs will utilize a practice space into which folding chairs are brought and set up for performances.

To consolidate a dance program's disparate elements can be costly, especially if the only option is to construct a new building. Reusing all or part of what is already there is a far more reasonable option, and the ultimate in sustainable design. However, to make that happen, you need more than money. As a typically small department that touches a minority of students, the dance program has to be able to articulate its needs, as well as the benefits of a renovation or adaptive reuse project, to the administrators holding the purse. Both the planning and the eventual execution of the project must be carefully choreographed.

## Point and Counterpoint

Mount Holyoke College is a small institution, but it is an integral part of an acclaimed collective known as The Five College Dance Department, a shared effort of the Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, Smith and University of Massachusetts Amherst dance departments. Like a lot of small colleges, Mount Holyoke's facilities grew in an organic fashion, with regular renovations and adaptations that shifted programs in and out of spaces as needs changed. Beginning with the 1950 construction of Kendall Hall, a second-generation campus gymnasium, the college set aside space for the dance program, as it fell, with athletics, under the umbrella of the college's physical education department.

With each alteration made to what is now called the Kendall Sports and Dance Complex, the dance program got better facilities, but the battles for space by two expanding programs began to sour the relationship between dance and athletics. Moreover, the interior arrangement of spaces became a jumble. The

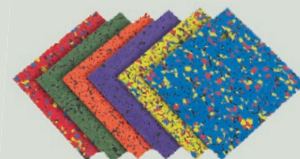
dance department's practice studios were at the center of the facility in spite of the department's desire for separation from other building functions, and its performance space was elsewhere in the building. A bit rustic, perhaps, the 300-seat performance space featured a gently sloped set of risers made of painted plywood on which sat rows of folding chairs. On the plus side, the room's past use as a natatorium (with the pool having been decked over in a previous renovation) gave it its signature element—floor-to-ceiling glass-block windows that were curtained for black-box theater purposes, but which provided welcome daylight during practice sessions.

When the athletic department began advocating for bigger and grander space, the administration was receptive. Certain of the benefit to the college in the recruitment of students and in maintaining their health, the administration soon determined that the scope of the building's fitness center offerings would have to expand significantly—and spaces long set aside for dance became the focus of planning efforts.

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Faced with this, the dance department made a pragmatic and necessary move. Fully aware that the administration did not see a dedicated dance facility as feasible, the dance department began to negotiate for a plan that could meet both departments' goals within the existing building. What started as the athletic department's proposal for a \$3 million fitness center renovation instead became a \$5 million renovation and addition for dance.

## Untangling the Center

Practice facilities for dance have only a few specific requirements—an appropriate, comfortable surface (with a sprung wood floor as standard), sensitive light and air handling controls, and a relatively separate location to ensure a quiet environment. If there are windows—and few studios in this era lack them—they can include a mix of transparent and translucent glass, for added privacy, and doors are made wide enough to allow the transport of larger objects (such as a piano). Dedicated storage space for costumes, cubbies for personal belongings, mirrors, ballet bars—it's not that complicated.



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Early proposals for the center involved some complications, however. Moser Pilon Nelson, initially brought in to perform design work on what was then only an expanded fitness center project, facilitated discussions about subdividing the existing dance studios vertically, given those spaces' 30-foot ceiling height. A floor could be added and a vaulted skylight specified to allow fitness to take over the lower portion while the dancers leaped ever higher above. This, of course, wouldn't solve one of the dance program's biggest problems—adjacency of practice space to performance space.

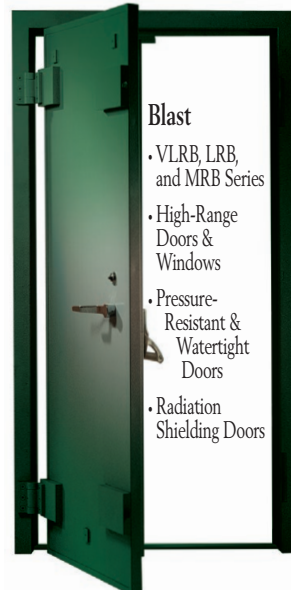
Once it was determined that the dance program would be best served by bringing together its disparate elements, the solution became clear. A 4,750-square-foot addition was placed next to the dance performance space, comprising two dance studios separated from the theater by a corridor. As part of the expansion, a new entry plaza replaced weathered steps of crumbling concrete and broken slate, and a diagonal grand staircase

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replaced the existing one under a canopy emphasizing the new entry. A 30-foot vertical glass element provides a view into the dance center corridor at the juncture of the new dance wing to the existing complex.

Inside, the performance center secured permanent, fixed seating, with the slope made steeper for enhanced sight lines and to accommodate a theater-arts classroom underneath. The project's trickiest maneuver involved finding daylight for what was now a fully interior space. With the glass-block wall now a firewall (necessary because of the expanded building's size), the design team specified a 12-by-80 foot skylight that runs the length of the performance space, outfitted with blackout shades that open and close with the push of a button.

Moving the dance studios from the building's core meant that a truly state-of-the-art fitness space could be fashioned out of the dance department's previous two-story vaulted space, with a mezzanine included for group-cycling programs and the space



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beneath for a strength and conditioning circuit. Improvements included a skylight above the mezzanine to bring additional daylight into the space. The entry corridor, running the entire length of the east side of the fitness center, became a glass wall to display the equipment and activity inside, and to redirect daylight into the corridor and to the coaches' offices across the hallway.

The reorganization complete, the dance program has an end of the building that—during performances, at least—it can call its own. In day-to-day operations, the two programs maintain a mutually beneficial relationship. Dance spaces are utilized by the general student body as “activity spaces” and for drop-in classes as diverse as ballroom dancing and folk dancing, yoga and Pilates classes. And dancers utilize fitness spaces along with other members of the student body.

## Major Savings

The Kendall Sports and Dance Complex project is a testament to the collective power of small design gestures. Working within the building's existing materials palette, as well as within a limited budget, the design team nonetheless achieved a sense of openness and serenity through building height and the judicious use and placement of glass.

Repurposing what you've got is the first and best way to be green. It saves not only the cost of a new building, but the cost of demolishing and disposal in a landfill. Also significant, repurposing and adding to an existing complex avoids duplication of infrastructure: A separate structure would require two boilers and chiller plants, two lobbies, multiple exit stairs, and a large increase in building envelope to heat, cool and maintain. By adding to and reorganizing space that it already had, Mount Holyoke gave its student body a fitness center that rivals those of the colleges of its caliber, while giving the dance program a greater prominence with its new facilities.



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** John Guinan is a partner with Connecticut-based Moser Pilon Nelson Architects.



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