A PLACE FOR CHANGE

The Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center truly will change the quality of life at Rensselaer – by widening the campus outlook and creating for our students a broader, richer sense of the world and its possibilities. It will become an international center for innovation in the arts, and a powerful and creative presence on our Troy campus, in New York State’s Capital Region, and on the world cultural stage.

The creation of EMPAC is a key component of our strategic blueprint, The Rensselaer Plan, in our drive to maximize our interdisciplinary potential and to explore at the edges where the sciences and the arts intersect. The opening of EMPAC will animate the architecture of our campus in a way that has not been seen since the creation of the Ricketts campus 100 years ago.

EMPAC will be both a signature venue and a program, set within a university dedicated to groundbreaking achievement in science and technology, discovery, and innovation. EMPAC will inspire experimentation, cross-disciplinary inquiry, and advanced research.

With EMPAC, Rensselaer will be able to provide a platform where research and technology can interact with artistic creation and reflection. As a result, students will benefit from a richer and deeper understanding of culture and society, as well as the roles and application of research and technology.

The Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center will provide a performing arts center that the Rensselaer campus has never had. Its beautiful spaces will become a campus gathering space — a place simply to “be.”
Ground was broken for the 220,000 square foot EMPAC building in September 2003. It is scheduled to open in 2008. The building is designed by Nicholas Grimshaw & Partners, London and New York, with architect of record Davis Brody Bond, LLP, New York.

“Our goal is to enable artists, engineers, and scientists to meet in such a way that they respectfully challenge and change one another, while building on the distinct characters of their disciplines,” Johannes Goebel said. “EMPAC will supply links between science and engineering research on one side and the sensory impact of art on the other, between the human aspiration toward clarity and precision and the equally human experience, so often felt in art, of life as a stumbling quest for answers. By creating EMPAC, Rensselaer takes a position on culture, science, and society that places it, I believe, far ahead of any other private research university.”

To make good on this program, Rensselaer is providing EMPAC with a unique building, offering facilities that can be found nowhere else under a single roof. The building will contain a wide and very flexible range of major venues — a 1,200-seat concert hall, a 400-seat theater, major studios — as well as suites for artists-in-residence, rehearsal spaces, and student and support facilities. All are designed and will be constructed to the highest professional standards to accommodate both the traditional performing arts and contemporary works that incorporate digital and other media; and all will be made available to artists-in-residence who work experimentally. Every program area — including the breathtakingly designed atrium — is designed so it can be used as a site for performance.

All venues throughout the building will be wired to production and post-production suites, which can receive sounds and images from every part of the building, and can transmit sounds and images in turn.

**A ONE-OF-A-KIND FACILITY**

According to Andrew Whalley, director in charge of the Grimshaw design team, “The EMPAC program poses a question: how to combine, in one building, the permanence of the traditional performing arts with the necessarily transient character of experimental media. Our solution is a scheme that shows them as yoked together yet distinct, within a building that draws its form directly from the topography. By fitting EMPAC into the slope of its hillside site, we conceal much of the bulk of the building, while at the same time revealing the venues inside, which are seen through glass curtain walls like objects in a display case.”
The distinguished firm of Fisher Dachs Associates is serving as consultant to Rensselaer and Grimshaw for theater design. “The thing that excited me most about EMPAC, when I heard about it from Dr. Jackson, was the focus on the artists,” said Joshua Dachs, principal of Fisher Dachs Associates. “The EMPAC concept of simply inviting artists to come and take advantage of the technologies available at Rensselaer, and giving them space to work in, is very refreshing and forward thinking. For us, it has meant creating spaces that range from the informality of an artist’s studio to a full-blown concert hall. Each space provides a different kind of working environment and different technical and acoustical resources, so artists will be able to create work at any scale they wish. I know of no institution like it.”

Larry Kirkegaard, principal of the renowned firm of Kirkegaard Associates, which serves as acoustical consultant to the project, agrees that EMPAC is a one-of-a-kind facility. “EMPAC presents us with a unique challenge,” he stated, “to meet extraordinarily high standards for some two dozen spaces, which may be used simultaneously and which must support the widest possible range of performances. The entire musical spectrum, from violin solos to yet-to-be-imagined computer-generated sonic worlds, will be composed and presented within EMPAC.

The story is the same in terms of configuring the spaces: Rensselaer aims to support traditional presentations of music and theater, but also wants to be able to break down the distinctions between audience space and performer space. Our response has involved both perspiration and inspiration: pursuing a multitude of mundane yet critical details that will never be seen by the artists and the public, and also developing with Grimshaw such features as the elegant and innovative fabric ceiling for the concert hall.”

EMPAC will inspire experimentation, cross-disciplinary inquiry, and advanced research at the intersections of disciplines. EMPAC is both an art institution and a research platform. Therein lie its daring and its promise.

— President Shirley Ann Jackson, Ph.D.