

# Tradition With a Twist

## RPI Combines Experimental Media With Performing Arts

by Natalie Keith



[www.newyork.construction.com/features/archive/0403\\_feature2.asp](http://www.newyork.construction.com/features/archive/0403_feature2.asp)

**Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's new Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center will provide an environment where research and technology can interact with artistic reflection.**

**When designing** the new Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, architects faced the task of combining the transient elements of experimental media with the more traditional aspects of performing arts.

The solution was to “yoke” the two uses together within a structure that draws its form from the topography of its hillside site. While the performing arts space is more traditional and well-lit, the experimental media areas are contained in a “cool space” clad in slick curtain walls on the exterior and sheer white polished walls on the interior.

“It’s a bit like the yin and yang,” said

architect William Horgan, an associate of Nicholas Grimshaw & Partners of New York and London.

EMPAC is a 203,000-sq.-ft., \$142 million building in Troy, N.Y. with a 1,200-seat concert hall; 400-seat theater; 3,500-sq.-ft. and 2,500-sq.-ft. studios; suites for artists-in-residence; rehearsal spaces; and student and support facilities.

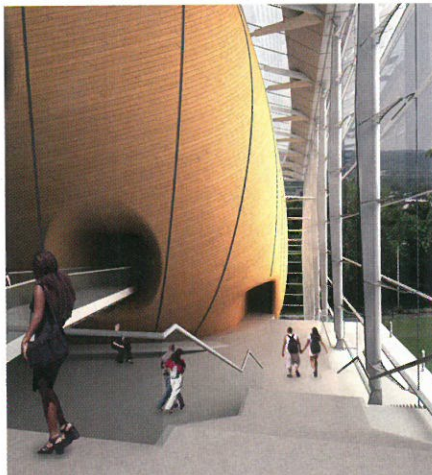
The center will serve the campus, the region and the international arts community as a place for cutting-edge artistic performances and where new knowledge is gained in a broad range of academic disciplines. It is expected to be completed in late 2006 with an opening festival scheduled in spring 2007. >>



"EMPAC will help us to maximize Rensselaer's interdisciplinary potential, providing a platform where research and technology can interact with artistic creation and reflection," said RPI president Shirley Ann Jackson.

Because the building is constructed within a hillside, "The geographical conditions are poor in terms of structural stability," Horgan said. "We had to design a robust and elaborate structural system."

However, the site offers a panoramic view of the Hudson Valley so the building was designed to make the most of this feature. Visitors enter the building at the top, not the bottom, of the structure and descend down into the building through a series of cascading staircases. Visitors will also be able to walk out onto the roof structure where they can enjoy views of Troy and the Hud-



Renderings of the new Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

son River, Horgan added.

"At each level, you have spectacular views," he said.

The architect of record on the project is Davis Brody Bond LLP of New York City, Fisher Dachs Associates, also of

New York, and Kirkegaard Associates of Chicago. Tishman Construction Corp. of New York City is the construction manager on the job.

Tishman is responsible for managing, supervising and coordinating all >>



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pre-construction and construction aspects of the project, including preparing bid packages, developing a complete critical path management system, developing and maintaining a schedule and reviewing all value engineering options for its client.

Dachs Associates. "The EMPAC concept of inviting artists to take advantage of technologies is very refreshing. For us, it has meant creating spaces that range from the informality of an artist's studio to a full-blown concert hall."

Larry Kirkegaard, principal of

**"The geographical conditions are poor in terms of structural stability. We had to design a robust and elaborate structural system."**

The building's spaces are designed so that they can be used as performance sites. Venues are wired to production and postproduction suites, which can receive sounds and images from every part of the building and transmit sound and images in turn.

"I know of no institution like this," said Joshua Dachs, principal of Fisher

Kirkegaard Associates, which served as acoustical consultants on the project, said EMPAC had to "meet extraordinarily high standards for the spaces. Rensselaer wants 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." <<

### Key Players

**Owner:** Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, N.Y.

**Architect of Record:** Davis Brody Bond, New York, N.Y.

**Architect:** Nicholas Grimshaw & Partners, New York, N.Y.

**Landscape Architect:** Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Inc., New York, N.Y.

**Civil Engineer:** Clough, Harbour & Associates LLP, Albany, N.Y.

**MEP & Structural Engineers:** Buro Happold Consulting Engineers PC, New York, N.Y.

**Acoustic Consultant:** Shen Milson Wilkie, New York, N.Y.

**Acoustic Consultant:** Kirkegaard Consultants, Chicago, Ill.

**Theater Consultant:** Fisher Dachs Associates, New York, N.Y.

**Construction Manager:** Tishman Construction Corporation, New York, N.Y.



Rendering of Columbia Residence  
Courtesy of Columbia University

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