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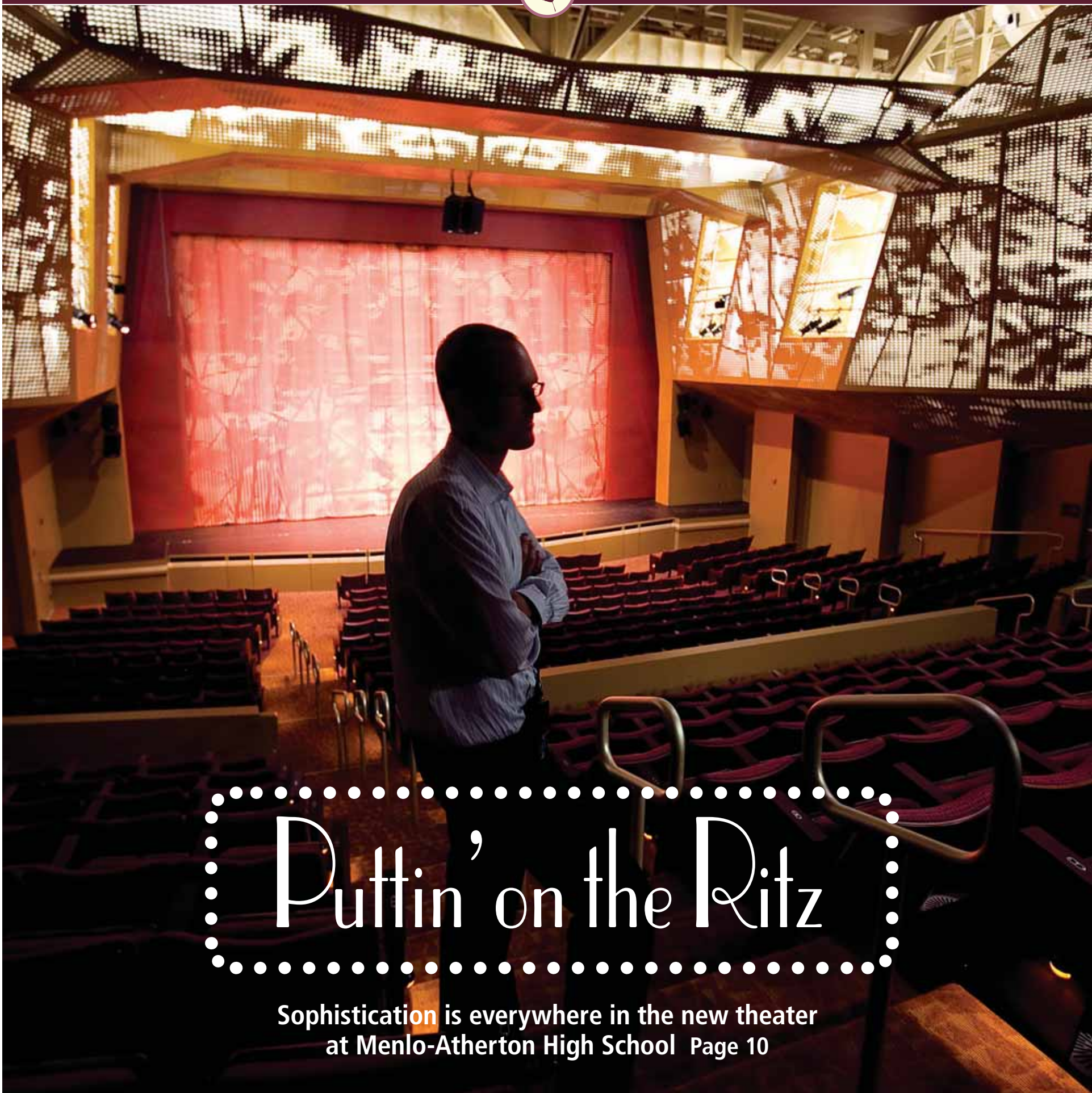
# The Almanac

THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER FOR MENLO PARK, ATHERTON, PORTOLA VALLEY AND WOODSIDE

OCTOBER 7, 2009 | VOL. 45 NO. 6



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## Puttin' on the Ritz

Sophistication is everywhere in the new theater at Menlo-Atherton High School Page 10

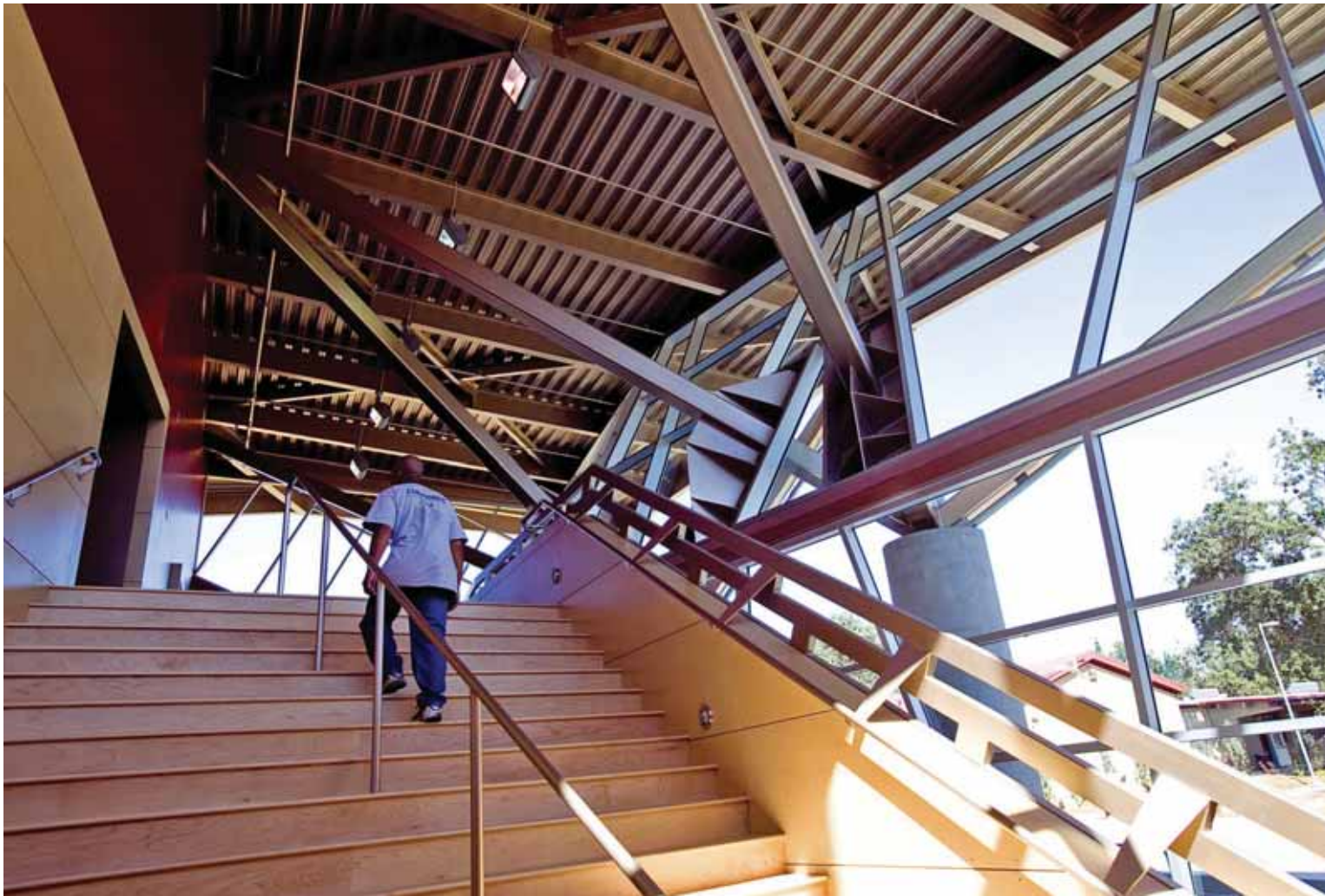


## Sophistication is everywhere in the new theater at Menlo-Atherton High School

It's big. It's bold. It certainly is bodacious. Perhaps the new performing arts center at Menlo-Atherton High School is also beautiful in its panorama of beige angles rising at the intersection of Ravenswood Avenue and Middlefield Road in Atherton.

Beauty depends on the eye of the beholder, of course, and in this case, possibly where the beholder is standing. The \$32 million theater opens this weekend. It seats 492, encloses 31,000 square feet under its sloping roofs, and will not infrequently be available to the Menlo Park community.





**Opposite page:**

At Menlo-Atherton High School's new performing arts center, the landscaping has a ways to go yet, but the building is ready for prime time with sophisticated lighting and sound systems and acoustics designed by a nationally known engineer.

**Left:** The theater's grand entrance includes an upstairs lobby framed by structural members that display the mechanical forces that hold up the roof.

**Below:** The theater's duct work and wiring are intentionally left in view to provide teachable moments for students, educators and visitors, the architect said.

The stage can accommodate an 80-piece musical ensemble, and has a vast empty space above it to store theatrical backdrops. In a gesture to the traditions of show business, the winches raising those backdrops are hand-operated rather than computer-controlled. The acoustics are reportedly first rate, as are the systems for lighting, sound and temperature control. There are practice rooms, large makeup rooms, a set-design workshop, storage cabinets for sheet music and instruments, and spaces for outdoor concerts and indoor/outdoor get-togethers.

The green room is actually green and includes a green couch.

Proposed in 2005 at a cost of \$17 million, begun in 2007 amid worldwide competition for building materials, and opening Friday, Oct. 9, the first weekend will include drama scenes, choral and guitar performances and concerts by the school's jazz band and by Music@Menlo, a professional chamber music ensemble.

(The school's celebration is by invitation only; the chamber music concert was sold out long ago.)

"We've been waiting quite a few years for this," M-A Principal Matthew Zito said during a recent tour of the facility. "Good things come to those who wait."

And to the city of Menlo Park,

which contributed \$2.4 million toward construction and can now reserve the theater for 55 performances per year. Most of those dates will be during the summers, Mr. Zito said.

Commenting on the theater's extraordinarily robust construction, a result of the state's seismic requirements for school buildings, Mr. Zito said that he expects the theater to be good for 150 years. "It's really built for the ages," he said. "It's the best construction that's on any campus in the country."

"Who said that?" a reporter asked, figuring that he was quoting someone with nationwide connections to the campus construction scene. "I said that," Mr. Zito replied.

In 2005, in giving guidance to representatives from the six architectural firms that competed for the right to build the theater, Mr. Zito said: "This building has to be useful, but it also has to look good when you're driving by at 35 mph in your Mercedes."

How does the finished product measure up? "I think it's accomplished both of those tasks very, very successfully," he said while rapidly ascending an outdoor ramp to the students' entry to the theater's upper lobby.

Inside and out, the theater

reflects the millions of dollars and countless decisions involved in its construction. Mr. Zito led The Almanac on a tour of the building in September, from the spectacular main entrance to the aeries high above the stage to the auxiliary spaces to the indoor/outdoor setting and catering kitchen at the rear entrance.

**An echoing of oaks**

A grove of mature oak trees stands between the theater's main entrance and Ringwood Avenue. With the trees as old neighbors, the entrance is an architectural attempt to become one with the neighborhood.

Turn around so the trees are at your back and look up at the entrance from a certain angle and you'll see the oak canopies reflected in glass amid cantilevered steel "branches" extending from twin concrete "trunks."

It's dramatic; it's artful; it's also simple. The structure is out where you can see it working. "I think the building has a vitality about it. It's raw by design," said lead architect Craig Hodgetts of Hodgetts + Fung Design and Architecture in Culver City.

Mr. Zito was a "very, very big advocate" of exposing the structure of the building, including the duct work, wiring and lighting,



Mr. Hodgetts said. "He was huge on that, to make the building an educational device in itself."

The community also lent a hand. Architects met with parents and representatives from the Sequoia Union High School District and the city of Menlo Park. "Those were very, very intense in-depth programming sessions," Mr. Hodgetts recalled. "At a creative level, the building really was shaped by all those forces. It was terrific. It's been a long haul but very satisfying."

The theater has revitalized the front of the campus, Mr. Zito said. Many of the campus buildings are from the 1950s; the theater's roof slopes back to meet them, and echoes their beige colors.

"I do think the building blends very nicely," he said. "Even though it is almost 70 feet high, it isn't

imposing." When challenged by a reporter on that, Mr. Zito said he distinguishes between large and imposing, and that this building is large. It's also "3,000 times nicer" than the J Building it replaced, he added.

The project's beneficial side effects include new sewer, water and irrigation components, a new electrical transformer, new paving and a 300-space parking lot for students on school days and theater-goers the rest of the time.

One expectation did not come to pass: While there now appears to be an entrance to the campus at Ravenswood and Middlefield, it's a decoration.

A traffic engineer said an entry there would have complicated the intersection and made it unsafe, Mr. Zito said. There had been "considerable discussion" about



**NOTICE OF PUBLIC MEETING  
AND  
NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING  
CITY OF MENLO PARK  
PLANNING COMMISSION  
MEETING OCTOBER 19, 2009**

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the Planning Commission of the City of Menlo Park, California, is scheduled to review the following items:

**PUBLIC HEARING ITEMS**

**Use Permit and Architectural Control/Roger Kohler/344 Waverly Street:** Request for a use permit and architectural control for a 210-square-foot second-story addition to an existing fourplex that is nonconforming with regard to the number of dwelling units and is located on a substandard size lot with regard to lot area in the R-3-A (Garden Apartment) zoning district.

**Appeal of Administrative Permit/Safeway, Inc./515 El Camino Real:** Appeal of the Community Development Director's approval of an administrative permit for outside seating in conjunction with food services (both Peet's Coffee and Rubio's Restaurants) and to allow the sale of beer and wine in conjunction with a restaurant use (Rubio's Restaurants only) in the C-4 ECR(X) (General Commercial, Applicable to El Camino Real, Conditional Development) zoning district.

**Use Permit/Entos Design/1040 Hamilton Court:** Request for a use permit for a dialysis clinic to be located in an existing office building, and for a change of use in a building that is nonconforming with regard to parking where 112 parking spaces are required per the Zoning Ordinance and 92 spaces would be provided in the M-2 (General Industrial) zoning district.

**Use Permit/Pacific Biosciences/1392 Hamilton Avenue:** Request for a use permit for indoor use and indoor and outside storage of hazardous materials for manufacturing of single molecule, real time (SMRT) chips and reagents for use in association with genome sequencing in the M-2 (General Industrial) zoning district.

**PUBLIC MEETING ITEMS - None**

NOTICE IS HEREBY FURTHER GIVEN that said Planning Commission will hold a public hearing on public hearing items in the Council Chambers of the City of Menlo Park, located at 701 Laurel Street, Menlo Park, on Monday, **October 19, 2009**, 7:00 p.m. or as near as possible thereafter, at which time and place interested persons may appear and be heard thereon. If you challenge this item in court, you may be limited to raising only those issues you or someone else raised at the public hearing described in this notice, or in written correspondence delivered to the City of Menlo Park at, or prior to, the public hearing.

The project file may be viewed by the public on weekdays between the hours of 7:30 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Friday, with alternate Fridays closed, at the Department of Community Development, 701 Laurel Street, Menlo Park. Please call the Planning Division if there are any questions and/or for complete agenda information (650) 330-6702.

*Si usted necesita más información sobre este proyecto, por favor llame al 650-330-6702, y pregunte por un asistente que hable español.*

DATED: October 1, 2009 Deanna Chow,  
Senior Planner  
PUBLISHED: October 7, 2009 Menlo Park Planning  
Commission

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**COVER STORY**

*continued from previous page*

it with officials from Menlo Park, Atherton and the school district, he added.

In a nod to the often awkward quick left turn from Ringwood Avenue when entering the campus from the west, the school moved the entrance further east on Ringwood to allow more vehicles to stack up.

**Hidden in plain sight**

Steel, concrete and glass present the tangible side of this theater, but its secrets, the pulse of sophistication that runs through it, is found in the intangibles and hidden components.

The acoustics, for example, are by Paul Scarbrough, head of Connecticut-based Akustiks LLC and a leading participant in renovations of Cleveland's Severance Hall and the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Scarbrough's touch is in every space where music will be played, including the three individual practice rooms — named Earth, Wind and Fire — and the band practice room, Mr. Zito said.

The delicate, back-lighted oak-leaf motif on the airy wooden panels that surround the stage echoes the oak foliage outside and cleverly disguises the panels' role in directing music up and out to the audience.

Oak leaves also show up on the rugs running up the aisles, but most of the floors are intentionally bare, another acoustics-related decision. For speaking engagements, curtains can mask the elements designed to enhance the music.

"Every inch (of the interior) was designed to maximize the acoustic properties," Mr. Zito said.

It's common practice these days



**The main stage** at M-A's new theater is expected to draw orchestral, jazz, choral and dramatic performances from the school. The city of Menlo Park, which helped fund construction, will have 55 dates reserved every year, though most will happen during the summer, Principal Matthew Zito said.

to tune heating and cooling systems to the presence of people, who are themselves heat generators. Temperatures in the lobby and main theater are controlled in this way.

But in this building, these environmental systems also sit on a separate concrete pad, Mr. Zito said. Their vibrations as they turn themselves off and on will not interrupt the audience's concentration on the performance.

The state requires the cycling of interior air, so the theater has huge variable-speed fans that can turn "very, very slowly," Mr. Hodgetts said. It's a "Rolls Royce" of an air-handling unit, he said.

When the heat does come on in the main theater, it seeps up from under the seats and is meant to warm only the five feet of air above the floor — where the audience sits.

"You basically almost never have to heat an auditorium," Mr. Hodgetts said. "The heat given off by 500 people is very considerable.

The mechanical systems, I think, are highly optimized," well beyond the state's efficiency standards.

The vast expanse of steel on the roof shades the windows to keep out the sun's heat, can accept solar panels, has highly efficient insulation under it, and will be recyclable, Mr. Hodgetts said, adding: "Of course, I hope they don't recycle it in my lifetime."

Asked if the building as a whole could be in the Rolls Royce category, Mr. Hodgetts replied: "No, I think we have a Prius."

Would he have done anything differently? He would have sunk the building further into the ground, he said, but the high water table on the campus made that impossible. "We could have reduced the overall mass of the building considerably, but it just wasn't in the cards," he said.

Had it been designed for evaluation by the U.S. Green Building Council, Mr. Hodgetts guessed that it might have earned a silver rating, or third-place score. ■

**Numbers tell a tale**

**By Dave Boyce**

*Almanac Staff Writer*

**T**heaters have appeared on many local campuses, including Menlo-Atherton and Woodside high schools and Woodside Priory, a private school in Portola Valley for grades 6-12.

Taxpayers in the Sequoia Union High School District are paying for the theaters at the public schools — M-A and Woodside — from the district's sale of municipal bonds, part of \$323 million from three bond measures approved by voters since 2001.

At \$32 million, M-A's 31,000-square-foot theater ran about \$1,032 per square foot. Asked about the escalation from the original estimate of \$17 million, M-A Principal Matthew Zito replied: "What we asked for was not going to fit in a \$17 million budget, and so the price went up."

Construction began in 2007 during a frenzied and worldwide search for building materials. M-A's theater contains 3,600 yards of structural concrete, 455 tons of structural steel, 207 tons of reinforcing steel and 5,230 square feet of glass, Project Executive Ken Schroeder of San Jose-based Blach Construction told The Almanac.

It's built to last, lead architect Craig Hodgetts said in an interview. The size of the beams and the extent of cross-bracing is extraordinary, "presumably because it's a seismic zone," he said, adding: "It's on steroids."

At Woodside High, the theater that was completed in 2004 encloses 27,300 square feet and cost \$16 million, or \$586 per square foot.

The smaller theater at the Priory was finished in 2007. Its 3,800 square feet cost \$14 million, or \$3,684 per square foot, according to a school spokesman. ■