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Built for children gifted in the performing and visual arts, the Claude Watson School for the Arts responds to its dense inner-suburban site with a form that, while simple, reaches out to the community. The south-facing library floats above an outdoor theatre, whose wide seats double as stairs to the main entry; its striking honeycomb brise-soleil shields the interior from direct sun.

All the school's a stage

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Kohn Shnier Architects puts on a class act with a Toronto arts school that performs beyond expectations



On a sunny afternoon with just a couple of weeks left in school, the students at Toronto's Claude Watson School for the Arts are full of summer energy. In front of the school's outdoor theatre, a pair of girls about 10 years old perform a dance routine, cartwheeling away from each other and skipping back together. "This is just what we wanted to see here," says architect Martin Kohn, casting a proud glance around the space. "These kids are performers. They'll make use of it."

Not many elementary schools have an outdoor theatre (or need one), but the 4,600-square-metre school has plenty of features to encourage creativity, from informal hallway rehearsal space to a theatre room with a full fly area. Delivering such details was a challenging task for Toronto's Kohn Shnier Architects. When the firm took on the project in 2001, it faced a meagre budget and strict space-planning guidelines – the standard obstacles that have generated a decade's worth of grim bunkers for Ontario's school system. But the design team overcame those hurdles. Employing a small material palette and creating areas that fill more than one requirement, it met the needs of the 300-plus Grade 4 to 8 students, who show promise in the performing or visual arts. The school had its own "unofficial program," as Kohn puts it, a specific list of elements and qualities, such as space meant for hanging out; working with teachers and parents, the architects established a wish list of values that led to a design that's far from dull.

For one thing, they decided it should be "a school that takes risks" – an appropriate training ground for young performers learning to share their talents. This is apparent in the outdoor theatre, whose wide seats double as a grand staircase leading up to the second-floor main entrance; overhead, a projected volume contains a third-floor library. The window on the library's south end is wrapped with a brise-soleil of aluminum sheeting; it resembles a giant honeycomb, earning the nickname "the beehive" – a metaphor for the creativity of the artists-to-be buzzing around its hallways.

The rectangular building hews closely to the street on its dense inner-suburban site, and the spectacular honeycomb facade, looking out over the schoolyard, clearly reaches out to passing traffic. Other than the projected volume, the school is clad in exposed aggregate stucco, with inexpensive (but large and well-proportioned) aluminum-strip windows. "We had to find efficiencies," Kohn says matter-of-factly, "so some aspects are very basic."

On the inside, however, the design fulfills a complex program, with thoughtfully arranged spaces on three levels. It had to serve both the school's arts and academic functions, and Kohn Shnier (who has long experience in

educational and institutional projects but had never designed an elementary school) responded in an intellectually rigorous fashion. Working with the school community, the architects rated the school's needs in terms of circulation, noise and light, as well as its demand for "clothing and stuff" – dance costumes, musical instruments, and so on.

Most of these criteria sorted the program elements into an order that's visible in the building's layers, from bottom to top. Large studios for music and dance, along with the gymnasium, occupy the ground floor; these were pushed 1.2 metres below grade to allow for higher ceilings and better acoustics. Medium-sized rooms for drama and visual arts, along with administrative offices and service rooms, make up the middle; while conventional academic classrooms take over the quiet zone on top, which is punctuated by the projected library.

From the elevated front doors, the plan is highly transparent. A light-filled atrium to one side reveals a corridor below (wide enough to accommodate rolling bass drums and other equipment). A nearby peephole gives the school's artistic director a bird's-eye view of the atrium. And an off-kilter composition of fluorescent lighting tubes adds a bit of whimsy to a wall for student art. To allow for large uninterrupted spans, the architects specified a structural system of precast Coreslab concrete planks. Because these provide inherent fire separation, there was no need for drop ceilings, creating studiolike spaces with exposed ducts and extra height.

Indeed, one of the elements on the wish list was that "people can see the arts happening in an informal way." The architects inserted large windows at sidewalk level, giving passersby a chance to watch rehearsals. They also learned something about impromptu creativity from the school's previous red-brick building, which dated to 1923. "The first time I came into the old building, I found myself in this wide stairwell," Kohn recalls. "There were a few kids gathered there, and one of them was crying. Then, suddenly, she stopped, they had a quick discussion, and I realized it was a rehearsal." Accordingly, the new building's stairwells are uncommonly spacious, lined with a steel roofing mesh that provides a note of brusque poetry.

And when a design change in midstream added a mechanical penthouse, the architects were ready to take advantage. The stairs that lead to the penthouse effectively "don't go anywhere," as Kohn puts it. But with its extra space and big windows, the landing becomes a bright rehearsal area for the school's jazz combo – a fine way to top off a building filled with the spirit of skilled improvisation. **AZ**

