A chronicle of the wildly inventive evolution of Cabrillo College and its new Visual and Performing Arts Complex

On a perfect fall day, sunlight streams through the trees at Cabrillo College in Aptos, illuminating the recently constructed Visual and Performing Arts Complex like a shiny new penny. The $80 million facility consists of five buildings totaling 122,300 square feet. The Crocker Theater and the recital hall may be the crowning glory of the new complex, but there are also three new buildings dedicated solely to art instruction.

“There has been a total transformation of our campus in the last five years,” says Cabrillo College President Brian King. Now is a great time to be a Cabrillo College art student of any genre because gone are the days of 50-year-old classrooms and art supplies left over from the Jurassic Age. The school’s new Visual and Performing Arts Complex is a masterpiece of spacious, well-lit classrooms and performance areas equipped to fully train a new generation of artists in Santa Cruz County.

The decision to undertake the massive project of creating this multi-mullion dollar complex was not taken lightly. In fact, the faculty at Cabrillo College has been hoping to see this dream become a reality since 1978, but obtaining sufficient funding—particularly for the arts—has always been the pressing issue. But the State of California smiled on Cabrillo College (fortunately before its coffers ran dry), providing $20 million in state bond money. Additional funds came from the Federal government and directly from our community, with voters passing measure C in 1998, which granted $85 million, and measure D in 2004 which provided another $118.5 million.

Some of the classrooms in the Visual Arts Complex were actually put to use in the fall of last year, and the verdict? Success. “It’s a dream that’s come true,” says Dan Martinez, dean of Visual, Applied and Performing Arts, who began his career with Cabrillo College back in 1979 as a ceramics instructor. “We knew that if we built it, they would come,” he says with a twinkle in his eyes. In fact, visit the Visual and Performing Arts Complex on any given weekday and you will see a plethora of passionate young art students enthusiastically rushing to and fro to their next class.

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The two main art buildings—one dedicated to two-dimensional art, the other to three—offer state-of-the-art classrooms where students can pursue genres such as painting, drawing, graphic design, printmaking and silkscreening. There’s
even a metal casting and bronze sculpture facility. “It’s such an exciting environment. It makes my heart warm every time I see it,” Martinez says.

The beauty of the Visual and Performing Arts Complex is that many of the classrooms are connected, allowing students to learn and create from an amalgamation of supplies. Art is continually evolving and medias are melding into each other to create new art forms. An apparent example is in the photography department. “Digital and traditional imagery are continuously integrating, so these art rooms are meant to be close together,” Martinez adds. “Another example is that the photography room is a fully equipped Mac lab which can be used for the integration of digital photography and graphic design.”

“Cabrillo was in my backyard and accepted me, at various stages of my life, giving me the opportunity to be who I am today.”—Richard Crocker

Prior to the new state-of-the-art building, digital and film photography classes may have been located across campus with their paths never intersecting. But according to Martinez, it is essential for photography students to understand the wet lab process of developing prints in order to more fully grasp lighting and other photographic principles that will make them better digital photographers in the end. In the Intro to Studio Lighting for Film and Digital Media class, artsy looking students armed with spotlights, reflective surfaces and cameras angled inanimate objects every which way in an attempt to capture the most creative image. A state-of-the art metal working lab replete with various kinds of unusual tubes, hoses and pipes poking out all over and resembling the lair of a crazy scientist is also one of the school’s new additions, affectionately dubbed by the faculty as the “best metal lab in the west.”

“We wanted to create spaces where students didn’t have to worry about messing up the building,” says Rob Ingram, Facilities Development Senior Project Manager.

Not only are the classrooms user-friendly for the students, but they are all designed according to the environmental standards of the state of California. All of the new buildings meet energy management standards, including insulation, energy efficiency of equipment and lighting. Also, despite there being a lush green lawn area for students to congregate, Cabrillo coordinated with the Soquel Creek Water District on the complex’s landscaping to ensure a water-friendly environment. Extensive collaboration between architects and designers took place to ensure that the complex was created to be student-oriented, visually pleasing and environmentally friendly.

The icing on the Visual and Performing Arts Complex cake is the 581-seat Crocker Theater, named after Cabrillo alumni and generous donors Richard and Theresa Crocker. Richard Crocker attended Cabrillo in the ‘60s, taking classes in trailers set up on the Watsonville High School campus. Eventually, he took night classes, raising a family in between. He graduated in 1967 and went on to obtain a bachelor’s degree in business at San Jose State University. Since that time, Richard has since developed more than 40 commercial real estate properties and founded Crocker’s Restaurants and Crocker’s Lockers storage facilities. “If Cabrillo wasn’t here I probably wouldn’t have completed my college education.”
Theresa Crocker became a Cabrillo College dental hygiene graduate. The couple turned heads last year with news of their $1 million donation to Cabrillo College. A staggering figure, to say the least, their donation to the college provided equipment for the theater, overhauls of “smart classrooms” campus-wide and permanent endowments for many programs at Cabrillo.

“It is an honor and a pleasure to come full circle as a Cabrillo student and have this opportunity, along with my wife, to give back to the college that made a huge difference in our lives,” Richard Crocker adds. “We are proud to invest in Cabrillo’s future students.”

Meanwhile, the theater itself is a site to behold. The massive stage in this exceptional space measures in at 3,000 square feet with a ceiling reaching 70 feet into the heavens. The beauty of all this extra space will enable the Crocker to be a true repertory theater—meaning that sets for multiple performances can be ready to pull out at a moment’s notice. The orchestra pit at the theater can raise and lower based on the sounds the performance requires. Additionally, Michael Howlin, Project Manager of Musson Theatrical enthuses about the lights at the Crocker are “These are absolutely, positively 21st century state-of- the-art lighting fixtures. It’s about as cutting edge as it gets in this building,” he says.

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The backstage area is also interesting to note. Complete with two star dressing rooms, it makes one feel as though one were about to perform on Broadway. There is also a costume room, dressing room and theatrical makeup room. There is also a small room called the black box theater. This intimate, professionally lit space will be the new home of acting and theater classes in order to provide Cabrillo students with professional theatrical training. “The black box theater is an experimental concept that we hope will allow new exciting things in theater arts,” adds Martinez.

The new Visual and Performing Arts Complex not only includes the new classrooms and the Crocker Theater, but a smaller recital hall was also constructed as a more intimate setting for performances from soloists to jazz trios. The church-like, intimate space was constructed with ingenious panels and other materials that allow sound to be absorbed or reflected at different levels, creating perfect aural harmony. The idea is that prior to each performance, an acoustician will determine the positioning of the panels that would best capture the sounds of each performance, and then rearrange the settings of the panels accordingly. One of the coolest (no pun intended) features about the recital hall is that it was built with a displacement air system—basically recycled air—that cools the building from vents beneath the seats, thereby saving money and energy. Additionally, the recital hall is equipped with 15 practice rooms for students whether they play solo piano or are a member of a musical ensemble.

The recent campus expansion is not only a boon to Cabrillo College, but to the entire community. Cabrillo Stage, now in its 29th year, will use the Crocker Theater for its annual performances. Cabrillo Stage also plans to expand into a year-round theater company, with performances being held in both summer and winter. Mark your calendars because on Dec. 17, “Scrooge” will be the inaugural Cabrillo Stage production in the new Crocker Theater.

As a thank you gift to the public for passing local bond measures that enabled the new Visual and Performing Arts Complex, a grand opening extravaganza will be held Oct. 9 through 11. Cabrillo students, interested area residents and art lovers of all kinds are invited to attend the free event. In addition to experiencing myriad performances, attendees can tour...
the Arts Complex and watch demonstrations such as mask making, bronze pouring, hip hop dance, acting and papermaking.

Sept. 14, 2009 was the 50th anniversary of the first day of classes held at Cabrillo College, and enrollment is currently at an all time high.

King notes that the new complex may boost Cabrillo’s exposure along the Central Coast. “Our arts faculty has always been outstanding, and Cabrillo’s new Visual and Performing Arts Complex gives us a facility that is as good as our faculty,” he says. “These wonderful new venues reflect Cabrillo’s commitment to the Arts. The physical transformation of our campus definitely makes Cabrillo more attractive to students, and is one factor in our explosive enrollment growth in recent years.”

More than 17,000 students attend classes at the school, yet during the current environment of budget cuts across the state’s entire educational system, the operating budget of Cabrillo will be cut by $3 to $5 million next year alone. It is a difficult issue because with many public four-year institutions reducing enrollment, more students than ever before are looking to Cabrillo to begin their journey of higher education. In fact, a recent study showed that 40 percent of 18 to 20 year olds in Santa Cruz County took one or more classes at Cabrillo. Despite tough times, the school is trying to make accommodate additional for additional students. Although, far fewer sections of classes are being offered this fall, enrollment is up two percent. Students are sitting on the floor, classes are meeting outside—the faculty and administration are doing anything that can be done to accommodate students that are dedicated to pursuing a college education.

There is no denying that these are challenging times for the higher education system in California, but through it all, our community has rallied together in an effort to protect the arts. “We want to thank the public for passing the bond measures that allowed these buildings to be created,” says King, President of Cabrillo College. “We are very appreciative to the community for their support and want people to know the resources that Cabrillo now has available.”

But the grand opening performance is just the beginning. Cabrillo art students will go on to be the actors, painters, photographers, musicians and dancers of the next generation, leaving Cabrillo with a strong legacy that is well worth the sacrifices that have been made to create the stunning Visual and Performing Arts Complex.

As for what lies ahead for Cabrillo, King is quick to point out that as the college begins its second 50 years, the community has never needed its community college more. “With a dedicated faculty and staff, I am excited that we are continuing to find new, innovative ways to help our students be successful. With tremendous support from the local community, I have no doubt we will build upon our proud history.

Grand Opening Weekend
The Visual And Performing Arts Complex will host a celebratory grand opening weekend, Oct. 9 through 11. Events will be kicked off with a dedication ceremony on Friday, Oct. 9. A lively schedule of over 500 musicians, theatrical performers and dancers will perform on the spanking new stage of the Crocker Theater. This performance, held at 8 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, Oct. 9 and 10. A Sunday matinee will be performed at 3 p.m. on Oct. 11. In addition, on Saturday, Oct.10, the entire Visual Arts Complex will be open to the public from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., which will include tours of this new section of the campus, interactive art, music, theater and dance classes and workshops.
Tickets to this artistic extravaganza are free, and are available on a first come first served basis at the Crocker Theater Box Office, 6500 Soquel Drive, Aptos. 479-6146. For more information, visit cabrillovapa.com.

The Breakdown
$425,000    Campus-Wide Crocker Permanent Endowment
$212,500    Dental Hygiene & Allied Health Crocker Permanent Endowment
$212,500    Visual and Performing Arts Crocker Permanent Endowment
$70,000    Theater Curtain
$50,000    Smart Classrooms (5)
$30,000    Grand Opening Events for the Visual & Performing Arts Complex

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