

The black box theater features 250 seats that can be set up in multiple configurations, or entirely removed from sight, allowing the theater to morph to accommodate many types of performances. Flexible HVAC ducts covered in dark fabric can be repositioned to not limit the placement of lights on the overhead grid.

bam fisher



By Cody Calamaio
Photography by
Francis Dzikowski/ESTO

H3 Hardy Collaboration Architecture designs a theater that maximizes flexibility in Brooklyn

Anchoring the Fort Greene neighborhood of Brooklyn as a cultural mecca, the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) is a true juxtaposition of old and new. Its latest building, the Richard B. Fisher Theater (BAM Fisher), epitomizes the fluidity and energy of the area.

BAM already occupies two massive turn-of-the-century proscenium theaters renovated and restored by New York's H3 Hardy Collaboration Architecture, including the Peter Jay Sharp Building that contains an opera house. The academy again called on Hugh Hardy's firm to create BAM Fisher by renovating an existing building and designing a significant new addition.

BAM had acquired a 1928 Georgian revival building, formerly a Salvation Army citadel, located immediately behind the Peter Jay Sharp Building. During the neighborhood's rougher years, the building's arched windows had been bricked over. Many interior elements, such as the ceiling beams, had fallen into disrepair and could not be saved. "It was like a fortress," says architect Daria Pizzetta, a partner at H3. "When you have an existing building, you never know what you're going to get when you open up the walls."

The entire back half of the Salvation Army building was demolished, leaving the façade and a streetside portion extending back about 20 feet, which now serves as part of BAM Fisher's first-floor lobby. A new seven-story addition, which houses two theaters and office space, rises behind the remainder of the structure. The basement remains as the only continuous original floorplate.

Flexibility drives function

The academy's Executive Producer Joseph V. Melillo called for a space with less than 300 seats in order to attract edgy, emerging performing artists who might not be able to fill the larger BAM theaters. "I was very clear when I made my pronouncement that we needed an intimate theater, and the intimate theater needed to be a flexible theater," Melillo says.

The black box theater—actually painted dark blue—was built with seats that can be set up in multiple configurations or collapsed entirely under the mezzanine to maximize floor space. The railings,



designed to appear like an abstracted street map of Brooklyn, can also be detached and relocated. Even the tension wire grid that hovers above the theater is built for maximum customization, and moveable HVAC ducts give theater technicians total control over light placement. “The space can be anything you imagine. It can be arranged to become the appropriate venue for the audience and the art,” Melillo says.

Directly above the main theater, a rehearsal space is encapsulated in a soundproof studio, which allows programming to occur in the two areas simultaneously. The clean, white studio has a double-height ceiling, a sprung floor, and large windows that allow for significant daylight and can be covered with blackout drapes to transform the space into a secondary theater.

Flexibility is not limited to the performance areas. All of the functional furnishings within first floor and basement lobbies—ticket counters, kiosks, and concession stands—were custom built with casters so they can be rearranged or removed entirely.

Connecting to the character of the neighborhood

Providing a transition between the interior and exterior of the building was an important element of BAM Fisher’s design. A new rooftop

terrace overlooking the Brooklyn skyline has a pergola at the same elevation as the neighboring opera house, and its back portion contains moveable glass walls that can create a private room or telescope open to form a large space perfect for parties or intimate performances. A green roof recycles water to nourish the native plant species in the garden, and contributes to the building’s LEED-NC Gold rating.

At street level, the restored arched windows bring natural light into the first floor lobby and down into the basement below. The interior color scheme was left neutral, with the exception of color-changing LEDs on the basement stair risers and a 37-foot long mural by local artist José Parlá, which features gestural brushstrokes evocative of the movement of dancers.

While the other BAM buildings may feel like time capsules from other eras—the nearby Harvey Theater was left as a seemingly unfinished “architectural ruin” that embraces chipped paint and eroded walls from the original 1904 structure—BAM Fisher was intended to be forward-looking, while keeping the historical connections to the area intact. The hybrid of new and old fits well in this Brooklyn cultural nexus. As Pizzetta says, “it looks like it belongs in the neighborhood.” ■

The bi-level lobby (opposite) features colorful artwork and moveable ticket stands. The rooftop terrace (right) has telescoping glass walls that can create a private enclosure or open up to the garden. A pergola was constructed to be at the same elevation as the roofline of the neighboring opera house. The soundproof rehearsal studio (below) has large windows and can be transformed into a secondary theater using blackout drapes and lighting from the catwalk.

BAM Fisher

Designer **H3 Hardy
Collaboration Architecture**

Client **Brooklyn Academy
of Music (BAM)**


Where **Brooklyn, New York**

What **38,000 total square feet
on seven floors and a basement**

Cost/sf **\$684**

For a full project source
list, see page 76 or
visit contractdesign.com.





A mezzanine level wraps around three sides of the black box theater and features a railing fabricated to appear like an abstracted street map of Brooklyn. Walls are painted dark blue, instead of a true black, to bring a more vibrant feeling to the performance space. The facade of the existing building (opposite, top) was restored, and the addition is set back from the street to complement the older structure.

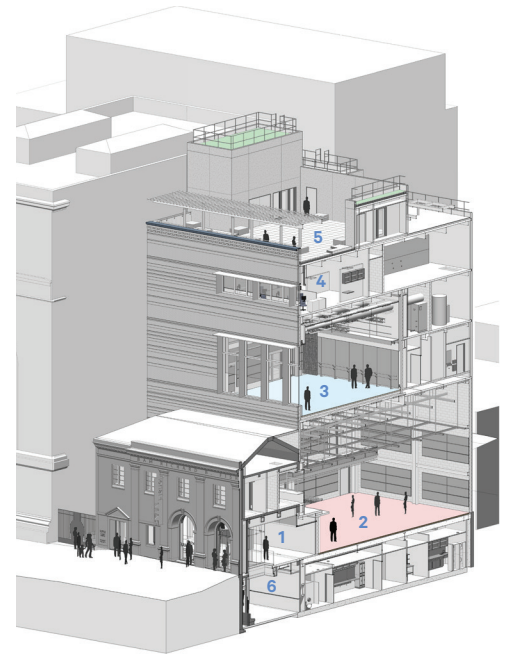
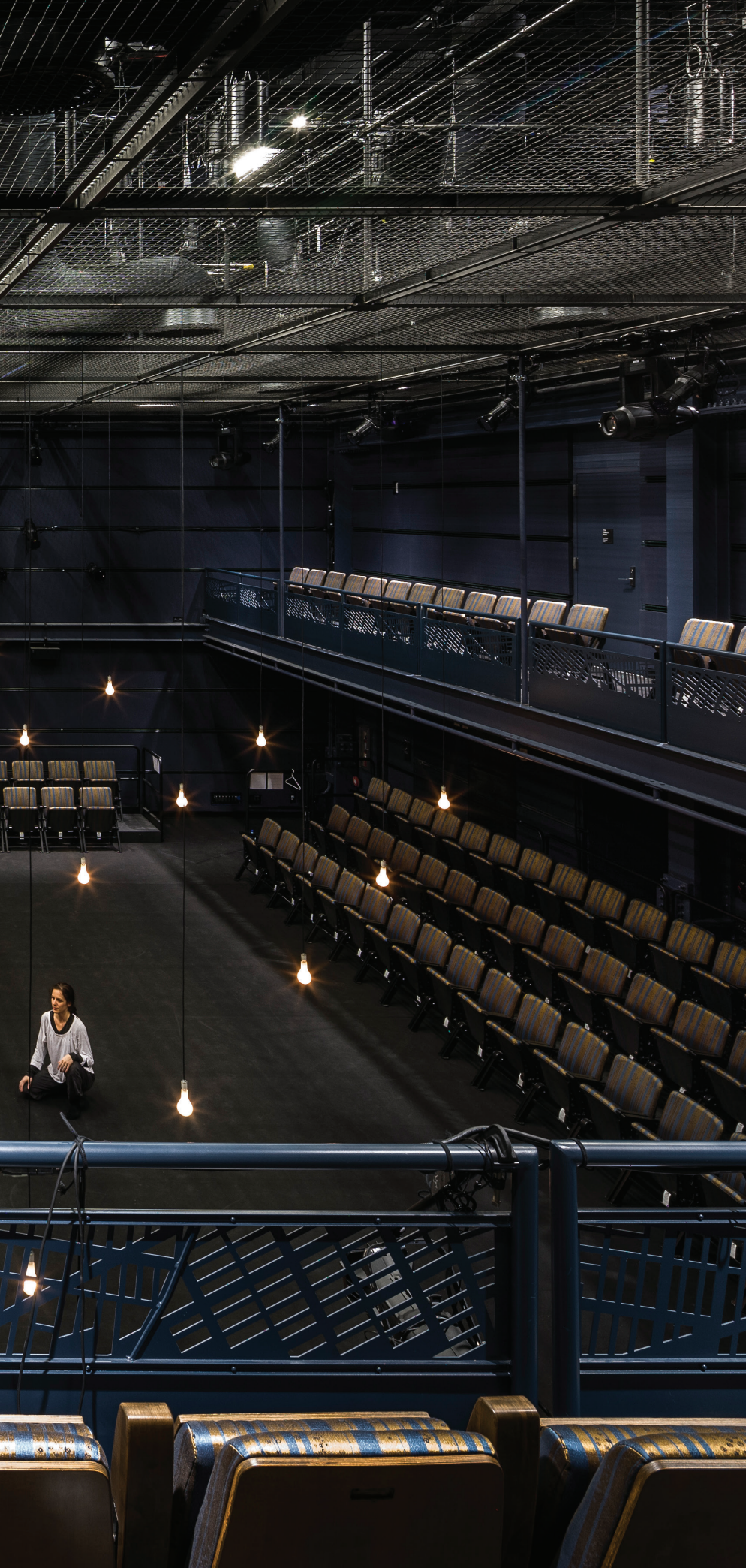
Key Design Highlights

Seating in the black box theater can be arranged in multiple configurations.

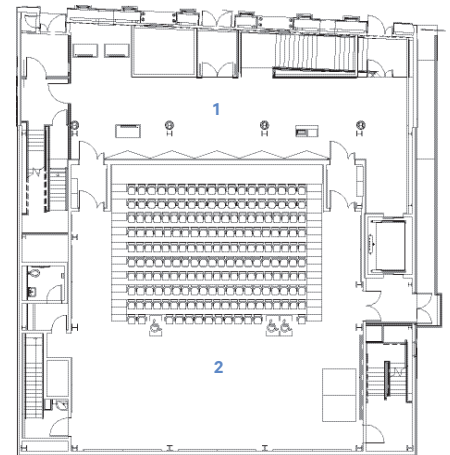
Neutral colors permeate the two-story lobby, with pops of color in large artwork and LED lights on the stair risers.

A soundproof rehearsal space has large, airy windows that overlook the Brooklyn skyline.

Telescoping glass walls allow spaces on the rooftop terrace to be reconfigured for parties or small performances.



Axonometric Section



Ground Level Floor Plan

- 1 Main lobby
- 2 Black box theater
- 3 Rehearsal studio
- 4 Offices
- 5 Terrace
- 6 Lower level lobby