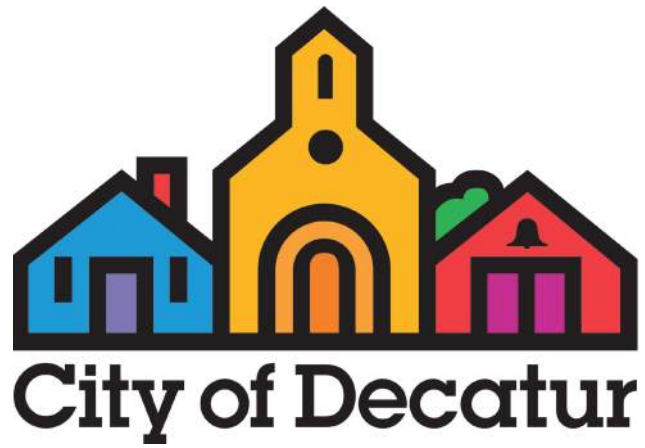


RE-BUILDING A COMMUNITY ICON

THE DECATUR RECREATION CENTER

The Decatur Recreation Center stands as an historic and cultural beacon in the Atlanta Metro community of Decatur. The original structure, built in 1958 and affectionately referred to as the Rec, for years was the home of the Decatur High Bulldogs basketball team. The original facility served an increasingly urbane audience as the city grew and changed with the rest of metro Atlanta. Scores of new programs, unheard of at the time of its construction, added stress to the already overloaded and increasingly antiquated facility. Cooking classes, yoga, judo and even weddings filled the Rec's schedule. A sense of overcrowding and a building perceived as dated and dowdy threatened the mid-century structure.



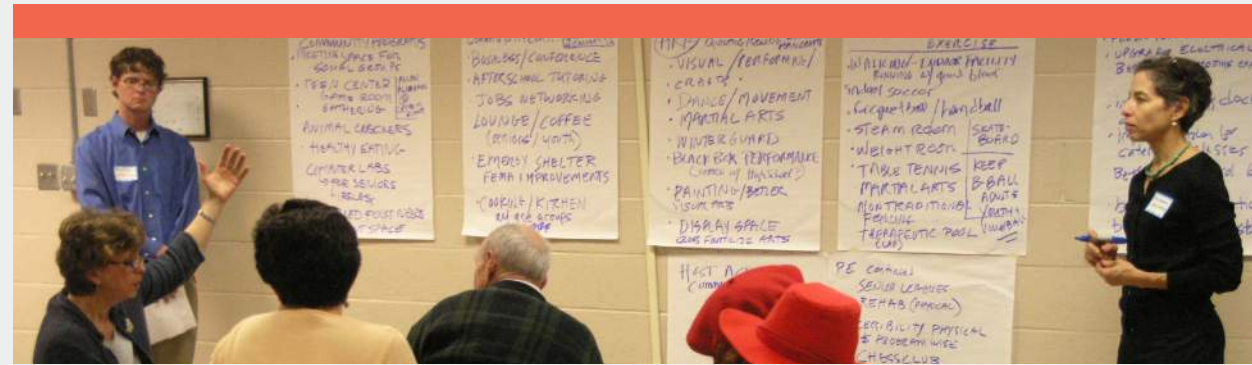


The construction of a new high school gymnasium and the subsequent loss of the Rec's primary tenant triggered the city's efforts to renovate the Rec as a 21st century Recreation and Civic Center. Praxis3, along with Amy Landesberg Architects, was selected by the city to renovate and repurpose this important but aging landmark. Our passion for the structure and appreciation of mid-century civic architecture prevailed over other design team's suggestions that the original structure was beyond easy adaptation or repair. In the final design, this iconic building has been reborn—maintaining its civic identity and its iconic memories, while providing the city with a state-of-the-art, 21st century civic facility.

PROGRAMMING THE FUTURE RECREATION CENTER

The design team's first task was programming the new facility as a modern, 21st century recreation and community center. A series of public meetings was scheduled to help the city figure out exactly what functions the structure should house. The groups using the center regularly ranged in age from Pre-K students to High School students, to seniors, demanding a building that was broadly appealing and extremely flexible. A wide range of uses including extensive meeting facilities, classes of all kinds, and a state-of-the-art dance studio designed to provide a home for Decatur's burgeoning dance scene, were all identified as top community priorities.

Praxis3 also embarked on a detailed study of current and projected building use over the typical day—every day of the week. This study was key in proving that the building program could be reduced through simple changes in building use and scheduling. By providing spaces that



could easily serve multiple functions throughout the day the city was able to cut back on a planned addition. This planned space would eventually be utilized to accommodate new centrally located offices for several city departments, an element not in the original building program.

The final design features an open multi-purpose room that accommodates dance instruction and performance, multiple simultaneous meetings, city movie night and special rental events, including weddings and other public and private celebrations. The gymnasium can easily accommodate the city's full or half-court basketball leagues, volleyball tournaments,

table tennis events and a host of other functions. A new two lane track installed above the gym floor, accommodates both runners and casual walkers. The space even served as host to a presidential address shortly after its opening. Other building spaces can also serve a variety of instructional or recreation functions. A state-of-the-art teaching kitchen provides the city with a source for cooking and nutritional classes.

“By providing spaces that could easily serve multiple functions throughout the day, the city was able to cut back on a planned addition.”

— David Hamilton, Principal at Praxis3.





THE HEART OF THE MATTER

All of these new functions could have radically changed the appearance and image of this special community building. The Praxis3 design team gave careful consideration to preservation issues surrounding the structure. 1950's vintage aluminum awning windows were carefully removed and upgraded to modern energy standards before being reinstalled. Brick walls and limestone panels were cleaned and restored to their original condition, and care was taken to preserve several beloved trees on the site.

The original high school bleachers, no longer needed in a recreational gym, were repurposed as ceiling and wall materials throughout the public areas of the building. This memory, important to many long time city residents, is preserved and displayed providing both poignant recollections and a practical sustainable solution to upgrading the building's public areas. In addition, the old gym floor is revamped in several custom built tables used throughout the facility. Original flooring and

1950's vintage ceramic wall tiles were also preserved, refreshed and reused.

The dynamic new mirror at the multi-purpose / dance studio echoes the former brick pattern at an outdoor terrace replaced by the new room. Carefully studied to replicate the pattern but to be solid enough to provide a useful mirror for dance lessons, the surface provides a dynamic reflective screen that enlivens the entire room.

The design team also paid special attention to the building entry. Formerly, only a small cramped vestibule served as the primary entrance and control point for the Rec. An adjacent area was occupied by a poorly conceived labyrinth of small administrative offices. In the new design, these office spaces were replaced by a large community living room. This new public area includes a public sitting area, an expanded main desk, a fireplace and digital signage announcing both Rec and other citywide activities.

A new second-story office addition pays special attention to materials and colors, complementing the mid-century character of the building while still revealing its identity as a significant addition. The city's recreation and day care departments now share this centrally located space. The multi-purpose room provides a dynamic, transparent look into the building, revealing the many activities of the Rec to passers-by.

The overall effect of the building is that of a new and dynamic, 21st century civic facility housed in a vintage, restored mid-century building. The history and memories embodied in the original Rec are all there – but inside, the dynamism of a new 21st century multi-purpose civic facility come to center stage.



USING THE SITE

The development of new park space in any city is an expensive and time consuming proposition. One of the valuable insights that Praxis3 brought to the Rec is the conversion of much of the facility’s existing suburban front lawn into active, operational park space. A dynamic grass oval facilitates play space for younger children as a part of the city’s Pre-K program. When not in active use the space serves as passive park area, providing perimeter seating for reading or just enjoying the outdoors.

A new bike shed and close-by bike repair shop support Decatur’s active biking culture. Space for bike commuter parking, formerly randomly spread across the site, is consolidated under a protected, well-lit shed. Designed to reflect the architecture of the building, the shed captures the mid-century aesthetic of the site.

An outdoor classroom is scaled to provide instructional and gathering space close to adjacent indoor classroom spaces. The benches were specifically selected for their aesthetic similarities with building overhangs and other mid-century design features.

Overall, the ‘found-space’ of the front lawn at Decatur Rec has provided the city with new and relatively economical park land. This new feature also preserves existing site landscapes. Two giant magnolia trees, beloved by the community, were carefully protected during construction and continue to flourish in a prominent location in front of the building.

“One of the valuable insights that Praxis3 brought to the Rec is the conversion of much of the facility’s existing suburban front lawn into active, operational park space.”

A SUSTAINABLE BUILDING FOR A PROGRESSIVE CITY

The city of Decatur prides itself on being a progressive, environmentally conscious city. The Rec had to live up to that reputation. The building was designed to meet LEED Silver standards and features many sustainable characteristics. The original windows have been reused and retrofitted with insulated glass panels saving embodied and future energy. All building HVAC and electrical systems are designed to maximize efficiency. Repurposed and reused

building materials make up a considerable share of the building's finishes and re-use of the old high school gym's bleachers provide a memorable touch to the building's public rooms and hallways.

Skylights were added to the gymnasium and provide active daylight harvesting in conjunction with switchable, variable-level lighting. A large cistern stores harvested rain water to help to irrigate the site. This feature is especially important given the Southeast's propensity for cyclical drought seasons. Together these features give community residents a well-earned sense of pride in knowing that they are helping to preserve the earth's natural resources.





AN AWARD WINNING BUILDING

Building for the public is a privilege and one of the most rewarding things that an architecture firm can do for any community. We were proud to be involved in the preservation and re-making of the Decatur Recreation Center. The happy faces of kids and senior citizens alike are rewarding in their own right, but the sincerely felt gratitude of city leaders make the project especially gratifying.

A great project requires several components: a superior site, an engaged community and a passionate client. The Rec had all of these things. We were honored that the building received the Georgia American Institute of Architect's (AIA) Honor Award for Design in 2013, the Georgia AIA's highest award for design quality. The City of Decatur truly has a new civic and recreation center that will serve the diverse and changing needs of the community for many years to come.

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