

GRAND

by
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DESIGNS

The three buildings that form Curtis's original home have undergone a meticulous restoration—enhanced with leading-edge technology—after work was accelerated during the pandemic.



Clockwise from top left: Casimir Hall (now Field Concert Hall), 1927; Gian Carlo Menotti (Composition '33) by Victor Scharf; Bok Room as a reading room,

1928; Leopold Stokowski leading rehearsal in the Common Room, 1925; Common Room entry; Angel by Abbott Handerson Thayer, c. 1885–89; Entrance

to Field Concert Hall; President's office; Tea in the Common Room, 1974. Photo by George Krause; The Common Room.



its seemingly chaotic, unfinished state, one could sense the grandeur of the mansion beginning to re-emerge, as if from a decades-long slumber.

USING HISTORY AS A GUIDE

When Mary Louise Curtis Bok and her husband, Edward, established Curtis in 1924, they purchased and renovated three mansions in Rittenhouse Square, an idyllic neighborhood in Philadelphia's Center City. In addition to the former Drexel mansion, the Boks acquired the Theodore Cramp Mansion, built in 1908 and now home to the Milton L. Rock Resource Center, containing the school's library and archives. Also acquired was the Edward A. Sibley House (c. 1875), which was annexed to the Drexel mansion.

Further changes to the campus have occurred since then—most notably, with the 2011 opening of Lenfest Hall down the street, containing a cafeteria, dormitory, and additional teaching and rehearsal spaces. An additional structure, now the Rubenstein Centre, was the latest acquisition (in 2012), which houses many of the school's administrative staff.

But the original property had never undergone the current depth of evaluation, with the pandemic providing the impetus. Making these renovations possible were substantial grants from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the William B. Dietrich Foundation, Joseph and Marie Field, the McLean Contributionship, and the Presser Foundation. The total cost is estimated at \$15 million.

Field Concert Hall, completed in 1927 and originally named Casimir Hall, is among the beneficiaries of this generosity. In addition to substantial upgrades in the theater's ceiling and HVAC systems, permanent theatrical lighting has been installed, microphones and cameras have been upgraded, and a direct connection made to the basement-level audio-visual studio has been established.

The 250-seat concert hall is now a state-of-the-art facility, enabling events including multimedia presentations. Another happy result: The number of concerts open to the public is expected to increase.

Plans to renovate 1726 Locust Street date back to 2015, and a phased, multi-year process was initially envisioned. But when COVID-19 struck in early 2020—prompting the cancelation of in-person classes and leaving the facility mostly empty—the decision was made to complete the refurbishment at one time. (As a parallel example, consider how the New York Philharmonic used the pandemic closure to fast-track its planned renovations to David Geffen Hall, now undergoing a massive transformation. The changes are scheduled to be completed earlier than planned.)

IN A MEMORABLE 1925 photo from the Curtis Institute of Music Archives, renowned conductor Leopold Stokowski leads a rehearsal—not in Field Concert Hall, which had not yet been built, but in the Common Room of the school's main building at 1726 Locust Street.

Fast-forward to the present, when the maestro might summon a grin, seeing the handsome changes that have restored the space to its late 19th-century glory. But the renovations, completed over the past two years, have also vaulted the former George W. Childs Drexel mansion squarely into the 21st century. Numerous technological upgrades underpin the gilded-age surfaces. Students, faculty, and friends of the school will find the Curtis they love remains intact, now augmented with modern innovations.

On a crisp December afternoon, I toured the building, buzzing with hundreds of changes in progress—the elegant spaces filled with drop cloths, sawhorses, paint splotches, and genial contractors on their lunch break. Even in

A GRACIOUS COMMON ROOM

Stepping inside the main Curtis entrance, the most noticeable change is the removal of a glass firewall, installed in the early 1960s at the base of the stairs in the Common Room. But thanks to better and more modern fire safeguards, the wall was superfluous. Removing it revealed a missing column to the right of the grand limestone mantel. Enter a team of 21st-century craftspeople, who recreated the missing right column. Additional architectural details—done in Romanesque and Renaissance style by Peabody and Stearns in 1894—have been gently scrubbed and brought back to life. (INTECH Construction was the general contractor for the entire operation, with help from architectural firms IEI Group and Vitetta Architects.) Fireplaces around the building have been preserved—even if they are nonfunctional—to maintain the old-world elegance.

In rooms, most notably studio 235B, aging linoleum tiles were peeled away, revealing long-hidden wooden parquet floors. These have been completely restored, showing off the handsome decorative marquetry.

And as a symbol of the care taken during this entire process, one can look no further than the lighting in the Bok Room. Decades ago, a bland chandelier was installed—pleasant enough, but with no reference to the room's historical significance. The Curtis Archives produced photographs of the original pewter ceiling fixture, and artisans will fabricate a new fixture reminiscent of the original.

ACCESSIBILITY UPGRADES AND A REFRESHED BLACK BOX

One of the most dramatic moves is the addition of an elevator, uniting all five floors of the building. Architects carved out space for an industrial-sized lift, not only making daily life immeasurably easier for students, faculty, and staff, but capable of shuttling two grand pianos between the basement and the top level. A piano in use by the opera department can now be moved more easily down to the piano technician's workshop for repairs.

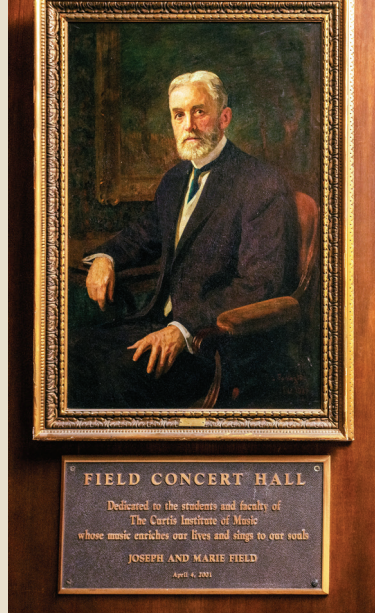
On the top level, a new "black box" space, dubbed the Media and Innovation Lab, is outfitted with 21st-century recording technology to enable digital-first projects, including short-form video content, artificial intelligence, gaming, and augmented reality productions. Each year the lab will highlight a distinct technological and performance concept, drawing on mini residencies with guest musicians and technical experts.

For opera students, the rest of the top floor will be a revelation. Curtis has gained 1000 square feet of space by repurposing a classroom and enclosing former rooftop areas. This has yielded reconfigured spaces for the costume shop, a hair and makeup room, and wardrobe storage. New window panels em-



(Clockwise from Top Left) The Bok Room with a portrait of Mary Louise Curtis Bok and Cyrus H.K. Curtis's piano; Portrait of Cyrus H.K. Curtis, outside Field Concert Hall; Student Lounge; Mieczyslaw Horszowski Room. (Left) The Bok Room ceiling.

phasize views of the neighborhood, overlooking Rittenhouse Square. As elsewhere throughout the building, preserving architectural details was a high priority. Equally important, modern HVAC capabilities will bring temperature control into the modern age. In most spaces, a window air-conditioning unit was the sole comfort for hardy students, sweating through the



humid Philadelphia summers.

This shift away from window units—and steam heat—is part of a larger overhaul of the heating and cooling systems at 1726 Locust Street. Contemporary “smart thermostats” now allow for more precise temperature adjustments, and new controls allow staff to remotely monitor room usage and adjust accordingly. If a room is vacant over the weekend, the system responds automatically. Gone too are the incandescent and fluorescent light fixtures of the past, replaced with LED bulbs, which are expected to increase energy efficiency by approximately 20 percent.

And to further bring daily life into 2022, rooms now have video technology from Crestron, which allows faculty—and guest artists—to do presentations from anywhere in the world. Even the bathrooms did not escape evaluation, becoming more spacious, better lit, and more accessible. Most are now gender neutral.

PRESERVING THE PAST, PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Increasingly, music conservatories around the country are being challenged to teach students more than just instrumental or vocal technique. Technological fluency has jumped into the queue. Traditional concert formats are being joined by multimedia projects, and creative collaboration between musicians and other artists.

And while some may wax sentimental about the school’s formerly dark corridors, oddly arranged spaces, and practice rooms that were either too hot or too cold, for most people, all of that will be quickly forgotten.

As Curtis prepares for its centenary in 2024, the school has taken a long, intense gaze. Some of the renovations are cosmetic to enhance the pleasure of being in one of Philadelphia’s most revered spaces. Other improvements reflect the evolving nature of classical music—how it is studied, conceived, and presented in the digital age.

Still other changes may be in the background but make day-to-day life more civilized for those who work and study there. And good design is more than “how things look;” good design makes life easier. It will be interesting to see how the architectural expertise deployed here affects daily routines for those most familiar with the building.

In the meantime, if Mr. Stokowski and Mrs. Bok were standing on Locust Street, I suspect they would be delighted and add their fervent applause as they gazed at the legend they set in motion. The storied past of Curtis has never looked more promising for the future.

A PHILADELPHIA RESIDENT SINCE 2020, BRUCE HODGES IS A REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR TO THE STRAD (LONDON), AND HAS WRITTEN ARTICLES FOR LINCOLN CENTER, PLAYBILL, THE JUILLIARD JOURNAL, AND THE SOUTHBANK CENTRE.

