

NEUTRAL COLORS + HOSPITALITY + SECRET SPACES

inspire a welcoming multiuse space with a dramatic flair.

By | Kate Rockwood

The James C. Olson Performing Arts Center on the University of Missouri-Kansas City campus plays a dual role: study hall for students by day and theater by night (pictured below).



An intriguing directive was given to Helix Architecture + Design for the renovation and expansion of the multipurpose James C. Olson Performing Arts Center on the University of Missouri-Kansas City campus: “cocktail lounge meets university,” says Alissa Wehmuller, IIDA, LEED AP, 2017 IIDA Member of the Year, principal, Helix, Kansas City, Missouri, USA.

By day, the shared arts center is home to hundreds of UMKC students who can be found rehearsing in the theater and studying in the building’s lobby. By night, the space welcomes patrons of the Kansas City Repertory Theatre for a show and a night out on the town. Wehmuller and her team aimed for a “happy marriage” of durability and design—with a dash of drama—to serve both groups.



Photos by: Michael Robinson

A NEUTRAL CANVAS

Wehmuller approached the lobby’s color scheme as a stage of its own, opting for bright white walls, charcoal floors, and a minimalistic hanging light display. “They’ll do different exhibitry and instillations with the different shows, so when it’s time for *A Christmas Carol*, they can bring in a lot of decorative elements to transform the space,” Wehmuller says. With students coming and going through the lobby space all day long—studying at café tables along the lobby’s windowed walls—the dark flooring helps hide whatever messes might be tracked in. The rich gray hue was also carried onto the walls of the Spencer Theatre, creating a black box effect that wouldn’t distract from the theatrics inside.

A COZY LIVING ROOM

Leaning into the center’s hospitality side, Wehmuller sought to create a lobby environment that would encourage patrons to linger and mingle after the final curtain drops—but wouldn’t feel too buttoned-up for students using the space to study or socialize on a regular afternoon. Inspired by the idea of a cozy living room, she opted for a floor-to-ceiling wood installation near the bar, reminiscent of a hearth (albeit with a large TV feature screen rather than a crackling fire). “We talked a lot about the pattern in which the wood was installed—that it wasn’t just a straight wood installation,” Wehmuller says. “It’s a little bit more of that dynamic angle, allowing the pattern to create this sense of warmth.”

HIDDEN SPACES

Given the center’s dual usage, Wehmuller faced a challenge when it came to designing a dedicated space where production souvenirs and trinkets could be sold. “How do we create a visually fun retail piece in that lobby that at the same time could be secured so that students don’t have access during the day—right in the middle of the space?”

Her solution was a gray box that folds up into the wall, blending seamlessly into its charcoal backdrop. “If you’re looking at photos when the retail store isn’t open, you probably wouldn’t even notice it’s there.”