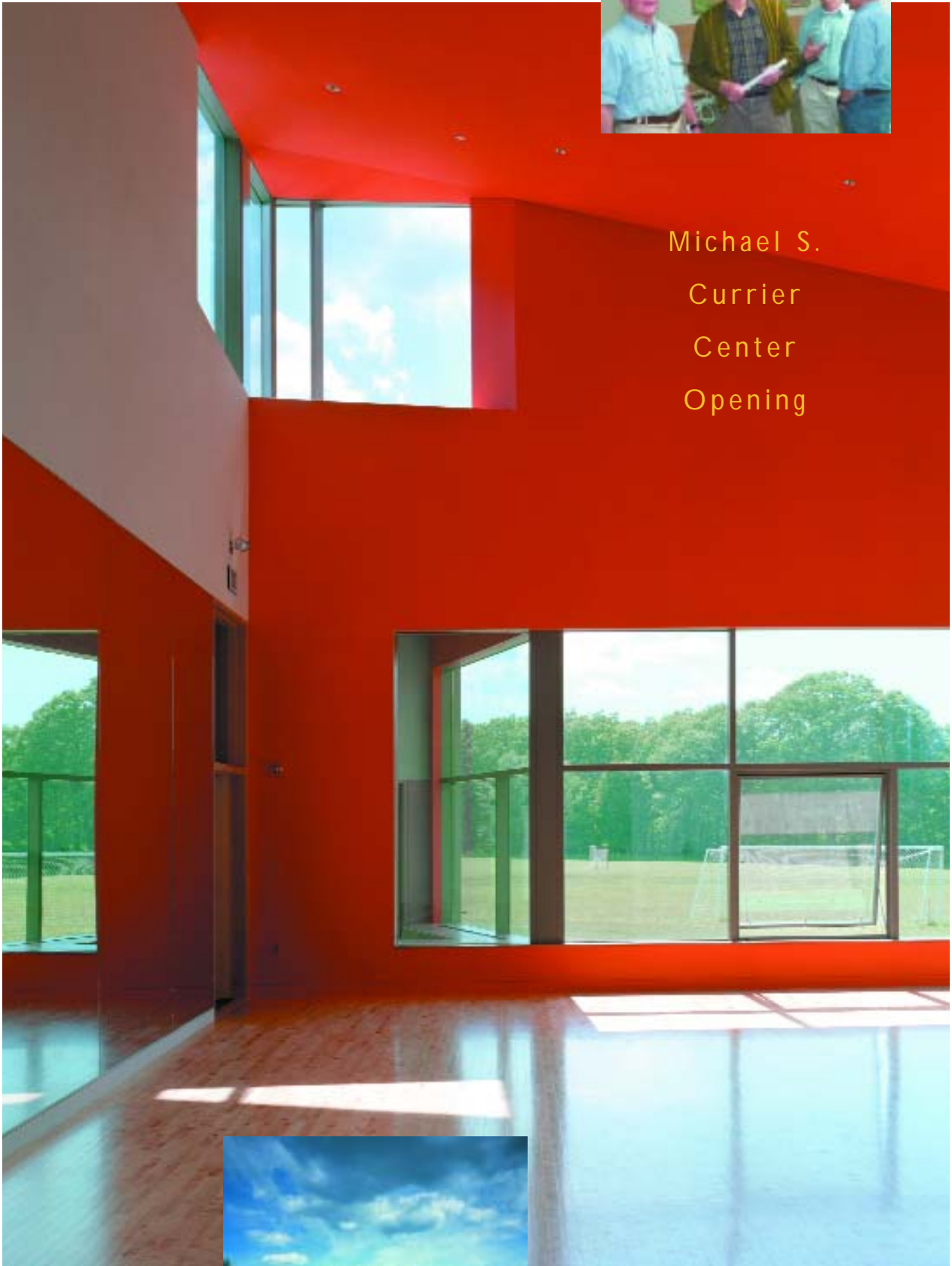




Michael S.
Currier
Center
Opening



Center: left photos © John Linden, Courtesy of Charles Rose Architects



Center: left photos © John Linden, Courtesy of Charles Rose Architects

Touring the Michael S. Currier Center

by Beckie Coffey



Where do you site an enormous building on a campus full of smaller buildings and beloved vistas? How do you design a modern, steel-framed building so that it blends unobtrusively with the whitewashed clapboard traditional to New England farms and to The Putney School? How bold—or, for that matter, how tame—should the design of a new performing arts center be if it wants to reflect what Michael S. Currier Center architect Charles Rose calls, “what is most alive on this campus—the artistic energy and spirit of the school?” What exterior color would set such a building subtly apart from the other Putney buildings while looking as good as white does in all seasons? How can a building be functional for many purposes while, at the same time, meet Putney’s “green” standards? According to Rose, these were the questions that he had to address with the trustees in a series of intensive conversations and workshops.



Previous page: (Center) Twelve-foot high mirrors and big windows give the dance studio a light, airy feeling. The hardwood floor is suspended by elastomers for springiness and dancer safety and the ceiling is lined with acoustic fabric to control musical reverberation. (Top) Buildings and Grounds Committee members George Heller '42 and Sam Bunker '45 admire a skylight during a tour. (Bottom) Part of the plan for landscaping the Currier Center is to restore the treeline connecting the Main Building and Watertower Hill that was disrupted when the old tennis courts were built.

This page: (Center) A towering roof allows dramatic, ceiling-high windows that provide plenty of natural daylight into the dance studio without sacrificing privacy. During the day, mirrors on the far wall capture reflections of the trees outside. (Top) The 8000-square foot art gallery features natural and adjustable track lighting. Walls roll on castors to allow the central portion of the gallery to be closed. Beside student and faculty shows, there have been inquiries for outside shows through 2008 already. (Bottom) The Music Room is used for classroom teaching and vocal rehearsing. The Yamaha C-3 piano was donated by Mel Dorr '51 (see Happenings, pg. 5). And, yes, the lights were hung that way on purpose.

Thankfully, trustee consensus was consistently achieved. The Michael S. Currier Center is now blissfully sited on a piece of land just to the south of the Main Building. (A first step in construction was the removal of the school's tennis courts.) The Truck Road passes to the rear of the building on its way from the barn to the main campus. Eventually, a line of trees will screen the Currier Center from the road. The view to the north—across campus and towards Green Mountain Orchard and the mountains beyond—is preserved, as is the view to the west of the athletic fields and barn and the view from the East Lawn. The Currier Center is enormous relative to the rest of the buildings on campus. But the fact that it is built in an “additive arrangement”—looking almost as though auditorium, gallery, classrooms, MIDI lab, dance studio, and Currier Room were built separately and then joined together in a fanciful, almost sculptural structure—prevents the Currier Center from visually dwarfing the other buildings on campus. The



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steel-framed structure is sided with lumber painted “driftwood gray.” This color promises to look just as good with the golds and reds of autumn and the whites of winter as it does in the green of summer. Efficiency Vermont and the U.S. Building Council consulted in the design of the building to keep the Currier Center as ecologically friendly as possible. The south-facing portion of the building's roof is sod. Special care was taken not to needlessly kill trees. When hardwood trees were felled, they were milled by The Putney School's staff for use in various activities and projects. And rather than being sacrificed, as many small trees as possible were uprooted and replanted.

Inside, the Michael S. Currier Center is spectacular. Skylights, huge windows and a mottled green, concrete floor pull visitors into a grand art gallery the very moment that they step in through the main doors. Beyond the gallery are an acoustically-tuned auditorium, a maple-floored, delightfully windowed and mirrored dance studio, a fully equipped MIDI lab, practice rooms, classrooms, and the Currier Room, which is an unprogrammed space reserved for quiet, individual activities such as meditation. There is so much light, transparency, wood paneling, blue fabric, and mottled green inside the Currier Center that its interior seems somehow melded with the grass, sky, and trees outside. “What I wanted was to create a sense of the building itself as part of an open vista,” says Rose. He has succeeded. Stand virtually anywhere in the building and your immediate surroundings will seem to accentuate the beauty of the dramatic vistas that the many, enormous windows allow you to see.

Multipurpose Building: Additive Arrangement

In a school that wants very much to support its curriculum in visual art, dance, chorus, orchestral music, and jazz, must meeting the performance requirements of one art form take precedence over meeting the performance requirements of the others? How can we create a building that is flexible enough to support a curriculum that is ever changing? These are the kinds of questions with which the trustees grappled over decades and Charlie Rose grappled for a few years.

Here are some results, in the Currier Center's three biggest spaces, of all that grappling:

(Top) Large windows everywhere, including the auditorium, allow light in and views out. The most important thing in the Michael S. Currier Center is the people. Our campus is beautiful and people like nice views, so big windows make sense. (Right) The Currier Room is paneled with European steamed beech. Its purpose is to provide a space for quiet activities such as meditation. Sliding glass doors open to the southwest and provide soft afternoon sunlight year-round.



The Gallery

In the earliest designs, the art gallery was rendered as a doored room that a visitor could deign or not deign to enter once inside the Currier Center's lobby. By final design time, however, all that deigning was "out." The gallery had become the life of the building. Visitors through the main doors are immediately pulled, visually at least, through the lobby and directly into the gallery, which is full of natural light, white walls, surprising angles and, at least during opening weekend and the two months following, extraordinary art in a remarkable variety of media [see Weekend-Long Celebration Opens Currier Center, pg. 43].

By design, it is actually difficult to tell where the lobby leaves off and where the gallery and hallways begin. On close inspection, there does seem to be a distinct part of the building identifiable as "gallery." It consists of a set of hinged

Grace Under—And After—Pressure

Charlie Rose, of Charles Rose Architects of Somerville, Massachusetts, is the principal architect responsible for The Putney School's new Michael S. Currier Center. On April 17, 2004 Rose led some of Putney's current and former trustees on a tour of the newly completed building. The trustees gathered just after lunch in the Currier Center's lobby at a table placed near a metal wall into which the names of the building's major donors are etched. Starting the tour at the wall itself, Rose quipped, "Well, let's see. There are still spaces waiting to be filled in on the wall here. Anyone?"

Thankfully, everyone laughed. That's not always the way around Rose. He's a controversial fellow. He has a unique architectural style. He has ideas that he's willing to defend. But while Charlie Rose occasionally ruffles feathers, nobody has ever accused him of being anything less than a brilliant designer—or a brilliant tour guide, especially when the tour is of a building he loves.

Certainly, it was Rose's talent for creating buildings that are perfect for their site and responsive to their surroundings that secured for him the contract to design the Currier Center. Charlie Rose is known far and wide for his commitment to open space and natural light and for creating buildings that are "just right" though difficult to ignore. But it was undoubtedly Rose's talent for talking that helped him shepherd his design through the oversight given by Putney's trustees. For, according to Rose, each and every step of the process had to pass through the wringer of trustee consensus. Months and months were consumed in review, as every site under consideration obstructed the favorite view of some trustee or another. Nearly every design threatened some memory or ethic that a trustee held dear.

"I've occasionally thought that Oprah Winfrey should host a special about Putney and call it 'Trustees Who Care Too Much,' Rose explained to the trustees, and his jibe met a roar of appreciation, especially from those whose faces went crimson at the remark.

You've heard the saying, right? A camel is a horse designed by committee. People say something equally nasty about consensus: It is made possible only by vague language and shallow commitments.

It is perhaps odd, then, that in the consensus-driven trustee committee process that handled oversight of the siting, design, and construction of the Michael S. Currier Center, something went very right. No doubt, the committee's conversations happened in an occasionally tense atmosphere. But Putney has an ethic of conversation. People at Putney know how to give each other ground without abandoning principle. Perhaps this ethic is why, in this particular committee process at this particular school, the Currier Center that now stands just to the south of the Main Building retains the spectacular character that its architect intended.

(Right) Architect Charles Rose addresses trustees and invited guests on a guided tour of their collaborative creation.



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walls that can be repositioned and locked. But when those walls are left unlocked and configured so that the corner angles are obtuse, the gallery space merges with the building's light-filled lobby and hallways, greatly expanding the wall space available to art. It also, as Rose pointed out during the trustee tour, "makes the art unavoidable. Students are in touch with great art as they walk to and from class or use the building in any way."

The Auditorium

At a school known for its musical curricula, the demands on an auditorium are significant, and, according to Rose, "the auditorium's design evolved through many stages." Putney wanted to accommodate 300 audience members. But should the seating be fixed and sloped? Or should the seats be moveable so that even the floor itself can be used for special events such as school dances? Should the auditorium's acoustics be optimized for music? Or should voice projection be the paramount concern?

The auditorium that emerged from the many iterations of design has a floor that can hold 350 stackable/removable chairs. The stage flooring is maple. And while, the floor of the seating area might well have been covered in acoustics-enhancing carpet, it is not, and for good reason. The first reason, of course, is that Snow Ball and Social Dance both

(Center) The 330-seat auditorium features a flat floor and removable seating for multi-use. Custom-drilled European steamed beech panels over acoustic damping material are just one of the methods employed in tuning the room for symphonic music. The Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra christened the room last spring and pronounced it superb. (Right) The Michael S. Currier Center's namesake was a member of the class of 1979 who served as a board member. With wisdom and generosity, Michael helped jump-start the financial revival of the school in the 90's that's made it the endowable institution it is today. Michael died far too young. Naming the building for him is a small token of Putney's gratitude for his help.




require a good dance floor, and if those events are to be held in the Currier Center auditorium, the floor of the seating area must be some sort of hardwood. The second reason that carpet was nixed as a flooring option is the more intriguing one: A lawn lies immediately outside the east-facing floor-to-ceiling glass doors of the auditorium. This means that, if the glass doors are simply opened, the floor itself can conceivably be used as an innovative stage for an event watched by an audience that sits outside. For these two reasons, carpet was not laid over the subfloor in the auditorium's seating area. American black walnut was.

A lighting grid hangs above the stage. A Plexiglas-enclosed control booth is housed on a mezzanine immediately above the rear of the auditorium. And, in the end, the acoustics were optimized for symphonic sound. Microphones will help voices carry, which means that musical and dance productions, assemblies, and meetings can readily use the auditorium. Assemblies have been successfully held in the auditorium since March. Putney's theatrical productions will continue in their usual home in the Lower Farm's Jeffrey Campbell Theater and Barnes Assembly Hall will now be used as drama program classroom and performance space.

The Dance Studio

Here is a short list of what Putney's burgeoning dance program needs in a dance studio: A space large enough for to accommodate large dance classes and rehearsals. A space large enough to perform in, albeit only if the audience is relatively small and sits, perhaps, directly on the floor. A space in which music sounds wonderful. A space large enough to hold a few musicians, if necessary. A barre. Mirrors. A flexible, splinter-free hardwood floor that has some bounce and give and that is smooth without being slippery.

Here, according to Rose, is a short list of what the Currier Center's overall aesthetic requires from a dance studio: It must contribute to the feeling of light and transparency that is central to the building's aesthetic. What Rose designed, therefore, is a maple-floored space that has, on its north side, a wall of windows and, on its south side, a wall of 12-foot mirrors. Those gargantuan mirrors so perfectly reflect the distant mountains that it is occasionally easy to feel a bit adrift in the studio. A skylight in the ceiling allows even more natural light to filter in. The ceilings and walls are acoustically optimized with fabric-covered batting, which makes any sort of music for any sort of dance sound just the way it should.

The Michael S. Currier Center is a graceful, outdoor-meets-indoor space. It is formal and informal, massive and light, impressive and inviting. Charlie Rose had the somewhat daunting task of introducing a large, new, and in some ways "foreign" structure onto a campus whose traditions, buildings, landscape, and vistas are cherished by many almost beyond measure. Most people are wowed by the Center. They consider it magnificent. Some still have their reservations. Regardless, the Michael S. Currier Center as it stands today expresses the prestige with which Putney regards innovation in architecture and in the entire spectrum of visual and performing arts. 

How do you blend a 26,000 square foot, steel-framed building into a campus full of white clapboard buildings? The answer lies in breaking up the rooms and rooflines so the building resonates with the aggregate nature of the traditional New England farmhouse. Aren't you glad you asked?