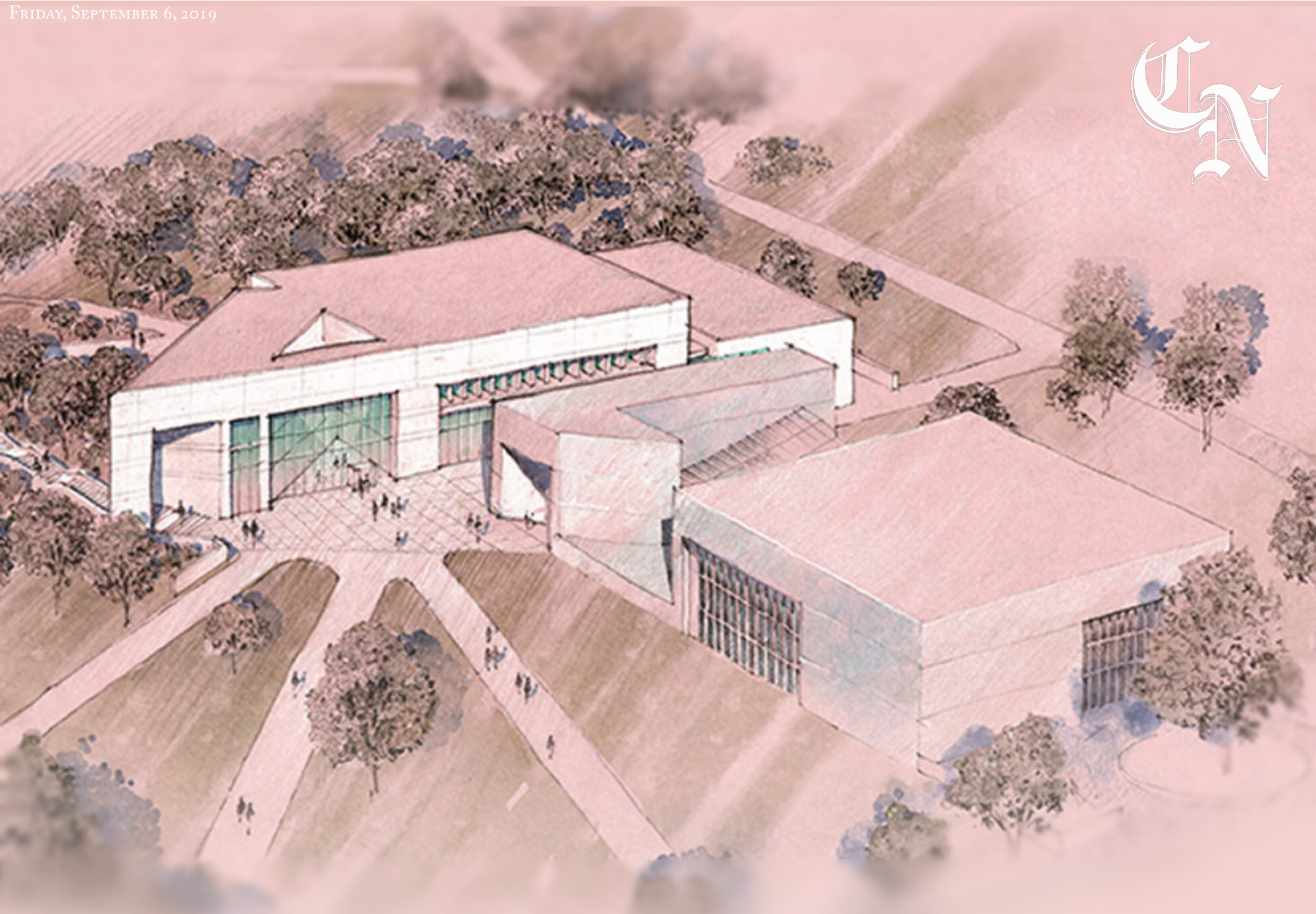

Colony Hall

Of the Arts, For the Community

If you're a Choate student, you likely viewed your first school meeting from a screen in Getz Auditorium. This year, however, with the opening of Colony Hall, Choate's new 1,070-seat auditorium and arts building, third formers will no longer be separated from the rest of the student body during all-school gatherings. Now, school meetings will truly bring the school together.

The foremost goal of the construction of Colony Hall was to create a space large enough to host all of Choate's students and faculty. As Head of School Dr. Alex Curtis recently explained, "We're a small enough school that we can get to know each other and we can share things together, but we're large enough that we're not sitting down to meals every evening. So for those moments when we do actually get together, if you're going to commit to doing that, you have to do it right."

As outlined by the School's 2013 strategic plan, Choate's initial idea to enhance "Culture and Cohesion" on campus was to build a new Student Activities Center and an attached auditorium. Originally, Choate believed that it would be more efficient to have an auditorium closer to the Student Activities Center and the Dining Hall, but as the plan developed, more and more inefficiencies surfaced. "The music program would be in two different places," Dr. Curtis said, and any event in the auditorium would by default close off part of the Student Activities Center.

Eventually, the decision was made to separate the buildings and move the auditorium to a site next to the Paul Mellon Arts Center. More than a space where the entire community could gather, Colony Hall would also play an active role in the arts. "Going to the new site allowed us to do a lot more," Dr. Curtis said. "That's when we added the practice rooms, dance studio, and recital hall that were not part of the original design." (The new Student Activities Center, known as St. John Hall, opened in 2017.)

For those moments when we do actually get together ... you have to do it right.

Dr. Alex Curtis
Head of School

Colony Hall's new stage will give the arts more freedom for performances. In past years, musical performances and theater shows were forced to work around each other's schedules. "Before, we could only have choral or orchestral performances at certain times because of the theater shows, and the shows got held up because they have to wait for those musical performances to happen," Dr. Curtis explained. "Now, we're moving to a point where there's free rein for those musical performances to happen whenever."

The striking features of Colony Hall, such as the towering wall of glass windows, are for more than scenery. Colony Hall is the fourth building on Choate's campus to earn certification in Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) from the U.S. Green Building Council, which evaluates the environmental effects of buildings. Colony Hall boasts geothermal wells, photovoltaic solar panels, and reserved parking spaces for electric and low-emission vehicles. The building itself was built with recycled material. Colony Hall, as St. John Hall and the Cameron and Edward Lanphier Center for Mathematics and Computer Science were before it, has been certified LEED Gold, the group's second highest rating behind LEED Platinum. (The fourth building, the Kohler Environmental Center, which was built in 2012, is certified Platinum — a title held by only five percent of more than one hundred thousand LEED-certified buildings.)

Last week, as 854 students from across the country and the world arrived on campus for a new academic year, they stuck to dorm rooms and the student center and the dining hall. All the while, Colony Hall sat silently on the far side of the PMAC, patiently waiting to welcome the Choate community. "You can feel it waiting for something to happen because there are just no noises," Dr. Curtis said. "I remember the same moment at St. John Hall, but then the next day the students came in, and it transformed."

That day has now come. Welcome to Colony Hall.

— Claire Yuan '21

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The history and future of the arts at Choate

What Lies Within Colony Hall

Text by JeeHwan Kim '21
Photos by Ryan Kim '20

Lobby

With multiple entrances for easy access, Colony Hall's spacious lobby lies behind the main face of the LEED-Gold building, and includes a stunning three-story window. This space offers a seating area with Lanphier Café-style furniture and space for students to leave their bags indoors during school meetings. Some prominent features of the building, including the dance studio and auditorium, are visible from the lobby.

Lounge

Many of Choate's music teachers come to campus to teach a single instrument, a single class, or even a single student. The lounge, which features a kitchen, is intended for those teachers who would otherwise be left to return to their cars and their homes. In past years, Dr. Curtis said, "they tended to just come into the PMAC, teach their class and leave. They really wanted some way of seeing each other and having a community."

Practice Rooms

Through a heavy wooden door and double-paned glass, students can access brand-new practice rooms. Varying in size, each includes a speaker system, piano, and acoustic panels. To avoid complete silence from outside the rooms, they were not built to be entirely soundproof. Head of School Dr. Alex Curtis said, "You'll know there's music in the place. It will be clear that there's not sound bleeding from one room to the other, but there will be an atmosphere of sound." The practice rooms that are specifically for louder instruments, such as drum kits, are disconnected from other spaces. Windows in the practice rooms allow for increased engagement with others in the building while lending a sense of the outdoors. (The PMAC's practice rooms did not have windows.)

Dance Studio

The highly anticipated, much larger, and less constricting dance studio is located on the second floor of Colony Hall. Its windows facing the lobby are translucent. "The hope is that from the outside, if you're downstairs, you'll see movement of people, but you won't see the actual dancing," Dr. Curtis said. "You'll see action. You'll see energy." The windows also provide connection to the outside world, which members of the dance department requested. But the best part of the Dance Studio? All agree — no more dancing in the WJAC, no more disconnection from the rest of the Arts Department.

Classrooms

The new classrooms have pianos and wheeled furniture, which allows for flexibility in room layout. Classrooms also have panels connecting to the space's sound booth, so they can be used as green rooms.

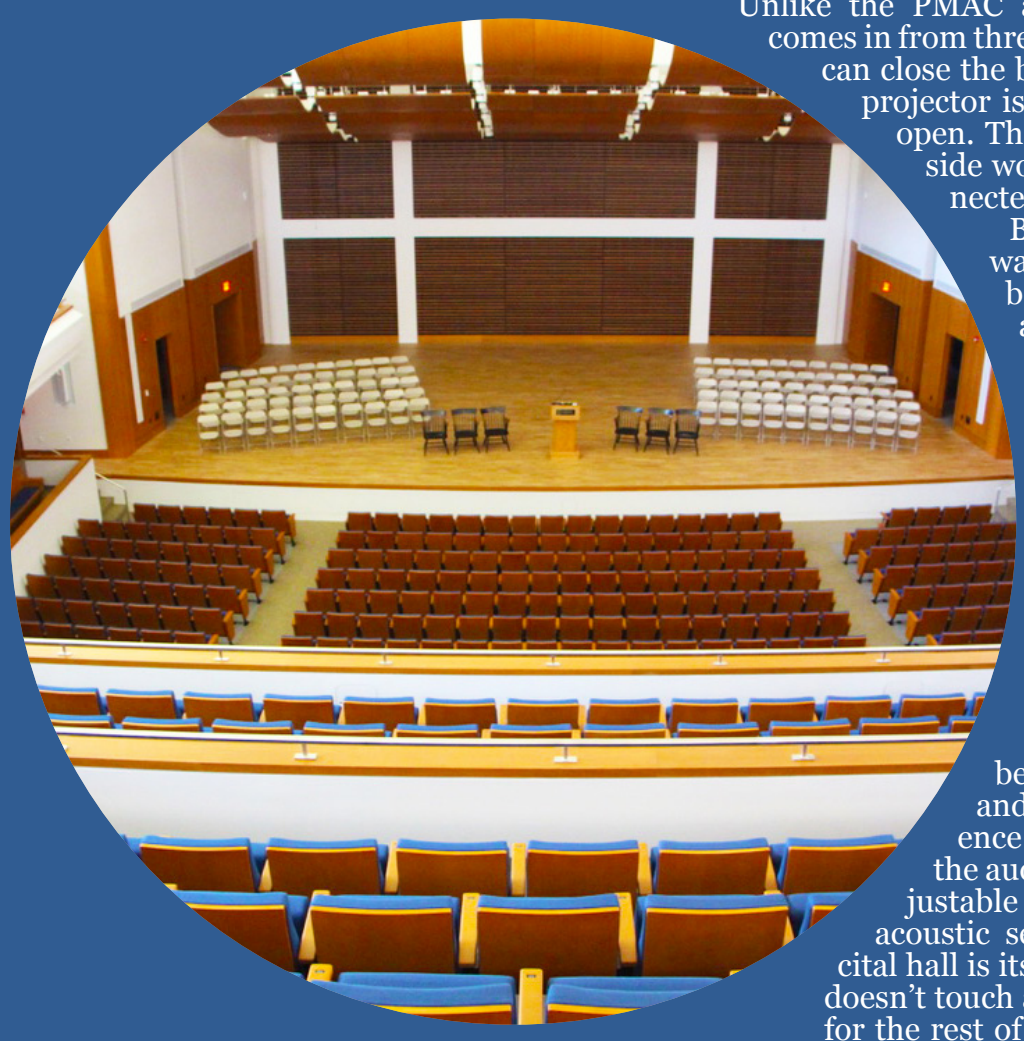
Auditorium

The first set of doors leads to a quiet vestibule that serves as light and sound locks to minimize disturbances from outside. Attached to the walls near each entrance are electronic card readers, eighteen in total, where students will scan their Choate cards to register their attendance at meetings and other events. The auditorium has 1,070 seats, approximately fifty percent more than the PMAC. The style of seats was chosen by students in a schoolwide vote. There are more than 600 seats on the first level, as well as cushioned benches. Benches near the stage allow speakers at school meetings to be engaged audience members rather than having to wait offstage. The auditorium's capacity allows it to be used for emergency drills as well as a variety of programs. The new auditorium blends intimacy and detachment. Although it seats more than the PMAC theater, the distance from the stage to the back of the theater is similar. "It looks giant from upstairs — two or three times the size of [the PMAC's auditorium]," Dr. Curtis said. "But when I'm down onstage, which is when it's important to feel the space, I feel like I can talk to and see everybody."

Unlike the PMAC auditorium, natural light comes in from three sides. Dr. Curtis said, "We can close the blinds around the top, but the projector is powerful enough to keep them open. The hope is that you can see the outside world instead of being completely disconnected from it."

Behind the wooden slats that cover the vast walls of the auditorium are curtains that can be manipulated depending on the desired amount of reverberation. It takes only fifteen seconds for the curtains to adjust to a new setting, allowing quick transition between performance types, such as a lecture and a concert.

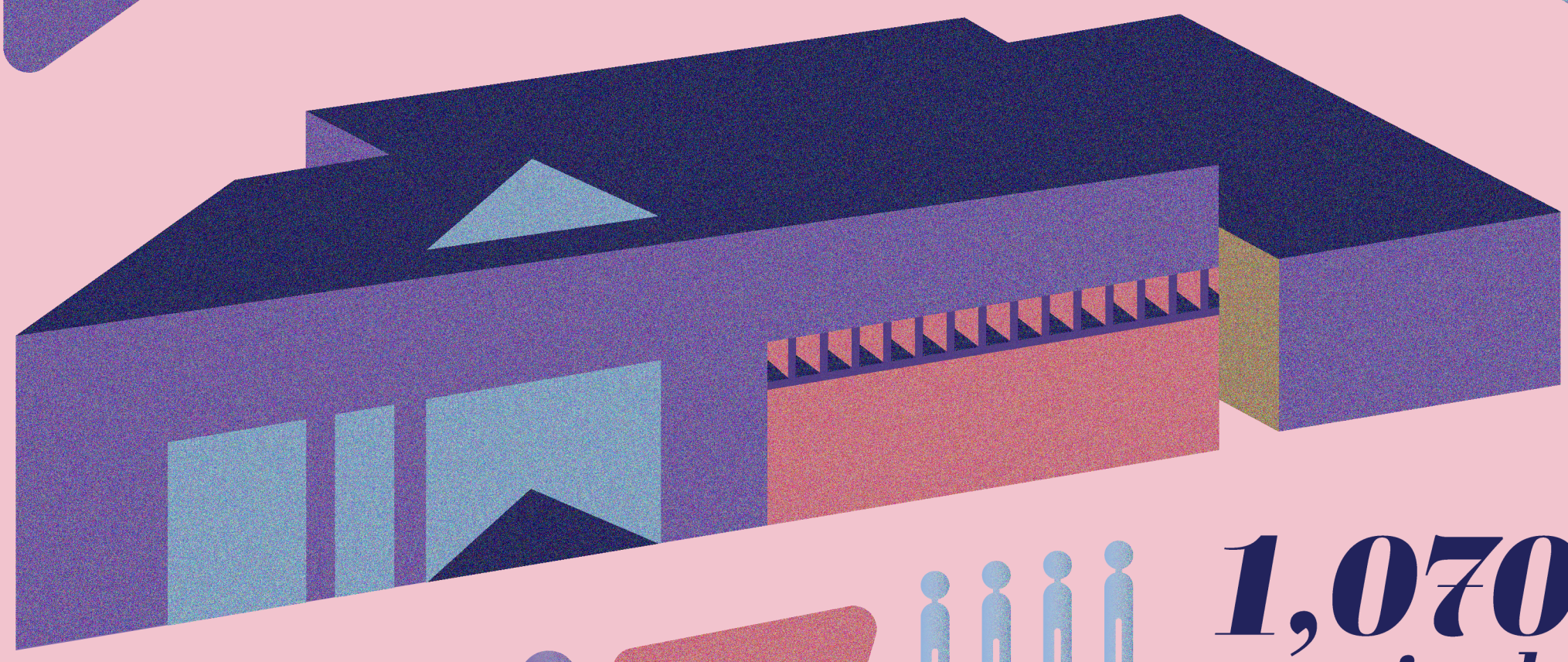
The auditorium has a third floor, with a back entrance leading to the parking lot, making the building handicapped-accessible.



Recital Hall

The recital hall sits behind the auditorium and can hold an audience of 55 people. Like the auditorium, it has adjustable curtains, but for acoustic separation, the recital hall is its own building. "It doesn't touch any of the support for the rest of the building," Dr. Curtis said. "Any noise from Colony Hall that shakes the walls doesn't produce a vibration that gets shared anywhere else. We believe you can have a full performance in Colony Hall and a full performance in the auditorium and not have any sound transferred between the two."

Colony Hall
by the numbers



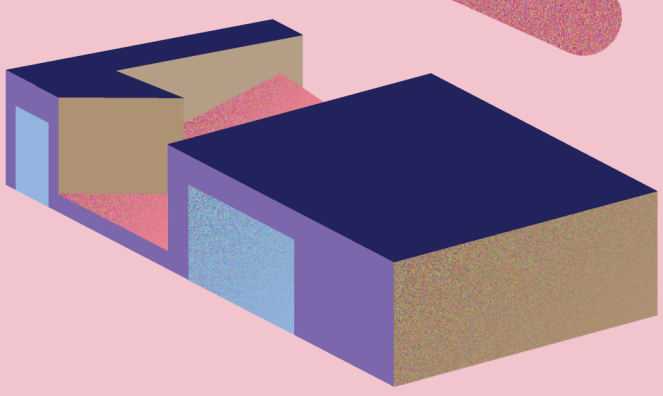
1,070 seats in the auditorium

585 days of construction

51,671 square feet

2,900 cubic yards of concrete

60 geothermal wells to cool and heat the building



18 electronic attendance trackers

11 practice rooms, housing pianos, drum sets, and Bluetooth sound systems

Before Colony Hall, the PMAC Revolutionized Arts Education at Choate

By Peter DiNatale '21

Colony Hall, the latest installment in a long history of housing the arts at Choate, opened Tuesday. Yet it would not be complete without the building that inspired it: the Paul Mellon Arts Center. A Choate icon for nearly forty-seven years, the PMAC remains the largest academic building on Choate's campus and a local monument to the power and potential of architecture.

The building's planning process began in the early 1960s with the support of Paul Mellon '25. Mellon, a titan of industry and prominent philanthropist, loved art and writing. He published four books on art, and, in 1966, founded the Yale Center for British Art. His love of the arts led him to support the development of the PMAC, then a new space for Choate's visual, theatrical, and musical arts programs.

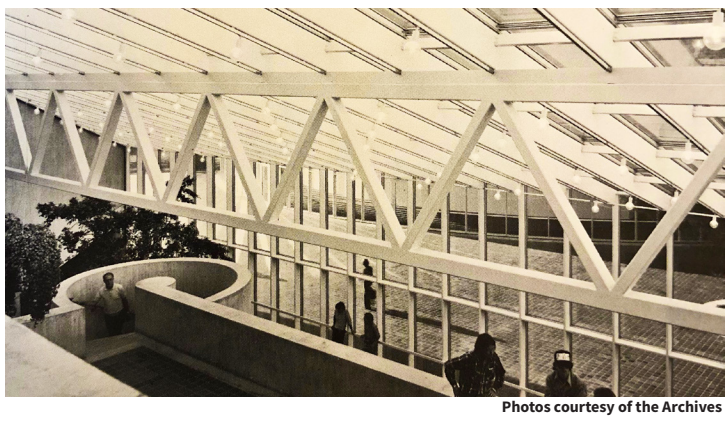
The PMAC was designed by the modernist architect I. M. Pei, who also designed the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and the glass pyramid that rises in front of Paris's Louvre Museum. The PMAC, full of Pei's trademark angles and austerity, was designed to let natural light in to enhance students' work in painting, drawing, and mixed-media projects. The building was officially completed in 1972.

The PMAC's construction coincided with a major event in the School's history: the merging of Rosemary Hall and the Choate School. The building's location, directly between the two schools' campuses, mirrors what the building facilitated — bridging the gap between two gendered schools. From its inception, the PMAC was a place of community.

"Everyone was blown away with the creation of the building," said Mr. Phil Ventre, who was Choate's Director of Instrumental Music in 1972. "We were all thrilled to death."

The PMAC's opening was undeniably a large step in advancing the School's art program. Before the PMAC, classes met at scattered locations across campus. Music and acting lessons, for instance, were held in the Chapel. The school band performed in the squash courts of the WJAC. Mr. Seymour St. John, then headmaster of the Choate School, said, in a pamphlet handed out at the opening ceremony of the PMAC, that Choate "liberated [its] musicians and artists from the basements and attics all over campus and brought them together in a magnificent building expressly designed for their craft."

Colony Hall was designed by Robert A.M. Stern Architects to complement the PMAC's design. In a sense, the new building will bring the same sense of liberation to the arts on campus. Outfitted with the most modern of resources — much like the PMAC when it opened — Colony Hall marks the latest step in Choate's work to cultivate a love of the arts in its students.



Photos courtesy of the Archives

A New Movement for Music at Choate

By Rachel Pittman '22

With the opening of Colony Hall, Choate's music program will move into state-of-the-art facilities, including a wing dedicated to music classrooms, a recital hall, practice and lesson rooms, faculty offices, lockers, a library, and, most notably, an auditorium and concert hall, to be used for both school meetings and special events.

During the building's construction, music teacher and Orchestral and Jazz Ensemble Director Mr. Phil Ventre and other members of the music department met with the leaders of the project to discuss the design of the acoustical setting, ensuring that the new space would meet the needs of Choate's musicians. "We talked about acoustics, size, the facilities in the classroom, all the new updated stereophonic equipment for CDs, DVDs, and projection in the recital," said Mr. Ventre. The concert hall has been specifically designed for music, with movable acoustical panels to adjust the sound, while the main stage in the PMAC will continue to provide acoustics more suitable for theatrical performances.

The move to Colony Hall will help alleviate the struggle for space between the music and theater departments. "The theater department's schedule is very compact, and they need a lot of time on the stage. That's not going to be a problem over here," said Mr. Ventre. "I suspect that moving to Colony Hall will give us the sense that this is the music department area. The PMAC becomes the visual art and theater department area. But the whole thing becomes an art center complex."

Colony Hall also opens up space within the music department itself. Between Colony Hall's concert and recital halls and the PMAC's recital hall, all of Choate's music ensembles will be able to rehearse at the same time, which was not possible with only the PMAC.

Ms. Kalya Yannatos, Arts Department Head, also suggested that the building would serve to connect artists of different disciplines. "It's going to be a positive for us as a community because a lot of the choral students also do theater productions — there's a lot of overlap with those students, so they will serve as the bridge from the instrumentalists."

As Dr. Curtis cuts the ribbon today, not only will Choate's instrumentalists receive a wonderful new space, but the music program, as a whole, will also receive further acknowledgement of the success and hard work of past, present and future instrumentalists. Said Mr. Ventre, "It's going to be a wonderful moment in the life of the music program here now that we have this facility."

Photo courtesy of Ross Mortensen

Choate Dance to Change its Rhythm

By Rachel Pittman '22

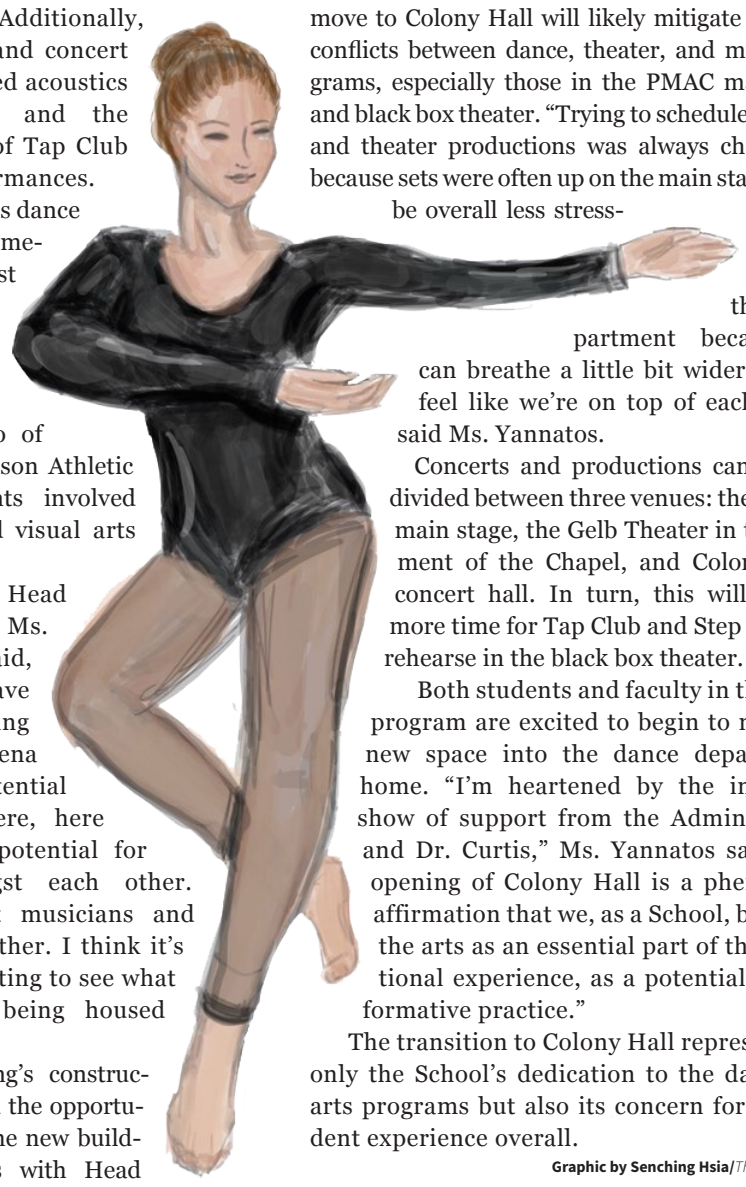
The dance department now enjoys an updated dance studio, an office for members of the Dance Program, changing rooms, and spaces for five dance-related classes, including Dance History, Dance Composition, and Dance Company. Additionally, the new auditorium and concert hall will offer improved acoustics for dancers' music and the percussive elements of Tap Club and Step Squad performances.

Since 1998, Choate's dance program has been somewhat isolated, at least physically, from the other aspects of the School's arts program. Dancers rehearsed in the studio of the Worthington Johnson Athletic Center, while students involved in music, theater, and visual arts worked in the PMAC.

Arts Department Head and dance instructor Ms. Kalya Yannatos said, "As much as we have absolutely loved being in the sports arena because of the potential for collaboration there, here we will have more potential for collaboration amongst each other. I could see student musicians and dancers working together. I think it's going to be super exciting to see what might bloom from being housed under the same roof."

During the building's construction, Ms. Yannatos had the opportunity to participate in the new building's design meetings with Head of School Dr. Alex Curtis and Mr. Rick Saltz, the School's CFO, to discuss what elements would create the best learning environment for dancers and other artists.

The instrumental and dance departments' move to Colony Hall will likely mitigate schedule conflicts between dance, theater, and music programs, especially those in the PMAC main stage and black box theater. "Trying to schedule concerts and theater productions was always challenging because sets were often up on the main stage. It will be overall less stressful for the department because we can breathe a little bit wider and not feel like we're on top of each other," said Ms. Yannatos.



Concerts and productions can now be divided between three venues: the PMAC's main stage, the Gelb Theater in the basement of the Chapel, and Colony Hall's concert hall. In turn, this will provide more time for Tap Club and Step Squad to rehearse in the black box theater.

Both students and faculty in the dance program are excited to begin to make the new space into the dance department's home. "I'm heartened by the incredible show of support from the Administration and Dr. Curtis," Ms. Yannatos said. "The opening of Colony Hall is a phenomenal affirmation that we, as a School, believe in the arts as an essential part of the educational experience, as a potentially transformative practice."

The transition to Colony Hall represents not only the School's dedication to the dance and arts programs but also its concern for the student experience overall.

Graphic by Senching Hsia/*The Choate News*

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