A HOUSE FOR ALL SORTS OF ASPIRATIONS

By SEAN RAMSDEN

The newly approved Dining and Athletics Complex will be a hub for the School community.

Open, multilevel dining rooms will become a new hub of student life beneath the undulating rooftop of the dining commons.
The signature component of the Lawrenceville 20/20 strategic plan is set to become a reality. Following formal approval of plans by the Board of Trustees, construction of the School’s Dining and Athletics Complex will soon be underway with the promise of a true community hub that invites students into a space of diverse interests and activities.

“One of our goals was that this be a facility not devoted just to elite athletes, but to the entire community,” says Head Master Stephen S. Murray H’54 ’55 ’65 ’16 P’16 ’21 of the planned complex, which essentially remakes Lawrenceville’s indoor athletics and fitness space while providing for an entirely new dining experience. “We want everybody who walks in the door to feel like they belong there.”

Fueled by the leadership and support of Joseph Tsai ’82 and Clara Wu Tsai, the Dining and Athletics Complex will include a new and expanded indoor athletics facility that preserves Lawrenceville’s indoor athletics and fitness space while providing for an entirely new dining experience. “We heard time and again from the students, faculty and staff, and even alumni, about the importance of this building not to be just an athletic facility, but a building that responds to a factor of the student population,” explains Vinicius Gorgati, AIA, LEED AP, chair of the campus studio at Sasaki Associates, the School’s partner in developing its master plan for campus. “There has always been an ambition that this would be a center for community life.”

The architecture of the Dining and Athletics Complex is the result of a “conversation with the landscape,” according to Gorgati, the principal-in-charge of the Lawrenceville master-plan project.

“One of the topics the Board emphasized from the time we started the master plan was the importance of new additions engaging with the ‘DNA’ of the campus — the tradition of Olmsted — while also creating a new addition,” Gorgati says. “It’s not unlike new generations of students coming to the campus and bringing in new perspectives, so what we’ve been trying to do at the architectural level should build upon the inventiveness on this campus.”

The undulating roofline of the complex reflects the varying elevations of the land it occupies. Gorgati explained how Sasaki was ever mindful to remain consistent in scale and color palette with the nearby brick buildings, such as Bunn Library, Crescent Houses, and the F.M. Kirby Math & Science Center. The highest peaks of the façade also allow for vertical windows that stretch from floor to ceiling, providing expansive views of Flagpole Green while permitting natural light to flood the dining spaces.

“It’s a campus of organic shapes, and the roof’s lines are very vivid,” Gorgati says, drawing a comparison to the bend of the Crescent and the soft, imperfect shape of the Circle. “So we wanted to make sure that the building plan could be articulated metrically, and in terms of materiality, in a way that would resonate with the campus.”

As they approach the building from Flagpole Green, the structure will beckon students through the Harkness courtyard, an outdoor green space that Murray says creates
an inviting entrance for the entire community.

"Which is why we’re doing dining and healthy eating and fitness, along with competitive athletics all in the same structure," he says.

With its oval shape, the Harkness courtyard borrows directly from the tables and learning style that live at the heart of Lawrenceville’s ‘House and Harkness’-centered mission.

"First and foremost, everything we do at the design level goes back to the strategic mission of the School," Gorgati says. "So I think when you hear Steve Murray’s perspectives on building upon the legacy, but also in creating an ever evolving environment for students and faculty, we try to fit design in terms of supporting that mission."

One of the eagerly anticipated aspects of the project is the transformation of the School’s indoor athletics facilities, which have lived inside historic Lavino Field House for nearly seventy years. Although the renovation of the existing structure will be significant — with relocation of the basketball court, swimming pool, and ice hockey rink to newly constructed sections of the complex — the indoor track, with its majestic steel trusses looming nearly 45 feet overhead, will remain in place. This signature aspect of Lavino’s architecture will remain a defining feature of the new facility.

"When Lavino was built in the early 1950s, it was almost revolutionary in terms of the quality of architecture and the daring of the space for schools of that time," says Gorgati, who recalls the astonishment of Sasaki’s structural engineer on his first tour of the field house.

"He looked at the big, rigid frame that structures the roof the main field house, and he said, ‘They don’t build them like this anymore!’" Gorgati says, referencing the curvilinear apex of the arches inside Lavino, which are pitched in a triangular fashion on its exterior.

"They are so beautifully detailed and so simple, but they’re so elegant," he adds.

"You see that they are muscular in a sense of conquering a very large space."

The space beneath those trusses will be transformed, Murray says, mentioning the new track surface, walls, ceiling, and skylights.

"It’ll be opened up with a lot more natural light coming in," Murray says. "It’ll be fully renovated, but we are delighted to preserve the heart and soul of the original Lavino building."

The future of the Dining and Athletics Complex has Tripp Welborne ’58 P’21, director of athletics, as fired up as he’s been since his days as an All-America defensive back at the University of Michigan. To him, the idea of a community hub reinforces the reflexive relationship between academics and athletics at the School, something he says is integral to life at Lawrenceville.

"We have made the conscious decision that our academic curriculum includes athletics as a learning vehicle, and because of that, there is some form of team bonding activity that manifests itself in every piece of the Lawrenceville life," Welborne says. "You’re in a House, which is kind of like your team. Then you’re in a classroom around a Harkness table, which is kind of like a team of twelve, because you have to interact on a team level."

Welborne, who previously shepherded the construction of an athletics facility at Shorecrest Preparatory School in Florida, says that experience taught him many things that he finds instructive during this process.

"I’m fortunate to have gone through it, albeit on a different scale," he says. "It was the crown jewel of the campus, where everybody went, so we have many of the same challenges here."

Construction is always something that has to be accounted for, says Welborne, but "creative scheduling, with a little bit of ingenuity and a lot of excitement, goes a long way."

Greg Buckles, the Shelby M.C. Davis ’54 Dean of Enrollment Management, is excited about what the Dining and Athletics Complex will mean for student recruitment.

"A place like Lawrenceville is competing with the very best schools for the very best students. Their hopes and expectations coming in are to see this will be made manifest in all that we aspire to and do well," Buckles says. "We’re going to have this new state-of-the-art facility that will further set Lawrenceville apart as the nation’s top independent boarding school."

Buckles’ faith in this idea is strong, and it’s bolstered as much by the ethos behind the project as it is simply by its brick-and-mortar result.

"One really important area in higher education now is the notion of food studies, wellness, community, sustainability, and farm-to-table food coming together all in one place," says Buckles, who until this year was the dean of admissions at Middlebury College. "We’re moving away from keeping these things in their own silos and recognizing the relationship they all have to each other."
That’s why, in an intentionally complementary way, the role of healthy eating and food options mirrors the School’s commitment to athletics and fitness, which will remain evident from the new dining facility.

“We’re really planning on the outcome to be an experience worthy of a 2020 education at Lawrenceville,” says Gary Giberson H’11 ‘18 P’10, the School’s executive chef and director of dining. “And that that period also carries on, so the building has longevity and fits in with the mission of the School.”

Giberson gives an affectionate nod to the nearly 50-year-old Irwin Dining Center, calling it a “great building that has served our community well,” but notes that student use and habits have changed over the years, leaving its modular design and antiquated kitchen setup at a disadvantage.

“We’re definitely going to look at multiple purposes for the room itself,” he says. “First and foremost, you want to be able to serve the students daily, so that’s our focus, but you don’t want to overlook the opportunity to use the space for other purposes, like gatherings, or even dances, or proms, or other banquet services.”

He was also able to learn something about the daily flow of students from the recently renovated Abbott Dining Hall, which reopened in fall 2017.

“We were able to close off the kitchen, but leave the Abbott dining room opened, whereas in the past, it was shut,” Giberson explains. “Now, that’s a gathering spot for a lot of the Fifth Formers, who can use that space all day long, and also in the evening.”

In addition to incorporating the same idea in the new dining rooms, Giberson also wants students to be able to “graze” throughout the day, in between meals.

“We’re considering how to offer food throughout the day without a full menu,” he says, responding to “where can I get a drink or a piece of fruit or a bowl of cereal?”

Nourishment of both body and mind for the entire Lawrenceville community was at the heart of the Dining and Athletics Complex planning, and Welborne is unequivocal that it will provide Big Red Athletics a significant leg up in terms of facilities. However, he also sees that benefit as something much greater than wins and losses.

“We’re building something that will create a competitive advantage for every student, and this is before you even get to the athletics component,” he says. “It provides opportunities for each student, as well as the adults in the community, to really find a place that can house all sorts of aspirations.”