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Everyone's Welcome

The Latest Trends in Sports Facility Design

By Chris Gelbach

As school districts and universities acknowledge the benefits of physical activity for enhanced academic performance, they're striving to get more students involved. This, in turn, has changed the face of sports facility design to create warmer, more welcoming spaces that place a growing emphasis on attracting non-athletes and new audiences as both spectators and participants.

A Focus on Inclusion

"What we're seeing in K-12 and university recreation facilities is more inclusiveness in the approach," said Dave Larson, senior vice president of TMP Architecture. "Educational systems are providing facilities that are a destination for students of all capabilities. Not just the ones that are naturally talented at running or throwing the ball, but people that are actually intimidated by that. ... Providing an atmosphere that welcomes people of all sorts of abilities and welcomes them to try things out is a really big thing in our profession."

To achieve these goals, design features such as more transparent, open, visible spaces that make sports seem less intimidating are becoming more prominent. More importance is also being placed on including lobbies and lounge areas that function effectively as social spaces.

A greater focus is also being placed on personal attention related to health, wellness and even things like basic instruction on how to use exercise equipment. "You get a prescription for how to use that facility so you're not just flailing around by yourself," Larson said. "That's something that the athletes have—they have coaches. But just an awkward, non-athletic kid, they don't have that, so having some of that is important."

The architectural firm Perkins + Will also implemented some of these concepts in its recent work on a sports facility for Phillips Academy Andover, an independent high school north of Boston. This includes a sports medicine clinic in a glass box off the main access. "Everybody sees it, everybody knows where it is," said Stephen Sefton, Perkins + Will's sports and recreation practice leader. "It's inviting, it's well-lit—it's just a different way to showcase the elements that are a part of it."

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An emphasis on inclusion is also extending to locker-room and restroom options, which are trending toward the use of more gender-neutral facilities in designs from elementary school to the collegiate level.

This spirit of inclusion is often additionally extending beyond students to the community at large. "We see a lot of taking into account not only the game-day experience, but also communities' recreational use of these buildings," said Bill Baker, principal for MSA Sport. He noted that the trend is being spurred in part by the increasingly diverse mix of public and private sources that are funding these new sports facilities. "They're always looking beyond just Friday or Saturday night games or meets to what community uses the facility can have," Baker said. "Do we have concerts? Do we have band competitions? Festivals? Youth sports?"

Baker noted the example of a sports complex his firm is working on in Marysville, Ohio, that includes a high school stadium for multiple sports, a track-and-field venue for sports and community recreation use, and a middle-school multipurpose facility that's for community and school use. "They're really selling it to their community as a community benefit. It's not just for Friday night games," Baker said. "It's for everything else."

Scott Klaus, senior design architect for Stantec, is seeing this trend attain particular prominence in Texas, where he works on district sports stadiums that are shared by several high schools. "A lot of that has to do with just getting more community involvement to pass the funding to get the facilities built. So the communities are asking for more things," Klaus said. "For instance, they'll have band competitions there, so fine arts gets involved. There's also choir competitions so we'll have a building for that, and for board meetings."

A recent facility in New Caney, Texas, also included a community room that was badly needed for the community. "They didn't have a place where 300 people could get together. And now they have an event in that room probably 250 days a year—it's constantly in use," Klaus said.

Related to this trend, Klaus is seeing these new facilities also create an enhanced spectator experience with large scoreboards and two-story pressboxes that have a business level and an entertainment level, with the latter featuring individual suites that can be rented out to the community as a revenue generator. He is also seeing the bar being raised on concessions.

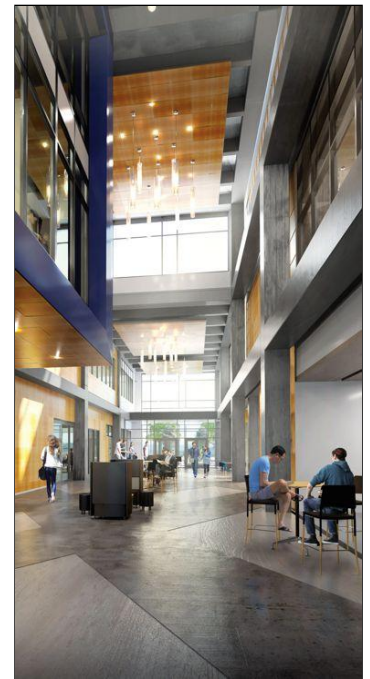


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Laura Casai, director of interior design for TMP Architecture, is likewise seeing more facilities opt for revenue-generating opportunities. "Revenue generators are all the rage," she said. "When you're working with donors and they're looking for revenue streams, clients want those public spaces where you could do anything from hold a cocktail hour to a wedding."

More Multifunction Spaces

As public schools diversify in their student populations, more girls continue to participate in sports, and interest in sports like lacrosse and soccer continues to grow, a demand is growing for spaces that can be used for multiple purposes. Designers are also seeing requests to accommodate additional sports such as cricket, girl's rugby, Ultimate Frisbee, Quidditch and other sports that were rarely asked about in years past.

But architects stress that this needs to be done in a strategic way after carefully considering what the top programmatic priorities will be. "One of the things we tell our clients is that there's a fine line between a multiuse space and a 'multiuseless' space," said Andy Barnard, a principal within Perkins + Will's sports, recreation and entertainment practice. "If you try to do too much, you get to a point where you're really compromising the value, functionality and usability of that space for just about any of the users."

Barnard noted that a variety of technologies can help schools that don't have much staff to facilitate the turnover of a facility from one sport to another. These include electrically operated curtains and netting, portable basketball hoops, volleyball standards that drop from the ceiling and hoists for wrestling mats.

"There are a lot of things that we can do as architects to help these schools to be able to transition these facilities very quickly and cost-effectively," Barnard said. "There's a little capital cost that comes when you're doing the project, but it pays huge dividends on the operational side."

As school districts try to accommodate an ever-growing array of sports, they are continuing to turn more and more to synthetic turf. "Even in districts that don't have a lot of resources, they're trying to figure out and do whatever it takes to get synthetic turf in," Baker said. "Because what it does do is it makes it instantly more usable, a lot more practical, so they can use the facility all the time. The issue is the replacement cost and the upfront cost."

As part of this trend, Baker has seen a growing interest in smaller indoor turf facilities at both the K-12 and collegiate level that serve as practice facilities for multiple stakeholders in inclement weather. He cited an installation MSA Sport worked on a few years ago at Wilmington College as a typical example. It's a 15,000-square-foot turf facility with a 30-foot clearance.



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"It's not a full field, but they can do baseball work and sprint work in there, they can do specific skills and stretching work," Baker said. "And it's directly connected to a partial outdoor field, so athletes can run in and out."

Facilities at both the K-12 and collegiate level are also placing more of an emphasis on function even in the recruiting arms race. "What we're seeing now are programs that are really trying to distinguish themselves, not in the eye candy of facilities, but in the functionality of facilities," Barnard said. "And it is similar to the student rec side where the term of the day is human performance or sports performance."

Barnard is increasingly seeing staple facilities such as locker rooms, weight rooms and sports taping areas being augmented by sports assessment facilities that assess athletes regularly and nutritionists who design sport-specific meal plans. "It's become this personalized environment in athletics where there's this support network behind every student-athlete trying to help them perform their best," Barnard said.

Future-Proofing Fundamentals

As they focus on building multipurpose spaces, sports facility designers are also approaching their designs with an eye on the future by creating facilities that are prepared to accommodate change over the longer term.

This includes building open exercise areas with an eye toward future potential expansion. "When we go back and do post-occupancy reviews, no one is ever bemoaning the fact that they built too much, particularly in fitness areas and multipurpose rooms and exercise spaces," Larson said. "They always seem to want more."

Larson recommends designing these popular spaces with an open end to them so that they can grow gracefully without having to go back into the existing building and redo elements that are already in place. "That goes into site preparation and planning where you want to make sure that the expensive underground utilities are not hugging the building so those don't have to be moved and dug up and relocated in the future," Larson said.



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Baker's firm MSA Architects is currently working on a 160,000-square-foot building for Xavier University that is being designed as a 100-plus-year building. It will feature a robust concrete infrastructure, large floor-to-floor height, circulation that's placed logically for future expansion, and multiple open fitness studio spaces that can be adapted for other uses in the future.

"We always look at the design of the building to say, if this does change or this does expand, or if this use is going to change over time, how might you add onto the building? Where is that?" Baker said. "And how can we design the building and the site infrastructure to allow that to happen?"

These same considerations should also be applied in opting for flexible ceiling and flooring materials throughout fitness facilities to allow for future adaptability. "One of the biggest mistakes I've seen people make is in the fitness area, when they don't make the flooring all the same thickness," said Casai. "Allowing for that thicker floor everywhere allows them not to be locked in to a certain equipment position."

Budget-Conscious Benefits

When designing facilities on a budget, architects stress an emphasis on function and inclusion as ways to get the most bang for the buck. Larson, for instance, recommends against viewing lobbies as wasted

space. "They're opportunities for people to casually associate with these facilities in a non-intimidating way," Larson said. So instead of cutting there, he recommends making the building as simple as possible by not spending any more money than necessary on structural elements.

This can also be the case with larger indoor facilities. Baker is working on another new project at Wilmington College that's an indoor running center that's a large-volume, pre-engineered metal building. "What we're doing is that at the entry and strategic parts of the building, we've spent a little money on architecture," Baker said. "You look at the building as a whole and invest appropriately with design elements, whether they are entry pieces, signage pieces, materials in one particular area to get your best bang for your buck from a design perspective." Baker sees this kind of strategic dressing up of larger barn-like facilities as a large trend across athletics to maximize functionality on a budget.

Sefton additionally recommends looking at buildings holistically. "How does it sit within its own building? How does it sit within a collection of buildings? How does it sit within the broader campus?" he said.

By answering those questions for Phillips Andover Academy, Perkins + Will is making the school's new sports facility one of the first net-zero facilities of its kind. The facility uses waste heat from the chiller plant of a nearby ice rink for heating that offsets the energy needed to heat the new building. The new facility also uses rooftop photovoltaic solar panels, a lot of natural lighting, LED lighting and other sustainable approaches to require only onsite resources to power the building. "Pushing energy around and thinking of these things as big systems is definitely the wave of the future," Sefton said.



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Baker also recommends designs that maximize the use of natural light and ventilation whenever possible, including the use of operable windows and features like overhead rolling garage doors. "It's tough to make them a hermetically sealed box just because of the nature of the space with the sweat and moisture," he said. "Moving the air around also helps with the operational costs—you don't have to heat and cool the thing all the time."

As facilities move toward a growing emphasis on graphics and branding, these elements can also be approached in a budget-conscious way. In Texas, Klaus is doing this in stadiums used by multiple school districts by using programmable LED lighting. "So if they're home or away, the stadium is lit in the color of that school, so it becomes a wayfinding thing but also customizes the stadium to that school for that night," Klaus said.

When working with budget-conscious clients, Casai also recommends using colored banners in the ceiling instead of opting for an entire ceiling plane of finish material. "You can space them out and make it look happy and fun and cool, but it's a smarter way of using your dollars but still getting a finished look," she said.

And fun is the ultimate goal as school districts and universities look to make fitness and wellness a more inclusive endeavor. "A lot of people hear the word gym and think of sweat and odor and pain," Larson said. "So in these facilities, there's the opportunity to change this image so they're actually fun buildings to be in and hang out in. Not just someone's idea of a torture chamber—they're real places to be."