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Raritan Valley Community College (RVCC) Physical Education Building

When architect Peter Johnston first saw the 23,580-sq.-ft. physical education building at RVCC in North

Branch, N.J., it had unfinished concrete walls and ceilings and dim lighting. Rather than lament the unremarkable state of things, Johnston saw unrealized potential for the space itself to work as an architectural element.

Using the ceiling's grid of concrete T-beams as a framework, he installed a series of bowed acoustical panels, wrapping their curved fiberglass forms in sailcloth over the gym and moisture-resistant PVC above the pool. Seen together, the panels gave the boxy form some interest — a fluid ripple over sports scenes.

Glass pendant fixtures gave the gym ambient illumination. For even more drama, Johnston installed accent lights inside wall recesses, turning them into light wells. For the pool, in addition to pendants, Johnston lined the walkway with lamps and the walls behind the bleachers with sconces. He illu-

minated the pool itself using “light pipes” hung from the ceiling. Inside the translucent tubing, light is projected along an internal reflector to provide an even glow.

The rest of the renovation deferred to context, practicality and safety. Floors are clad in a standard poured rubber ideal for basketball games. Bleachers by the pool are epoxy-coated to keep swim-meet spectators from slipping.

Johnston, assisted on the RVCC project by Mumina Maryam Abdul-Fattaah, also helped the client recapture a missed opportunity to define and enhance its spaces with the school colors — forest green and gold. Now green sailcloth wraps acoustical panels, and gold paint covers the light wells and recesses. For contrast, the walls and original ceiling were painted cream.

The gymnasium is used by the area's police academy, is rented out for high-school swim meets and is available to senior citizens. In addition, the gym is used for non-athletic events, including large gatherings and a summer camp program. www.rvcc.edu

