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firm: fiedler marciano architecture site: syracuse



Picture an urban dead zone, filled with parking lots, billboards, and vacant offices and surrounded by busy roads and train tracks. Inserting a state-of-the-art recording facility here seems counterintuitive. Yet when SubCat Music Studios was offered a building, rattling and shaking on just such a dismal spot in Syracuse, the site was actually a lure: a pivotal location between downtown and a developing arts neighborhood. Plus, the building next door was already a theater, the Red House Arts Center.

Previously based in a far tonier suburb, SubCat hired Fiedler Marciano Architecture to transform the century-old Italianate redbrick building into a setting suited to working with musicians on releases for the likes of Virgin Records. SubCat's 10,000 square feet would be spread over the building's three stories, but its primary visual presence would be on the ground level, home to recording studios, control rooms, and a lobby with a café. Connecting the lobby and café to the theater would furthermore unify the two-building row as a single arts center, called 219 West.

Mark Fiedler and Martin Marciano, who met in the undergraduate program at Syracuse University, were particularly attuned to 219 West's



From left: Stones filling galvanized-steel cages form a gabion wall that partially blocks views of traffic passing the 219 West arts complex. Signage in painted aluminum announces one of the two tenants, SubCat Music Studios.



potential to revitalize the desolate area. Their first task was to reorient the complex toward downtown to better take advantage of foot traffic. That meant turning the back of the buildings into the front.

However, a shoestring budget meant that a stair and elevator tower, clamped onto the rear to meet code requirements in 1991 and now in a state of disrepair, had to stay put. So Fiedler and Marciano mined local history for a solution. "There used to be a huge train shed nearby, built from corrugated metal—an industrial

vocabulary that exists elsewhere in the city, too," Fiedler explains. Accordingly, he and Marciano gave 219 West a contemporary beacon by camouflaging the tower in perforated corrugated aluminum supported by a framework of galvanized steel.

In the space right outside the tower and the redbrick rear facade, the architects built a glass-box lobby. Its enclosure picks up on the linearity of the tower's corrugated aluminum via vertical swaths of glass: clear, lit by white LEDs, surfaced in mirrored-bronze film, or

back-painted a deep red. (An inside joke, the red recalls a velour theater curtain that served acoustical purposes at SubCat's former digs.)

The red reappears in the studios as wall covering, part of an acoustical system far more complex than that curtain. Recording studios built from the ground up take advantage, ideally, of the reverberations produced naturally by tall spaces of particular proportions. "When you don't have that luxury, you end up using many different materials around the perimeter of the studios to control the

Clockwise from top: Shared by SubCat and the adjoining Red House Arts Center theater, the lobby features plywood paneling, vinyl flooring, and a custom bench in stained ash. The lobby's glass enclosure intersects with an existing stair and elevator tower, now clad in perforated aluminum. In a recording studio and a control room, engineered wood flooring, white-oak acoustical paneling, and recycled-polyester wall covering help to control sound.



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From top: In the café, steel frames unify the custom tables and stools, the former topped in stained ash and the latter upholstered in vintage kimono fabric. A concrete-block addition to the theater was built in 2004.

amount of absorption, reflection, and diffusion," Marciano explains. He and Fiedler were determined to meet SubCat's lofty technical demands.

Keeping interior bearing walls as intact as necessary, the architects gutted the rest, then constructed the studios from plasterboard. It's concealed, alternately, by the red wall covering and white-oak paneling, carefully balanced to diffuse sound at different frequencies. Full-height windows, their triple glazing separated by precisely angled air spaces, offer additional sound insulation as well as continuous sight lines between rooms.

Yet perhaps the most fundamental element of the program remains invisible. Beneath the carefully insulated studios are two poured-concrete slabs, the upper slab embedded with disks and springs that allow it, twisted and torqued, to float 2 inches above the lower slab. This absorbs virtually all vibrations from cars and trains. "It was eerie," Fiedler recalls. "We were all there one day, and someone happened to look up and see a passing train that no one had heard or felt." Fortunately, the same can't be said of 219 West's impact on the area. New neighbors include a TV station. —*Meghan Edwards*



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