

BOXED IN

With cement board and plywood, the Galante Architecture Studio turns a limited budget to advantage at a municipal recreation center in Massachusetts. BY MAX PAGE

A good, tough box. That's something towns need more often than architects would like to believe. The town of Falmouth, Massachusetts, needed one for its growing adult sports and youth recreation programs and called on the Galante Architecture Studio of Cambridge to provide it. Challenged by the words of one Falmouth official, who said, "We have enough money for a cinderblock box with tar paper on top," principal Theodore Galante reimagined this most basic of buildings.

Working with a bare-bones budget—about \$166 per square foot—Galante created a spare, two-story addition to an existing recreation center that stands with dignity at the back of a parking lot, facing onto several sports fields. On the lower level are generous locker rooms, showers, and storage areas for home and visiting teams; a fitness center, recreation room, computer room, café, and a large lounge and game room occupy the floor above. The gathering spaces were the idea of local teens, who had ardently petitioned the town for somewhere to meet after school.

BUILDING BLOCKS

Lots of program and little money is enough of a design problem. Compounding the complexity of the project was another of the town's demands: The 9,000-square-foot addition had to be

contextually responsive to the original Gus Canty Recreation Center. Designed by the local firm of Keenan & Kenny Architects in 1988, the building is classic 1980s pompo: a steel-framed building with a brick veneer, topped off with a few peaked roofs, circular vents as clichéd ornament, and blunt capitals on brick columns.

Philosophically disturbed by what he calls the "fibs" of the earlier building's design, Galante decided to be contextual through a subtle and convincing critique. He borrowed the rhythm of the faux-bricks on the old building, but exaggerated their scale, using 4-by-8-foot panels of fiber-reinforced cement. These panels create a thin but tactile sheathing, broken only by windows that appear to be sliced out with a very sharp knife. The structure of the building is displayed proudly, with steel beams and ducts visible through the windows and inside the building. The walls are finished—or intentionally unfinished—in plywood. And each metal fastener holding the fiber-reinforced concrete panels to the steel skeleton is proudly made visible. Shadows highlight the subtle irregularities in each panel and the places where they overlap. This alluring cladding gives a sense of strength to the building. And because of the size of each panel, which required two construction workers to install, they serve as a reminder of the teamwork that makes the building—and most sports—possible.



Most impressive, and least visible by its very nature, are the energy-saving strategies of the building. Encouraged by town administrators, who hope to convert all municipal buildings to renewable energy sources, Galante employed waterless urinals, solar hot-water panels, and photovoltaic panels for electricity. (The photovoltaic system was placed on a canopy roof of the original recreation center—clearly visible from the street—as a political move, to show the public the results of their \$50,000 investment.) Computers in the study room on the north side will be installed with software that allows teenagers to chart the changing production and use of energy in the building.

HOW BUILDINGS TEACH AND LEARN

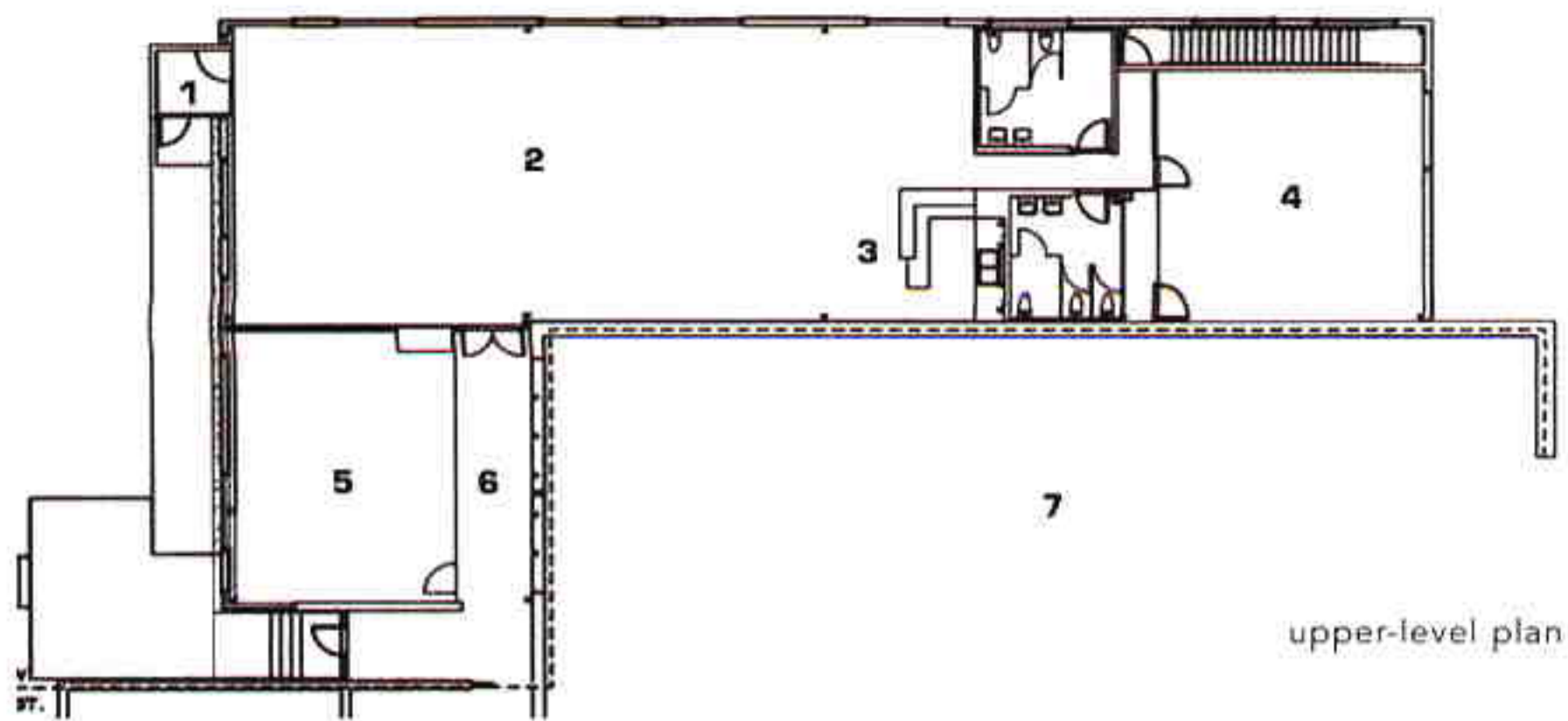
Galante hopes that the building will be a “vehicle for learning” about architecture and natural processes. While PlayStation joysticks presently litter the study-room tables and a flat-screen TV dominates the lounge area, Galante nonetheless hopes that young people will be inspired by the overt display of the building’s guts to think about what it takes to make a building serve its function.

In creating a foil to the original building, Galante has at times gone overboard in his effort to “do the honest thing.” For example, diagonal trusses run across windows, allowing passersby to see

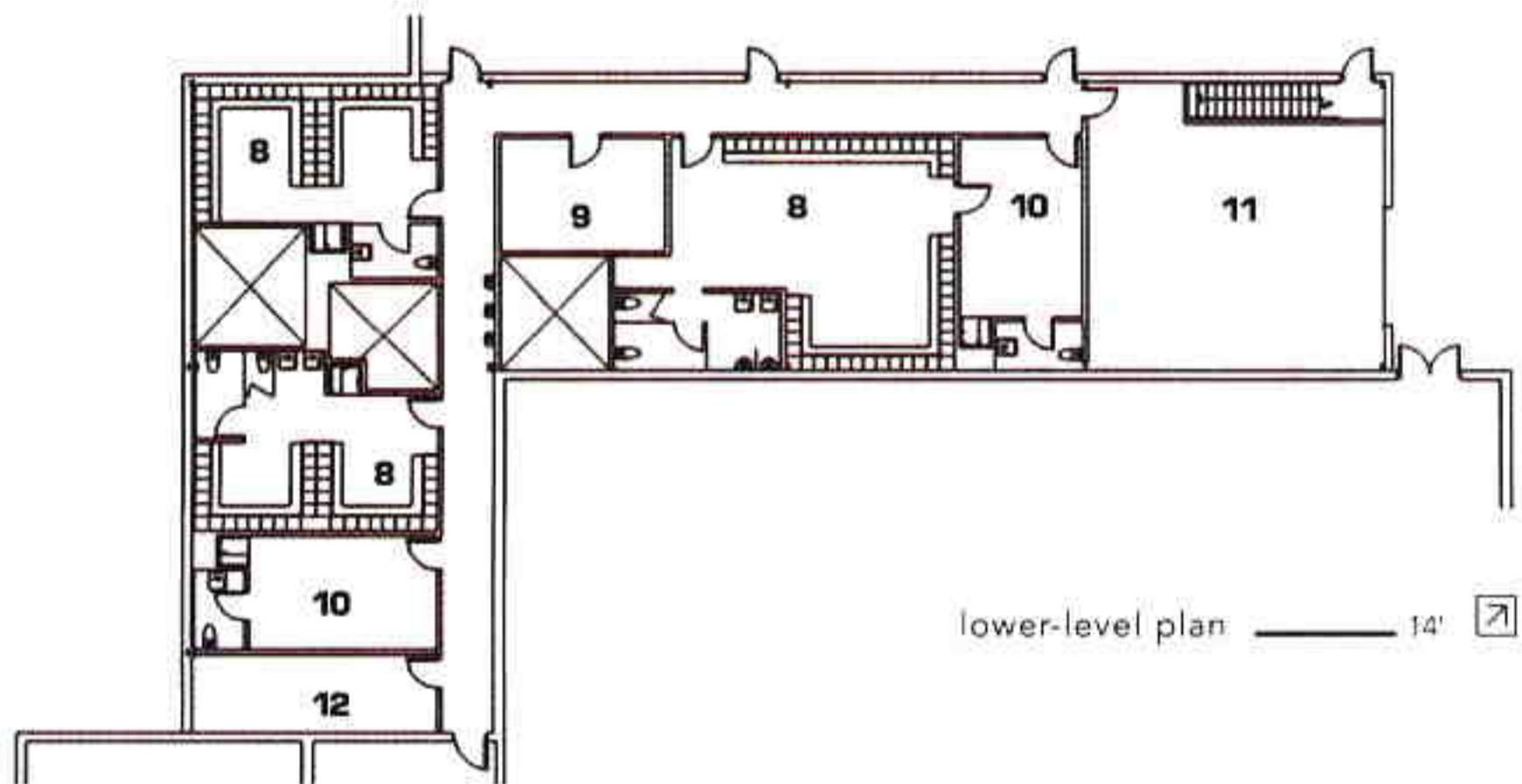
the steel holding up the building. And indeed, it is striking how clearly the construction of this building is visible from the outside. But once inside, the placement of the trusses blocks a good portion of the view out to the sports fields, undermining his effort to provide an interior viewing place for the “Hillies”—the locals who used to sit on the hill where the building now stands.

On a recent visit, just months after the building opened, Galante shook his head in dismay that in the main lounge room, someone at the recreation center had painted the walls white and had begun decorating them with glazed tiles made by local high school students. I confess I found it comforting. A rabbi once urged his congregation not to get hung up on keeping their yarmulkes and prayer shawls so clean. “Stains are the sign that you are putting them to good use,” he said. These alterations, disrespectful as they may seem to the designer, are signs of something quite wonderful: This good, tough box is on its way to being a home away from home.

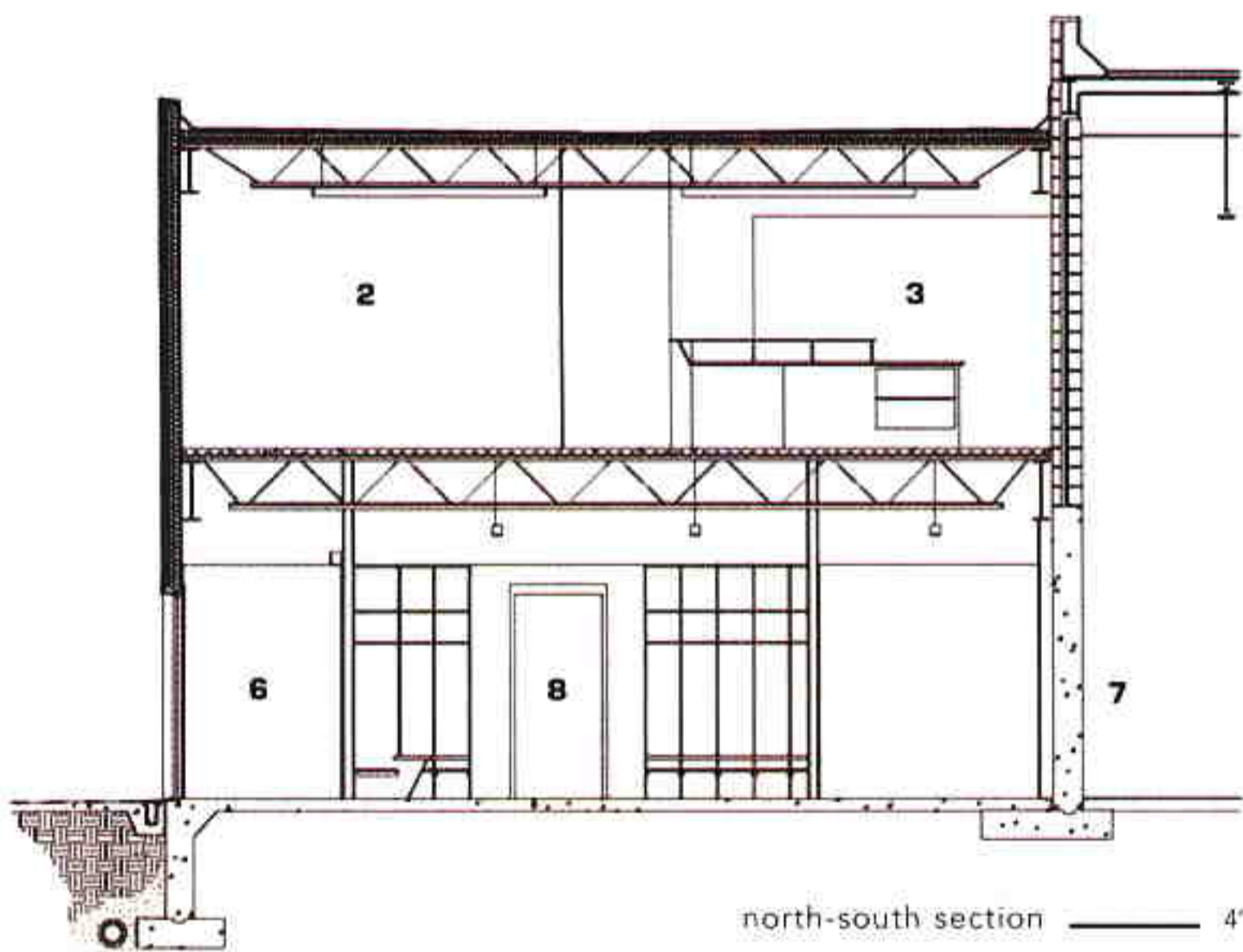
Max Page, associate professor of architecture and history at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, is a 2003 Guggenheim Fellow and coauthor of *Building the Nation: Americans Write about Their Architecture, Their Cities, and Their Landscape* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).



upper-level plan



lower-level plan 14'



north-south section 4'

Rough materials and exposed structure dominate the recreation center. It is faced with an unfinished rain screen of fiber-reinforced cement board on its main façades and sheets of red copper on an entry cube (facing page, top and bottom left). Raw plywood lines the interior (facing page, bottom right). Joists, ducts, and hardware are exposed—as are structural steel members—setting off finished items, such as drinking fountains, epoxied floors, and the glass partitions of the “sports corridor” (facing page, lower middle). The new center wraps a corner of an existing building and employs photovoltaic panels and a solar hot-water system.

- 1 vestibule
- 2 recreation center
- 3 café
- 4 computer center
- 5 fitness center
- 6 corridor
- 7 existing gymnasium
- 8 locker room
- 9 training room
- 10 coach's office
- 11 storage
- 12 solar thermal room

Gus Cauty Recreation Center, Falmouth, Massachusetts
client | Town of Falmouth **architect** | Galantè Architecture Studio, Cambridge, Massachusetts—Theodore Galante (design principal); Joel Fisher, Nancy Clapp Kerber, John McLaughlin, Reem Rihani, Will Stevens (project team) **engineers** | MacLeod Consulting (structural); C.A. Crowley Engineering (M/E/P); BSS Design (civil) **consultants** | Zapotec Energy (photovoltaic design) **construction manager** | W.W. Reich—Chris Lopes (project manager) **general contractor** | MHD Construction—Jon Phillips (project manager) **area** | 9,000 square feet **cost** | \$1.4 million

photographs by Theodore Galante, Chris Lopes, and Joel Fisher

Specifications
 plywood | Georgia-Pacific **metal/glass curtain wall** | Kawneer **20-ounce red copper cladding** | Revere Copper **cement board** | CemBonit/Cement Board Fabricators **EPDM membrane roofing** | Firestone **locks/hinges** | Sargent **closers** | LCN **exit devices** | Von Duprin **cabinet hardware/door pulls** | D-Line **ceiling systems** | Armstrong **paints/stains** | Sherwin-Williams **flooring** | Garland (epoxy resin); Armstrong (VCT tile) **cold-rolled steel baseboard** | Heritage Iron Works **interior ambient/task lighting** | Lightolier **exterior lighting** | Hubbell **plumbing fixtures** | Eljer **HVAC** | Trane **photovoltaic systems** | Solar Works **solar panels** | Evergreen