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## One grand leap for D.C. dancers

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Ten years ago, Fabian Barnes, a former dancer with the prestigious Dance Theatre of Harlem, was commuting to Washington from New York, trying to jump-start his idea of founding a major dance school and company for the black community in the nation's capital.

That's when I first saw him, rehearsing a group of dancers at the African Methodist Episcopal Church on 11th Street Northwest -- in the basement. The ceilings were so low that the women couldn't go up in lifts. Pillars in the middle of the room presented obstacles to dance around. Undaunted, Mr. Barnes breezily ignored these problems, leading his dancers with confidence and verve.

Fast forward 10 years -- he's still upbeat, clearly with good reason.

His umbrella organization, Dance Institute of Washington, is poised to unveil a new state-of-the-art building in the heart of Columbia Heights. The area, ravaged by the 1968 riots following Martin Luther King's assassination and left in shambles, finally -- almost four decades later -- is bursting back to life, with large-scale buildings completed and some still in the making.

DIW's new home, at 14th and Monroe streets Northwest, is probably the smallest but one of the most interesting projects in this explosion of new architecture.

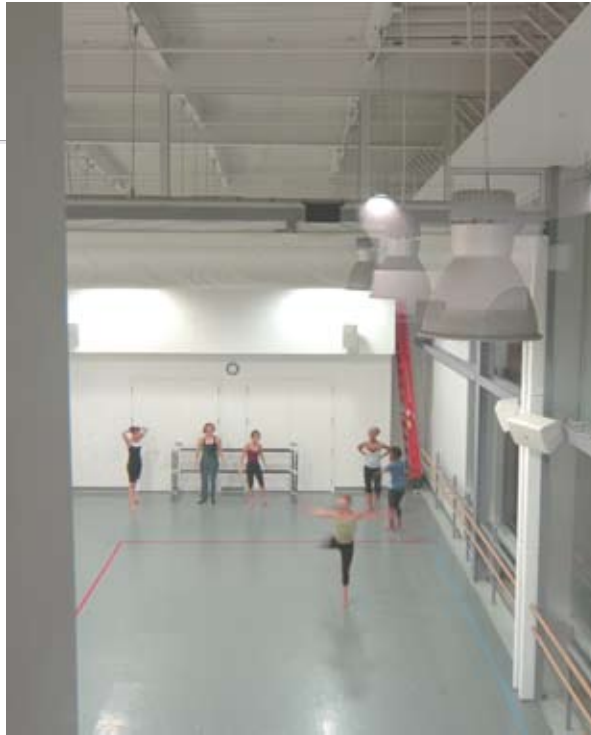
"The building from the outside is quite a presence in the community," Mr. Barnes says. "The major studio space located on the 14th Street side will bring the activity going on in the studio to the street, and the street to the studio. That's one of the things the city was interested in -- having that vitality."

The eye-catching structure houses, among other things, three large studios, all with the sprung floors dancers need.

"The largest studio has a lighting grid," Mr. Barnes points out during a fast-paced preview tour, "and we've ordered floor-to-ceiling draperies that will be operated by remote control so we can create a theatrical atmosphere for informal recitals."

This achievement will be celebrated Nov. 1 with a ribbon-cutting attended by Mayor Anthony A. Williams, District Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, Democratic mayoral nominee Adrian Fenty and Arthur Mitchell, Mr. Barnes' mentor and the founding artistic director of Dance Theatre of Harlem.

On Nov. 3 to 5, another prize aspect of DIW's new home will be revealed. Across the street, cater-corner from its entrance, lies the Gala Hispanic Theater (formerly the Tivoli),



an impressive artifact from pre-riot days. The DIW building's entrance is deliberately set on an angle facing the theater, emphasizing their synergy. Freshly restored, the theater is a treasure, seating 285, perfect for DIW's Washington Reflections Dance Company. It is small enough to be intimate, large enough to serve an audience of close to 1,000 over a weekend of performances.

The celebratory program will include two new works by up-and-coming choreographer Camille Brown, a dancer in the Ronald K. Brown/Evidence company who has created two premieres for DIW: "The New Second Line," a tribute to the spirit of New Orleans for the entire 12-member company, and a solo, "Afro Blue."

The 10-year stretch that led to this accomplishment involved DIW having to move from one temporary site to another -- four in all -- before a permanent home of its own became a possibility four years ago. At that time, the National Capital Revitalization Corp. (NCRC), a consortium of government, corporate and philanthropic groups, invited proposals from a range of applicants, retailers, real estate developers and others.

"We had to demonstrate that we had the capacity to do the project, that we had community support and that we had all the key players in place to pull something like this off," Mr. Barnes says.

That meant holding meetings asking those in the community what they would like to see in the irregularly shaped site, at the time just an abandoned lot. After discovering that the greatest need was a day care center, a partnership was arranged with the National Family Child and Development Center, which will have roughly a third of the 16,000-square-foot building.

The process involved producing letters from philanthropic foundations saying they would be interested, assembling a team of architects and engineers, and then waiting several months to hear whether they had won. "We were the only project that had unanimous support," Mr. Barnes says. "That was nice; I felt the community really wanted this to happen."

The architectural firm responsible for the design, Shinberg.Levinas, specializes in work with an educational connection. "This is Milton Shinberg's first dance building," Mr. Barnes says. "He's done a beautiful job."

"This has been a labor of love," Mr. Shinberg says. "It gives them the functional space that they've been hungry for, so they can expand their programs." Their mission, he notes, "is community service, and there's space to do that. It's a visible reminder just walking down the street that Columbia Heights is a place where the arts are fine."

