Sited next to Pierpont Commons on Murfin Avenue near Bonisteel Boulevard, the new Walgreen Drama Center will be a compelling addition to North Campus. The Drama Center will consist of two components: The Arthur Miller Theatre, a stately glass cube during the day that will transform into a luminous glass beacon at night and a long and elegantly proportioned “learning loft” housing the academic and administrative spaces of the Departments of Theatre & Drama and Musical Theatre, as well as the costume, scene, and sound shops of University Productions.

The “learning loft” portion of the Drama Center will include specialized studios for the teaching of theatre crafts, and classrooms designed for such specific skills as voice, acting for the camera, and scenery, lighting, and costume design. The building will include a large studio (replacing the Arena Theatre in the Frieze Building) and will be used for productions by Basement Arts. All the studios in the new complex will double in the evenings as rehearsal spaces and will be of a size appropriate to stagings in the Power Center and Mendelssohn Theatre, thus allowing actors to rehearse more effectively for all productions.
The Arthur Miller Theatre is named to honor the illustrious U-M alumnus and Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright who died in February 2005. Miller reviewed the plans with then School of Music Dean Karen Wolff and expressed an interest in providing flexibility of the space so that students could work with different stagings. As such, the new theatre will provide a flexible performance space that can be converted to either thrust or end-stage configurations for different types of theatre experiences. The theatre is designed on the model of the Elizabethan courtyard theatre, which clustered its audience tightly around and above the actor, and will include a balcony that wraps three quarters of the way around the stage. The 250-seat Arthur Miller Theatre will replace the 140-seat Trueblood Theatre in the Frieze Building.

The Arthur Miller Theatre and Walgreen Drama Center comprise 80,000 square feet. Students will have a richer learning experience in spaces with flooring, acoustics, and lighting all designed specifically for the theatre. For the first time, students will have access to a proper dye room for costume work with natural lighting for more accurate color matching. Students of costuming will have access to the Theatre Department’s historical costume collection. The acting-for-the-camera studio will be outfitted with sophisticated equipment in a larger space with studio quality lighting. The lighting and design studios will be larger as well and equipped with superior lighting. Faculty offices will be acoustically discrete so that sound levels from adjoining studios will not interfere with quieter work.

The Walgreen Drama Center is named after Charles Walgreen, Jr., and his wife Jean who donated $10 million to the project.

Said former Dean Karen Wolff when the Regents approved the North Campus building project in June of 2004, “For decades, theater has held forth in a building designed for other purposes, a make-do, make-shift facility.” She described the new Arthur Miller Theatre as an “intimate and flexible space … a catalyst for the creation of great art.”
Walgreen Drama Center (view from southeast)

Arthur Miller Theatre
Building Site

The Arthur Miller Theatre Under Construction
(photos Peter Smith Photography)