

All together now

Van Phillips, Jones & Phillips Associates, USA

While it is notoriously difficult to please everyone, a new generation of multipurpose arts centers are trying to do just that. And as a viable alternative to theaters built for one specific company, the partnership model is performing successfully

While on a recent consulting trip to Orlando, Florida, I was peppered with questions by the two principal architects, as they were preparing to interview for the design role on another new performing arts center. “To put this project together the city has put X, Y and Z groups into one user package. What do we have to propose to allow them to all work in the facility?”

“As there are four performance spaces, ranging in size from 2,500 seats to 200 seats on a tight site, can we commingle audiences and audience-support facilities?”

“How many use-nights, and with what kinds of performances, will it take to make the 2,500-seat hall at least break even?”

As I looked out of the conference-room window on to the proposed site, I was struck by the change in the focus of the questions coming from architects and owner/users. After

35 years of consulting as a theater planner, the questions have shifted from, “What will this performance company need?” to “How can a facility truly serve many constituents?”

Since the days of the Greeks, theaters have been built by a specific group of people for a very specific idea of theater and the presentation of that dramatic or artistic literature. By the time the production of Greek theater was formalized in the 5th century BC, the architectural form of Greek theater was standardized too, to support those ideals. In fact, before the 21st century, the vast majority of the places created for performance were built for a specific ideal of public presentation and often with a particular performance group and audience in mind.

Historically from Asia to Europe, most of the well-known theaters were designed with the architectural team being well aware of the ritual aspects of the productions that would reach each stage, even when they did not know the specific players or the plot/score. In these purpose-built theaters the architect had little fear, for example, that a Japanese Kabuki or Noh performance would reach the stage of one of Europe’s opera houses or theaters. If a Kabuki was to be performed on a European stage it was transformed into the tightly written concepts of the styles of production in that region, and the audience was offered only a glimpse of the exotic Orient.

Shakespeare was one of a handful of unique theorists who designed a truly new space for production. Yet, in his own way, this much-respected artist followed tradition; the creation of the Globe Theatre in itself created a style of performance that is now referred to as traditional. While architects, through most of the world’s history, vied for fame and glory by creating elaborate performance places, few brought really new ideas of theatrical architecture before the public. Content to follow the ideas of their culture’s production styles, most architects were left to embellish the artistic spaces they designed, rather than to explore new presentation space concepts.

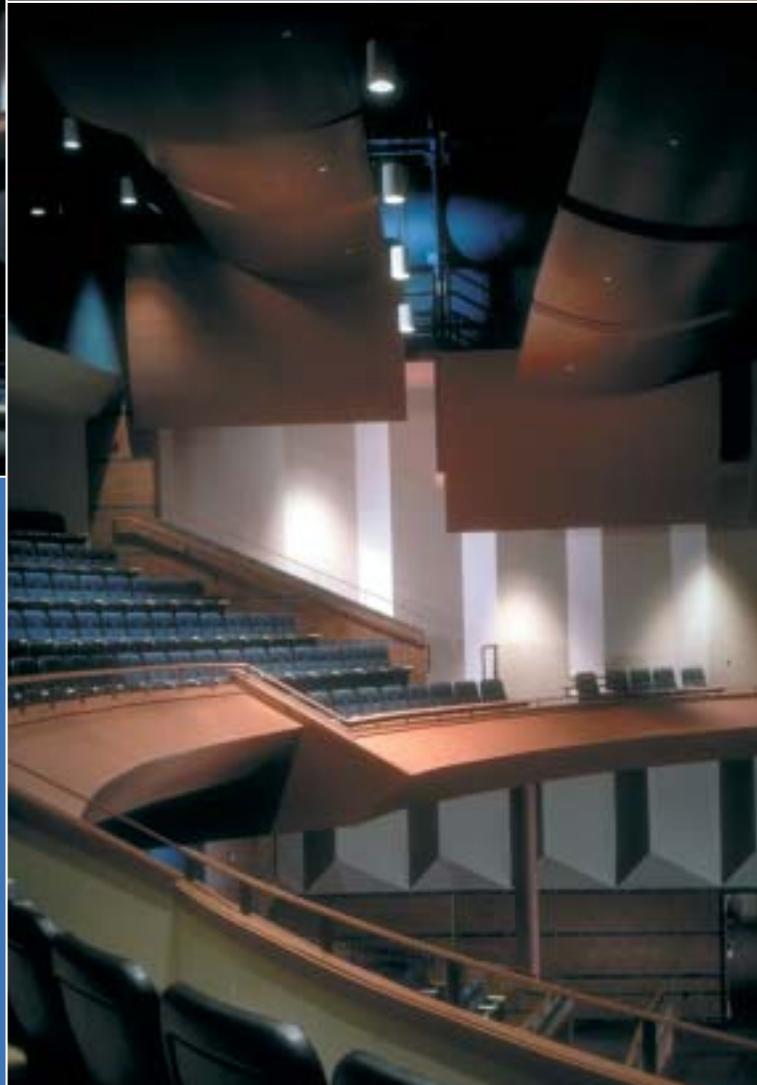
Building for a new world

In the USA, designers followed their predecessors, copying mostly from Western European performance halls. Even when the USA found some individuality, in the days of Vaudeville, one space was pretty much like the next in following the ideals of the time. These theaters and ‘American opera houses’ (very different from their European counterparts) were being built in nearly every town in the USA with a population over 3,000. Pictorially, the US performance halls from the 1830s to the 1930s were very different. In one house the audience could experience the wonders of *The*

The questions have shifted from, “What will this performance company need?” to “How can a facility truly serve many constituents?”

Arabian Nights complete with tent forms making up the ceilings. In another facility the audience was treated to *The Romance Of Venice* and in the next they found a starry night sky over a Mexican village. And yet, with all this embellishment, the stage, audience relationship and the acoustics were nearly identical.

By the time World War II ended, several things had changed in the USA that affected performance architecture. For one, there was a strong economy coupled with an assertion of a



[This page] The Lake Orion Performing Arts Center is an example of how fine arts and modern educational facilities can work together beautifully. It was awarded the Walter Taylor Award for 1999 in recognition of its architecture and educational innovation

[Photos] URS Corporation, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Hedrich Bressing Photographers

“The USA built a seemingly unlimited array of theaters that reflected the personalities of the production company they were created to support”

There are some single-purpose venues still being created in the USA. Often these get a great deal of attention in the media because of the sheer wealth and size of the donation of the patron or the amazing popularity of the performance group, such as Cirque du Soleil. Jones & Phillips sees its share of these single-purpose venues, but a full 70 per cent of its work is in partnership-based performance architecture. These two projects illustrate the opportunity, and the challenges, these modern partnerships create.

Lively Arts Center, Daytona, Florida

- Architects: Farmer Baker Barrios
- Theater planners: Jones & Phillips Associates Inc.
- Acousticians: BAI
- Structural engineers: Walter P Moore & Associates

The Lively Arts Center was the dream of Daytona's Seaside Music Theater, a professional company specializing in musical theater performance. The owner/editor of *The News-Journal*, Tippen Davidson, who was also a member of the Seaside Board of Directors and a theater artist himself, took up this dream and determined to make it a reality. Under Davidson's leadership and business understanding he and the Seaside staff have forged a series of partnerships that are making the Lively Arts Center a dream come true.

When Seaside found it could raise money from local donors for the 850-seat theater it wanted, but insufficient funding for all of the support and rehearsal facilities desired, it built four partnerships. The first was with the Daytona Arts Museum. This married both the visual and performing arts within the surrounding communities. The second was with the University of Central Florida, which will create a graduate acting program in the center that will be about 50 miles from the main campus. This partnership brought state money into the project.

The next partnership was with the City of Daytona and those who desired to bring life back to the old storefront face of Daytona, which overlooks the Intra-Coastal Waterway and Daytona Beach beyond. This partnership secured the old bridge approach property next to the waterway that was abandoned when a new bridge was created a few hundred yards south.

The last partnership has been forged with the community schools, who will use school funding to permit junior and senior high-school students to take theater 'magnet' master classes at the new performing arts center. Under the administration of a faculty member employed by the schools, the professionals at the center will serve as master teachers for the students. This partnership will support the salaries of the staff professionals as well as the general facility funding.

In conceptual design the Lively Arts Center won recognition from the American Institute of Architects (AIA) as a yet-to-be-built facility. Today, as the project continues the design process it is planned to include over 103,000ft² of art spaces, with one 850-seat proscenium theater, one 265-seat flexible thrust theater and a visual-art gallery. In addition, aside from separate administrative spaces and production support, the facility has two acting studios, two dance studios, a large rehearsal room and several individual practice spaces.

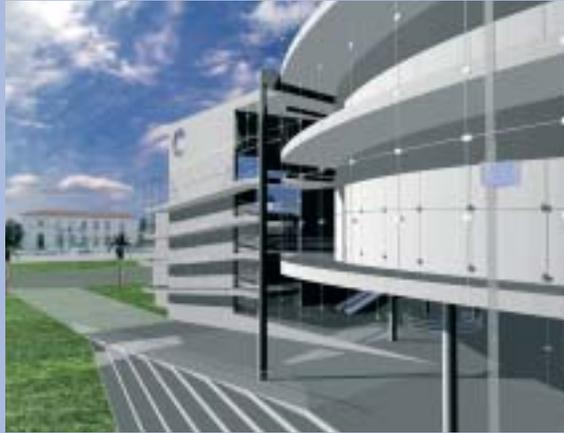
The Lake Orion Performing Arts Center, Lake Orion High School, Lake Orion, Michigan

- Architect/Contractor: URS Corp.
- Theater planner: Jones & Phillips Associates Inc.
- Acousticians: Acoustical Design Group Inc.

Like many of the new cultural facilities being built in Michigan, and throughout the northern Mid-West, the community of Lake Orion voted to approve bonds to build a new theater at the High School – only if it would also serve as a community performing arts center.

This facility is an award-winning example of the marriage between the fine arts and modern educational facilities. The new facility was recognized with the Walter Taylor Award for 1999. This prestigious award is given in joint recognition for both educational and architectural design and innovation. The building houses an 800-seat proscenium theater with a full orchestra pit and lift, full fly loft and an orchestra shell in a facility designed to serve the community and its public schools. Also included are television and radio production studios. Backstage support includes a drama classroom, shops, dressing rooms, music classrooms and rehearsal facilities.

The facility has quickly become the new cultural icon for the community and serves as the area's performing arts center. It is interesting to note that for the past four years a local church with a predominately performance-based worship service has called the performing arts center home. The Mount Zion Church, using the name The Creators Art Center, has become so attached to the center that they now want the original design team to create a duplicate where they can have access to their own facility full time. •



[Image] Farmer Baker Barrios Architects Inc.

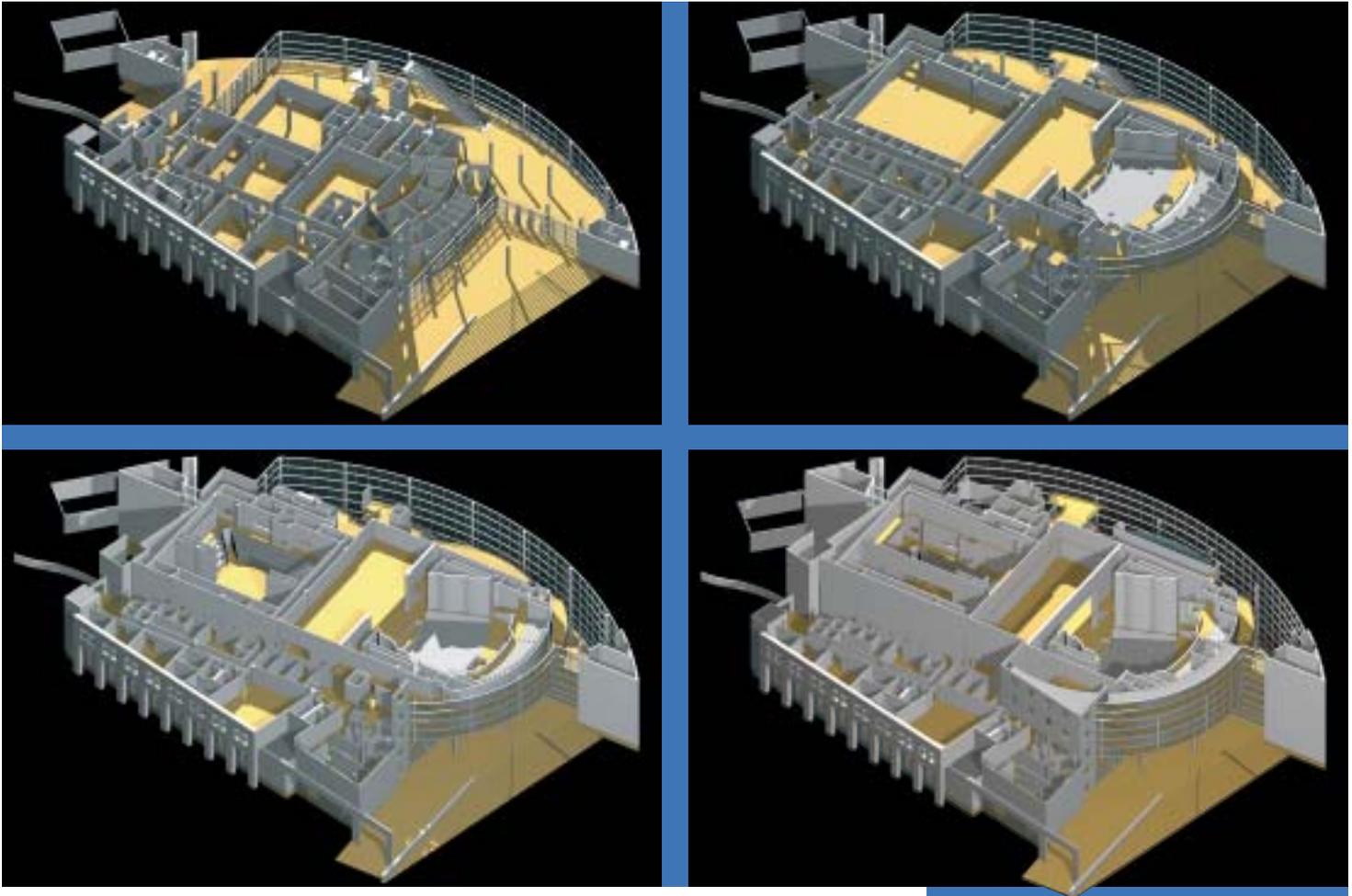
US identity. Unlike our counterparts in the rest of the world's older cultures, we did not have a strong tradition of attending live performances. What tradition we did have was tied more to Vaudeville and short situation comedies that quickly became the fare of film and later television.

Multi-venue campuses, with facilities dedicated to each individual presentation art, were considered the most desirable solution, but one out of the economic reach of all but a very few cities

Desperate to attract audiences, the US performing arts community tried to offer something different and unique to their audiences. This effort led some architects to follow older European performance hall designs. In some cases these efforts came very close to the outright copying of well-known halls from around the world. Some of these copies worked fairly well while others failed to recall the original models because the designers focused more on form than function, thus losing the formula for success. This tendency to copy older halls was especially prevalent in the new opera, ballet and concert venues.

Theater companies in the USA seemed to fly toward two opposite extremes. On one side, we built several copies of Shakespeare's Globe. On the other hand, we built a seemingly unlimited array of one-time-only theaters that reflected the personalities of the production company they were created to support. These facilities often found themselves orphaned once the popularity of the original company waned. Many of these theaters have been the scene of rather furious battles in the past couple of years between those who want to save them for nostalgic reasons and those who want to develop the land in other ways.

One such battle site is the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The theater company has the new facilities they had sought for years. With this in mind the Art Museum wants to expand onto the land occupied by the original Guthrie, but the museum has been met with opposition from those who want to save the structure for historic reasons. The forces that want to retain the old building have



offered no suggestions for a performance company that could remain viable in this 'purpose-built' theater. It is interesting that while this debate continues in the USA over

There are more facilities for live performances being built today in the USA than at any time since the late 1800s

a theater built in the image of Sir Tyrone Guthrie for the production of Shakespearean plays, a similar battle has raged in England over what to do with the theater at Stratford-upon-Avon.

Sense of purpose

All of this would lead one to believe that new performance architecture in the USA is in a decline, while nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is that there are more facilities for the presentation of live performances being built today in the USA than at any time since the late 1800s. The curious part is that while a

few of these new facilities are purpose-built, single-tenant structures, the majority are organized around multiple user groups.

In the 1960s and early 1970s several attempts were made to create the true 'multipurpose theatrical venue'. However, often because of a lack of real understanding of the individual needs of the various performing arts users of these facilities and frankly because of some questionable engineering concepts, most of these new venues satisfied no one. The phrase that was quickly coined was: "A multipurpose theater is a no-purpose theater".

In spite of this dubious reputation, economic factors forced theater planners, as well as architects, community leaders and performing arts companies wanting new venues, to keep re-examining the options for multipurpose performance halls. Building multi-venue campuses, with facilities dedicated to each individual presentation art, such as the Lincoln Center in New York, were considered the most desirable solution, but one out of the economic reach of all but a very few cities. Yet as the cost to create new performance facilities skyrocketed in the last 25 years of the 20th century, the clamor for new space rose as well. Film and television notwithstanding, the number of potential audience members for live entertainment has grown.

Still, most of today's touring show promoters cannot commission facilities as their Vaudeville counterparts had done 100 years before. Production expenses and artist fees have created

The Lively Arts Center in Daytona, Florida, a triumph of partnership and adaptability, won recognition from the American Institute of Architects (AIA) as a future facility. It is planned to include over 103,000ft² of art spaces, with one 850-seat proscenium theater, one 265-seat flexible thrust theater and a visual-art gallery. In addition, the facility has two acting studios, two dance studios, a large rehearsal room and several individual practice spaces.

[images] Farmer Baker Barrios Architects Inc.

a demand for a greater and greater number of seats in venues to stabilize ticket prices. The expectations for production technical support has reached enormous proportions, undoubtedly spurred on by modern film and television special effects. The result over the past 20 years or more has been the rise of partnership-based performance-venue development.

The result of this modern development is that architectural consulting done by large firms has been forced to make multipurpose venues not just work, but work well. ●

Van Phillips is principal of theater planners Jones & Phillips Assocs. in Lafayette, Indiana. He recently retired from teaching theater design at Indiana's Purdue University