

# Play to the gallery

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**Europe's theatrical past is the inspiration behind bold new design concepts in the USA that bring the intimacy of the opera house to today's large-scale venues**

Fashions in theatre architecture come and go, but the classic designs of our theatrical heritage remain a source that designers return to again and again for inspiration. This can be illustrated by two venue designs recently undertaken by Indiana-based theatre planners and consultants Jones & Phillips Associates. One university was planning to build a 2,000-seat performing arts center not far from where another Jones & Phillips client had already opened a 2,000-seat "road house" space. The new client envisioned something similar, and had already instructed an architect to draw up plans based on the nearby venue before selecting theatrical or acoustical consultants.

The acoustical consultant for the original project teamed up with Jones & Phillips to pitch for the new project, and together they presented many more recently designed facilities, yet both client and architect were set on a facility that would look like the one down the road. The Jones & Phillips team was duly selected, and asked to present ways to enhance the favored design.

Drawings were made and the client team was taken through several features from the nearby facility that had not been included in

the current design, including moving the balcony forward to achieve shorter viewing and acoustical distances from the rearmost seats to the stage. The architect was interested in how moving the 800-seat balcony forward would affect the lobby design. It was then that a new proposal was suggested that would achieve the same shorter distance from stage to rear seats, but in a different way.

By drawing inspiration from images of classic European performance facilities from Vienna, Milan, Berlin and London, it was shown that these facilities all derived benefit from having several two to five-row deep galleries rather than two large balconies. Drawings of a new facility were then presented to the client, to show the following advantages:

- The rear seats in the galleries moved forward almost 40ft and were only two rows farther back than the rear seats on the main floor;
- The height had increased but the footprint of the building was substantially smaller;
- The lobby, freed from a ceiling created by the underside of the rear portion of the balcony, now soared several stories and featured small audience overlooks related to each of the gallery elevations;
- By breaking the audience into a series of groups, the operating size of the facility would not just be 1,200 or 2,000, but could be opened in smaller increments at 1,100, 1,450, 1,700 and 2,000. This would provide more options to determine what was perceived as a "full house";
- By reducing the footprint required to hold 2,000 people, the span of the roof members could be shortened and the galleries could be set on columns running to the roof trusses to minimize the cantilever;
- Finally, the stage could remain the same as in the favored design. The new design meant that the stage house no longer seemed like a monolith sticking up beyond the theatre.

In essence, this was the latest in theatre design, nothing like the American concepts of the 1950s, 1960s or 1970s, and well ahead of the 1990s facility nearby. It was a done deal.

In fact, what the client was buying into owed much more to the "gallery theatre" or "opera house", a traditional approach going back more

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than 1,000 years. Whereas the large single or dual balcony theatre built in the USA came into being only in the last part of the 1800s.

## Back to the shoe box

The USA experienced a wave of theatre building in the latter half of the 19th century and just prior to the Great Depression. These facilities were created to meet the expanding nation's desire and demand for entertainment. The vaudeville theatres of the time were characterized by single, large balconies built at the rear of the audience.

Occasionally, some were even being built with two large extended balconies. The design showed off the prowess of industrial technology as much as it asserted US individuality. The ability to cantilever seating 20 to 30 rows over the first-floor audience was an amazing feat at the time. It was the same "look what can be done with steel framework" attitude that drove Mr Eiffel to conceive his Paris tower.



Another motivation behind the “shoe box” design was the desire to create something uniquely American, especially as it related to the arts. The USA had been so dependent on Europe for everything associated with culture and taste that economic advancement fuelled the desire to be independently American.

This newer, large-balcony concept was certainly modern, visually unique and uniquely American. It was also perceived as a “one class of audience” facility, as the royal box was minimized or eliminated altogether. The gallery theatres of Europe were, in turn, viewed as old-fashioned, foreign, stuffy and elitist.

It wasn't until the 1950s and 1960s that the people of the USA came to see the balcony as a symbol of a “second class”. As the civil rights movement gained momentum, the press constantly pointed out that for many years the balcony in many theatres had been used as just another way of forcing segregation. This “black” balcony rhetoric led to the perception of a balcony being second class.

After the second world war, the demand for live performance was replaced in the USA with a demand for motion pictures. By the time television became an additional siphon on audiences and the civil rights movement made large balconies unpopular, most balconies had been abandoned to dating couples.

Many of the pre-1950s theatres were sold to movie franchises. By the 1960s, when the multi-screen movie complexes were gaining popularity, several of the older downtown theatres fought back by converting their large balconies into smaller-audience theaters.

As renovation of the old downtown theatres became a public focus in the 1970s and 1980s, acoustical consultants pointed out that these overly large cantilevered balconies made for terrible under-balcony acoustics. During renovations, they would try to correct these acoustical problems with “distributed

electronic acoustics”. More often than not, the rear wall of the main floor was brought forward until the depth of seating under the balcony was roughly equal to the height of the main floor to the under balcony lip. This helped the acoustics but management, faced with high costs, fought to keep all of the balcony seating.

Thus, the balconies had their own acoustical environment and typically the rear seat was

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20ft to 50ft further from the stage than the main floor. This fact added to the perception that balconies were a second-class section.

Something else that was uniquely American involved combining large rear balconies with toboggan-like box seating areas that marched down the audience chamber side walls. A few of these strange-looking hybrid spaces were even built in Europe and Asia.

North America is not devoid of late 20th-century gallery spaces as several architects, consultants and theatrical companies have made use of the courtyard or gallery design concept. The results have ranged from classic to brutish, but the concept remained the same. The audience above the main floor was situated on galleries one to five rows deep, supported by columns moving up through several seating layers. Examples of these can be found at the Metropolitan Opera, Kennedy

Center and even New York's La Mama Theatre of the 1960s, where the audience sat on the metal galleries. With the exception of a few experiments such as the La Mama Theatre, most of the designs were a form of classic reproduction and modernization sponsored by and built for opera, ballet and classical music.

### Galleries past

Many modern architectural historians tie the gallery theatre to small private music chambers built after the start of the Renaissance. However, most of our theatrical facility designs stem from organizing less formal public presentation into an architectural form. The “gallery” was no exception.

Long before the Renaissance, musical and theatrical groups toured throughout Europe, spreading popular music, social and political commentary and even performances with messages on moral behavior. Lacking a formal performance facility these companies set up shop at the local inn. For security and privacy most of these inns were built around a central courtyard or coach yard.

When a traveling troupe came into town, these interior yards became an ideal place for performance. Entry was through a controlled checkpoint or gate, so admission could be limited to those who had the entry fee. Looking much like an “open atrium” concept, circulation galleries surrounded the courtyard above, and access to these could be controlled as well. Special guests could be given seats on the galleries overlooking the courtyard below. The galleries were structurally simple as well, as each was supported on both the interior face and the exterior wall by vertical columns. In this way, complex and costly cantilevers were eliminated. As the courtyards themselves were used as a staging area for coaches, the ground made an ideal flat surface for the erection of a platform for performance.

In this way, all the basic elements were present for the architects to see as they created the first “gallery presentation rooms”. All they really needed was a roof and a more formal main floor for the central court. In the case of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre the design didn’t even bother with the roof.

By the time of the Renaissance, when perspective settings became a popular element of presentation, all the architect needed to do

## The gallery theatre has slowly become the popular and even fashionable choice in newer designs

was to attach a formal stage, with machinery to handle painted scenery, to one end of the courtyard and the first “gallery theatre” was created. The refinements have been centuries in the making: most of these first halls were built as private spaces for princes and top church officials and the entertainment of their guests. Out of these grew more elaborate public and national performance facilities. Examples of these can still be seen today across most of Europe, from Vienna’s Royal Opera House to The Royal Opera in London.

History tells us that in these early halls the prince of church or state would sit in the center of the main floor and guests would be given seats radiating out from that point based upon rank and status. This would suggest that the galleries were once lower class, but by the time this design was used for larger state opera houses, this had also changed. To separate the royal court from the public, yet afford them high visibility, access was limited to the galleries. Some were partitioned off into royal boxes. Many of these boxes were located near the stage end of the gallery, where the attendance of the king, queen or emperor was as much a part of the show as the performance. In Vienna, however, better sightlines for perspective scenery ruled the day and dictated that the royal box be centered at the rear of the first gallery. This box, in its entire splendor, can still be seen today.

### A modern classic

It is interesting that over the past 10 years or so, the gallery theatre has slowly become the popular and even fashionable choice in newer designs. This has been true even when the facility is intended for anything but the “classical” performing arts. These newer spaces range from civic multi-function performance facilities to spaces intended for pop concerts and even country and western music.

One reason for this change has to do with the number of European architects that have gained design commissions for new performance facilities across North America.

Certainly, they brought their own sense of architectural design across the Atlantic with them. Part of this change is also due to one of Jones & Phillips’ competitors, which happens to have its main office in London. Theatre Projects Consultants introduced its own unique version of the gallery theatre to North America, in which gallery boxes nearest each side of the stage sit on mobile units.

The units can be held against the exterior walls for concerts and angled toward the centerline to close the proscenium for theatrical performances. The Theatre Projects Consultants’ design has become the company’s signature, as it has been used for several multi-function civic performance facilities built from California to New Jersey.

The public’s desire for theatres that break away from the “shoe box” theatre designs, with their monolithic, almost cliff-like, side walls, has not been lost on the rest of the consulting and architectural world. Added to that, several of the newer gallery designs have opened to much public acclaim and excitement. The Allegan Performing Arts Center is design collaboration between Jones & Phillips Associates Inc and architects Tim Casai and Mark Stievater, of TMP Architects Inc. Facilities such as these have created a new set of popular expectations.

Not long ago, one of Jones & Phillips’ new clients was taken on a tour of recently finished facilities to review design options. Standing on stage at Allegan, looking out at the house, the spokesperson for the group quietly said, “Wow! Can we have something like this?”

One might ask if the “gallery theatre” and “multi-function gallery theatre” have set the fashion so that now we will just be duplicating designs while changing only decorative elements. Hardly!

Take, for example, the newest collaboration between Jones & Phillips Associates Inc and architects Frederick Gore and Leonardo Tombelli of the Grand Rapids office of URS Corporation, for the Red Skelton Performing Arts Center. Vincennes

University and the City of Vincennes, Indiana, wanted to recognize the life and contributions made by a native son. Known for a career that spanned vaudeville, radio, film and television, the late Red Skelton was certainly an icon as actor, comedian and a clown of many faces.

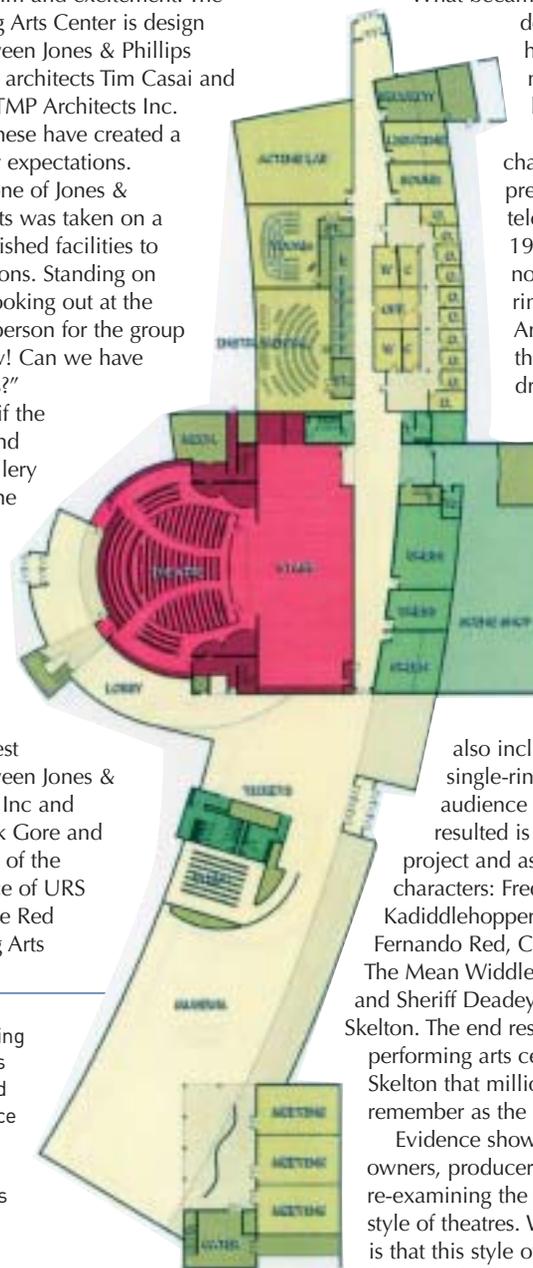
Red was born in Vincennes in a house that is now only a block from the university campus. Most of the Skelton memorabilia, including paintings, audio tape, film and original television tapes remain in the hands of Skelton’s widow. Knowing this, a plan was formed to create a new performing arts center named after Red Skelton. The facility will eventually include an attached museum to house the Skelton collection.

Accepting a commission to celebrate the life of an American performer who has become an icon is no easy challenge. How do you recognize the career of a person known mostly through radio, film and television in a live performing arts venue? The design team began to research the life of Red Skelton.

What became a departure point for design was that although his career spanned numerous media, he was best remembered for several original clown characters he created and presented on radio and television from 1941 to 1971. These characters were not like those of the three-ring circus for which America is famous. Rather, these were individually drawn characters created by one clown and presented in the single ring of the television screen.

The single-ring circus is more of a European format than American, so a plan was formed to create a design using a “gallery theatre” concept. The concept also included the introduction of single-ring circus elements into the audience chamber. What has resulted is a design unique to this project and as original as the characters: Freddie The Freeloader, Clem Kadiddlehopper, George Appleby, San Fernando Red, Cauliflower McPugg, Junior The Mean Widdle Kid, Willie Lump Lump and Sheriff Deadeye, each created by Red Skelton. The end result will be a unique performing arts center dedicated to the Red Skelton that millions of loyal fans still remember as the “Clown King of Comedy”.

Evidence shows that North American owners, producers and architects are re-examining the potential of the gallery-style of theatres. What they are discovering is that this style of architecture can be classic and yet modern, flexible and still original at the same time. ●



[Right] Single-ring circus elements were introduced into the audience chamber at the Red Skelton Performing Arts Center

[Image] Keith Winters, URS Corporation