

BREAKING OUT

SPOTLIGHT

BY TOM GRESHAM

USING NEW GATHERING SPACES AND FLEXIBILITY, DESIGN TRENDS MAKE PERFORMING ARTS CENTERS MORE WELCOMING TO COMMUNITY

FLEXIBILITY IS THE focus both on stage and off in performing arts center construction and renovation as operators seek ways to appeal to both traditional and new audiences while forging strong community connections that infuse their venues with a welcoming atmosphere.

Joshua Dachs, principal at Fisher Dachs Associates, said today's performing arts centers face "different kinds of demands" than in previous eras.

"Whether you're approaching a concert hall or an opera house or a Broadway touring venue, there's increasing pressure to think about having greater flexibility both onstage and in the house," Dachs says.

The Shed, opening later this year, seen from the High Line in New York City.

BRETT BEYER





THE SHED OPENS SPRING

LOBBIES AND GATHERING SPACES

Wendy Pautz, partner at LMN Architects, said her firm always planned for a variety of events, including future potential uses, when designing performing arts center lobbies. The use of the venues for private and public activities is its own reward, she said, but it also offers a potential entryway for new audiences for a center's regular schedule of events.

"It's a win-win to bring more activity into a performing arts center and to generate interest that can make arts centers feel more open, welcoming and accessible," Pautz said.

Pautz said performing arts centers today frequently seek a hybrid design that is more than just an auditorium and a lobby but that also includes other key spaces. Often, she said, these are flexible spaces connected to the lobby and designed to host meetings, conferences, banquets and other events.

the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts in San Antonio and Marion Oliver McCaw Hall in Seattle that included an emphasis on community engagement and creating spaces that would allow those outside the theater to "feel the vibrancy of the art performance that's happening inside."

"For both of those buildings, key components of the design were taking buildings that were very introverted, not really connected to the streets, and to open those buildings up to be connected to the street and urban life and to signal accessibility to broader audiences," Pautz said.

Pautz said she believes performing arts centers are particularly "well-primed" to forge strong connections with their immediate communities and pointed to the Tobin Center as an example. She said that the building's stage was oriented to face the city's Riverwalk and that a public plaza that was part of the project serves to connect the activity of the Riverwalk with the center.

"It's really valuable to create spaces that can be infused with ordinary city life," Pautz said.

FLEXIBILITY AND NEW VENUES

Dachs said designers and operators are approaching new buildings and renovations with an eye on the different kinds of work they should be able to feature. With that in mind, Dachs says today's performing arts center projects include both large, traditional centers that are incorporating nontraditional components, such as flexible auditoriums, sophisticated technology and smaller venues adjoining the center, and "nontraditional venues that are trying to break the mold."

Dachs points to the Park Avenue Armory and The Shed in New York — the latter set to open in April — as examples of venues taking fresh approaches to accommodate a range of activities with an emphasis on contemporary works and radical new approaches to traditional pieces.

"As people approach new venues, they're recognizing that even conventional or traditional art forms are approaching their work in a completely new way," Dachs said.

Dachs said an increasing number of performing arts centers were adding a smaller adjoining venue that can accommodate live contemporary music, private events, experimental theater and other activities. The new venues provide intimate, lively atmospheres that are different from the centers' main stages. Dachs said adding this type of venue can help a performing arts center fill a void in its community and build its market share.

"A different style of venue becoming an accepted piece of a performing arts center is happening now and will happen more," Dachs said.

Dachs said performing arts centers use the spaces in part to strive to shed the reputation of being stuffy spaces that are "separate and apart" from the rest of the city.

"It's about creating a sense of welcome, a sense of belonging rather than an elitist or exclusive kind of experience," Dachs said.

In that vein, Pautz said, LMN is working on the new Octave 9 venue at Benaroya Hall, the concert hall for the Seattle Symphony. The venue will be an experimental immersive space within the building that supports contemporary performances and offers a music research space. LMN Architects aspires to create a new contemporary "participatory sound machine" for the city of Seattle with the space.

Pautz said these efforts help centers become part of a community's daily life.

"You could say that these sort of additional spaces that are being crafted are very much about supporting the art, but also potentially engaging different audiences in the presentation of the works," Pautz said. "In that way, they're reaching out to their communities to invite them to participate in the arts." ▣



A rendering shows The Mc-Court, a performance space within The Shed

Millie Dixon, principal at Theatre Projects, says performing arts centers can be slow to accept the need for additional spaces beyond the typical lobby and auditorium arrangement, but that a variety of breakout rooms and "special spaces" also can provide key places to host sponsors and donors. In addition, the economic viability of centers can receive a crucial boost from supplementary funding sources such as rentals to private groups.

"Capitalizing on those sorts of things is becoming much more important," Dixon said.

Pautz said a pending LMN project with this approach is the Port Angeles Waterfront Center planned in Port Angeles, Wash.

"What we find really exciting about this is that it really changes the nature of the performing arts center from something that is just single use to something more than that," Pautz said. "It helps it become a stronger contributor to the community."

AN EYE ON THE COMMUNITY

Dixon says performing arts centers are more often serving as centerpieces of mixed-use, developer-driven projects than they did in the past. Dixon says the arrangement is more about incorporating different funding sources into the development of a center than creating a community-focused venue, but the arrangement "does reach into the community fabric a little differently that way."

Pautz said LMN had worked on major renovations for

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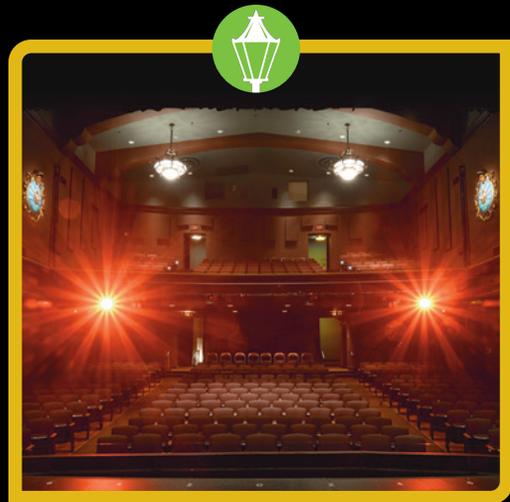
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