

the **ASTC** letter

The Newsletter of the AMERICAN SOCIETY OF THEATRE CONSULTANTS

WILL IT MAKE A THEATRE? (When the Answer is “Yes, but...”)

The question is as valid today as it was when designer Eldon Elder first asked it in 1979. All of us have had clients come to us with ambitious hopes of converting an existing building to a performing arts venue, and will we do a feasibility study?

Often these are churches or movie theatres, though factories and department stores are sometimes in the mix, but it can be any type of building. Buildings with a raked floor, raised platform or a high ceiling and few columns particularly inspire local community leaders.

So we team with an architect and arts management colleague and inspect the building, meet the stakeholders and try to answer the question – will it make a theatre?

We want to say yes – we are in the business of creating theatres, and we’re in the business because we care about live performance and wish to encourage it. Most communities can use more spaces available to small performing groups at reasonable rates, and in the larger sense these groups are part of a vibrant society and a vigorous economy.

But the thing we know almost before we set foot in the door, and certainly minutes afterwards, is that the answer is almost always “Yes, but...” As in, yes we can create a space in which an audience can see and hear a performance reasonably well. But the stage will almost certainly be too small, the wings non-existent, the loading difficult, the performer and technical support spaces makeshift and the audience amenities limited. But there will be fewer seats than the business plan recommends. But it will cost more to build and run that originally imagined. So why do we keep saying yes? Well, first refer to paragraph 4 – we love performing arts and we believe that performing arts groups are good for communities. We want them to multiply and flourish.

Is there a better way? Can we serve our clients better and still help them create the community spaces they desire? I believe the answer is yes and no – some buildings are so limited that any assembly space will have more drawbacks than attractions and we need to tell our clients so. We may be able to find local uses and users that can still

make some level of adaptation viable, but we owe it to our clients and our integrity to be clear and complete in our assessments of what can and can’t be accomplished with reconstruction work on the building. That sucks, doesn’t it? Still, sometimes the answer is no....or at least more no than yes.

Secondly, with the more usual cases, we need to say a qualified yes; we need to help the clients understand the true cost of the building after renovation; the ongoing labor required, paid or volunteer, the fundraising and endowments needed, the limited opportunities for professional engagements that will be available. This is where partnering with an experienced arts management firm is so valuable; they can provide the numbers and the credibility that partner with our architectural and functional expertise. (And vice versa I might add; I could wish that some of our operational-side consultants included architects and theatre consultants more often. We truly do add value to such studies.)

I suspect I might be preaching to the

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COMING SOON

The ASTC Newsletter *ONLINE VERSION*.

If you’d like to see the ASTC newsletter online, in a shorter version that will come 2-4 times a year, please send your email address to: newsletter@landb.com.

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SELECTED ASPECTS OF PERFORMING ARTS DESIGN THAT ACOUSTICIANS WISHED THEATER CONSULTANTS & ARCHITECTS KNEW

(omitting much of what both acousticians and theater consultants wish architects attended to)

There may be no architectural sub-discipline more inherently aligned with the adage “*Form follows function*” than architectural acoustics – especially room shaping associated with unamplified music rehearsal and performance. Acoustical consultants dealing in this building type often wish their colleagues were equally appreciative of this inescapable driver from physics. That said, there remain a plethora of untapped design solutions that can yield both acoustically and architecturally wonderful results; the inventive acoustician and architect will find them if they permit themselves.

Just because “some other” acoustician let you have your way with “whatever” (e.g. wall shaping, ceiling shaping, reflective vs. absorptive materials here/there, etc.) on “some other” project, please respect that when we suggest it’s acoustically the wrong thing to do in this project, we actually mean it. This notwithstanding, don’t hesitate to ask, as frequently (not always) something else could be adjusted to permit realizing your expressed desire – or a variant fully acceptable to you. We can often relax our position

on a variety of things depending on just what else is designed in the room – or could be altered in shaping and finishes.

Know that “acoustical goodness” for auditorium patrons is ultimately a composite of a great many, often seemingly highly disparate, seemingly inconsequential features and so excessive “wounding” of too many of the acoustically good things and an excess of the “only-slightly-bad” things can swiftly tip the scales from a potentially acoustically great venue to an also-ran, or worse. Even having a huge portfolio of performing arts projects with a variety of acousticians can actually become an impediment to good acoustics in your next important hall. We have multiple project examples wherein designers couldn’t resist drawing on a plethora of separate but acoustically problematic (but individually “permitted”) features across many completed projects and introducing those early in design. Again, while some acoustically problematic features can be tolerated in any one hall, these can often be readily permitted if sufficiently overcome by other appropriate acoustical measures. Let’s talk !

The natural room-acoustics of an important theater is invariably a result of multiple interacting features. Once an important shaping feature is established in some detail it necessarily informs the design of other acoustically-interacting forms and surfaces. Thus, please know that as design unfolds, once something forces a significant change in shaping or finishing any interacting elements, then accommodating adjustments can be expected in many others. Lincoln Center’s highly problematic Philharmonic Hall was a poster child for this sort of development. In very late design after the acoustician completed his work and while he was on vacation the seat count grew by 11% and the side-walls lost their acoustically intended diffusion in favor of a barrel vault shape. He first learned of these changes upon visiting the construction site! Please be prepared to accommodate changes in aspects of design that everyone expected were “frozen” if acoustically-important shaping or finishes elsewhere must be adjusted late in design.

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choir with this article, but if anyone is looking for the “how” of this, I offer a few tips –

- Find and really talk to the key advocates of the project and the users that are experienced enough to understand the discussion of physical limitations. If possible, put them in the same room for a while, with you leading the discussion.
- Organize a public session and invite local user groups and find out if they can and will use what can be realistically provided. Discuss needs in detail. Find out how often they would use it and how much can they pay?

- Find similar facilities and urge the appropriate parties to make contact, or make contact and get a report you can give the client. If they can tour a similar place, that’s even better.
- Develop a realistic cost estimate for the entire construction process and equipment systems, including soft costs, early on – facilitate a discussion “Is it worth \$XX million for this project?”

All of this seems like basic services for such a project, but I’ve written this article because again and again it does not get done. The building owners spend a lot of money and garner a lot of public-

ity and support and don’t really know what the building will do until after it’s built and they start booking it. And sometimes, the building ends up empty again, and that’s a crying shame. Let’s see if we can prevent that by not getting so caught up in a project we blind ourselves to flaws that we should be showcasing to the client. Many of these projects can be valuable community resources if expectations are clear and resources are appropriately allocated toward the functional aspects of the building and not toward creating the Taj Mahal – it’s beautiful, but it’s a tomb.

Rose Steele, ASTC

For architects, especially, regarding musically-important venues:

- Please foster fully-open and frank discussions between the project acoustician and stakeholders from earliest planning through Tuning Week. This is by far the best path to a successful Opening Night and beyond. To miss this is to court fully avoidable and enduring patron (and client) grouching.
- A seasoned and truly caring acoustician should periodically “test” both stakeholders and architects on matters that may seem already “asked and answered” as the variety of acoustical paths and solutions to achieve stated ends continue to grow and morph through design. This is simply about ensuring both abundant clarity on end-game listening environment goals (acoustical and musical lexicon is highly inexact and generally non-uniform) and ensuring that designers are aware that specific solutions initially suggested by the acoustician aren’t necessarily the only methods of achieving optimal results – especially as room form is adjusted by others.
- For halls requiring catwalks with underbelly acoustical reflectors, as these catwalks are established in space to ensure appropriate lighting angles and may require spatial adjustment for any reason, the nature (dimensions, curvature, shaping, tilt angles, etc.) of the reflectors will likely require re-adjustment as well. It’s all dynamic.
- Please don’t become wedded early to excessive flat/planar surfaces in many regions of the hall. As visually elegant as such forms may be, these can foster harsh and spatially “spotty” acoustical hot and dead zones for music. Curvature and/or substantial dimensional articulation as suggested by the experienced acoustician inevitably provides optimal distribution of sound around the room without these adverse characteristics.
- Know that for optimal listening to both the unamplified (or modestly “lifted”) spoken word and the fine articulation of acoustic music, low background noise is absolutely key and is among the least appreciated need in such spaces. This topic has everything to do with apparent dynamic range (for music, it’s appreciating artistic pianissimo nuances; for speech it’s catching critical but quiet inflections). During design, if we sense clean acoustical reflections in support of unamplified speech and music becoming irreversibly compromised by architectural or theatrical design desires, we may require a more Draconian approach on HVAC-contributed background noise - designing to levels lower than initially established. Such a development, of course, can impose both project cost and design challenges to the M.E.P. engineer’s existing work.
- Recall that auditoria are called “audit”oria for a reason. They aren’t necessarily “visi”toria first and auditoria second. Any hall has the potential of achieving at once, both monikers but this rarely happens by accident!

David A. Conant, FASA

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2014 USITT Architecture and Theatre Student Design Competition Sponsored by American Seating

**Competition Documents Available
August 15, 2013**

**Application due
December 7, 2013**

**Submissions due
January 4, 2014**

The Architectural and Theatre Students "Ideal Theatre" Design Competition requires teamwork. Theatre students serve the role of “the Client” and architectural students function as “the Designer” to create their university’s ideal theatre. A “Team” can enter as an independent group or as part of a structured class.

Design brief available here: <http://www.usitt.org/files/Awards/2014%20Brief.pdf>

Application forms here: <http://www.usitt.org/files/Awards/2014%20Student%20Architecture%20Design%20Competition%20application%20Form.pdf>



TOP TEN THINGS A THEATRE CONSULTANT HATES TO HEAR

10. The building came in over budget so the theatrical equipment supplier is preparing value engineering options for the theatre systems.
9. Why do we need followspots if we have moving lights?
8. We won't need you. The drama teacher from the high school will be providing our theatre consulting services.
7. The project is a go; we've completed programming and schematics and we'll need your design development drawings by the end of next week.
6. The Owner has decided on Design-Build project delivery and your services are no longer required.
5. The maximum zoned height is 35' and we won't be going for a variance. The site is granite and there's no money for blasting.
4. Oh, this is your third request to see the catwalk steel? We already approved and returned those drawings.
3. So-and-so school has 1000 seats, so we want 1200 seats!
2. It's only a high school
1. We'll NEVER do (dance, music, film...fill in the blank) here so we don't need (stage lighting, rigging, fill in the other blank here!)

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF THEATRE CONSULTANTS & THE UNITED STATES INSTITUTE FOR THEATRE TECHNOLOGY

Present

THE ASTC USITT STUDENT/CONSULTANT VENUE RENOVATION CHALLENGE Fort Worth, March 2014

ASTC and USITT announce a collaborative regional project which will culminate in a panel presentation at the USITT 2014 Annual Conference in Fort Worth, March 26th to March 29th. Student members of USITT will work with ASTC member theatre consultants in their areas. They will select a space on the students' campus as the subject of a theoretical renovation. The student/consultant team will tour the selected space, study and discuss the existing conditions and current use. Through a collaborative and interactive process, the students and consultant will develop a plan for the potential renovation of the subject space for an actual or fictitious performing arts program of the team's choice. The conceptual renovation plan may focus on any aspects of the space to achieve a specific objective or objectives. Some possibilities for renovation concepts are:

- Functional improvements to an existing theatre
- Meet the needs of a particular production
- Conversion of non-performance space into a performance space
- Create a new type of theatre form

The final proposal may be presented via electronic display, graphic boards, and/or models. There are no budget constraints for the conceived renovation. An ASTC jury will award \$750 to the team presenting best Challenge solution. ASTC and USITT look forward to wide-spread participation, dynamic interactive presentations and lively discussion at the annual conference. A special session will be held to showcase the concepts, space and time TBD. For more information or to participate, please contact:

Mike McMackin, ASTC at mmcmackin@auerbachconsultants.com or
Christine Troscher, USITT christine@usitt.org.

A \$250 travel stipend will be provided and conference registration fees will be waived for the first four students who request financial assistance. The four students must be on separate teams. Applications and Challenge submissions are to be sent to the email addresses above.

Applications Due: December 21, 2013 Submissions Due: February 15, 2014

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To learn more about the ASTC, visit:
www.theatreconsultants.org