

TexasArchitect

MARCH/APRIL 2010



Dallas Arts District: Past and Future

Three decades in the making, the Arts District still evolves



THE REINVIGORATED DALLAS ARTS DISTRICT provides a timely opportunity to feature performance venues around the state while highlighting the Winspear Opera House and the Wyly Theatre. Both are stunning additions to the downtown cultural enclave that has evolved over three decades through the roller coaster ride of the boom-bust economic cycle.

To learn more about the past and potential future of the Arts District, I invited four Dallas designers to join in an informal roundtable forum in January. The participants were: Duncan Fulton, FAIA, whose firm Good Fulton & Farrell Architects is the architect of record for the Annette Strauss Artist Square; Michael Malone, AIA, who wrote this edition's feature article on the Winspear Opera House (see p. 44); Kevin Sloan, ASLA, who wrote the introductory article to the feature section (see p. 34); and Willis Winter, FAIA, an assistant director of the City of Dallas Park and Recreation Department with responsibility over the planning for the Woodall Rodgers Park currently under construction adjacent to the Arts District.

Our discussion began with reflections on the city's 1982 announcement of the Sasaki Plan that recommended the consolidation of arts venues in the northeast quadrant of downtown. The Sasaki Plan offered a comprehensive approach to developing the future Arts District. The news sent a collective thrill through the local architectural community.

"It had tremendous coverage and what was described sounded like a very exciting concept," recalled Fulton. "They described it in terms of cafés; they described it in terms of what we now call work/live environment; and it incorporated strategies that today we would call New Urbanist—an intense focus on the street [and] an intense focus on uses."

The boldly ambitious plan, Winters remembered, was a quintessential "grand 'Dallas' idea that could only happen here. And the fact that they have stayed with the plan, through changing economies says a lot about the city to stay with something like this and not lose the vision."

The timing of the announcement was important because it arrived during the real estate boom of the early 1980s. The plan placed the Arts District next to the downtown commercial center, which Sloan said was "a developers' playground" at that time. While the Sasaki Plan recommended low massing where buildings met the street, he said, managing scale posed a challenge because "there was an impetus to build high and

go vertical, and not necessarily be as obedient to a kind of uniform fabric as one might hope."

Then, of course, came the real estate crash of the late 1980s and all private development ground to a halt until the close of the millennium.

The eventual recovery of the local economy prompted city leaders to try to complete the vision for the Arts District. Those efforts coalesced as the AT&T Performing Arts Center with projects by marquee architects.

Like many of his peers in Dallas, Malone was ebullient in his praise for how the Winspear and the Wyly complement their surroundings. "The thing that's remarkable to me about the District now, even with all the gaps, is the level of urban gestures that all the buildings incorporate and the way they're designed and work together. If you're in the lobby of the opera house or the theater building, the way they're organized and their spaces are set up to view the other buildings and make connections between them; both Foster and Koolhaas/REX made strong gestures to try to tie their buildings into what was going on around them. And that little lesson in urbanism is something we don't get very often down here."

So what's next for the Arts District? Besides SOM's City Performance Hall and Artist Square, everyone is curious to see the private sector's response to the City of Dallas' Woodall Rodgers Park. Designed by The Office of James Burnett, the municipal park will be created by decking three blocks of the freeway (shown on the right side of the photo above) along the north perimeter of the Arts District. Work on the infrastructure has begun, said Winters, with the first phase of the park scheduled to open by mid-2012. Already, he said, commercial interests are developing plans for tracts of land adjacent to the future park. "There's a very interesting dynamic that has happened now," Winters said. "We've been talking about the Arts District for almost 30 years, centered around Flora Street. Now the emphasis has shifted slightly, a block north and two blocks west to Woodall Rodgers. That in turn has caused a whole new development scenario to happen on the periphery, including impact on the Arts District."

STEPHEN SHARPE

PHOTO BY CHRIS D. BLACKMON, FAIA

PROJECT Dee & Charles Wyly Theatre, Dallas
CLIENT AT&T Performing Arts Center
DESIGN ARCHITECT REX/OMA
ARCHITECT OF RECORD Kendall/Heaton Associates
DESIGN TEAM REX: Joshua-Prince Ramus; Erez Ella; Vincent Bandy; OMA: Rem Koolhaas; Kendall/Heaton: Rex Wooldridge; Pat Ankney; Vincent Nguyen; James Benton
CONTRACTOR McCarthy Building Companies
CONSULTANTS Transsolar Energietechnik (MEP/FP); Cosentini Associates (MEP, building controls, security design, IT); URS (as LOPEZGARCIA GROUP) (civil); Magnusson Klemencic Associates (structural); Theatre Projects Consultants (theatre); DHV BV (acoustical); McGuire Associates (ADA); Donnell Consultants (cost); FRONT (curtain wall, exterior envelope); Quinze & Milan (furniture); 2x4 (graphics); Tillotson Design Associates (lighting); HKA Elevator Consulting (vertical transportation)
PHOTOGRAPHERS Iwan Baan; Tim Hursley

Drama Machine

by STEPHEN SHARPE



Stacked and compact, with its complex inner workings tantalizingly hidden behind a shimmering veil of aluminum tubes, the Dee and Charles Wyly Theatre appears to pose aloofly in the midst of the Dallas Arts District. The Wyly indeed seems coolly detached from its nearest neighbors, including two distinguished buildings by Pritzker Prize-winning architects. Conceived in part by another member of the exclusive Pritzker club, this 12-story metal clad cube commands center stage as a machine for the theatrical arts.

Rem Koolhaas (Pritzker honoree in 2000) and Joshua Prince-Ramus, enabled by enlightened patrons, designed the Wyly to function like no other traditional theater—vertically, with its main performance space at ground level and almost all support facilities placed at the building's upper tiers. This daring experiment in the logistics of stagecraft exemplifies Koolhaas's intellectual approach to re-interpreting an established building type from the ground up.

As intriguing as the architectural response to the Wyly's sophisticated program is the backstory that traces the project's lineage, beginning with Koolhaas and his OMA principal in charge, Prince-Ramus, who subsequently split from OMA and opened his own shop, REX. Prince-Ramus continued with the project separately from Koolhaas. A full account of the project's arc of trajectory, detailing its conceptual authorship and the handoff of construction documents, has yet to be published. Maybe there's no mystery to reveal, or perhaps with all the principal actors, including the locals whose behind-the-scenes efforts to fund and build the Wyly, apparently pleased with the completed project—as well as with the enthusiastic reception it has garnered in the architectural media—no one is particularly eager to upstage the star attraction.

The Wyly's innovative scheme demands much of theatergoers, asking more than just the customary suspension of disbelief during the performance but also to dispel any perceptions of luxurious comfort. The entry sequence calls for audience members to descend a sloping plaza either via a zigzag path or

(preceding spread) The Wyly's north facade reveals its main theater space set below its curtain-like skin of aluminum tubes, some tapered at points to allow views within and without. The lobby below features bare, yet surprisingly elegant, fluorescent-tube lighting.

(this spread, from far right to left) The theater allows three distinct stage configurations to accommodate all types of performances. The rooftop terrace, embellished with artificial turf, displays the building's massive structural columns. The nine-story 'theater machine' envelops 90,000 square feet stacks 'front of house' functions below stage level and 'back of house' above.





a slightly steeper set of steps along the side wall to reach the basement-level lobby (actually the upper of two below-grade floors). Once inside, they experience their first close-up of several austere accoutrements that herald the architects' bold conceits for this machine: the elegant lighting surprisingly consists of fluorescent tubes hanging vertically from the polished concrete ceiling, the same surface treatment used on all the lobby's floor and walls save for the long facade of mostly glass that opens to the entry ramp. The lens of this transparent wall focuses views north toward the Winspear Opera House, its high canopy extending beyond its vivid red elliptical theater chamber, and the charcoal-finished brick massing of the arts magnet Booker T. Washington High School, two other recent additions to the Arts District. From this below-grade space, the ascent to the stage level requires queuing up to climb the narrow stair that is fancifully lined on both sides with fine-gauge metallic mesh that adheres to magnetic panels placed behind—a whimsical distraction that helps offset the lobby's elemental harshness by inviting patrons to playfully swirl patterns and smooth wrinkles in the tactile material.

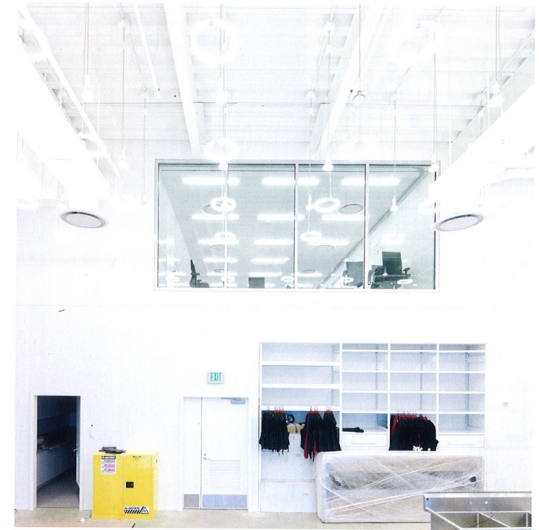
Climbing to the theater level, the payoff is worth the efforts imposed by switch-back ramps and a restrictive stairway, as ticketholders emerge to find themselves surrounded by the cityscape of downtown Dallas and the newly invigorated Arts District. Arriving in this circuitous manner heightens the experience, with the revelation taking hold that the Wily's inner sanctum is itself a stage on which audience members themselves play to the city beyond. Simultaneously, they observe the goings-on at street level through three walls of transparent glass. While black drapes enshroud the theater chamber during performances, the spectacle continues in full view after the final curtain call.

Also at the theater level is also where the architecture's internal—and gloriously unconventional—structure becomes visible from both inside and outside the building's nine stories.

Exposed at various points at the perimeter are six massive poured-in-place concrete columns—two rising vertically, and four others angled and joined as pairs—that work in concert with a mid-height steel belt truss to hold up the 132-foot-tall tower. Such skillful engineering negates the need for interior columns, an economy of structure that minimizes obstructions to sightlines in the theater. Again, there's off-stage dramatic artistry in the powerful supporting roles played by these visually arresting elements, and the building coyly allows glimpses at intervals as the columns extend upward.

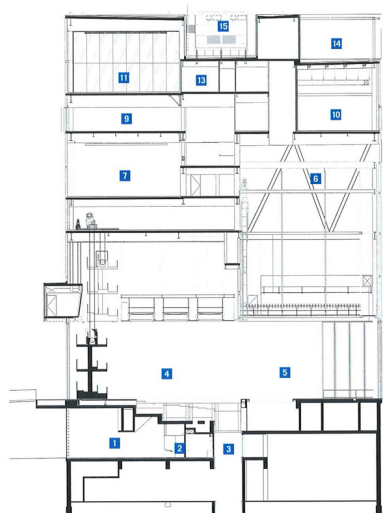
The point of all this architectural finesse is to enhance the stagecraft of the Wyly, to create a theater that operates with machine-like precision while expanding the artistic director's options. Specifically, Koolhaas and Prince-Ramus were asked to design a multifunction theater, one that could be rearranged quickly and inexpensively for at least three types of stage configurations—flat-floor, proscenium, and thrust. The work can be accomplished by a small crew of stagehands in only a few hours. Balconies are moveable and seating wagons can be shifted or stored away.

Speaking to reporters during the Wyly's media debut in mid-October, Prince-Ramus described its flexibility: "So now we've actually created a kind of theater machine that allows them, without requiring a lot of operational budget, to move between three configurations as well as any other configuration the artistic director might conceive of, as well as an auditorium that is very, very malleable in terms of scenic alteration." Continuing, the architect used a three-piece model of the building, with the pieces arranged horizontally on a table top. Then he arranged them vertically, saying, "...by stacking the building we were able to open up the perimeter of the auditorium, which is a very unique thing. Historically, in order to meet the acoustic requirements, in terms of keeping sound out, [and] light requirements, auditoriums are usually built behind two feet of concrete. The technology has advanced enough now that you can actually build a very, very high

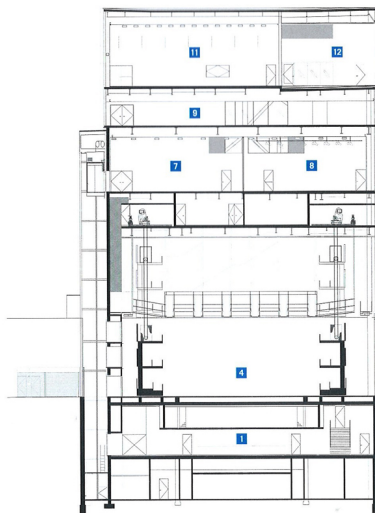


(opposite page) Balconies and floor seating can be reconfigured within hours by a small crew of stagehands.

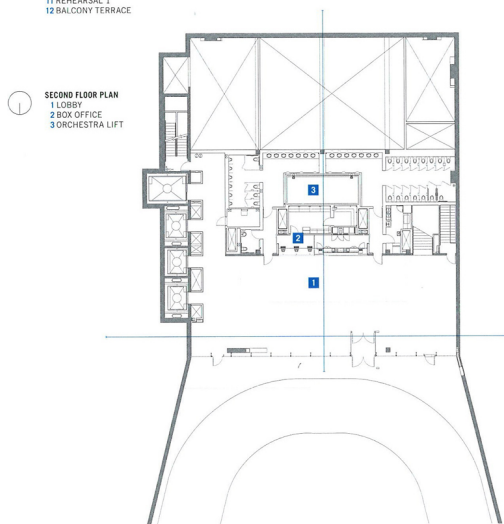
(top and bottom) Stacking the Wyly's internal workings created numerous views into adjacent spaces, such as the costume shop as seen from the education center. The conference room is positioned for peeks into the studio theater.



NORTH/SOUTH SECTION
 1 LOBBY
 2 BOX OFFICE
 3 ORCHESTRA LIFT
 4 SEATING, ORCHESTRA & PARTERRE
 5 MAIN STAGE
 6 GRID IRON
 7 PATRONS LOUNGE/REHEARSAL 3
 8 OFFICES
 10 COSTUME SHOP
 11 REHEARSAL 1
 12 STAGE MANAGEMENT
 13 BALCONY TERRACE
 14 COOLING TOWER



EAST/WEST SECTION
 1 LOBBY
 4 SEATING, ORCHESTRA & PARTERRE
 7 PATRONS LOUNGE/REHEARSAL 3
 8 REHEARSAL 2
 9 OFFICES
 11 REHEARSAL 1
 12 BALCONY TERRACE



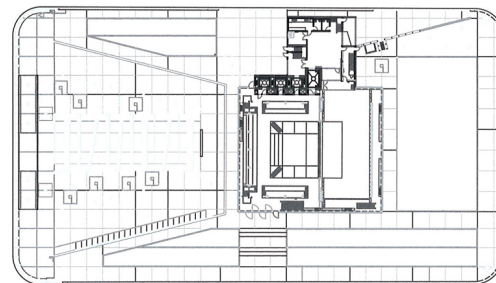
SECOND FLOOR PLAN
 1 LOBBY
 2 BOX OFFICE
 3 ORCHESTRA LIFT

RESOURCES UNIT PAVERS: Hanover Architectural Products (Dee Brown); RETAINING WALLS: Craig Olden; SITE, STREET, MALL FURNISHINGS: Marshalls, Landscape Forms; PLANTING ACCESSORIES: ValleyCrest; GRANITE: Cold Spring Granite (Dee Brown); METAL MATERIALS AND METAL DECKING: W&W Steel; RAILINGS, STAIRS, STEEL SUPPORT FRAMING: American Steel & Aluminum; LUMBER: Mid South Lumber; ARCHITECTURAL WOODWORK: WoodHaus; WATERPROOFING: Polyguard; WATER REPELLENTS: Stego Industries; METAL ROOFING: A. Zahner Company; METAL DOORS: Piper Weatherford (Performance Door); WOOD DOORS: Woodhaus, Dallas Door & Supply; ENTRANCES, METAL WINDOWS, GLAZED CURTAIN WALL: Oak Cliff Mirror & Glass; ALUMINUM TUBE FACADE CLADDING, PIVOT DOORS: Tisi Estructuras Metalicas; RAINSCREEN: A. Zahner Company; INTERIOR METAL PANELS, LIGHTED STAIRWELLS AND HANDRAILS: Total Design Manufacturing; GYPSUM BOARD FRAMING: Facility Construction Services; TILE: DalTile; INDOOR ATHLETIC SURFACING: ProGreen of Texas; FLUID APPLIED FLOORING: PPG; WALL COVERINGS: Rochester Magnets; CARPET: David Foster; FLOORING: PDL Designs; METAL FLOORING: Orozco; SIGNAGE: Environmental Signage Solutions dba ASI Signage Irving; WHEELCHAIR LIFT: Lift Aids; THEATRE SEATING: Moroso; THEATRE EQUIPMENT: SECOA



A single narrow stair leads from the lobby to the main theater. Sheets of metal mesh line the magnetized stairway walls, a whimsical touch that invites patrons to leave their mark as they ascend to the performance space.

SITE PLAN



and very, very secure acoustic enclosure using glass." The transparent walls also afford the artistic director the freedom to pivot open sections, allowing performers to enter or exit the theater space to serve the script. According to Prince-Ramus, the architects also responded to a request to help the artistic director "get the architecture out of the head of the audience." The design achieved the objective, he said, "to effectively, to the extent possible, remove the hand of the architect and supplant it with the hand of the artistic director."

Nonetheless, the architects show their hands in the organization of spaces above the theater, where interior windows open views to adjacent rooms set at a different floor level. Slightly disorienting to the first-time visitor, these internal peeks encourage cross-pollination of ideas among the members of the theatrical troupes.

While the Wyly presents itself as an object that can't be overlooked on the cityscape, REX/OMA's rigorous manipulation of structure and space is only fully apparent from within, behind its lustrous metal envelope where the hardware hums and the technicians operate the gadgetry to create art.

Stephen Sharpe is the editor of *Texas Architect*.