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Curtain lifts on \$70M Robinson Center revamp

By Eric E. Harrison
This article was published today at 5:45 a.m.

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PHOTO BY BENJAMIN KRAIN
Weldon Foxworth cleans the stage at Robinson Center in Little Rock before the unveiling of the renovated performance hall and the grand ballroom Thursday after "a 28-month intermission."

Explore the Robinson Center's new look in this 360-degree photo. Click and drag the image below to see the changes. Note that the image contains some distortion.

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The renovated Robinson Center, featuring a brand-new add-on conference facility, including a grand ballroom, and a totally rebuilt performance space, emerged Thursday at an unveiling by the Little Rock Convention and Visitors Bureau.

[PHOTOS: [Inside look at the Robinson Center's multimillion-dollar renovation](#)]

The \$70 million project, funded by a rededicated advertising and promotion tax, took a little over two years but was completed on time and on budget, officials said.

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Inside the newly-renovated Robinson Center
Inside the newly-renovated Robinson Center



This view shows the taller, narrower Robinson Center Performance Hall from the back row of the main level, facing the stage.



Acoustic design of Robinson Performance Hall

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The Arkansas Symphony Orchestra will inaugurate both spaces over the next 10 days, starting Saturday in the ballroom with its annual Opus Ball and proceeding Nov. 19-20 to the now-2,214-seat hall -- formerly known as Robinson Center Music Hall, now billed as Robinson Center Performance Hall -- with a pair of Masterworks concerts.

The concerts will feature four musical pieces designed to show off the hall's new acoustics, closing with an expanded orchestra (including offstage brass and an onstage organ) playing Ottorino Respighi's titanic tone poem *The Pines of Rome*.

Responsible for the acoustic design is Mark Holden, chairman and lead acoustic designer at Norwalk, Conn.-based Jaffe Holden Acoustics, a consulting firm with a branch office in Houston.

The goal from day one and design square one: create a multiuse space in which the acoustics could comfortably shift according to need, especially for the three organizations that have historically made Robinson their home -- the Arkansas Symphony; Celebrity Attractions, which provides touring Broadway shows; and Ballet Arkansas, which returns its annual *Nutcracker* performances to the hall Dec. 8-11.

"In 2010-11, we were invited to be on the team to do the very first study" on Robinson's acoustics, Holden said Thursday after the grand-opening ceremony.

The study identified serious deficiencies. Though the bones of the building were acoustically sound, and while Holden agreed that the space may have been state-of-the-art for the 1930s, the space was too wide, the balcony was too low, the seats were too far from the stage and the volume -- the open space for sound to travel and reverberate -- was also too low.

"We looked at the old girl and decided that this girl needed a lot of help to bring into the modern era," recalled Holden, who literally wrote the book on the subject -- *Acoustics of Multi-Use Performing Arts Centers*, published this year by Taylor & Francis Group.

His recommendation was to convert the hall into a 2,200-seat, multiuse facility with a taller, narrower structure, two balconies, side boxes and intricately shaped walls.

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The rebuild changed just about every surface in the hall, some of which still bore traces of the 1972 revamp from the original concert hall to a municipal auditorium. About the only remaining unaltered surface is the brick back wall of the stagehouse.

Holden said a great deal of attention has been paid to composition of wood, walls, light fixtures, carpeting and seats.

With more than 2,200 of the latter in the hall, he said, "any anomaly would be multiplied 2,200 times."

A major factor in altering the shape of the room involved lowering the stage 36 feet from its previous level -- the division between black paint and brick on the back wall shows precisely the previous stage level -- into what had been a combination exhibition hall and occasional boxing arena.

"At the time, that was a bit of a radical idea," Holden said.

Architect David Porter with the Little Rock firm of Polk Stanley Wilcox, working with New York-based architecture firm Ennead Architects, said Wednesday that the rebuild also involved removing a plaster subceiling (creating another 12 feet of height); the placement of sound-neutral, acoustically transparent metal scrims across the ceiling (to partially hide from view catwalks and other equipment); and 11,300 square feet of musical drapes that can be extended or subtracted depending on the needs of the performance (present for nonamplified concerts; retracted for amplification, such as rock concerts or Broadway shows).

The stage platform can extend forward into the first two rows of seating to move the string instruments forward under a hanging wooden forestage reflector.

Holden explained that it serves to increase the "visual and sonic" intimacy.

A movable, articulated wood orchestra shell across the back of the stage will enclose the remainder of the orchestra.

Holden said the two things that are unique about Robinson Center's rebuild: the insertion of a whole new hall within the "bones" of the existing room and the sound transparency of the two balconies, which are designed to bring sound forward without negative effects or covering the seats beneath them.

Part of the construction involves grills through which sound passes and recirculates to the space below.

The hall has undergone three days of audio-system and acoustic testing against specifications earlier this week to make sure it matches -- or, in this case, Holden said, actually exceeds in some respects -- the mathematics and physics of the design.

That involved, among other things, bursting a custom-designed balloon on the stage and measuring the sound through meters and digital recorders.

"It shows the hall is operating better than we thought in some ways," he added.

But the real test will come when the orchestra gets onto the stage, at which point, "we actually 'tune' the hall," said Arkansas Symphony Music Director Philip Mann, who has been involved with the acoustical aspects from the beginning.

"We'll have what's called an acoustical tuning rehearsal the week of the concert, the purpose of [which] will be to make subtle adjustments to the hall, in terms of acoustic draperies and things that either soak up sound or the absence of which let sound reverberate more.

"We have the ability to tweak things in terms of the positioning of the musicians on the stage -- forward, back, side to side -- use risers, not use risers, use risers of different heights," he said.

"We may discover that the basses project better if they're positioned in the middle of the orchestra, or if they're on the other side of the orchestra. We may find that the brass need to be all together or we separate the horns on the other side of the stage. We won't know until we pick up the instrument and play it, so to speak."

"The ear is the final arbiter of quality," Holden agreed. "It's one thing to match the math criteria and the physics, but in the end, has your soul been moved? Have we breathed life into your experience?"

Improved sightlines

The reconstruction has improved sightlines for all patrons, Mann said.

"Standing in the middle of the stage, there's not a single seat you can't clearly see."

Above the stage are all-new "electrics" and lighting systems and a combination of new and old battens on which to hang them and backdrops.

Behind the stage and in the "stage left" corridor are four private dressing rooms, three "chorus" dressing rooms (all of them equipped -- good news for performers -- with their own restrooms) and a "performers lounge" (aka "green room") at stage level, with an overflow dressing room one floor up.

Dressing-room space previously was in short supply and below the stage, requiring performers to climb up and down tight spiral staircases to reach the stage.

Backstage, the loading docks have been rebuilt at street/stage level with twice the capacity. This permits, for the first time, loading and unloading directly onto the stage.

That, along with expanded stage and wing space, now makes possible the booking of touring shows that Celebrity Attractions couldn't previously attract, including *Phantom of the Opera*, which will be onstage March 8-19, and *The Lion King*, coming in the spring of 2018.

Approved by voters

The building officially closed July 1, 2014, after voters in a December 2013 election agreed to rededicate an existing 2 percent advertising and promotion tax to fund the project.

The need for an acoustically up-to-date performance space was among the prime arguments over the years for either building a new music hall or rebuilding this one.

At Thursday's opening ceremony, officials referred to the new Robinson Center's "second act" after a "28-month intermission."

Attendees and speakers included Mann; Gretchen Hall, president and CEO of the Little Rock Convention and Visitors Bureau; Gov. Asa Hutchinson; and Little Rock Mayor Mark Stodola.

The conversion reduced the number of seats from 2,609 to 2,214; extending the stage for symphony concerts will eliminate another 70 or so seats.

The rebuild incorporated two tiers of balcony seating and removed the former mezzanine level. New electrical and mechanical systems and a series of catwalks have increased production capabilities; a mechanical lift in the orchestra pit makes it easier to move instruments and equipment.

Mann said the pit, where orchestras perform during musical stage productions, has been expanded.

"The previous pit held comfortably maybe 22 musicians," he explained.

Now "we can put 60 or 70 musicians in the pit and do truly grand opera -- imagine Puccini with a full string section -- or a collaboration with The Rep that showcases the orchestra, or a ballet with a full orchestra. I'm very excited about the possibilities of that."

The center also has a new street-level lobby and a lot more restrooms, with increased accessibility.

The so-called historic lobby, at the top of the rebuilt Markham Street limestone steps and accessed through the original pillars, has survived, with its terrazzo floor and stone walls cleaned and polished; two chandeliers are awaiting delivery.

Two original Art Deco lighting fixtures that had been in the concert hall ceiling are now in the public space between the lobby and the entrance to the second tier.

The facility also has a new permanent box office area that will be open weekdays, instead of just an hour or so before performances, and built-in concession and merchandise spaces.

A new elevator and two new entrance vestibules will enable patrons to reach the lobby directly from the adjacent parking garage. New patron drop-off areas will be available on the east and west sides of the hall. The landmark exterior limestone stairs on the Markham Street side have been rebuilt and waterproofed.

The building's original brick back walls now form the south wall of the conference center lobby.



And a number of architectural features high on what had been the building exterior, not easily visible to passers-by, are now prominently visible, including geometrical designs and some quasi-Aztec bas-relief faces, one surviving in its entirety (minus a bird's nest), one damaged and restored.

Information for this article was contributed by Brandon Riddle of Arkansas Online. Additional details about the project are available online at RobinsonCenter.com.

A Section on 11/11/2016

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