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02
2009

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POINTS OF VIEW

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MUSEUM OF THE
ROMAN THEATER
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Three: BROAD STAGE

Santa Monica, California

Renzo Zecchetto creates a performing arts center that captures the laid-back vibe of Southern California.

By Clifford A. Pearson

Architect: Renzo Zecchetto Architects—Renzo Zecchetto, principal; Michael Stebbins, project manager; Lari Hashimoto, Danielle Yafuso, assistant project managers; Taylor Hsiao, Daryl Maguire, Minya Radenkovich, Keri Morton, Mathew Nelson, Sara Loe, Larry Biggs, Richard Song, project team

Engineers: Nabih Youssef & Associates (structural); Mazzetti & Associates (m/e/p); KPF Consulting Engineers (civil)

Consultants: Jaffe Holden Acoustics (acoustics); Newson Brown Acoustics (sound isolation); Fisher Dachs Associates (theatrical)

General contractor: FTR International

Size: 32,000 square feet

Cost: \$34 million

Completion date: September 2008

SOURCES

Basaltina stone cladding:

IMT Italian Marble & Tile

Curtain wall: W&W Glass

Steel windows: Hope's Windows

Skylights: O'Keeffe's

Acoustical ceiling: BASWA Acoustic

Suspension grid: USG

Window coverings: MechoShade

Downlights: ERCO; Rambusch;

Indy Lighting

Exterior lights: ERCO; Simes;

Poulsen; Lumux

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For westside residents in Los Angeles, the Eli and Edythe Broad Stage in Santa Monica offers a welcome alternative to fighting traffic en route to a downtown theater. Owned by Santa Monica College but serving both school and community audiences, the theater complex juggles a range of tasks. On one level, it provides remarkably sophisticated theater-arts facilities for a community college. On another, it stands as a symbol of a blossoming cultural scene in Santa Monica (and the "growing Balkanization of the L.A. area" due to traffic congestion, as Christopher Hawthorne noted in the *Los Angeles Times* on October 11). "Santa Monica is a beach town," states Dale Franzen, director of the Broad Stage. "We're not a black-tie kind of place." But with movie stars, famous artists, and big-time developers living in the area, it's not Podunk either.

Program

Funded by private donations and bond measures passed by the cities of Santa Monica and Malibu, the project cost \$34 million to build and serves many masters. It comprises the new 499-seat Broad Stage, a black-box theater in a renovated building next door, and a variety of rehearsal, teaching, and support spaces in the old and new structures. The main theater had to accommodate a range of performances – from opera and music to dance and drama. With Franzen, a former opera singer, as its director and actor Dustin



The theater's south elevation faces busy Santa Monica Boulevard.

Hoffman as its board chairman, everyone expected the Broad Stage to provide excellent acoustics and a great place to watch theater.

Solution

"We started with the idea of an acoustically superb space," states Renzo Zecchetto, who established his firm in Santa Monica in 1990 after working with Charles Moore for 10 years. "From the beginning, we designed from the inside out," he adds. With Italy's "horseshoe" opera houses in mind, Zecchetto kept the dimensions of the theater fairly intimate (74 feet long and 72 feet wide) and tucked boxes at either end to bring audiences close to the performers. But he gave the theater a grand stage – 94 feet wide and 36 feet deep with a proscenium opening 47 feet wide and 24 feet high – to accommodate large productions.

Collaborating with Jaffe Holden

Acoustics, Zecchetto developed a system of convex surfaces – some finished with CNC-milled mahogany panels and others with plaster – that combine early and secondary sound reflections and soften the acoustics. Zecchetto likens the plaster-coated sections curving above the seats to a peeled orange, while the mahogany forms at either end of the balcony recall the hulls of a ship. Motorized drapes hanging from the ceiling adjust acoustics to handle different types of performances.

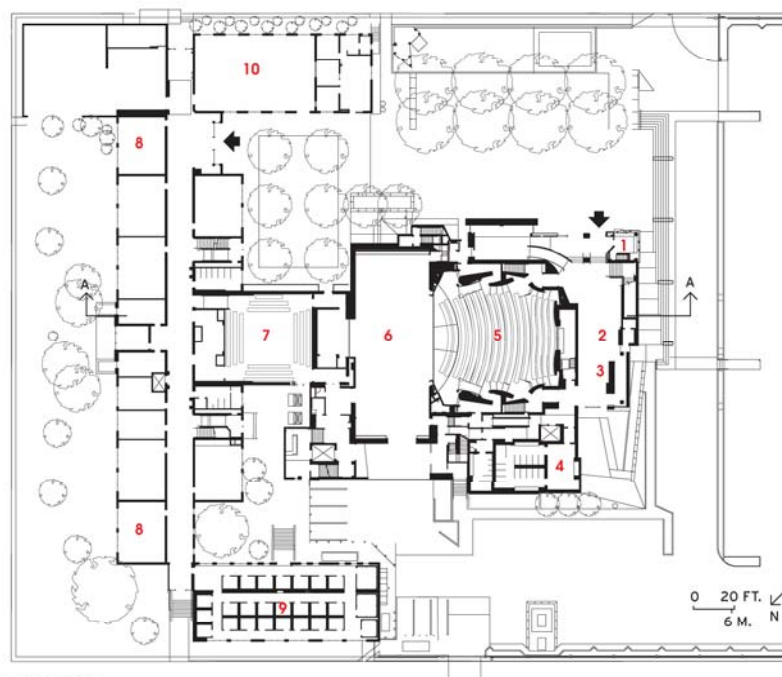
Reducing noise was as important as creating a rich sound. So the designers brought air in from below the seats, instead of using noisy equipment to force it down from above. They also pulled mechanical equipment out of the hall, housing it in a set of white boxes expressed on the exterior of the building.

To get double use of the impressive fly tower with its 37

To buffer the theater (below) from noise, the architect set it back behind a glass-enclosed lantern and housed mechanical equipment in separate white boxes (right). The lobby (far right) is naturally ventilated.

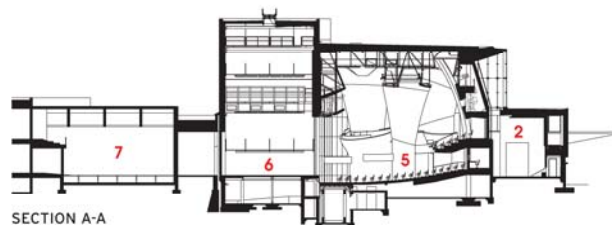


1. Ticket office
2. Lobby
3. Concession
4. Women's lounge
5. Theater
6. Stage
7. Black-box theater
8. Classrooms
9. Rehearsal
10. Administration



MAIN FLOOR

Curved mahogany and plaster surfaces shape the acoustics in the main hall (below). The theater seats 499 but expands to 539 with chairs above the orchestra pit.



SECTION A-A



counterweight line sets for scenery, Zecchetto placed the 99-seat black-box theater on the other side of the tower. So the small theater could work independently of the main one, he provided access to it from a courtyard serving the classroom wing in the existing building. With little money for renovating this structure, the architect dressed up the entry with tall banners strung on simple metal frames projecting off the old facade.

To wrap the new building housing the main theater, Zecchetto used mostly composite-wood panels and glass on the east, where people enter, and dark-gray basalt stone from Italy on the long south elevation. A glass lantern tops the composition, revealing the warm mahogany on the main wall and ceiling in the upper lobby of the theater. Below the lantern, a large canopy whose underside is surfaced with composite-wood panels turns the corner, tying the wood-and-glass east facade to the mostly stone south facade. A poured-concrete frame carries most of the building's structural loads and supports a steel roof.

Although Zecchetto started designing the building 10 years ago, before sustainability became such an important issue, he designed the two-story lobby to capture breezes from the west, eliminating the need for air-conditioning here. Inside the lobby, he used mahogany and basaltina on the walls and brought them together with polished limestone on the floors.

Commentary

The new Broad Stage provides a handsome home to an array of theater facilities serving a disparate set of audiences and performers. If its east and south elevations don't come together in a totally graceful manner, you can blame it on a complex program. However, setting the building behind a sea of parking on the south – the main public elevation – is a bigger problem. Zecchetto says the client hopes to put the parking below grade someday and provide a landscape park above. But you wonder if there wasn't a way of getting the building closer to Santa Monica Boulevard on the south and tucking the parking behind it on the north. ■