

JONES HALL RENEWAL

Project Statement

October 20, 2016

Summary

An example of mid-20th-century modernism and recognized by the AIA with its highest honor to an individual building in 1967, the Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts was designed by Caudill Rowlett Scott and completed in 1966. It is the permanent home of the Houston Symphony and the Society for the Performing Arts. In recent years, the much-loved Hall has struggled: the existing building does not meet the contemporary needs of its two resident companies in terms of patron experience, operational efficiency and physical accessibility. The Symphony, one of the Hall's anchors, recently explored the possibility of moving to a new venue; however, its identity is intimately connected to Jones Hall and ultimately the company decided to remain. However, to serve the performing arts community (patrons, musicians, administrators, staff) - indeed to survive - the Hall must change. Architectural interventions to improve the Hall must be sensitive to the existing building fabric, to the building's placement on its site and in its urban context, and on users' memories and expectations.

Jones Hall reflects the commitment Jesse H. Jones and Houston Endowment made to building a vibrant community. Jones was Houston's preeminent developer during the first half of the 20th century, a philanthropist, a civic leader and one of the most powerful members of President Franklin Roosevelt's administration. He knew thriving cultural institutions strengthened communities, and he wanted Houston to have its first state-of-the-art performing arts hall. Some years after Jones passed away, the trustees of Houston Endowment—the philanthropic foundation established in 1937 by Jones and his wife, Mary Gibbs Jones—realized Jones's vision by building Jones Hall and giving it to the people of Houston. It is located on the block previously occupied by the City Auditorium, the site preferred by Jesse Jones.

Mid-Century Modernism

Jones Hall catalyzed the performing arts in Houston and encouraged the development of the Theater District. That, combined with its expression of the architecture of a particular cultural moment, makes the building significant. While the building is *of Houston* in its civic importance, it is exemplary of the universality of mid-century modern architecture in America. The conviction shared by Jesse Jones and Houston Endowment that the arts exert a positive influence on the community, coupled with the pervading optimism at mid-century, found its expression in architecture.

Broadly, mid-century modernism describes the period in architecture, furniture and graphic design from the mid-1930s to the late 1960s. Although it had its origin in Europe between the wars (International Style), American mid-century modernism is largely a post WWII phenomenon. Embracing the transformation of building materials and construction methods of an earlier time, it was a time of experimentation and went further, reflecting the progressive aspirations of the immediate post-war years, a belief in the future, the idea that architecture could be a vehicle for social change and a better society, democratic and inclusive. This

hopeful lens on the world and expression of positive values took form in redefined space, expression of function, honesty in construction technologies and structural systems.

Across building typologies, these aspirations were translated into bricks and mortar. Characteristic of the singular identities of mid-century modern architecture are unornamented, streamlined forms: simple volumes; smooth, flat planes whether of reinforced concrete, stone, or glass; steel skeletons and the universal space made possible by steel construction; the extensive use of glass to create a seamless integration of exterior and interior spaces; integration with nature and the landscape.

Brief Description of Architectural and Cultural Significance

Occupying an entire city block, the Hall is distinguished by its eight-story-high colonnade and inset white marble-clad curved facade. Inclusive of its solid attic story, the building rises 120 feet. The building anchors its site. The curved planes of the exterior envelope are a counterpoint to the rectilinear quality of the colonnade, which is built out to the edges of the site. Although it appears continuous, the exterior envelope is in fact, three planes that slide past one another surmounted by a clerestory range.

Architect Caudill Rowlett Scott (CRS) was a Houston-based firm that relocated to the City in 1958 after auspicious beginnings in Austin in 1946. In the vanguard of architectural thinking at the time, the firm achieved national prominence for complex projects, including Jones Hall and became the largest architecture/engineering firm in the United States by the early 1980s. Known for technically complicated buildings, for its rigorous research-based predesign analysis, its collaborative team approach as well as for its individual partners (among them William Caudill and John Rowlett who educated succeeding generations of architects at Texas A&M), CRS achieved great distinction for concert halls. Jones Hall was its first concert hall and a national AIA Honor Award winner. Among the distinctions of the design was its flexibility: designed in 1963 as a convertible theater, for 20 years it accommodated the Houston Symphony, Houston Grand Opera, Houston Ballet and the Society for the Performing Arts. The unique movable ceiling and walls, which still operate, adjusted acoustics and auditorium size as needed.

Along with Richard Lippold's monumental sculpture, the building's relationship to its site—with its rhythmic colonnade establishing the perimeter, singular sculptural form, lack of surface ornamentation, material palette and open plan—place it firmly in the canon of mid-century modern architecture.

The Issue

A huge stock of mid-century modern buildings built primarily in the 1960s by a range of architects including Louis Kahn, Wallace K. Harrison, Max Abramovitz, Edward Durrell Stone, Paul Rudolph, Gordon Bunshaft, Eero Saarinen, Mies van der Rohe, et al is coming of age. Many of these buildings have outlived their original uses and must be repurposed. Many are experiencing the natural effects of age and must be preserved. Many have been jeopardized by interventions in the past fifty years that should be reversed. Many must be expanded to serve new uses and ensure their future. Many require that new structural, mechanical, electrical, data systems be introduced. Notwithstanding the dire need to revitalize these buildings architecturally and often

adapt them to new purposes to ensure a sustainable future, the very characteristics that establish their identities pose significant challenges in connection with necessary interventions.

Like other mid-century modern examples - the TWA Terminal, the New York Hall of Science, Washington DCs Martin Luther King Public Library, Bell Laboratories, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts Alice Tully Hall, New York State Theater - the design of Jones Hall is emblematic of a moment in time and a specific purpose. The building is significant architecturally and culturally - an important marker of Houston's recent past. But since its completion in 1966, audiences have grown, technical demands are greater, performing art forms have expanded, and while built flexibly, the building no longer is able to serve its higher purpose. Agility and evolution are critical if a goal of preservation is to ensure that our past accomplishments continue to serve their communities even in the face of monumental advances in technology, the advent of social structures that challenge traditional ways of understanding community, the sophistication of users etc.

Among the elements that compromise Jones Hall's ability to accommodate expanded and inventive programming and to support contemporary theatergoers' expectations are:

- physical and visual/virtual inaccessibility: ADA non-compliance and impermeability of the exterior envelope;
- insufficient administrative space to serve its three resident companies;
- improved circulation throughout including the need for sound and light locks into the house
- lack of patron amenities;
- inadequate loading from the street;
- lack of large scale lobby floor space;
- new house chamber for dramatically increased improved acoustics, ADA compliance and better sight lines;
- additional practice / rehearsal space; and
- complete replacement of outdated mechanical, electrical, plumbing and fire protection systems.

Solution

For Jones Hall to retain its place in the public consciousness as a civic anchor and cultural destination, to function as a state-of-the-art performance venue, providing stage and musical performances to Houston's citizenry and beyond, and to compete with other cultural destinations, it must change.

Ennead Approach

Underlying our approach to projects involving an existing building with an iconic identity is the belief that planning and design may be employed to reinvigorate the structure without compromising its historic integrity. Our renowned interventions in historic precincts and additions to individual landmarks respect existing conditions while forging new identities. In his seminal work, *The Architecture of Additions*, Paul Spencer Byard cites many of our buildings as superlative examples of inventive, yet sympathetic, additions to landmark and historic buildings.

Our extensive experience with the renovation and expansion of modern buildings proceeds from the premise that modern architecture deserves the same attention and preservation as that of earlier historical periods. Our work in these buildings always begins with a thorough evaluation and analysis of the existing conditions, which serves as a point of departure for both formal and systems interventions, no matter the scale or extent.

Our ultimate goal is to ensure that Jones Hall remains a vital, living, state-of-the-art participant in the cultural life of today by optimizing operations, enhancing the user experience and reinforcing its inclusive public mission. Our approach, which is founded in both a sensitivity to the original design intentions and an acute understanding of the disjunction between those intentions and the actual operation of the building for its users, distills and follows the "organizing" principles of the original design and enhances the building with contemporary elements. Our solution is based on increasing both literal and experiential accessibility and optimizing operations.

Proposed Changes to Jones Hall

Urban condition: The relationship between the building and its immediate urban context is unaltered. The colonnade, whose scale and rhythm defines the appearance of the building and its presence on the site, remains intact. Further, the strength of the colonnade in defining the identity of the building mitigates interventions in the exterior envelope.

Theater Experience: The architects of the original building intended to connect the building with the City, heightening anticipation for theatergoers and providing passersby with visual cues as to the activities within. New glass enclosures provide space for patron amenities and maximize views in and out, extending the transparency achieved by the monumental glass curtainwall at the entry. New windows in the stone enclosure enhance visual accessibility, extending the theater experience to the street. The curtainwall, clerestories and transparency achieved by new glass enclosures and openings combine to mark the building as a beacon, drawing people to it and displaying the performing arts to the city. Notwithstanding the penetrations in the stone enclosure, the overall form of the curved planes sliding past one another is preserved.

Visual and Physical Accessibility: Interventions in the lobby enhance usability and accessibility and increase opportunities for patrons to "see and be seen," an essential element of the theater experience. A flat floor replaces the "split levels" of the original lobby, reinforcing the open plan and furthering the goal of universal space. The theater will be fully ADA compliant.

Operations: A discreet rooftop addition provides essential support space. The slim profile of the addition's roof, which hovers above the new administrative floor, harmonizes with the original building, minimizing its visual impact.

Loading: The speed/efficiency with which shows can load into a building is critical to the economics of the theater, its operational viability and production quality. Proposed changes to Jones Hall's loading dock are directed principally to correcting a flaw in the initial design that forces trucks to jut out into the street blocking traffic when parked at the dock. These conditions present a burden on operations that could limit the ability to book certain productions: times during which operators are permitted to load into the hall are restricted; once a

truck is at the dock, the tractor must be detached from the trailer so that traffic can pass; and each time there is a load-in, the Hall must secure a permit and have a police officer for traffic control. The proposed loading dock will provide the ability to have a truck completely off the street when loading without the need to disconnect the tractor. The proposed dock also allows for expanded possibility for parking a broadcast truck off the street in a location that will allow greater functionality.