

## **ELLIE CAULKINS OPERA HOUSE: BELOVED NEOCLASSICAL PERFORMING ARTS VENUE**

### **What design elements do you think are important for a performing arts venue?**

The Neoclassical Denver Municipal Auditorium was constructed in response to Mayor Robert Speer and other Denver boosters' desire for a large auditorium, as early as 1899, when voters approved a \$400,000 bond for its construction. It took another bond issue in 1904 and much argument over location before the cornerstone was laid in 1907. The official opening was July 5, 1908. The auditorium was located in the historic downtown neighborhood, among other prominent government, public and cultural buildings (Noel and Zimmer, 2008).

### **Structure**

The original structure featured four cupolas on the roof, and 7,000 light bulbs highlighted the pediments, domes, cornices and corners. Terra cotta symbols of music and theatre decorated the outside pilasters. The interior boasted a 246-by-145-foot hall, separate meeting chambers for men and women, dressing rooms, an orchestra pit, a removable running track and a dance floor. The hall could be converted to a theatre with a ten-ton proscenium arch that spanned 60 feet wide and 50 feet high, and was stored in the ceiling. In just four hours the giant hall could be transformed into a theatre with over 3,000 seats, complete with balconies that were brought out from the walls (Voelz Chandler, 2013).

The 2,100 seats in the current performance space are arranged in four tiers, and the farthest seat from the stage rests 113 feet away. In order to provide the best acoustics possible, the theatre is designed in a lyric shape, and many surfaces are cherry veneer over plaster. The Figaro seatback titling system allows audience members to see either English or Spanish translations of opera libretti during performances.

### **Renovations**

The building was closed in 1955 for renovations that provided a fixed-seat theatre with fewer and larger seats. Windows were bricked in and many of the Neoclassical elements were stripped away to make it more modern. It reopened in 1956 and was the site for touring Broadway shows, orchestra concerts, ballet presentations and other large attractions.

In 2001, the exterior was renamed the Quigg Newton Denver Memorial Auditorium. Shortly after, in 2002, Denver voters approved a proposal to restore the outdated and unsafe auditorium theatre, which was designated as a landmark by both Denver and the National Register of Historic Places, and to create an opera house within its walls. Funds for the restoration came from a prior \$25 million general obligation bond, an existing seat tax, the Colorado Historical Society's gaming tax preservation funds and private donations. Exterior stone and trim were repaired or replaced, some of the light bulbs were reinstalled, and the entrance was moved from 14<sup>th</sup> Street to the Galleria of the Denver Performing Arts Complex, complete with the original wooden door and window frames. Preservationist Rick Geiser of Semple Brown was in charge of the exterior modifications. The 14<sup>th</sup> Street entrance was replaced with new plinths that exactly matched the original ones, and most of the bricked-in windows were returned to their original state (History Colorado Center).

Semple Brown Design, with lead architect Peter Lucking, was hired to rebuild the gutted interior of the Auditorium Theatre, now designated the Ellie Caulkins Opera House, as a result of a \$7 million donation by George Caulkins, in honor of his wife. The original steel columns at either end of the lobby were left exposed. Glass railings border the balcony walkways, which look over a Dale Chihuly blown glass chandelier. After being restored and exposed, the original red sandstone foundation provides the inner wall of the Chambers Grant Salon on the lower level.

### **Architect**

The original Denver Auditorium Building architect, Robert Willison, was born in Scotland and came to Denver in 1890, and eventually joined the firm of Frank E. Edbrooke in 1896. At the time of the construction of the building, he was the City Architect.

Semple Brown Design, who designed the renovated building, won the Award of Honor from Historic Denver, Inc., in 1989. Sarah Semple Brown was the principal designer for the Ellie Caulkins Opera House, Peter Lucking designed the theatre, Bryan Schmidt was the project architect and Mary Kay Sunset was the interior design principal.

### **Uses**

The Ellie Caulkins Opera House is the home of Opera Colorado and Colorado Ballet, local professional performance groups. Opera Colorado was formed in 1983, and usually presents two operas a year, with four or five performances each. The Ellie became its permanent venue when it opened in 2005. Colorado Ballet evolved from the Colorado Concert Ballet in 1978. Besides its annual *The Nutcracker* every December, the company presents full-length story ballets as well as other dance works. The stage at the Ellie was designed with dance in mind.

The Studio Loft is another performing space that doubles as a reception hall, and was later created on the third floor of the building. Public access is gained through a canopied entrance on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, near Champa. This venue is used by Opera Colorado for rehearsals, public panels and small group performances, and is leased for use by other groups (Denver Center for the Performing Arts).

### **References**

Noel, T. and Zimmer, A. 2008. *Showtime: Denver's Performing Arts, Convention Centers & Theater District*. Denver: Denver's Division of Theatres and Arenas.

Voelz Chandler, M. 2013. *Guide to Denver Architecture*. Denver: Fulcrum Group.

History Colorado Center.

Denver Center for the Performing Arts.