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Performing Arts

On January 16, 1770, the 13-year-old Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart performed a concert at what is now called the Teatro Bibiena in Mantua, Italy. At that time, the theater was only a year old, having just been completed in an early Rococo style and with a bell-shaped floor plan by the architect Antonio Galli Bibiena. Not long after the concert, which was a resounding success, Leopold — little Wolfgang's father — wrote a letter to his wife, which included the following description of the theater on that night:

I wish you could have seen the place where the concert was held, namely, what's called the Teatrino della Academia Filarmonica. Never in my whole life have I seen anything more beautiful of its kind; and as I hope that you are assiduously keeping all my letters, I shall describe it to you in due course. It's not a theater but a hall with boxes, like an opera house; where the stage should be there is a raised section for the orchestra, and behind the orchestra is another gallery, like boxes, for the audience. The crowd of people — the shouting, clapping, noise, and the bravo upon bravo — in short, the general shouting and the admiration shown by the listeners is something I can't begin to describe to you.

Well, clearly, the architecture of a performing arts space becomes part of the performance. The two projects in this portfolio section — one at UT Rio Grande Valley in Edinburg, the other at the Greenhill School in Addison — show that a superlative performance hall requires more than good acoustics and clear sightlines: The juxtaposition of audience and performers, the arrival and the procession into the hall, the way the building interacts with its surroundings all factor into the experience and elevate the drama of human life itself.

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Greenhill School Performing Arts Center, Addison

Addison

Weiss/Manfredi

Ron Stelmarski, AIA



Orchestra, Choir, Band, Mariachi

Page's design for the new Performing Arts Complex at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in Edinburg responds playfully to the campus' 1970s architectural vocabulary while opening up to the wider community and representing the region's predominately Hispanic culture.

by Aaron Seward

The recent consolidation of the University of Texas at Brownsville (UTB) and University of Texas Pan American (UTPA) in Edinburg to form The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) didn't go off without its share of controversy. Most of it, however, centered on the naming of a new mascot. Supporters of UTPA, the larger of the two legacy schools, were adamant about keeping their beloved Bucky the Bronc; whereas proponents of UTB, formerly proud home of the Ocelots, favored a clean slate for the merged academic institution. In the end, the UT System Board of Regents approved a new mascot, the Vaqueros, which perhaps better signifies the region's predominately Hispanic culture, but was nonetheless decried as culturally insensitive, racist, and sexist. Well, this just goes to show how seriously people in Texas take sports. It also serves as an illuminating bit of context for an architectural project that does a much better, if quieter, job of bringing the two schools together while connecting them to their community and placing them within the global cultural discussion: the UTRGV Performing Arts Complex (PAC), designed by Page.

ALL PHOTOS BY DROR BALDINGER, AIA



Facing *The glass clad lobby creates an open, welcome entry to the PAC, serving as a gateway to the campus and expressing its role as an amenity to the wider community.*

This page clockwise *The large cutouts in the heavy masonry walls serve to bring daylight into the circulation spaces. Each of the four main practice rooms is acoustically tuned for the type of music performed there. Page incorporated patches of color into the building and took a playful approach to the window penetrations. The music of Mozart was a guiding inspiration of the architecture.*



The lobby is spacious and inviting, designed to accommodate events. The generous stair landing can serve as a stage for performances and speeches.

Sited on Edinburg's University Drive at the southeast corner of the former UTPA campus, the PAC comprises a 1,000-seat performance hall; rehearsal rooms for orchestra, choir, band, and mariachi, each with its own acoustical treatment; a large, glass-enclosed lobby that can be used for receptions and other events; and — in two renovated existing buildings — smaller practice rooms, classrooms, and offices for staff and faculty. In addition to providing facilities for the UTRGV music program, the PAC is home to the Valley Symphony Orchestra & Chorale and hosts traveling performance groups. Far more than serving the university, the PAC is a community resource whose state-of-the-art performance hall can handle anything from a chamber ensemble to a Broadway show. The \$42.7 million project — which was pushed through by passionate supporters during an era of belt-tightening for the UT system, before the shale boom filled its coffers with tax dollars, when most of what was approved were science, technology, math, and engineering projects — is also a happy sign that, in the Valley, the arts matter.

The PAC replaces an older performing arts facility that occupied the same site, which was designed by now-deceased Houston architect Kenneth Bentsen. Bentsen, who was born in Mission, also master-planned the UTPA campus and designed nearly 20 of its buildings. An admirer of Louis Kahn's work in South Asia — the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad and the National Assembly of Bangladesh in Dhaka — Bentsen established a vocabulary of heavy masonry walls with large geometric cutouts that performs well in the subtropical climate. His performance hall was well liked, but it had its problems — including chronic flooding and a very steep seating rake — and so the decision was made to replace it outright.

Page's building takes its cues from Bentsen's Kahn-inspired vocabulary, but gives it a playful twist with a less-regimented use of large cutouts and the introduction of color. The mariachi practice studio, for example, is entirely clad in glazed red brick, a real departure from the light brown brick that predominates on campus. It's also a more open building than was Bentsen's. The aforementioned glass-enclosed lobby is a

welcoming gesture to the community and functions as a gateway to the campus. Inside, the architects used the cutouts as clerestories to bring daylight into the circulation areas. Page worked with New York-based acoustical consultant Jaffe Holden and theatrical consultant Schuler Shook to design the performance hall itself, whose stage features wings that reach out to embrace the audience for mariachi and ballet folklórico performances. These wings can also be used as premium seating for orchestral recitals. An acoustical system of curtains concealed behind wooden screens in the ceiling allows the hall to be tuned specifically to whatever is happening on stage.

When the PAC opened for its grand premier in April 2015, the program included everything from mariachi and ballet folklórico to symphony and guitar ensemble. Many of the performances featured UTPA and UTB students — Broncs and Ocelots — on stage together for the first time. It was a fitting moment of unity, made possible by the universal languages of music and architecture.

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