They Finally Got-It Right: Architecture
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New York Times (1923-Current file); Oct 21, 1973; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
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Architecture

They Finally Got It Right

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

AKRON, Ohio

THEY got it all together in Akron. The trials and errors of a 15-year performing arts center building boom in the United States have finally produced a superb structure—the Edwin J. Thomas Performing Arts Hall, which had its gala opening last week.

It happened in Akron, not in New York, where the performance halls of Lincoln Center look, and are, provincial by comparison, or in any of the cities that call themselves the country's cultural capitals. This is a building of which any world capital could be proud.

Located on the campus of the University of Akron, a stone's throw across the railroad tracks (which the university hopes to bridge) to the city's downtown, Thomas Hall is a spectacularly beautiful job. Its superior design is the result of 13 years of collaborative effort on similar projects by theater designer George Izenour and acoustician Vern Knudsen, and the lessons learned from the ambitious Jesse Jones Hall in Houston by the architects, Caudill, Rowlett, Scott.

Everybody's learned a lot. "The theater of experience," a distinguished drama critic colleague of ours calls it, with not a little irony, and adds, "At last they've got it right."

Architecturally, this is a strong and sophisticated work, conceived with unusual care. It is a structure of essentials, in which nothing is there without a reason, and all the elements are utilized rationally and creatively, for a powerful effect. Dalton, van Dijk, Johnson and Partners of Cleveland worked with Charles Lawrence of Caudill, Rowlett, Scott, and Ian MacGregor was the university client as vice president for planning.

Acoustically, we cannot pretend to judge, but the hall contains, and in fact consists of, one of the most flexible acoustical systems yet devised, and there were happy faces among the experts at the opening performances of the Akron Symphony. That all-important factor still remains to be evaluated fully with continued use. And whether inevitable compromises have had to be made for a multi-use structure meant to accommodate music, dance, drama and a full grab-bag of cultural events also remains to be seen in practice.

Programmatically, the building raises all the questions that these centers habitually pose, of how to match the facilities with arts resources, although as part of the university it will also be used for educational purposes, which eases the strain. Financially, it will surely be no stranger to the economic problems that haunt the performing arts and their physical plants and are the cultural cross of the communities that have taken on these extravagant centers. But Akron's resources are considerable; this is a $13.9-million hall and its sponsors are feeling no pain. Akron desperately wanted this building.

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It is a big, as well as an expensive, building, providing a 3,000-seat auditorium. Like other big performance halls in smaller cities—Greater Akron numbers about 250,000—it is designed as a multi-use, multi-form facility.

A striking hung ceiling of steel sections that move in mitered catenary curves can cut off parts of the house to make it serve smaller audiences of 2,400 or 900 people. It takes an incredibly short 15 minutes to make one of these changes; we know, we watched. The cables from which the ceiling is hung are counterweighted to lighten it, so that the 44-ton ceiling is balanced by 47 tons of weights, which hang, as 27 massive chrome-plated steel cylinders, in the soaring lobby. Their polished geometric forms, suspended in 90 feet of space, surpass any sculpture.

The building is poured concrete, its weighty mass lightened by entrance walls of glass on two sides, butted and joined without metal, in the European fashion. This crystalline delicacy juxtaposed to solid walls makes a facade of great visual elegance, in which boldness and delicacy strike a breathtaking balance.

From the outside, the angled structure—the result of an asymmetrical plan — appears to be folded into terraced steps and plantings which lift people from a fountain below to entrances on several levels above, with parking tucked underneath. Nothing is static. The upper and lower plazas, banked tiers of flowers and patterns of movement, turn this architecture into a multidimensional solution through extremely skillful site planning and the treatment of the act of entrance as a complex and ceremonial sequence of spatial experiences.

Inside, the lobbies are also a spatial experience. This is just about the handsomest public area to be seen anywhere, barring some not-quite-appropriate furniture. Three continuous lobbies flank the auditorium and stage house, and they can accommodate all 3,000 occupants of the hall at one time.

The focus of this splendid space is the clerestory lit-main lobby that rises to the full height of the 90-foot wall which contains and insulates the whole complex against the bordering railroad. Bridges, balconies and stairs lead to this great room from orchestra, grand tier and balcony levels, and the movement of people is like an architectural fugue. Dominating the space are the shining giant cylinders of the counterweights with their intricate pattern of wires and pulleys. A lower lobby continues down steps, under the grand tier, and up again to open full height on the other side.

It is space—functional and formal space sensitively controlled—that is the chief ingredient here; beyond that there is the restrained effect of white plaster, discreetly used pale gumwood facing, and vermilion red (not "theater" red) carpeting that sends a warm reflective glow to all surfaces, including the splendid steel "sculpture." See this play of scale, movement and color and sense the public and esthetic presence here, and then think of the big, banal box that stretches across the Kennedy Center's halls as a public foyer for depressing contrast. And if you haven't had enough, think of the kitsch of New York's Metropolitan Opera House.

Inside, the auditorium breaks many rules. It is fan-shaped, rather than the more conventional rectangle, a 30-degree hall in which no seat is more than 132 feet from the stage. How the far side seats will work in terms of vision and intimacy for drama is still to be tested. There is a noticeable lack of traditional acoustic treatment of broken surfaces, wood and fabric.

What one sees is a three-level sweep of vermilion seats in so-called "continental" arrangement, topped by a floating abstraction of a ceiling consisting of 3,700 steel sections hung invisibly on 20 miles of wire and cable in natural catenary curves, looking like an undulating black-veined white mosaic. Computers control the movement that cuts off the hall's back sections. Lighting, indirect except over the stage, shines up from balcony and tier edges, reflecting softly from the irregular ceiling.

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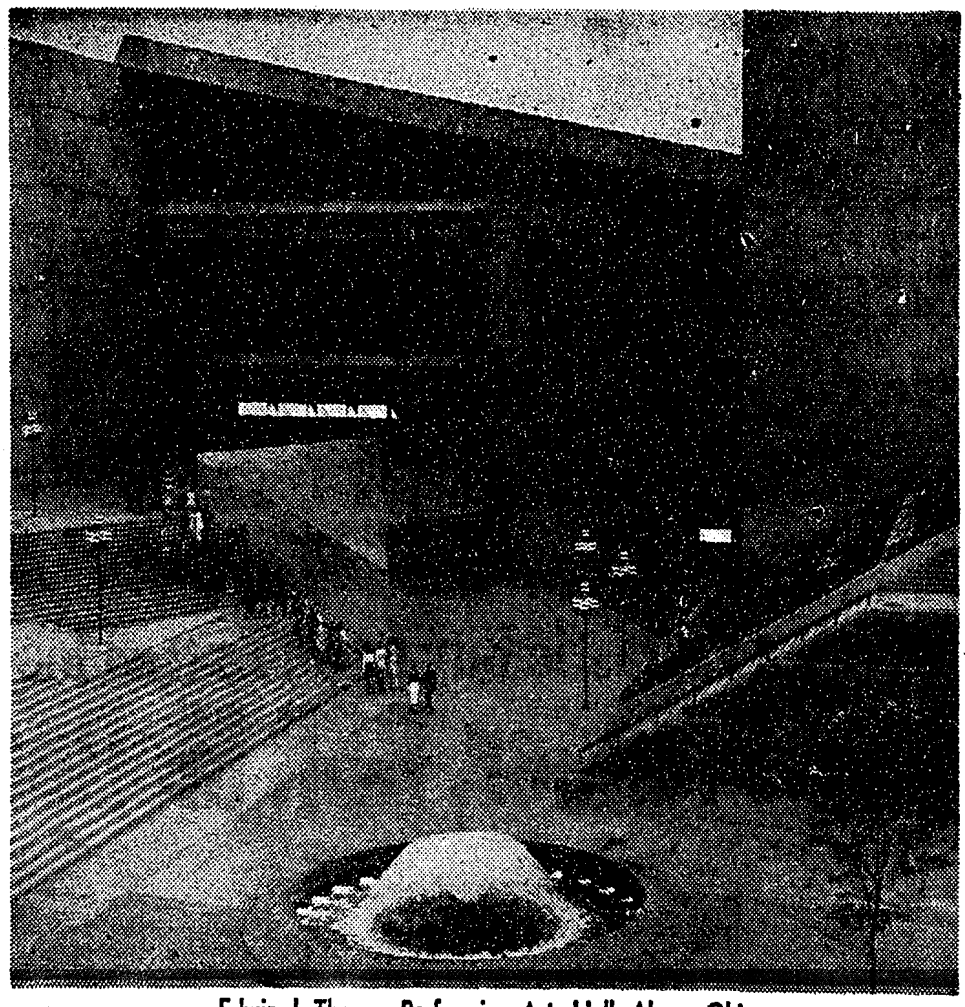
Below the patterned white ceiling, and surrounding the vermilion seats, are plain, straight, undecorated walls of a soft brownish tone, and what one does not see is everything that goes on behind them. They are made of heavy bronze mesh screen, through which sound travels. In back of this screen are the curves, baffles, absorptive surfaces and adjustable felt curtains that respond to computerized directions for "tuning." The stage walls, of the same composition, are moveable.

It must be noted that there is not one "glamour" cliché, and this is a genuinely glamorous house. There are none of the expected touches of "theater" nostalgia; no one has fruited it up with mock-modern chandeliers or gift-shop crystal and colored it conventional red. This technique never works anyway; the result always has a cheesiness that looks second-rate even when the stuff has been turned out by royal factories and supplied by government gift. Elegance is not a handful of beads or gold trim. It is drama and sensuosity, as practiced here.

One hopes that, unlike Houston, it will not be found necessary to sell the full 3,000 seats for every performance, suitable or not, to balance the books, so that expensive flexibility becomes a bad joke. Or like still other halls that started with gala performances, it will not be reduced to an amateur-night formula after its initial schedules run down.

Sir Rudolf Bing, at an opening luncheon, served notice that the Metropolitan Opera's costs were too great to abandon the 7,000-seat Cleveland Auditorium, no matter how badly performances suffered there, and no matter how tempting Akron might be. He painted a dismal picture of unused houses and arts without subsidy.

There is only one thing that can be said with certainty on the uncertain cultural scene today: Thomas Hall is a splendid performing arts center, synthesizing all that has gone before it. But unless there is content to match, architecture becomes an empty art.



Edwin J. Thomas Performing Arts Hall, Akron, Ohio
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