ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

This Time Avery Fisher Looks Beautiful

This time it's not a cosmetic job; it's radical surgery. After 14 years of desperate tinkering with Avery Fisher (née Philharmonic) Hall, a whole new hall has been built in the old shell. The auditorium has been literally ripped out and replaced in a process almost as interesting as the result.

First, the building was gutted to the glass. Almost everything inside was removed—the walls, ceiling, balconies, seats, ducts, and even some of the structural steel of the hall. This was probably the most monumental rubble job since the demolition of Penn Station. Then the new auditorium was hung from a huge truss erected on the roof, with balconies suspended from the roof truss on steel rods. So that what the concertgoer sees now is not a remodeled or redecorated space, but a totally different interior structure—new shape, stage, seating, materials, colors and style. And what he sees, at last, after all that visual and audial stumbling around, is a truly beautiful hall.

What he hears, however, is the real test of success. And what he sees and hears are inseparable in this case, since the architecture is the direct expression of the acoustical requirements. But that expression is anything but automatic. The look of the auditorium is a very conscious and carefully calculated architectural act, responsible both to the personal taste and philosophy of the architects and the acoustician's rigid proscriptions.

"We mutually designed it," say the architects, Philip Johnson and John Burgee, speaking of the acoustician, Cyril Harris. "There's no shape in here that Cyril hasn't approved," says Mr. Burgee. "Cyril thinks we did it, we think he did it," Mr. Johnson adds.

But even in the closest and most successful collaboration, vision takes over from acoustics at some point. The result here is a stylishly elegant, contemporary interior with an ear to the past and an eye to the present. There are none of those cheap easy tricks—the tacky chandeliers and derivative details that are supposed to marry "modern" to "traditional" and only signal a failure of conviction and creativity. The design never compromises its modernity. It holds a delicate line between the old and the new with admirable architectural balance.

It should be noted that this kind of solution was not possible when the hall was built in 1962. At that time a modern design had to prove that it was modern by demonstrating its total rupture with the past. The honorable modernist, committed to "pure" form and aggressive originality, was out on a limb 14 years ago. This interior achieves its own style within the acknowledged, and necessary, framework of history.

That framework is necessary because it has turned out to be foolhardy and expensive ($6.4 million in this case) to ignore those tried and true principles—the spaces, surfaces and structure that are the proven producers of good sound. Today, with an increasing concern for historical sources and a growing delight in a more complex and eclectic ex-

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It Looks Beautiful

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pression, the doors of modern design are open much wider. "We were very tied to the 19th century," Mr. Johnson says without apology. "We wouldn't have dared design this way before."

There are many echoes of the past. The new color scheme of creamy antique white with a delicate greenish cast and generous gold leaf is straight out of Bavarian baroque. (The original blue and gold had been changed to a kind of grungy plastic wood in the tinkering. I used to sit with my eyes shut.) The traditional rectangular hall and proscenium-arch stage are an established concert hall formula. Also traditional are the wood walls and floors and plaster ceiling.

But the esthetic product is totally of the 20th century. The broken, reflective and diffusing surfaces that baroque and classical curves and ornament provided so decoratively are replaced here by a series of simple, flat planes of irregular width and sequence. They form a continuous faceted, angled and straight-edged pattern on the walls and ceiling. Against the walls are straight-lined, stepped boxes, with smoothly curved, gilded fronts (the only curves in the hall).

Ceiling lights are adjustable horizontal bands of gold-color metal globes, and rows of clear bulbs are placed along the bottoms of the boxes. These bulbs reflect in the gold leaf with a soft brilliance. Seats are of gold velours. The effect is of genuine theatricality without any of the corny "recall" of mongrel "theater modern"; the obvious moral—you don't have to be red to be right. This is a glamorous hall.

The most fundamental change is in the shape, from almost fan-shaped to rectangular, with a few less seats (formerly 2,790, now 2,747) and much more sense of intimacy (a fan shape makes a stage seem like the end of a tunnel). The size is actually about the same—a little more than 87 feet wide and 120 feet from the back wall to the stage. Where there was no formal stage, the hall is now defined and terminated by a proscenium arch. The flat balconies replace ones that were long, swooping curves against curved walls. Seats are now set in straight rows on a ramped slope. Even the contour of the floor has been altered.

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The design and structural details dictated by acoustical considerations are fascinating. Everything in the hall is solidly fastened down. Wall panels are not "hung" in the usual fashion (today's technology uses attaching hardware that "hooks" flat finishing panels to the base wall) but are firmly screwed down, by Cyril Harris's orders. These screws have polished brass caps that reflect light to add pinpoint glitter to the European oak that lines the stage. Wood furring strips that are regularly spaced in conventional wall construction are randomly spaced here to add still greater surface variety. A wooden beam, rather than steel, spans the stage for increased vibration. The sound absorption of fabric has been measured. The porosity of concrete was controlled.

The only public areas that are the same are the outer, glass-walled foyer—an awkward space that has always choked the Lippold sculptures—and the surrounding promenades. Columns have been painted a de-emphasizing dark brown. The restaurant that one tripped over on the way in has been eliminated for a more rational and functional entrance, with box offices moved from the rear.

It is a lovely house now, with everything going for it, if the sound is right. And you don't have to close your eyes.