UNIVERSITY AUDITORIUM

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY AT KALAMAZOO

1968
GRAND OPENING FESTIVAL / JANUARY 12 - 26, 1968

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Western Michigan University today takes its place in the forefront of the great universities of the nation which have outstanding facilities for the presentation of cultural events. The University Auditorium, at this time of the Grand Opening Festival, marks another high point in the University's development. Here we will present the performing arts in all their forms not as culture for culture’s sake, but for the enrichment of the lives of our students, faculty and our friends of the community.

First of all, I wish to pay tribute to all members of Western's outstanding Board of Trustees. Their understanding and confidence has made possible a monumental undertaking which has brought to fruition on this campus one of the nation's finest auditoriums. Not only did they give approval and take action on this project, they have, during the planning and construction periods, spent many hours with faculty planning groups and with architects. They gave most generously of their time to visit other auditoriums to make certain that Western's would be superior.

The University Auditorium is a facility of which we are proud, but is one which we will share with our fellow citizens. The purposes for which the Auditorium is to be used are well illustrated by the orchestras which will be presented in the Grand Opening Festival series—the Western Michigan University Symphony; the Kalamazoo Symphony and the Detroit Symphony. This selection of orchestras emphasizes that the Auditorium is here to be shared with our students, the Kalamazoo area and with all of Michigan.

We cordially invite each of you to participate with the University in the use and enjoyment of this fine new building.

James W. Miller, President

The Western Michigan University Board of Trustees which approved the planning and construction of the University Auditorium on June 26, 1964, was composed of:

Fred W. Adams
Alfred B. Connable
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A new center for university activities has been developed on the southwest slopes of Western Michigan University's campus. Designed on a plaza scheme by the architectural firm of O'Dell, Hewlett and Luckenbach, the complex includes Brown Hall, the Laura V. Shaw Theatre, Sprau Tower and the University Auditorium. The buildings through their scale and height provide a new major focal point for the campus and establish a strongly compelling visual axis toward the area.

While there are several possible approaches, vehicular and pedestrian, the most prominent is that from Sangren Hall. Suitable to the rolling site, a leisurely approach is accomplished by broad walks and stairway ramps carefully adjusted to the rise and fall of the land. These are interspersed with terraces provided with benches inviting one to linger. As one nears the area, the grand plaza unfolds around the vertical mass of the tower, and the dominant, horizontal form of the great Auditorium emerges into full view.

The organization of the buildings around the plaza is essentially grid-like and depends upon an interplay of clean-cut vertical and horizontal elements intersecting and repeating at various levels. This is congenial with the stepped terrace system, and the geometric quality of the forms reinforces a sense of clearly articulated space within the grand plaza area.

While there are striking repetitions of slabs, materials, and surfaces, these have been sufficiently varied to prevent the relationships from becoming monotonous. Brick, concrete, glass and stone are used throughout; yet any element when traced will yield variety. The concrete vertical ribs of the tower, for example, are complemented by those of the Auditorium windows, while this element is contrasted with the horizontal line of a concrete connecting corridor between the tower and the classroom building.

One of the most significant utilizations of material is the glass in the lower story of Sprau Tower and in Shaw Theatre. This transparent and reflective medium tends to alleviate part of the mass of these two buildings and emphasizes the dominance of the Auditorium mass. It also reflects the light and shifting sprays of water from the pool in front of the Auditorium, thereby adding an element of movement and life to the complex. Both effects contribute to emphasize the breadth and scale of the Auditorium.

Article by DR. CHARLES E. MEYER, Chairman of the Department of Art, Western Michigan University.
In keeping with the total concept of the complex, the Auditorium is a clearly articulated mass marked by clean vertical and horizontal forms, and by strongly advancing and receding planes. As one moves around the structure, the scale of the impressive building is made emphatic by these elements.

The facade facing the grand plaza is dominated by a massive central panel of alternating glass and concrete ribbing, while receding planes of concrete and brick step away to the sides. This works, in effect, to concentrate attention upon the prominent height and projection of the major facade element. A similar interplay may be observed when examining the side elevation of the Auditorium. From this vantage point the silhouette of the structure is emphatic series of steps proceeding between the massive block on the plaza and that of the stage end. As in the facade, a series of vertical brick panels advance and recede to effect a focus upon the plaza side of the building.

Although patrons arriving by car will be encouraged to enter the Auditorium from the parking area through the orchestra level entrance, most patrons will join the major flow of pedestrian traffic entering on the plaza level. Since this is the entrance to the grand tier foyer, it is appropriate that the emphasis upon this side be maintained.

Light will become an attractive visual element during evening performances when the building interior, terraces, and the great fountain-pool are all illuminated. This feature should move patrons onto the plaza level from which the scale of the Auditorium's glass facade will become strikingly apparent. The glass, which reflects the plaza during the day, becomes transparent at night and visually links the interior with the exterior space. From the front terraces of the plaza, the sloped ceiling and inward canted balconies of the main foyer will then function like a lighted, perspectival drawing, welcoming the patron into the dramatically penetrated space.
The grand tier foyer is one of the most impressive spaces within the Auditorium. From it one may look through the windows and down upon the carefully stepped terraces, walkways, gardens and fountain; or one may enjoy the interplay of elements on the interior. While exterior shapes are essentially rectilinear, interior forms are dominated by the powerful sweep of a curved wall ascending through all levels from orchestra to the balcony. This massive curvature is complemented by the foyer ceiling, which in turn curves downward from the windows to the wall, thereby further dynamizing the movement of interior space.

With this dynamic movement of the wall, one is encouraged to follow as it penetrates the various lobby levels and as it goes from end to end of the main foyer. The repeated usage of brick in the stairwells and in the upper balconies also helps to move the eye up through the interior space. But it is the movement of people through all the spaces that primarily catches the eye and causes one to explore the structure.

To the sides of the grand tier foyer are a number of pleasant lounges which provide more intimate intermission spaces. Here the ceilings are low and inviting, and smaller spaces open discreetly into one another. The broad, comfortable stairways encourage easy movement from level to level. Ascending and descending, one finds similar intermission areas on the balcony and orchestra levels.

Although the breadth of the large, curving foyer wall suggests the form of the grand performance hall, most visitors will be unprepared for the powerful, sculptural sweep of its spacious interior. Shaped like a broad amphitheater, the space is divided into three levels by the arched platforms of the grand tier and the balcony. With the dynamic ramps of the steps rising from the stage to flank the seating, it appears as though the interior were embraced by giant arms, and the seating brought intimately together.

The force of this total impression is effectively supported by the repeated flow of curved forms which carry the eye easily to the stage while they suggest an ascending expansion from it. Such an alteration of effect creates a feeling of easy flexibility which is borne out in the function of the hall itself.

It is significant that the only major element of color in the interior is the rich red of the "continental" seating. All other surfaces are essentially neutral and may be washed by a special lighting system to assume colors suitable to the mood of any given performance. This flexibility is well matched by an electronically operated system of reflectors and baffles which accommodate acoustical properties to given performances.

Unquestionably grand in scale, there is nevertheless a remarkable sense of warmth and ease in the carefully shaped interior. With this character, and with the soundness of its functional planning, Western Michigan University's new University Auditorium should prove to be one of the finest performance halls in the country.
It was a thrill to look over the rolling acres of the former Gateway Golf Course and to know that here we could mold a wholly new focal point for the university campus. Clearly evident were the enthusiasm of the professional staff as they spoke of this new project and the vibrant expectancy of the students as they moved about the campus. What we were about to do had to be exciting in the fullest meaning of the concept.

Excitement has been the key to this development—in its scope, in its concept, and in its realization. Today, dreams have become forms. Three-dimensional fantasy has become reality.

We visualized buildings acting as retaining walls for a plaza which would be some twenty feet above street level. There would be views of the Auditorium down a tree-lined avenue of buildings, and hills and valleys would grant a view and hide it from another angle.

The plaza would have a personality of its own—a place which would be serene for some and vibrant for others. As a backdrop would be the Auditorium, rising far above, with its height accentuated by strong vertical lines of doors and windows. The court would contain a pleasant pool, filtering the reflection of the Auditorium through a colorful spray of undulating lights.

The Auditorium, facing a great plaza on which many campus activities would be held, was seen as a central focus for the Western students, faculty and staff as well as for the entire community. It would have the excitement of crowds moving over paving contrasted with plantings, of sparkling fountains and color, and it would be lighted at night. To all this would be added the approaches from several levels and the variety of entrances.

An "over-the-shoulder" look from the foyer as it is entered from the main terrace serves as a warm reminder of the campus and gives a strong statement of the complex itself. The nearby Sprus Tower symbolizes the reaching for learning, stressing that culture grows through knowledge and that culture has a definite place in a program of education.

Many happy opportunities for the expression of the theme were revealed as the Auditorium developed. Attendance at functions in the Auditorium should be much more than just "being at a performance." It should be a satisfying experience from the moment one approaches the Auditorium. The visitor should be invigorated by changes of level, changes of scale, changes of view. He should feel all the excitement of confined space under the canopy between buildings rising to the plaza and then rising again to the terrace and overlooking the plaza.

Guests should desire an early arrival to enjoy the experience of watching others move through the spaces, gesture to friends on other levels and relax with each other and within themselves.

A new experience was designed into the hall itself. The vastness of the space opens before the guest and yet the nearness of all seats to the stage draws him intimately into the performance. The spaciousness and comfort of the seating are a reminder that individual needs are considered. The ability to transform the interior by coatings of color and by stereophonic capabilities will play upon the psychological reactions of attendees.

The Auditorium is to be used for a wide range of performances and activities: from single speakers to symphony and grand opera, from film presentations to audience participation events and conventions. The large stage, with its adjustable rear stage and direct access to both the orchestra and grand tier seats, permits variation and an unusual amount of audience participation. The arrangement of foyers with side lounges and auxiliary meeting rooms facilitates conventions and meetings.

Because requirements vary for the several types of performances and activities, the hall has been designed as an acoustically transparent chamber with curtains behind the metal mesh and ceiling that can be adjusted by push button controls to provide more or less sound absorption and reflection. In addition to this acoustical adjustability, a sophisticated stereophonic sound system has been installed. Neutral gray walls and main curtain have been used to form a background for a wash of multicolored lighting directed from the lighting control booth to change the character of the hall to suit the activity. The use of theatrical lighting on side walls of the auditorium gives the audience a greater sense of participation in the performance.

A university auditorium should have as little contrast between orchestra seventh row center seats and top balcony last row side seats as possible. Studies indicated that the most seats within the recommended distance and site lines are contained in an orchestra and two-balcony arrangement. By taking advantage of the natural topography of the site and the fact that the traffic from the campus would be largely pedestrian and from the north, it was possible to design the auditorium with a major entrance at the first balcony level. This is the grand tier and, in effect, makes the second balcony a first balcony level, and the only level where patrons must use stairways or elevator.

The grand tier foyers open to those of the orchestra below and the balcony above so that patrons on all levels would be able to see each other. The "continental" seating plan allows more efficient exiting and provides seven inches more leg room than would have been possible with a traditional seating plan. It also permits more seats within the desirable distances and site lines.

Much thought was given to the positioning of the Shaw Theatre both as an individual unit and as a complement to the Auditorium in scale and its design. The intermission garden between the buildings provides an intriguing transitional space which, with its circular pool, should be a source of pleasant experiences. This area, too, can become an independent center for a group activity.

Much thought, much individual creativity, much personal dedication have been expressed in this achievement. It is classical, yet as modern as life itself. It is spacious, yet intimate. It is awesome, yet friendly. It is powerful, yet welcoming.

May the hopes of the design become the expressions of all who enter!

Article by STEPHEN S. PAGE, A.I.A., member of the architectural firm of O'Dell, Hechts and Luckenbach, and designer of the University Auditorium.
SEATING: Approximately 3550 seats, Continental Style

FOYER: 3 levels around central well with outside entrances on 2 levels and a passenger elevator.

PROSCENIUM DIMENSIONS: 66' x 30'

PIT ELEVATOR: 70' x 13', first 3 rows of seats mounted on a hand cart which can be removed to allow an extension of another 10'

STAGE DIMENSIONS: 150' x 50', gridiron height 67' 9"

LIGHTING SYSTEM: House: Century with incandescent in ceiling and fluorescents on side walls. Stage: Kliegl System controlled remotely from rear of house and stage manager's panel backstage.

PROJECTION EQUIPMENT: 2 Super Trupers, 1 projector (16 mm), 2 projectors (35 mm), 1 slide projector.

SOUND SYSTEM: Altec Lansing/Stereophonic Reverberation with entire hall being completely, adjustable acoustically with adjustable drapes behind steel mesh side walls and ceiling.

REGGING: 38 lines. Complete sets of gray and black drapes and a cyclorama.

DRESSING ROOMS: 2 Chorus Rooms, accommodating 41 persons each. 4 Dressing Rooms, accommodating 5 persons each. 2 Star Dressing Rooms, accommodating 2 persons each. 1 Stage Hands' Room, accommodating 15 men.

ORGAN: Portable Schnitker Organ, self-contained on 5 band carts, consisting of a 3 manual console with pedal organ, Swell, Great, and Positive divisions.

LANDSCAPING: Intermission Gardens on either side of building which faces a plaza with a reflecting pool. Parking lot in rear of building accommodates 1,000 cars.

COST: Approximately 5 million dollars

ARCHITECTS: O'Dell, Hewlett and Luckenbach/Birmingham, Michigan

GENERAL CONTRACTOR: Miller-Davis Company/Kalamazoo

STAGE CONSULTANT: John Ditmire/Purdue University

ACOUSTICAL CONSULTANT: Bolt, Beranek and Newman/Cambridge, Massachusetts

MANAGER: J. C. Pheneger/University Auditorium
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