UNIVERSITY AUDITORIUM / DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

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 vibrance for others. As a backdrop would be the Auditorium, riding 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 Sprag 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 nervousness 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 were considered. The ability to transform the interior by coatings of color and by stereoscopic 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 force 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 grey 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 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 foyer opens 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 size 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, AIA, member of the architectural firm of O'Dell, Hebbert and Luckenbach, and designer of the University Auditorium.