Although jazz is widely considered to be a quintessentially American art form, the new SFJAZZ Center in San Francisco is breaking new ground as the first freestanding performing arts venue in the USA devoted to the genre (Jazz at Lincoln Center’s Rose Hall in New York is part of the Time Warner Center).

Providing a new home to the 30-year-old organisation – which has been scattered in rented venues across Frisco – the SFJAZZ Center will not only provide a state-of-the-art auditorium capable of numerous configurations ranging from 350 to 700 seats, but also boast attendant rehearsal spaces and a sidewalk-level café.

The new space aims to provide not only a physical home for jazz performance and education in San Francisco, but a spiritual home for the entire genre. “We have 700 seats, but we’re looking to spread the word beyond that,” explains Mount Allen, the organisation’s operations director. “We have a small footprint but in our impact we look to be more global.”

The venue was designed by local firm Mark Cavagnero Associates, a veteran of performing arts spaces. The building is situated along Franklin Street in the city’s burgeoning Hayes Valley neighbourhood, near two historic architectural landmarks – the Beaux Arts-style San Francisco Conservatory of Music and the War Memorial Opera House. “It struck me, when out walking, that SFJAZZ should be glassy and transparent,” says Mark Cavagnero. “It would be more modest, but stand out and have its own punch.”

As well as drawing audiences for scheduled performances, Cavagnero envisaged others attending on a more ad hoc basis. "You could
“Venues like this live and breathe on their sound quality; without it they don’t command worldwide recognition”

stop for a coffee in the café on your way home and watch a band practice,” he suggests.

Cavagnero’s see-through design is therefore fronted by the lobby, café and a performance space. The building is framed with reinforced concrete to allow wide volumes in the public areas and the auditorium, as well as for optimal acoustic properties. Upon visiting a variety of venues in New York for inspiration, the client and architect found it wasn’t Carnegie Hall or even small jazz clubs that proved influential, but a series of found spaces in Brooklyn. “Some were smaller than your living room and some were warehouses with curtains and high school bleachers,” says Cavagnero. “But the client loved the proximity to the performer in those places. They wanted something intimate that felt very much like a jazz venue and not like a classical music, dance or opera hall.”

The auditorium is configured to allow seating on all four sides of the central stage. Allen explains that drumming fans have made the seats behind the band popular, as they can look down on the drummer. “We’re quickly becoming known for the acoustic quality of the venue,” Allen says. “There are no bad seats visually nor acoustically. Venues like this live and breathe on their sound quality; without it they don’t command worldwide recognition.”

And Allen would know: his sister is acclaimed pianist Geri Allen, who has already played at SFJAZZ Center since its January 2013 opening and gives the venue her enthusiastic approval!
A stage for soul

For 30 years, San Francisco’s SFJAZZ organisation didn’t have a home of its own. It presented its annual festival and other performances in rented spaces scattered around the city. But not any longer. This year saw the opening of the SFJAZZ Center – the first freestanding facility built specifically for, and dedicated to, the creation, teaching and preservation of jazz in the USA.

Auerbach Pollock Friedlander and founding principal Len Auerbach were part of the planning and design process from the start, collaborating with SFJAZZ founder and executive artistic director Randall Kline. “Auerbach was instrumental in the creation and realisation of SFJAZZ Center,” says Kline. “He listened to our wants and needs, guided us with his experience early on and helped us fulfil this ambitious dream. But most importantly, he brought heart into the project.”

The firm initially assisted in studying vacant buildings that could be adapted into a jazz hall, including a retail space on Market Street, a warehouse space in the SOMA district and former military spaces in the Presidio. Although each of these buildings offered some suitable features, they did not fulfil all the criteria outlined by the team for the new SFJAZZ Center, which included access to public transit, high interior volume and a highly visible location. These spaces would have required substantial renovations yet still wouldn’t have been the perfect building to suit the SFJAZZ programme. A possible joint-use venue with the San Francisco Symphony was also explored and a concept developed, but in the end SFJAZZ decided that it was time for a facility of its own.

Customised from scratch

Auerbach Pollock Friedlander then began collaborating with Mark Cavagnero Associates for a new-building project. Together they studied several locations before SFJAZZ acquired a site that was once home to a muffler shop. Even though the site had a smaller footprint than originally envisioned, it was a very good fit geographically as a result of its proximity to other cultural venues – the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and the San Francisco War Memorial & Performing Arts Center, which includes the Davies Symphony Hall, the War Memorial Opera House and the Veterans Building’s Herbst Theatre. Notably, Auerbach Pollock Friedlander had previously provided consulting services for these venues.

“I look at the Civic Center/Hayes Valley area as a performing arts campus,” says Auerbach. “The venues work together. Each contributes a different element that enhances the whole district but they also maintain their individuality and are a stronghold to performing arts in the city. We also considered how SFJAZZ Center would be used as it relates to our current work on the Herbst Theatre.”

After finalising the location the design team – including SIA Acoustics – began the collaborative process of developing a concept for the building. From San Francisco to New York City, the team and representatives from SFJAZZ...
toured and experienced a wide variety of jazz venues – from small back rooms for jam sessions, to intimate night clubs, to historical music halls. These expeditions were an essential part of the development of the design and determined not only the essence of the venue but also helped to further develop the identity of SFJAZZ.

“Underpinning all of the spatial and visual design priorities was the most important goal: to create performance spaces with the highest-quality performance and acoustic qualities throughout,” says architect Mark Cavagnero. “We worked closely with Auerbach Pollock Friedlander and Sam Berkow, founder of SIA Acoustics, to create the highest-quality acoustics and a performance experience specific to jazz. While the public spaces are highly transparent, the performance hall is strong and focused. This great room is flexible and multidimensional, designed so audience members can have very different views of the performers, even from the side and rear. This required a great deal of creativity from the Auerbach team.”

**Flexibility and intimacy**
The centre’s main room, the Robert N Miner Auditorium, can be formatted in up to eight configurations – from 350 to 700 seats –
The Robert N Miner Auditorium was visually and acoustically designed to enhance the creation of spontaneous music depending upon the performance requirements. “Numerous iterations of the room configuration were developed for the auditorium, from the most formal to the most eccentric,” explains Auerbach. “One of the biggest challenges was developing each of the various desired designs to fit within a very compact building site.”

Miner Auditorium is configured for optimal intimacy, with the stage on four sides wrapped with tiered seating risers and terraces, ideal for experiencing jazz performances and other events. Flexible stage and seating configurations are achieved with manual and semi-automated platforms, stair plugs and custom portable seating. A resilient floor in the lower orchestra accommodates standing concerts and dancing by the audience and performers. The auditorium recently hosted a concert by pianist and composer Jason Moran accompanied by 10 professional skateboarders improvising tricks on a 36 x 20ft ramp installed at the front of the stage.

**Designed for connection**

Auerbach Pollock Friedlander was integral in the development and adaptive design of the centre's family of custom seats, which include fixed theatre seats, loose stacking seats and swivel stools. Tailor-made, they create a unified visual audience experience, providing excellent sightlines and comfort while meeting all ADA guidelines. The swivel stools, in particular, are one of the details that make the venue feel more like a club and less like a formal concert hall.

The firm also developed theatrical systems to support production flexibility, including a technical catwalk system, overhead rigging support, theatrical lighting, room-reduction banners, video projection systems, a broadcast infrastructure, piano lift and a material lift.

In addition to the main hall, the centre includes the Joe Henderson Lab – an ensemble room and rehearsal space that also hosts small performances. This intimate multipurpose space is accessed directly from the lower lobby and can accommodate 70 patrons.

The facility’s interaction with the surrounding urban landscape plays a vital role in the overall visitor experience. The building is a three-storey glass, concrete and steel structure, with the two lobbies, street-level restaurant and ensemble room all visible to people wandering past outside.

“We wanted to lock it into the street and to have the sidewalk, the lobby and the café all open up into the public realm,” notes Cavagnero. “There is no opaque wall between you and the SFJAZZ Center. Once you start engaging the neighbourhood, the neighbourhood can benefit from you – but you can benefit from it, too. The lobby isn’t 25ft wide, it's 125ft when you look through an open window wall to the old brick schoolhouse across Fell Street.”

The *New York Times* has called SFJAZZ Center, “a temple of jazz in California”, while the *Wall Street Journal* affirmed, “This building sounds the right note”. The *JazzTimes*, meanwhile, declared “jazz has an enviable new home in San Francisco”. And indeed, it has.

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