



# Grand designs

**Maria Roberts** meets the theatre consulting masterminds behind some of the world's foremost arts venues

**B**ased in San Francisco, and with offices in New York and Minneapolis, Auerbach Pollock Friedlander is an international design consultancy firm for performing arts projects worldwide. Its portfolio includes state-of-the-art work on opera houses, professional repertory theatres, concert halls, performing arts training facilities, museums, planetariums, and even popular entertainment venues in theme parks, casinos, cruise ships and nightclubs, spanning from Las Vegas to Beijing.

Shanghai Grand Theatre, Carnegie Hall's Judy and Arthur Zankel Hall and Berkeley Repertory Theatre are just some of the many projects that APF have impressed with its very modern stamp.

Services cover all aspects of theatre design, from planning and programming through design, documentation and construction administration to the detailed development of all theatrical systems, including sound, video and communications. (Its client base includes the spectacular *Cirque du Soleil*.)

In California's wider Bay Area, the firm, which was founded in 1972 by current company president S Leonard Auerbach, has left a lasting impression on the arts community. Furthermore, APF has worked on some of San Francisco's most prominent arts institutions – many situated in the city's Hayes Valley district, close to Van Ness.

The company has contributed to the renovation of the San

Francisco Opera House, made its mark on the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, as well as the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Its latest project, and newcomer to the golden cultural corridor, is the SFJAZZ Center.

As the first stand-alone facility dedicated to jazz on the West Coast, and one of only two such purpose built venues in the US, the SFJAZZ Center's completion is hotly anticipated.

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The modern venue is to become a permanent home to the 28-year-old organisation that previously presented its shows, as well as the San Francisco Jazz Festival, in rented facilities throughout the city.

Auerbach was involved from the very beginning. 'In the case of SFJAZZ we started very early on when they were looking for a venue to go to, and we looked at a number of existing spaces that were vacant,' he says. 'We designed the theatre itself and collaborated with the architect on the building and the site but the design and the theatre spaces were a result of working with Randall Kline [executive artistic director and founder of SFJazz], to get the essence of what he wanted that space to be.'

The centre's scaffolding was pulled down just under a month ago and now with its swish exterior finally revealed to the public, it makes for a spectacular sight.

Above: Interior of Joan and Sanford I Weill Hall at the Green Music Center



Photo: © Kristen Loken



The USD60m (€46.2m) modern three-story building, with acoustic design by SIA Acoustics, is made of glass, steel and concrete and features lobbies that are clearly visible from the street. The main space accommodates 700 and the steeply raked seating elicits an atmosphere intended to match the intimacy of a New York jazz club.

Other spaces include the 80-seat ensemble room/rehearsal space, which will be used for smaller performances, rehearsals, classes and lectures. APF worked with architects Mark Cavagnero Associates, and the project is designed to LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Gold specifications.

Of course, one of the advantages of the company's involvement in the cultural quarter's ongoing development of its venues is that a harmony and synchronicity can run throughout the sites.

'It is essential to consider Herbst Theatre [at the War Memorial Veterans Building Performing Arts Center] and the Opera House and Davies Symphony Hall as an entire campus of arts organisations,' he says. 'We meet regularly to coordinate our work and there's always an understanding of utilisation because the spaces are so different. Herbst, for example, has no resident company. There has to be a cooperative understanding when you are doing the planning.'

Over on the sunnier side of the state, at Sonoma State University, sits another jewel in APF's crown. Here the impressive Donald and Maureen Green Music Center (known as Green Music Center) boasts the recently completed Joan and Sanford I Weill Hall, a multi-use space that will host concerts by leading classical musicians, as well as other performing art forms, and even present lectures for its students.

The firm provided theatre design and consulting services in collaboration with acoustician Kirkegaard Associates and the design architect William Rawn Associates. Kirkegaard is a long-term friend of Auerbach; they worked together early on in their respective careers.

'It is a very interesting concept because the situation was that there was a brief that was pretty much developed and legislated by the state university system to build this performance space – and they had their ideas of what they wanted it to be. They wanted to focus on music because of the Greens, who became a major benefactor of the project,' says Auerbach.

Dr Ruben Armiñana, president of Sonoma State University, went to Tanglewood some years ago and heard the Boston Symphony Orchestra in the then new Seiji Ozawa Hall. He famously declared: 'I want one of those.'



A period of time followed as the committee tried to raise the money to make a concert hall happen. With funds drying up, the centre was built phase by phase, provoking protests from community members along the way. It was considered an expensive pursuit in light of a nationwide economic recession in the US, not to mention soaring building and material costs. It was a USD12m donation by Joan and Sandy Weill in 2011 that gave the flagging project a much-needed boost. Other donors then came forward to offer support and the concert hall inaugural concert by Lang Lang took place on 29 September. By this point the project's estimated cost had soared to an estimated USD145m.

By all accounts, Green Music Center is a striking venue that seamlessly joins interior and exterior spaces, effortlessly marrying understated elegance with academic practicality. The end result is a big-bang 'wow factor' that will draw locals and tourists alike: the vast landscape of the Sonoma Mountains, set against an expansive skyline, create the perfect mise-en-scène for productions taking place inside the hall. For patrons at a table on the lawn, the effect is like peering through an enormous television to see real-life characters playing within.

APF's services included consultancy on the layout and sightlines,

Above: The grounds at Green Music Center; a rear view of Weill Hall; S Leonard Auerbach

Photos: top © Kristen Loken; right © David Wakely



'We find that audiences expect a lot more in terms of presentational gratification, such as multi-media projected images'

a custom-made stage lift for orchestra, a flexible overhead rigging infrastructure, programmable theatrical lighting, automated variable acoustics banners and custom designed theatre chairs, all of which were handmade. Weill Hall seats 1,400 indoors, whilst outside the rear wall opens up to provide visibility for 5,105 patrons (3,457 on the lawn and 1,648 at tables and chairs) on a series of terraced risers for casual or formal dining and picnickers.

The rear wall can also remain closed and act as an exterior stage area for outdoor performances. Weill Hall will be used for the university's performance programme, as a regular venue for the Santa Rosa Symphony, the San Francisco Bach Choir and other Bay Area orchestras.

'The difference [between the Green Music Center and Seiji Ozawa Hall] is that it has to work more as a year-round venue. It has to be a lot more of an appropriate building for the environment, plus the programme of activities goes beyond just classical music, and so consequently the building became a lot more highly developed,' explains Auerbach. 'If you look at the site, it not only addresses the community and access requirements – you don't have to go through campus to get to it – but is also totally open to the academic part of the university and is totally accessible. By marrying the performance side for the public with the academic spaces that are on campus, such as the academic wing and the recital hall, it's perfectly guided to encourage this cross traffic.'

Of course, the commercial requirements of a touring orchestra, or popular performers, also had to be considered; the artists can, when necessary, be safeguarded by restricted access.

'They have, by contrast, complete exclusive use of the building for reasons of security, soundchecks and touring schedule requirements. It had to be designed with sensitivity to internal circulation. It needed to be a totally open complex that could be used by students on a daily basis, and yet also function independently while a touring group has

exclusive use of the performance space.' APF is also providing theatre design consulting for the Green Music Center's 250-seat Schroeder Recital Hall, currently in construction, and named after the pianist character in Charles Schulz's beloved *Peanuts* comic.

Schroeder Recital Hall will accommodate choral, organ, chamber and jazz concerts, community performances and lectures. The design was inspired by European churches and features a soaring ceiling. A further phase of the project will see the 2015 completion of an outdoor amphitheatre with seating for 10,000.

Auerbach has more than 40 years experience in theatre consulting industry, and throughout this time requirements have altered dramatically.

'The expectation of the audiences have been greatly expanded with the different generations that have evolved over the years. We've gone from purpose-built spaces to large multi-purpose halls – these didn't work very well for everybody – then back towards more purpose-built concert halls, Broadway theatres, repertory theatres and the like.

'What we're finding now is that audiences expect a lot more in terms of presentational gratification; such as multi-media and projected images. The difference now is that this special concept of presentation is now being planned in the design of concert halls, even where you have the traditional subscription or patrons of classical music. They [venues] are trying to engage a younger audience and so there's a lot of media presentation, video projections, special projections and changes to enhance the music and make the concert – where it's appropriate – a lot more dynamic.'

Though the team at APF are architecture and tech specialists, experience in the arts runs right through the firm. 'Essentially everyone on our staff has worked in the arts – the architectural designers have been involved in the theatre; either they have been dancers or have worked in scenic design,' says Auerbach. 'We have a broad base of people in our highly advanced audiovisual department, who have broadcast experience or have toured with Rock'n'Roll. We have people who have done rigging and we have Broadway lighting designers, so the skills that are necessary come out of practice.'

'We're not consultants that are theoreticians,' adds Auerbach. 'We are practitioners.'

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Above: SFJAZZ Center

Photos: courtesy of Mark Cavagnero Associates



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