The Freeman Performing Arts Center

Community Design Center

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Freeman Performing Arts Center
Freeman, South Dakota
for the
Freeman Education and Research Board

University of Arkansas Community Design Center + Koch Hazard Architects
Fayetteville, Arkansas
Sioux Falls, South Dakota
September 2017
Introduction

Site Design
The Freeman Performing Arts Center marks the threshold between prairie and civic life. Design for the center is a place-based response to the Freeman Education and Research Board’s apt decision to locate the center at the southwest corner of the city plat. The southwest corner is an important location since it houses the city’s staple civic institutions—the Freeman Academy, the Heritage Hall Museum and Archives, and the Freeman Prairie Arboretum. The corner is also the site of Freeman’s celebrated Schmeckfest festival. Despite these institutions collective importance, the city’s edge here lacks the appropriate public frontage and gateway identity fitting of this concentration of civic amenities. Incremental development has occurred informally without an overall plan. Miscellaneous relations among buildings along Cedar Street (e.g., building rears facing the street) present an opportunity to clarify this corner with a unifying identity. Thus, design for the Performing Arts Center deploys a hall-type building with a roofline profile that unifies this collection of buildings and landscapes at the corner of the one-mile grid. The center’s architecture appeals simultaneously to the scale of the prairie and the intimacy of a campus.

The center’s west façade—or the principal face of the building—is a translucent curtain wall that functions as a beacon in the evening. The wall’s singularity suggests a compelling icon for Freeman, not unlike the disciplined beauty of regional agricultural structures dotting the prairie. While admitting diffused light for the building’s west corridor, the translucent wall screens windowless performance and support spaces, resulting in dramatic illumination of the center’s interior massing. An intrinsic design challenge involving theater fly towers is reconciliation of the tower’s profile with the building’s horizontal mass without the tower appearing as a conspicuous add-on. The center’s massing therefore projects an ascending system of familiar gable roofs that absorb the fly tower into a composition reflective of pragmatic building forms. A lean-to roof form at the wall’s north end provides the only opening on the west façade—a campus-sized Porch inviting entry from the automobile parking/drop-off area to the Theater-Museum Plaza beyond.

The Porch celebrates transitions between the prairie’s horizon and the intimate gathering space of the plaza, with full views into the center’s Lobby before arrival at the front doors. The plaza provides a shared outdoor room for entering either the existing museum or the Performing Arts Center—amplifying the current museum experience. Opposite the center’s translucent west façade, its east elevation is a more intimate human-scaled edge of articulated windows and charred wood cladding. The east elevation defines the pedestrian-oriented Theater-Museum Plaza. Charred wood comes from the Japanese technique involving controlled burning of the wood’s surface, altering its chemical composition to ensure longevity (80-100 years without maintenance) and superior protection against moisture, rot, pests, and UV exposure. The charred wood rain screen recalls a time-tested vernacular craft that has become popular once again, and can be implemented with local volunteer labor. Entry to the Performing Arts Center occurs through the charred wood elevation. The plaza and the center’s east elevation formalize a north-south connection between the city’s arboretum and Freeman Academy, offering memorable wayfinding for visitors to this emerging cultural complex.

Building Design
The Performing Arts Center is a “hall” building defined by a passage space under a common roof housing support spaces—Recital Hall, Courtyard, and Concessions/Box Office—lining the approach to the Theater. At 35,170 square feet on the primary level (another 4,900 square feet in utility spaces on the second level), the center’s organization is the most efficient layout for one-story theater buildings. Theater lobby size is driven by peak-demand use at show intermissions to accommodate intermingling among the maximum allowable seated patrons. Total Lobby space is diversified to include circulation areas around support spaces, alleviating
potential bottlenecks at the Theater, Toilets, and Coat Check. The plan optimizes flow and chance for sociability among patrons.

Natural light is an important component of the center’s design in creating a sense of expansiveness among modest sized spaces, as well as a connection between interior and exterior environments. The Courtyard expands the Lobby’s gathering area during favorable weather while bringing natural light and nature into what will hopefully become one of the community’s more important interior spaces. This openness is a nice foil to the enclosed performance spaces. The Lobby and its Courtyard offer a year-round venue for multiple community uses outside of scheduled shows. Translucent walls, clerestory windows, and an interior courtyard combine to create a simple but spatially rich public realm with vitality and a theatrical sense of change over the day and season.

Performance Spaces
The two performance spaces, Recital Hall and Theater, are warm interiors with wood surfaces. The Theater seats 568 people in a continental seating plan that eliminates the center aisle. The proscenium stage is close to 20 feet high with a 35-foot depth and 53-foot wide opening serviced by a fly tower with 51 feet of inside clear height (59 feet near the stage). The room is acoustically modeled for musical performances requiring longer reverberation times than stages for speech (refer to acoustical schematic design report in appendix). Wood wall and ceiling panels are convex shapes to ensure the spread reflection of sound, supported by sound diffusing surfaces of the wainscot. A wood floor assembly known as a “floating floor” (acoustical isolation from structure) completes the wood room. The Theater is supported by Green Rooms, Scene Shops, and other preparatory spaces that will attract professional traveling companies to the Freeman Performing Arts Center. New facilities will also accommodate an annual increase in local programming.

Conversely, the Recital Hall seats 155 people and sponsors more flexibility in its interior environment, dependent upon venue. The stage’s back glass wall can be opened to the courtyard for informal outdoor performances or social gatherings, in effect creating a traverse stage with audiences on two sides. Or, the courtyard can be screened from the stage with roll-down acoustic shades for more formal performances. Like contemporary museums, many small theaters currently seek adaptable interior environments, including ones visually open to the exteriors and their publics. Accordingly, the Recital Hall’s clerestory windows admit natural light to the space, while the room’s articulated ceiling is showcased to the Lobby and Porch, overcoming the homogeneous black box effect imposed on small performance spaces.

As the next stage of investment in the city’s heritage infrastructure, the Freeman Performing Arts Center is more than a new home for Schmeckfest. The center can readily function as a platform for multiple community uses given its improved levels of visual and physical accessibility. The center unlocks new synergies with surrounding civic and institutional amenities defining Freeman, enhancing visitor experience. For instance, the center’s site planning provides a new gateway porch and plaza for the museum, while strengthening connections between Main Street and the Freeman Prairie Arboretum. Equally important, the center structures an identity and a sense of arrival for this corner of the city through pragmatic solutions to the building program. Thus, the center aims to be a fitting architecture for both the scale of the prairie and the cultural traditions that make the City of Freeman.
one mile grid
The Performing Arts Center presents a unified civic frontage on Cedar Street, connecting Freeman Academy with the Heritage Hall Museum and Archives, and the Freeman Prairie Arboretum. Its image reflects the disciplined beauty of regional agricultural structures.
Site Plan

1 Existing Heritage Hall Museum and Archives
2 Theater-Museum Plaza
3 New Freeman Performing Arts Center
4 Lobby Courtyard
5 Arts Center Vehicle Drop-off
6 Paved Public Parking
7 Pervious Public Parking
8 Stormwater Retention
9 Loading Dock
10 Existing Visitor Center Drop-off
11 Existing Visitor Center
12 Existing Freeman Prairie Arboretum
Ground Floor Plan

1 Entry
2 Coat Check
3 Recital Hall
4 Courtyard
5 Lobby
6 Toilets
7 Concession-Box Office
8 Theater
9 Orchestra Pit
10 Stage
11 Janitor
12 Offices
13 Scene Shop
14 Green Room
15 Dressing Room
16 Wardrobe
17 Loading Dock
Second Floor Plan

1  Mechanical Room
2  Control Room
3  Storage
4  Catwalk
The Performing Arts Center reflects a straightforward hall-type building organization with various programs as “wood boxes” aligned along the approach to the theater.
Longitudinal Cross-Section looking east and highlighting the Recital Hall, Outdoor Court, and Theater.
Entry from Cedar Street is illuminated by the building’s translucent wall, creating a landmark condition that anchors the southwest corner of town and the site of Freeman’s celebrated Schmeckfest festival.
Entry through the Porch provides transition from car parking to the pedestrian-oriented Theater-Museum Plaza beyond. Entrance to the Performing Arts Center occurs on the plaza, allowing full views into the lobby before entering.
View looking from the Porch into the Lobby with Coat Check underneath the Recital Hall. Images of great composers and playwrights like Leonard Bernstein, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and Shakespeare add to the pageantry of the theatergoing experience.
A foil to open prairie beyond, the Theater-Museum Plaza’s intimate space creates a common outdoor room shared by the Performing Arts Center and the museum. The plaza also formalizes a connection between the city’s arboretum and Freeman Academy. The intimacy of the wood wall and articulated windows of the east elevation is opposite the translucent curtain wall of the west elevation, scaled to function as an abstract civic marker on the prairie.
Entrance to the Performing Arts Center with views to the Recital Hall and Coat Check. Here, the center’s east elevation—a charred wood rain screen with a blue background—provides a tactile, corduroy effect that gives the space a human dimension.
View from Lobby looking at building programs housed in “wood boxes” surrounding an outdoor courtyard. The foreground wood box is the Recital Hall followed by the Concession/Box Office, and the Theater in the background.
The Recital Hall environment can be formal or informal, dependent upon the venue. The stage can be opened to the courtyard for outdoor performances, in effect creating a traverse stage with audiences on two sides. Or, the courtyard can be screened from the performance space with roll-down shades.
Longitudinal section of the Recital Hall looking east toward the Lobby. The performance space seats 155 people.
View from Lobby looking toward the Courtyard and Recital Hall. Theater lobby size is driven by peak-demand use to accommodate intermingling among the maximum allowable seated patrons. Total Lobby space is diversified to include circulation area around the Courtyard and wood boxes, alleviating potential bottlenecks at the Theater, Toilets, and Coat Check. The plan optimizes flow and sociability among patrons.
The Courtyard expands the Lobby’s gathering area during good weather while bringing natural light and nature into one of the city’s more important interior spaces—a nice foil to the enclosed performance spaces.
The Theater seats 568 people in a continental seating plan that eliminates the center aisle.
The room is acoustically modeled for musical performances. Wood panels are convex shapes to ensure the spread reflection of sound, supported by sound diffusing surfaces of the wainscot. A wood floor assembly known as a “floating floor” (acoustical isolation from structure) completes the wood room.
View looking from the southeast corner of the city plat where the Performing Arts Center marks the threshold between prairie and civic life. Assisted by the horizontal spread of Freeman Academy and the Freeman Prairie Arboretum as a backdrop, the skyline of the theater and its fly tower structures a new frontage for this busy corner.
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