

Marathon Center for the Performing Arts

Downtown Findlay, Ohio once enjoyed a rich entertainment and cultural arts tradition with 14 original theaters hosting live shows, vaudeville and later cinema. In recent history, that number was reduced to only one – Central Auditorium.

Central Auditorium was built in 1939 in a rich art deco style as an addition to the first Findlay High School built in 1924. As common with the time, this 128,825 square foot school was located in the heart of the community, near the Courthouse and Downtown.

As the community grew, a new High School was built in 1962 on the edge of town and the Downtown building became Central Middle School. Then in 2007 Findlay experienced a 500 year flood with significant damage to Downtown Findlay and Central. Due to the damage, Findlay City Schools qualified for State funding to build a new Middle School. With voter approval, the Findlay City School Board of Education decided to abandon Central Middle School and with it, the last auditorium in Findlay. The community faced a Rubicon. By 2013 when the new school was complete, either a plan would be created to save Central Auditorium or it would be torn down.

Rising to the challenge and as a public service to create a sense of urgency, a group of citizens led by an architect formed the Celebrate Central Committee in 2011. The committee's purpose was to explore options for the repurpose of Central Middle School and to eventually initiate the fund-raising and management of such a complex. Many ideas were studied including a consolidated County Government Office Complex, Downtown Housing, University Business College and even a Misdemeanor Jail Center. Amongst these suggestions, the Celebrate Central Committee decided that the best chance of success for the project was to demolish the school portion of the facility, while leaving the auditorium.

A final concept was developed which closely resembles what is built today. The 55,721 square foot facility would be 25,857 square feet of renovation and 30,094 square feet of new construction. After 18 months of feasibility studies and conversations with local donors, the Hancock County Performing Arts Center was formed in 2012 and the architectural firm was officially hired in 2013. By 2015, it was announced that a lead gift was received from the Marathon Petroleum Corporation and the facility was officially named the Marathon Center for the Performing Arts.

The concept retained the original auditorium and historic lobby but demolished the stage house. The original stage house was small with virtually no wing space and no formal dressing rooms. Used as a school auditorium for 89 years, the seats were small, closely spaced and the technology was out of date and inadequate for modern performances. Restrooms were primitive with half height partitions and no privacy doors (for school security). The entire building was not accessible and certainly not the type of venue worthy of world class acts.

The new stage house is 40' deep by 92' wide stage with a 70' clear fly. The stage floor was lowered 18" to improve site lines and the stage was equipped with an orchestra lift. Loading to the stage is via two overhead doors and a 14' sound proof stage door. To the rear of the stage is located star dressing rooms and a green room. General cast dressing is found in the lower level with access to the stage floor via a freight elevator.

The auditorium was refitted with new seats and the balcony was re-tiered to improve the viewing angles. Seating was reduced from 1030 seats to 952 through these changes. The interior of the auditorium was

returned to art deco splendor with the addition of 4 wall sconces from a Brooklyn theater and a color palette that reflected the Midwestern warmth of the architecture. LED Lighting and new sound system was incorporated as well as acoustical treatments to enhance the acoustical and visual performance of the hall.

The former lobby which is now referred to as the Historic Lobby was very small and not accessible. Disabled patrons used to have the indignity of entering the auditorium from the east exit door via an outdoor ramp. The solution was to build a new Atrium to the west of the existing auditorium. The elevation of the Atrium is strategically placed above the 500 year flood line and from that entrance, patrons can use the elevator or stairs to venture up to the main floor of the auditorium and lounge; to the upper level for balcony seating or to the ground floor for restroom facilities. The Atrium is centered on another restored art deco theater lighting fixture from a New York theater.

The first floor level is the heart of the facility with a lounge area overlooking the event grounds / parking to the west and the Atrium below and above. To the north, the corridor leads to a multi-purpose hall sized for catered events up to 300 persons. The floor in the multi-purpose hall is the same wood flooring as the stage and is the same size as the main performance area so that rehearsals or recitals can be accommodated.

On the second floor, an Art Gallery which also overlooks the Atrium was created for art classes and traveling exhibits. As patrons go to their balcony seats, the Gallery is open for viewing and enjoyment of a drink during intermission.

The exterior of the building is finished with a rich red brick very similar to the original masonry. Other than the Atrium which serves as the void to the mass, the new additions are complementary but plain in order to not complete with the articulation of the original façade. The original terra cotta and the front door lanterns were both restored to their original finishes. Unfortunately, budget shortcuts dictated that the original entrance doors and windows were not replaced but are scheduled for 2017. The parking lot is multi-purpose as an event space with water and power supplied to several key locations.

This award entry meets the following Principles for Livable Communities:

1. **Design on a Human Scale.** Downtown Findlay is seeing a Renaissance of amenities. Fine dining, offices, locally owned shops and downtown living have all contributed to a vibrancy both day and night. Many young professionals are choosing to live Downtown where they can walk to work, to the grocery, to dine and to the theater. Marathon Center for the Performing Arts provides yet another good reason to enjoy Downtown.
2. **Provide Choices.** Instead of travelling to Toledo or Detroit for live shows, Findlay and area residents can now enjoy the best of theatre, music and entertainment in world class facility. The variety of the productions from dog shows to rock concerts appeals to a wide audience in different stages of their lives. In addition, a Multi-Purpose room has created a new venue for wedding receptions and fund raising events in the community.

- 3. Preserve Urban Centers.** In lieu of building a new venue near I-75 where visibility might be heightened, the decision to build and renovate a Downtown building has added a key component to a very livable community. The Marathon Center for the Performing Arts is already attracting other community events Downtown and bikeways and pathways are being planned to enhance the experience of Downtown living. Located across the street from the Post Office, Public Library and the County Courthouse, the Center ensures these institutions remain in a pedestrian friendly environment.

- 4. Build Vibrant Urban Spaces.** What once was a potential vacant lot is now an active Center for the arts and the community. School day bus trips, corporate meetings, senior citizen art classes as well as large productions all add life and vibrancy to Downtown Findlay. The outdoor event space / parking lot is richly landscaped and bordered by an ornamental fence giving scale and relationship with the surrounding neighborhood.

- 5. Create a Neighborhood Identity.** The Marathon Center for the Performing Arts is part of the Civic District in Downtown Findlay. Visible as a beacon to downtown visitors from I-75, MCPA joins the Library, Post Office, City and County Government offices, Banks and Downtown Merchants to form a network of public service sites.

- 6. Design Matters.** As the former High School, Central Auditorium was important to many citizens of Findlay. During the development of the project, citizens would reminisce with their stories of their first live show. Preserving the auditorium and complementing it with a sensitive addition was important not simply because it makes for good design, but because it was what was right for the community.

Since opening its doors in December of 2015, the \$14.3 million Marathon Center for the Performing Arts has enjoyed a variety of artists and patrons, all of which have been delighted by the new Center. Robert Lamm of the newly inducted Rock and Roll Hall of Fame band, *Chicago* said after their May 2016 show:

“As I said to the audience during our concert last Saturday evening, we've performed literally all over the world in a wide variety of venues. The restored Marathon Center for Performing Arts sounded amazing, and the people who addressed the acoustic aspects really knew what they were doing. Bravo!”