

# Redesigning the River Center Theatre

With help from Post Architects and HMS Architects of New Orleans, the venue will cater to Baton Rouge patrons and performers alike

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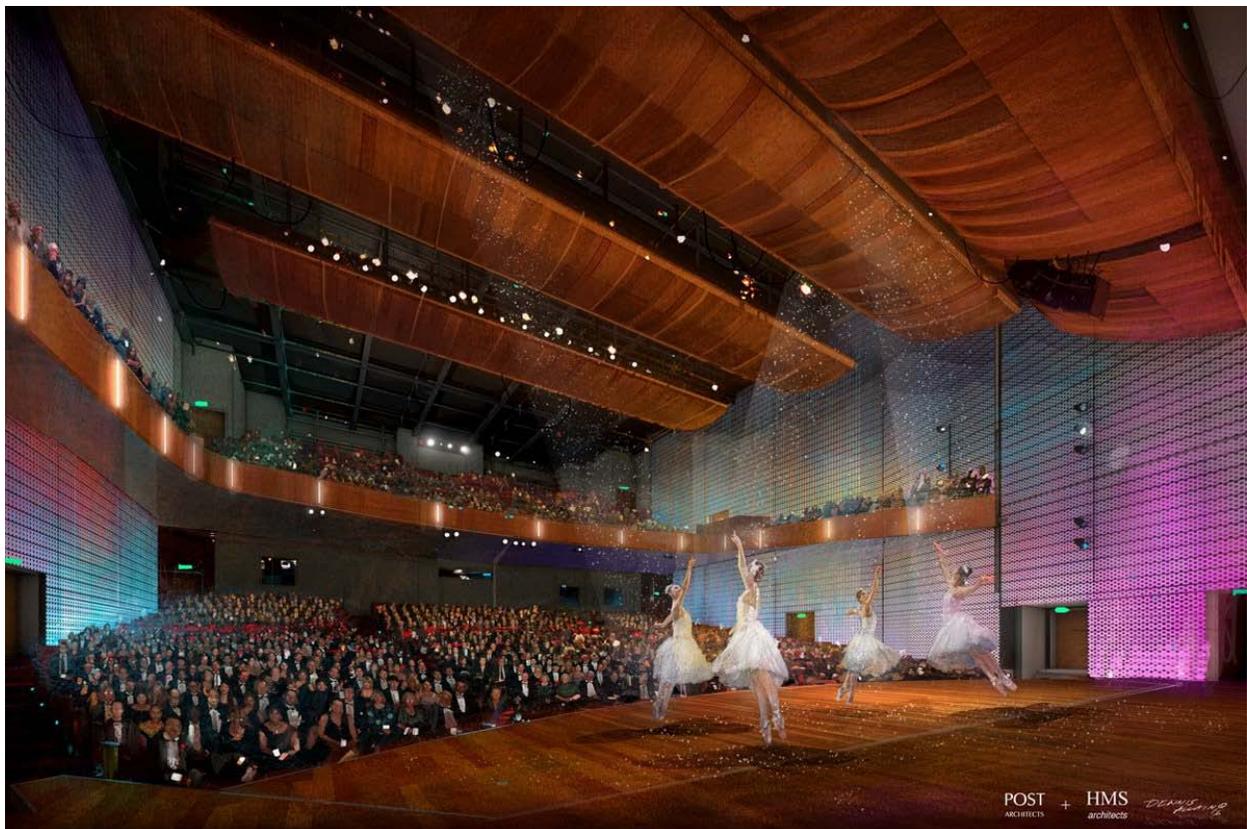


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For the first time since its founding forty years ago, the River Center Theatre for the Performing Arts in Baton Rouge is receiving a redesign, led by local firm Post Architects along with HMS Architects of New Orleans.

Since it first opened in 1977, the River Center Theatre for the Performing Arts has been the principal performing arts hub in the Capital City. The facility currently hosts about 175 event days each year and is home to the Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra, the Baton Rouge Ballet Theatre, the Baton Rouge Broadway Series, and several dance academy performances and school concerts. Scores of budding ballerinas in sequined tutus have pirouetted across its stage, which has also welcomed opera singer Renée Fleming, jazz trumpeter Chris Botti, and other internationally known performers. The beloved concert hall holds important memories for vast numbers of local arts lovers. But as recent patrons will attest, the theatre is long overdue for updates. It has seen no significant improvements since its founding forty years ago.

That's about to change. In June, Baton Rouge Mayor-President Sharon Weston Broome announced that the River Center Theatre will undergo an \$18.1 million renovation, a project that has been in the works for the last few years. Post Architects in Baton Rouge is leading the redesign project in partnership with HMS Architects of New Orleans, a firm that specializes in performing arts venues. Contractors will bid on the project in Spring 2018, with construction anticipated to begin in July and an estimated completion date in late 2019 or early 2020.



“It’s going to be a game changer for the arts organizations who perform there,” said Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra Conductor Timothy Muffitt. “This will allow us to provide a complete experience to patrons and really enhance what surrounds a performance.”

The project presented several interesting design opportunities, said project manager Lisa Nice of Post Architects. The design team began by meeting with stakeholders and user groups to determine what they appreciated about the facility and what needed updating. Using that information, along with current theatre design trends around the country, Post and HMS are developing a modern design that promises to engage audiences and underscore the theatre’s downtown setting.

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One of the top priorities that emerged from early brainstorming sessions was the need for lobby improvements. Currently, the space is too small to adequately host the sort of pre-event functions common in similarly-sized performing arts halls nationwide. Having a larger, robust lobby with expanded concessions will enable patrons to do something they particularly enjoy—socialize.

“Baton Rouge is a very social community,” said Muffitt. “When you think about an LSU football game, one of the most important parts of it is the tailgating. This will allow us to create the kind of pre-event parties that local audiences expect and enjoy.”

The design team also saw the main entrance as an opportunity to help reconnect the theatre with perhaps Baton Rouge’s most important civic and cultural element, the Mississippi River. While the theatre is located in close proximity to the river and other picturesque sites downtown, including Repentance Park and Louisiana’s Old State Capitol, its current orientation ignores those views. The theatre’s main entrance and lobby look directly onto the south side of City Hall, a stark, gray concrete building located a short distance across the plaza.

“We probably looked at fifty different design studies to solve the problem of the entrance,” said Nice. “We wanted to meet the functional needs of the space with a lobby expansion, but we also wanted it to pop visually and connect with the river.”

Nice proposed a solution in which the entrance is angled, which will tilt the lobby line-of-sight to incorporate the Old State Capitol and parts of Repentance Park. As patrons mingle in refurbished public spaces on the second and third floors, they can take in panoramic views of the river itself. Moreover, a proposed outdoor terrace area on the second floor could become a public balcony akin to the River Terrace at Shaw Center for the Arts on Third Street, where guests can enjoy an evening out and a stunning river view. “I thought it was out-of-the-box thinking to bring the lobby out at an angle and the view in,” said Michael Day, general manager of SMG Baton Rouge, which manages the River Center complex.

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Post also found a way to radically change the façade while still remaining within budget. The theatre’s current Brutalist style features an exposed concrete exterior, which gives the building a fortress-like feel. The style was popular in many countries, including the United States, from the ‘fifties to the ‘seventies and was often used for civic buildings. Post’s proposed design calls for softening and modernizing the entrance with two large sections of structured glass walls separated by a tower clad in perforated metal panels, which will be illuminated by changing LED lighting to set the mood of what’s being staged for patrons and to capture the attention of passers-by.

Updating the theatre’s current seating scheme is one of the most anticipated parts of the project, said Nice. The current design, referred to as continental seating, features continuous rows of seats with aisles only on the far sides of the auditorium. Once commonplace, this arrangement was valued because it created a larger number of uninterrupted choice seats in the center of the theatre. Today, however, continental seating has fallen out of favor because modern audiences find it inconvenient.

“Today, patrons want to be able to get up and get something to drink and go to the restroom without having to step on everyone’s toes,” said Day. “With this new design, they’ll be able to move around and get back to their seats easily before the show starts.” The new seating plan calls for an arrangement with two center aisles, larger seats, and new premium boxed seats on the first and second floors that will feature drink service for some shows. The number of permanent seats will be slightly reduced from the current 1,897, but the experience for patrons will be much more enjoyable, said Day.

Excellent acoustics, particularly for live music and vocal performances, are one of the River Center Theatre’s longstanding attributes. In fact, the facility’s reputation for excellent sound helped the Baton Rouge Symphony Orchestra attract not only Fleming and Botti, but also violinist and conductor Itzhak Perlman, soprano Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, and other respected performers. “A big priority is ensuring that we maintain the quality of the acoustics for music,” said Nice.



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There was room for improvement, however. The very reverberation that has enhanced live music and voice performances has challenged other events, including comedy acts and dramatic theatre, said Nice. To address it, the interior design plan calls for new ceiling baffles and acoustical panels installed along interior walls, which are expected to reduce echoing and improve clarity. The acoustical panels will be tucked behind floor-to-ceiling perforated metal screening, a design solution that will give the interior a warm, modern feel. LED lighting will

illuminate the metal screening and will change hues and intensity depending on the tone of each performance.

“It’s really going to be fantastic when it’s finished,” said Day. “I don’t know what that first show will be, but it’s going to be a magical night for Baton Rouge.”

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