

Historic Overview

The original Amphitheater dates from 1892 and according to the National Register, is “at the center of all Chautauqua activities.” From the beginning it has been the very heart of what was originally known as The Chautauqua Assembly.

The National Register of Historic Places Registration Form dated 2/14/89 gives the following description of the Amphitheater’s evolution. The original Amphitheater was covered by a pavilion-like tent.

In 1879 a second, hard roofed, structure was constructed and later, in the summer of 1892 the present structure was begun. The sizes of the earlier structures are unknown, but presumably were too small to accommodate the needs of the growing community. The central unbroken Front-of-House (FOH) space was, and continues to be, 160 feet by 100 feet. The columns flanking the central space are on 19’-6” centers. Under the eaves at the roof edge there were, and continue to be, “bracketed wooden supporting posts”. The seats were and continue to be “solid wood benches descending in tiers toward the stage”.

The plan included a thrust stage and the back-of-house consisted of office space, men’s and women’s toilet rooms with lounges housed within a two story turreted structure. There were “entrances for singers” at each side leading to chorus seating at the rear of the stage, much as it is today.

The Massey organ and its brick masonry chamber were installed in 1907. The rolling steel fire shutters or doors were also installed at that time and continue to be operational to this day. Interestingly, the masonry organ chamber has essentially been surrounded by a wood frame building for most of its life.

The original Amphitheater roof was constructed of “leak proof iron shingles” that have subsequently been replaced with a standing seam metal roof.

Over the years the stage facilities have been expanded and improved to accommodate the evolving programming at Chautauqua. The original placement of the chorus arrayed at the back of stage in a curved arrangement continues to the present. However, the original “thrust stage”, to accommodate a speaker, has been enlarged more than once to allow for larger stage productions of dance and musical group performances.

Recent alterations (in the last 35 years) have included alterations to the Amphitheater roof structure by adding bracing to resist snow loads (1977) additional alterations to the roof structure (1978), renovations to the Amphitheater including the roof (1980) alterations including removal of the turrets and the addition of a porch to the back of house (1981-1983) and additional alterations/ renovations to the stage (2002-2013).

Chautauqua is fortunate to have an excellent archive of documents, photographs, drawings, newspaper articles and the like, which have been an invaluable resource for understanding the Institution’s history and growth. Perusal of this material leads to the realization that the essence of Chautauqua is its evolution; the process of continuous change from a simpler state to one which is more complex. This pattern began 139 years ago in 1874 with the founding of the Institution and explains the range of periods of significance described in the Preservation League of New York State’s “Comments on “Chautauqua Amphitheater Historic Rehabilitation Analysis and Scope Report”” of February 2013.

These periods are listed as 1850-1874, 1875-1899, 1900-1924 and 1925-1949, which represent the range of dates when major events occurred that shaped Chautauqua's evolution. The comments make an important point concerning large historic districts, such as Chautauqua with its 647 buildings on 207 acres (1989 registration form)*, and where the vast majority are contributing, that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts". This concept should be borne in mind when considering changes to any contributing building at the Institution.

*Note: The Institution currently has 700 acres.

Secretary of the Interiors' Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties

These standards are not mandated for the Amphitheater Projects because no federal funds are involved. However, the standards do represent a "best practices" approach to the stewardship of landmark quality properties. The following is an excerpt from the Preservation League Comments of February 2013. There are four treatment approaches that are identified in the standards which are briefly described as:

"Preservation (which) places a high premium on the retention and repair of historic fabric through conservation, maintenance and repair. It reflects a building's continuum over time, through successive occupancies, and the respectful changes and alterations that are made."

"Rehabilitation emphasizes the retention and repair of historic materials, but more latitude is provided for replacement because it is assumed the property is more deteriorated prior to work. (Both Preservation and Rehabilitation standards focus attention on the preservation of those materials, feature, finishes, spaces, and spatial relationships that, together, give a property its historic character.)"

"Restoration focuses on the retention of materials from the most significant time in a property's history, while permitting the removal of materials from other periods."

"Reconstruction establishes limited opportunities to re-create a non-surviving site, landscape, building, structure, or object in all new materials."

The NPS documents go on to say that "choosing the most appropriate treatment for a building requires careful decision-making about a building's historic significance, as well taking into account a number of other considerations" (summarized as):

- "Relative importance in history. Is the building a nationally significant resource? National Historic Landmarks, designated for their exceptional significance in American history," or many buildings individually listed in the National Register often warrant Preservation or Restoration (treatments)."
- "Physical condition. What is the existing condition- or degree of material integrity- of the building prior to work? Has the original form survived largely intact or has it been altered over time? Are the alterations an important part of the building's history?"
- "Proposed use. An essential, practical question to ask is: Will the building be used as it was historically or will it be given a new use? Many historic buildings can be adapted for new uses without seriously damaging their historic character."

Discussion Regarding Treatment Approach

The **Preservation** approach will, most likely, present obstacles along the way that cannot be overcome. The design program for the Amphitheater requires considerable alteration in order to accommodate new programs which cannot be held in the existing volume. These programs, along with some audience expansion, are entirely consistent with the evolutionary nature of the Institution. The **Restoration** approach is also problematic because there is no single period of significance. The **Reconstruction** approach is not appropriate in this instance. This leaves **Rehabilitation** as the approach of choice because of its flexibility. However, that "latitude" must be tempered with discretion and well founded judgment as to what should be retained and rehabilitated and what should not.

Program

The program for the Amphitheater's current stage of evolution consists of expansion of audience capacity to meet the anticipated population growth of Chautauqua while simultaneously improving safety, accessibility, sight lines and accommodating a wider variety of performances through functional changes that are responsive to those needs. The project should demonstrate responsible ecological development.

Qualities and elements of the Amphitheater which are important and should be retained, replicated or referenced in its rehabilitation**A. Front-of-House**

1. The existing bracketed wood columns at the FOH perimeter are, to many people including me, symbolic of Chautauqua. Their size, scale, spacing, materials and details are very important because almost everyone who enters the spectator area engages these columns rather intimately. Ideally they would be replicated with little or no dimensional change especially in the brackets. If replication is required, the final product should appear to be solid wood for each member.
2. The height of the roof edge and flat beadboard ceiling above the perimeter walk are very inviting and humanly scaled. These are wonderful qualities for a 270 degree perimeter entrance.
3. The thin roof edge is quite refined and whose quality should be retained.
4. The perimeter lights at the roof edge are iconic and the bulb shape and size as well as the fixture design and spacing are what make them so. They should be removed, retained, restored, or if necessary, replicated. Conversion to warm LED lamps should be possible without compromise to the fixture's appearance.
5. The vaulted ceiling over the center space is a good surprise that one discovers upon entering the space and experiencing the volume. It is a very important spatial feature.
6. The two clerestories are also an interesting feature of the Amphitheater both in form and function, although I understand that their transparency can be theatrically problematic and they are frequently covered.
7. The historic Massey Organ in its entirety and the original fire doors which separate it from the Amphitheater are a focal point of the space. The chorus area flanking the Organ is an important historic relationship and should be retained.
8. The ramps that serve as the public's descent into the Amphitheater space are dangerous and without any safety devices to hold onto. Complicating the situation is the awkward transition from the ramps to the stepped seating area. Retaining this feature would be a mistake.
9. The bench seating system is historic and should be retained conceptually. Adaptation to something more ergonomically appropriate is desirable.
10. The original openness of the perimeter of the Amphitheater should be reclaimed so that patrons can readily see into the space from a 270 degree arc as it was before the "bleachers" were constructed. Current plans call for their removal. This removal will restore the welcoming sense of community and public nature of the Amphitheater's Front-of-House.

B. Back-of-House

1. The symmetrical design of the existing BOH is quite subtle and not obvious at all. This is achieved by the shape of the plan and the resultant three-dimensional form of that part of the building. Elements that originated with the two former turrets contribute to this quality through the employment of “chamfered corners” and multiple wall planes.
2. The “layered” quality of expressing each floor separately, including the projecting roof, is a successful device to emphasize horizontally and help eliminate any sense of monumentality and/or vertically.
3. On the existing east elevation the pairing of the second floor windows and their strong relationship to the fine first floor bracketed porch columns comes across as a welcome ordering device. Such elements communicate a close relationship to the adjacent residential context. This relationship is reinforced by the apparent private nature of Back-of-House with its residential type windows that are used somewhat sparingly and as can be seen in the nearby residential context. This historic condition seems quite logical given that the BOH is not a public space, as is the FOH, but rather a more private “house-like” place for performers, staff and musicians.
4. The evolution of the BOH has obscured the Massey Organ addition of 1906-1907. Hints of its existence and quality/ nature of construction are visible upon entering either of the ground floor doors on the east elevation. The brick masonry construction with its classical detailing, as seen in the brick quoins at the corners and which comes as quite a surprise, illustrate the value placed on the organ.
5. The BOH design qualities along with the cedar wall shingles, cedar clapboard, simple wood railings, and bracketed columns at the porch and reminiscent of those at the FOH, as well wood lattice, all work to contribute to the human scale of the BOH. The existing Amphitheater relates very well to its immediate context of the Athenaeum and other nearby wood framed structures. The overall effect of the FOH and the BOH combined is one of “we made this ourselves”, which is very much the spirit of Chautauqua.
6. Just as the Amphitheater is the “heart of Chautauqua” the Massey Organ is the “heart of the Amphitheater.”
7. Despite its charm, comfortable size/ scale, the Back-of-House simply cannot meet the programming needs of today’s Amphitheater. Both performer and staff spaces are too small, circulation is inefficient, inadequate and congested. The effect is constrictive on programs which are the Institution’s life blood. It is also taking its toll on the condition of the Amphitheater which is abused by the congestion and intensity of activity.

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings:

1. A property will be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces, and spatial relationships.
2. The historic character of a property will be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive materials or alteration of features, spaces, and spatial relationships that characterize a property will be avoided.
3. Each property will be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or elements from other historic properties, will not be undertaken.
4. Changes to a property that have acquired historic significance in their own right will be retained and preserved.
5. Distinctive materials, features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property will be preserved.
6. Deteriorated historic features will be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature will match the old in design, color, texture, and where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features will be substantiated by documentary and physical evidence.
7. Chemical or physical treatments, if appropriate, will be undertaken using the gentlest means possible. Treatments that cause damage to historic materials will not be used.
8. Archeological resources will be protected and preserved in place. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures will be undertaken.
9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials of the property and its environment.
10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.

Concerns and Observations Regarding the DD Phase Design Drawings for the Rehabilitated Amphitheater

Front-of-House

1. The proposal for expanding the audience capacity consists of deepening (through excavation) of the seating bowl and extending the roof edge to accommodate the desired additional seats. Seating will be on tiers and on a flat floor at the lowest level, again much as it currently is. The steep ramps will be replaced with concrete stairs aligning with the seating tiers, creating a much safer condition at the junction of aisles and rows than currently exists.

There will be 100 wheel chair positions along with 100 companion seats. An increase in standing capacity is provided through an expanded promenade at the perimeter made possible by removal of the bleachers, redesign of gates and extension of the roof.

The expanded roof design continues the experience of the existing by utilizing materials and detailing as is seen in the existing. I believe that the deeper bowl is a good solution to capacity increase because:

- a. It continues and expands the historic condition
- b. The only alternatives that I can think of entail expanded bleachers or an expanded footprint, both of which are inconsistent with the Standards.

Please see the attached comparative building sections which show the proposed volume superimposed over the existing.

The current proposal includes replacement in kind of all the beadboard (primarily on ceilings) for cost reasons. I do think this should be revisited since much of what I saw seemed in good condition. The retention of such elements as the vaulted ceiling and the control booth are very important features and their continuance helps significantly in retaining the “feel” or historic spatial quality of the Amphitheater. The two clerestories in the roof near the stage end have been removed for what I understand are programmatic reasons concerning difficulty in controlling entering light at the sides of the stage. I recommend that some additional research be devoted to this question to ensure that removal is the best solution at this time.

The removal of every other steel column in the tiered seating area will improve sight lines for many and will be welcomed. The design and detailing of the new columns will recall that of the original. The addition of an orchestra pit, lift and enlarged stage will substantially increase the performance options. All in all the effect of the FOH changes is consistent with the evolution of the Amphitheater for the past 121 years.

Back-of-House

1. The proposed BOH appears to have evolved from clean, well ordered plans that should work very well for the variety of productions/ events programmed for the rehabilitated Amphitheater. The elevations have a monumental quality which results, in part; from the buildings block form, strong, very readable symmetry and emphasis on verticality. The linking of level 2 and level 3, joining level 2 windows with level 3 windows and the uninterrupted two story timber columns supporting the east elevation balcony, all contribute to the sense of verticality.
The recessed center sections of levels 1 and 3, plus the projecting balcony do help somewhat in mitigating the formality of the east elevation, as seen more clearly in the model rather than the elevation drawings
2. The BOH elevations have a crisp, contemporary feel which seems to have created a schism between the rehabilitated BOH and FOH. The materials presently used in both the FOH and the BOH are, in some cases, the same and in others very compatible. The bracketed posts at the perimeter of the FOH have the same material, scale and feel as those at the BOH porch. The slight recesses on the north and south elevations do help in easing the bulk of the BOH. The proposed wood trellises are a positive element linking the BOH and the FOH and “feel like Chautauqua”.
3. I recommend that the new double hung windows of the BOH should be 9 over 1 wood window similar to the existing. I also recommend full double hung windows in Offices 203 and 212, which will make them more habitable spaces. The high windows at dressing rooms and toilet rooms are appropriate. The proposed spandrel material between level 2 and level 3 windows is wood panel, which I think could be reconsidered to be wood boards or other unitized wood product.
4. The slight roof overhang on the clerestory (seen on the east elevation) seems very appropriate and I can't help but wonder if a similar detail would help in softening the east elevation and reflect the quality of the existing condition.
5. Details such as the very contemporary metal railings at the balcony and other areas seen on the east elevation as well as the glass and metal railings at interior stairs do not reinforce the character of Chautauqua. I recommend employing wood for the exterior elements and metal for the interior conditions.
6. The wall Detail 2 on drawing A600 is terrific and very much in the spirit of Chautauqua.
7. The “rainscreen” material proposed for the BOH exterior siding appears to be a traditional siding pattern. In researching the Hardie siding products, I found that they offer a straight edge wall shingle (panel) similar to the existing west gable and new east gable of the Amphitheater roof as well as to the existing cedar shingle siding of the present BOH exterior walls. I recommend its consideration for the rehabilitated BOH exterior.
8. I think the “green walls” of the BOH and “landscape elements” at the FOH are very much in the spirit of Chautauqua. It appears that the green wall planting proposed for the BOH east elevation, level 1, will cover the proposed stone veneer and will result in a “living green wall” year round.
9. In reviewing the site Planting Plan which shows the continuation and reinforcement of informal walks surrounding both the FOH and BOH of the Amphitheater, I realized that it is that very informality which makes the present Amp work so well. Compare the walk patterns around nearly level Bestor Plaza in relation to its surrounding buildings to the undulating, meandering walks surrounding the Amphitheater. One's views of the Amp are always askew or oblique in relation to it and never on axis. I believe it is this important quality that makes the present Amp appear to not be symmetrical, when in fact it is very subtly so.

In summary, I believe the rehabilitated BOH communicates a message of formality that is not consistent with the feel or spirit of the present Amphitheater and relates formally to the Bestor Plaza masonry structures rather than the proposed Front-of-House and the existing Back-of-House. I recommend that further study of the BOH elevations and materials be done to reflect both their evolution and present condition. For example, consider expressing the three levels as horizontal layers which could help in humanizing the BOH and reducing or eliminating the strong sense of verticality or monumentality.