**The Renewal of Our Amp: Its place. Its purpose. The feeling. The experience.**

The Chautauqua Amphitheater — the “Amp” — functions as our community’s most important place for assembly around arts, culture and worship. Over its 122-year history, most of the Amp’s parts have been built up, torn down, repaired, replaced and remodeled. What we see today is the result of decades of changes, and Chautauqua Institution intends to review the Amp to meet the community’s needs for the next 100 years.

**Safety and accessibility.**

As with most structures of a certain age, it is important to secure the Amp as a safe place for assembly. Wholesale repairs and reconstruction are required to address some significant safety issues which affect audiences and artists alike. The Amp in its current configuration also presents major barriers to accessibility, especially for differently abled persons and those with physical limitations.

**Respect for audiences.**

Current and future audiences deserve an Amp that provides a modern-day experience. Providing such an experience demands significant attention to comfort, access and inclusion of an independent structural engineer to fully examine not only the best contemporary art and culture, but also art and culture that is innovative and dynamic — all of which require an Amp with substantially modernized and upgraded facilities. Chautauqua audiences also deserve an experience which honors the Amp’s traditional feel (e.g. openness to nature, neutrality and large-scale simplicity).

**Respect for artists and presenters.**

In order to attract renowned artists and presenters the Amp must be a facility that additionally respects for and the work they do. This is particularly important for our resident artists and presenters, who use the space many times throughout a given season. The current Amp’s backstage area is woefully inadequate and even unsafe for artists, presenters and production crews. Chautauqua’s artistic leadership is unanimous in its desire for improved performance space and technology in order to deliver the best possible art in both individual and collaborative forms.

**Institutional sustainability.**

Chautauqua’s vitality is dependent upon its ability to provide an evolving array of programs that meet the needs and desires of current and future audiences. As the center of event planning, the Amp is a long-term and cobbled together, and it is important to renew the Amp in a way that is long-term and comprehensive.

Financial sustainability requires that we increase seating and standing capacity both in an absolute sense but also by not compromising existing seating during inter-arts performances or when it rains.

**Commitment to history and historic adaptation.**

Our plan for the Amp’s renewal faithfully adheres to its past. That past is a story of a very modest, large utilitarian structure that has been frequently and practically mended and repaired, decade after decade, for over a century. Its various forms and functions have been adapted, replaced or modified in support of program changes and basic upkeep needs.

The Amp’s neutrality, openness to nature and large-scale simplicity has led to frequent and non-strategic maintenance, repair and adaptation year after year. But the piecemeal and reactive response to maintaining the structural health of this facility has taken its toll. Decade after decade, the community and audiences easily accepted whatever change to the Amp’s stage, roof or audience space occurred. They did not then, and — with the proposed, more comprehensive Amp renewal being planned — will not in the future experience change or loss to what is important, what is sacred, and what matters most about assembling as a community in this Amp.

**Where we are now: Working with the National Park Service.**

In response to concerns expressed by preservation proponents and regional preservation groups, Chautauqua Institution requested the National Park Service’s assessment and technical assistance in reviewing current project plans for the Chautauqua Amphitheater. The NPS review of the project was made in the context of Chautauqua’s long-held federal designation as a National Historic Landmark District — a designation conferred by the Department of the Interior. Though the Amp itself is not a landmark, it is clearly one of the most important contributing structures to our NHL District.

In March, National Park Service representatives conducted a two-day, on-site inspection of the Chautauqua Institution grounds, including a hands-on review of the Amphitheater structure and its context within the district. A full report from their visit is available at ciweb.org/amp-project. Among the NPS recommendations:

- Continued identification of the Amphitheater’s “character-defining qualities,” along with a determination of how those qualities might be preserved.
- Retain an independent structural engineer to fully examine and clearly identify the Amphitheater’s structural challenges, to understand its current status, if the plan was not undertaken.

In response, the Institution has:

- Convened an advisory panel of key professionals with strong backgrounds in architecture and historic preservation.
- Retained the services of an independent structural engineering firm that has expertise in historic buildings.

**Where we are now: Continuing our work with the Chautauqua community.**

This coming season, Chautauqua Institution will hold a series of community engagement sessions on the Amphitheater renewal project. These sessions will be designed to listen to concerns and answer questions, and to educate attendees on the current state of the structure, the history of changes and modifications throughout its 122 years and the Institution’s proposed design. Attendees will be encouraged to ask questions and offer input, and their contributions will be recorded and reported out to the public.

The sessions will take place on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays all through the season:

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<td>In-person, in-depth tour of current Amphitheater facility, including attic space, back-of-house, stage and seating bowl 45 minutes</td>
<td>Session on the structural history of the Amp, the challenges (and sometimes perks) of presenting there, and the process that led to the current design proposal, followed by community dialogue and Q-and-A 60 minutes</td>
<td>Community dialogue and input through breakout groups on aspects of the Amphitheater project, followed by reports from each and general dialogue and Q-and-A 60 minutes</td>
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All recorded input will feed into materials the Chautauqua Institution Board of Trustees will consider at its Aug. 29 meeting, when the Amphitheater project is scheduled for a vote.

“We recognize your strong commitment to preserving and maintaining the Chautauqua NHL District, and the extensive and high-quality programming that is critical to maintaining a successful and on-going community.”

— Bonnie Halda, Chief of Preservation Assistance, National Park Service  •  April 2015 report to Chautauqua President Tom Becker
The Chautauqua Amphitheater: Continuity and Change

BY JON SCHMITZ, ARCHIVIST AND HISTORIAN

A

t the center of this and every chautauqua there is a platform, around which the whole chautauqua community assembles. In today’s world we each go to our own place — our website, our own books and television shows. But, at Chautauqua, people gather in one place, one physical place to experience and learn, not alone, but as a community. No matter what else separates them, they come together by sharing a common experience together. This is why the Amphitheater, a facility inherited from the old camp meetings and still serving a need today, stands at the heart of Chautauqua’s past, present and future identity, and why it is so important to preserve the unique look, feel, function and experience of this site.

The Old Auditorium

At first, the Assembly gathered under the trees in an outdoor auditorium where Miller Park is today. When it rained, the audience would trek up the hill to find shelter, as best they could, in the large canvas tent. Lewis Miller realized that many more people could sit under the canvas if it were raised over the ravine to the south. This is where the present Amphitheater stands today.

The 1879 Amphitheater

The covered ravine became the new center of the grounds; and, in 1879, a wooden structure was erected and named the “Amphitheater” by one of the first and best known speakers at Chautauqua, the nationally renowned Rev. James Buckley. The sides were left open for better ventilation and to keep some of the outdoor experience of the tent and old auditorium. The structure was impressive, more for its functionality than its appearance. It seated 5,000, although often many more would cram in as best they could. The acoustics worked well, except when it rained. The roof was flat and the sound of heavy rain would make way for the Memorial Organ donated by the Massey family of Toronto. The organ is still the largest outdoor organ in the world. It was built by the Warren Organ Company of Woodstock, Ontario. There are 4 manuals with 61 notes each, and a pedal of 32 notes, 18 stops on the Great, 19 on the Swell, 15 on the Chor, 8 on the Solos and 14 on the pedal. The wind was supplied by an Orgelbloc electric fan that could vary pressure.

Installing the organ required taking out and rebuilding the front of the building — the side facing the lake. The organ needed to be placed further back than the original, and the choir seats arranged on either side for more room. A fireproof chamber was constructed to house and protect the organ. The stage was lowered and additional seats were added around its perimeter. Unlike the 1893 construction, this project failed to keep on schedule, and the season of 1905 ended without any organ, not even the organ. But it was worth the wait. Already, the Amphitheater was nationally known as one of the best constructed structures for public speaking, now it had also one of the country’s finest organs.

The 1893 Amphitheater

The Board met early in 1892 to discuss renovations, but it was decided that these would cost nearly the same amount as a new Amphitheater. They postponed a final decision to their summer meeting. In the meantime, a new structure, “Ellis G. Hall,” drew up plans for the new Amphitheater. The plan retained the original width and location of the old building, but was extended along the ravine — 13 feet towards the lake and 30 feet up the hill. The central area of 160 by 100 feet would be free of columns, allowing a clear view of the stage. The seats would be replaced with slightly reclined, solid wood benches. Unlike the flat roof of the 1879 Amphitheater, the new roof was pitched, covered with steel columns and trusses, and wooden pillars to support the eaves. The choir gallery was constructed to house and protect the organ. The organ needed a separate area to accommodate the orchestra and allow it to be arranged more easily in a semicircle. New rooms were added for speakers and guest performers with space set aside for the orchestra’s library. The concrete floor in the back was covered with light-colored asphalt tile, and new restrooms were installed. The backstage was given a face-lift, with new lighting and plywood ceilings and walls. The roof was given a face-lift, with new lighting and plywood ceilings and walls.

The new Amphitheater incorporated several significant improvements, giving Chautauqua one of the finest large facilities for public speaking anywhere in the country. In fact, without the new facility, it is uncertain that Chautauqua would have continued to attract national speakers so successfully over the next several decades. The real capacity of the new Amphitheater is unclear, since it allowed considerable standing room. As a reporter for the Assembly Herald wrote, the new Amphitheater “would hold from 7,000 to 15,000 people according to the degree of one’s imagination.” The administration claimed it could hold around 11,000 — but this may have been a little generous (there was actual seating for about 5,500, depending on the space required by each person).

1907 Massey Organ addition

The first major renovation took place over the winter of 1906–07 to accommodate the massive “Memorial Organ” donated by the Massey family of Toronto. The organ is still the largest outdoor organ in the world. It was built by the Warren Organ Company of Woodstock, Ontario. There are 4 manuals with 61 notes each, and a pedal of 32 notes, 18 stops on the Great, 19 on the Swell, 15 on the Chor, 8 on the Solos and 14 on the pedal. The wind was supplied by an Orgelbloc electric fan that could vary pressure.

Two Major Projects

Above, the center of the original backstage area is completely removed in the 1906–07 off-season to make way for the Memorial Organ donated by the Massey family. At right, the 1954 stage is demolished and the entire stage area is excavated during the winter shortly after its construction in 1939, with the original thrust stage meant for sermons and lectures.
Dear Friends,

As the 2015 Chautauqua Season approaches, I think it appropriate to publicly share my views regarding aspects of the Amphitheater’s role as the heart of Chautauqua and its governance issues in particular. I do so now in the hope it will provide you accurate information and therefore be helpful to the enjoyment of our community and Chautauquans everywhere.

The Chautauqua Institution’s Board of Trustees is the governing body of the Institution. As such, the Board, rather than any other director or group of directors, has the responsibility for considering and approving or disapproving any plan that might ultimately become a proposal for design, construction, development, enhancement, or rebuilding of Chautauqua’s historic Amphitheater.

From the very beginning, the Board has been closely engaged in the process surrounding the Amphitheater project — a process that remains both evolving and continuing. The core project ideas articulated in the Board’s 2010 Strategic Plan support such a project, and the Board-approved Revivification Campaign announced in 2014 makes such an undertaking the cornerstone project of the Campaign.

From the earliest conception of the project, the Board has not only been receptive to ideas from the Administration, but has provided feedback, made requests, challenged assumptions, and articulated important information. The Board has been guided and informed by a recognition of, and commitment to, its role as the governing body and policymaker. The decision-making responsibility for any project that might come before it in the future for consideration or possible approval. In that regard, the Board has ensured that it has had the information and knowledge to make an informed decision and have the Board’s independence and complete lack of predisposition with regard to any particular project or design.

With that as background, I note the following based on my involvement in that process:

This is the right time for the Institution to undertake a project to address the needs of the Amphitheater. Those needs currently are complemented by strong leadership, outstanding artistic, educational, and religious capabilities; unmatched financial stability; and a donor base with the capacity and inclination to act. However, this fortunate circumstance alone will not last indefinitely. Accordingly, there exists some urgency to act.

The project is evolving and iterative. Consequently, I am not surprised when new information emerges, new circumstances are encountered, and new decisions must be made. Design and other changes have occurred throughout the project in response to new information, circumstances, and decisions. And such changes continue to occur and no doubt will continue in the future. Such changes will not serve as a source of frustration, skepticism, or anger, but instead should be understood as inevitable and evidence of thoroughness.

The Amphitheater project planning process was underpinned by any preconceived ideas. Every key project-related decision — including the long-term location of the Amphitheater, the nature of the Ampitheater’s structure, and the construction timeline — has been driven and continues to be driven by the development of facts and given the current landscape of options available.

This project goes back to the work of the initial Amphitheater planning committee and continues to this day. The input and input over several months to employ a balanced perspective as they consider the relative merits of the project as it morphs toward a final design — by seeking to identify the positive and not just the negative aspects, to look out the window for the challenge and the process, and by acknowledging the integrity and good intentions of the dedicated and committed people on all sides of the issues that surround this project.

Chautauqua is unique and exceptional. It is a periodic program around which a permanent community has grown. It remains founded on progressive notions of self-improvement, growth, and change, yet it is deeply rooted in history and tradition. Those who come in contact with Chautauqua develop a sense of passion for it and ownership of it. It is simultaneously both a personal experience and a community — to respect the views of others; to give the benefit of the doubt; and to acknowledge the integrity and good intentions of the dedicated and committed people on all sides of the issues that surround this project.

At its best, this intriguing, sometimes self-contradicting collection of attributes can inspire, inform, and amaze, making the Institution a place with a unique hold on the hearts of Chautauquans. At other times, however, Chautauqua can also cause unduly informing processes and lead to overzealousness in defense of individual visions and desires.

The debate around the Amphitheater project has seen both ends of the spectrum — inspired, selfless effort in support of the community and in defense of personal views, but also skeptical and uncharitable comments both in public and private. The next several months, including the 2015 Chautauqua Season, present a moment for all of us to pause, reflect, and then move forward in a manner that exemplifies the best of our community — to respect the views of others, to give the benefit of the doubt, to assume good motivations of those whose views differ from one’s own, to temper the tone with which one communicates, and behavior to rigorous self-scrutiny.

Neither the Chautauqua Institution nor any individual’s Chautauqua experience is about a particular program, building, belief, event, or person. Rather, both are and should be about celebrating the best in human values. And so we are called to the task of understanding the issues at hand, to make that real and true not only in the upcoming Season, but throughout generations to come.

With best regards to each of you and your families for a most enjoyable 2015 Chautauqua Season.

Sincerely,

James A. Pardo, Jr.
Chair
Board of Trustees

CHAUTAUQUA INSTITUTION BOARD OF TRUSTEES

An open letter to the Chautauqua community
A TOUR OF OUR AMPHITHEATER

CURRENT/HISTORICAL

APPROACH FROM BESTOR PLAZA. Keeping the Amphitheater at its current site retains vital connectivity to the other significant community gathering places at the heart of the Chautauqua institution grounds, including Bestor Plaza, Smith Memorial Library, the Athenaeum Hotel and the Brick Walk Cafe. On our approach from Bestor Plaza, as now, the brick walk ushers us toward the Amp and its open, welcoming embrace. The effect is even more striking with the renewed Amp, which reclaims the historic openness of the facility's western plaza area by removing of the 1981 bleachers.

JUST OUTSIDE GATE 4. As we prepare to enter the Amp's outer boundary, just as in 1907, we can see clear through the facility toward the Presbyterian House and Athenaeum Hotel to the south and southeast. The wings of the roof are extended 15 feet on the edges to protect more seating from the elements. The height of the roof’s peak and western gable remain exactly the same, and, despite the entire structure’s prominent size and surface area, it dissolves into the surrounding landscape as the activity inside the Amp grabs our attention and draws our eyes downward, toward the stage. Retained in the new design but not seen in this rendering are the hundreds of globe lights ringing the roof’s edge.

DESCENT INTO THE BOWL. We descend into the deepened seating bowl at eye level with the grand Massey Memorial Organ façade, which continues to serve as the dramatic backdrop for onstage activity. The Amp’s signature alabaster color is preserved in elements from the benches to the choir loft to the beadboard-like ceiling. Code-compliant steps and handrails provide safer means of ingress and egress, and ramps allow for wheelchair- and scooter-accessible seating at three tiers of the bowl rather than two. The stage itself has been widened by 30 feet to accommodate Chautauqua’s growing and continually evolving artistic programming, and stage entrances are wider to allow easier access for our artists and crews and their instruments, set pieces and equipment.

VIEW FROM STAGE AREA. From near the stage, we see that the Amp’s unique large-scale simplicity has been carefully preserved. The curved wooden ceiling is retained and continues to contribute to the facility’s tremendous acoustics. The distinctive “tree-top” columns ringing the outside of the bowl provide a connection to the Amp’s urban forest setting, and interior steel columns, fewer in number, echo the Amp’s past while yielding better sight lines for more in the audience. Ergonomically improved wooden benches provide a more comfortable experience, and the similar seating configuration preserves the strong connection the audience feels with the lecturer, preacher and performer.