

Chautauqua Amphitheater

Character Defining Qualities

Preamble: Association, Evolution, and Feeling

Chautauqua Institution's Amphitheater, commonly called "the Amp," embodies Chautauqua's significance as a place of assembly by serving as the central gathering place for Institution programs. As one of the most important structures in the Chautauqua National Historic District¹, it is associated with the tradition of social, religious, educational, cultural, and performance-based artistic programs of Chautauqua Institution for over 140 years. The Amphitheater expresses both continuity and change: it dates to the early days of the institution, serves its founding purpose, and retains the majority of its character-defining qualities; yet, it has been modified many times to reflect changing culture, as influenced by the evolution of Chautauqua Institution's programs

The Chautauqua Amphitheater evokes the feeling of an informal outdoor communal gathering place for educational and cultural activities in a summer community; manifests the passage of time and a sense of history through the evolution of its form and design; and represents a continuity of original materials and later additions. Inside, one can feel the weight of history: as stated in the Institution's National Historic Landmark District nomination, "few podiums in the country have held such a distinguished group of speakers and performers."

Location²

The Chautauqua Amphitheater is located on the grounds of Chautauqua Institution³, beside Lake Chautauqua, in the southwestern section of the State of New York. Other significant locational qualities are:

- Close proximity to Lake Chautauqua
- Embedment into the Institution grounds as a central, easily accessible gathering place for the Institution
- Location over the ravine that creates a natural bowl

¹ *National Historic Landmark District* is the highest historic classification awarded by the U.S. National Parks Service.

² *Location* refers to a specific place (USNPS).

³ Chautauqua Institution was founded in 1874, as an experiment in out-of-school, vacation learning. Chautauqua is dedicated to the exploration of the best in human values and the enrichment of life through a program that explores the important religious, social and political issues of our times; stimulates provocative, thoughtful involvement of individuals and families in creative response to such issues; and promotes excellence and creativity in the appreciation, performance and teaching of the arts.

Setting⁴

The Amphitheater is sited amid trees and paths with lake views, immediately accessible from the core of the grounds and integral to the daily life of the institution. The Amphitheater's setting also:

- Is integrated into the community through very close proximity to surrounding houses, which have been built around it
- Uses its northwest and southwest corners as arrival points
- Intercedes in direct line between Bestor Plaza and Lake Chautauqua, thereby creating a transition from the formal environment to the natural and informal one
- Exists within an undulating, meandering pattern of surrounding, soft-edged brick walks that, through oblique views, give the perception of an asymmetrical structure, when, in fact, it is very subtly symmetrical
- Serves as the destination of a pattern of circulation, with walkways leading to it, including an historic pathway across the ravine.

Materials and Workmanship

Among the important materials used in the Amphitheater are: wood, steel, steel, glass, concrete, brick, and cedar shingles. It incorporates simple, stock materials used in a straightforward manner without elaboration or enrichment.

Design⁵

The Chautauqua Amphitheater incorporates a building over a bowl or ravine, in the tradition of using natural hollows of hills and terraced seating (amphitheaters); it is an open air pavilion with a broad sheltering roof supported by columns and trusses, which are a mix of wood and steel. Its proportions of space, functional divisions, assemblage of materials, and embellishments give the building its form and distinctive character. The amphitheater contains seating tiers or platforms built onto the ravine with simple bench seating; a stage with balconies at the side and rear; an atypical thrust stage, altered over time to accommodate performance; and a back of house with an organ, organ house, and an addition facing toward Lake Chautauqua. The amphitheater itself retains a remarkably high level of integrity, while the back house has been altered numerous times and has a low level of integrity.

The amp's most significant design quality is the natural amphitheater (or "bowl") covered by a broad sheltering roof. Other features that contribute to its distinctive design include:⁶

- Bracketed, three-dimensional, "tree-top" wood columns at the front-of-house perimeter

⁴ *Setting* refers to the character of the space (USNPS).

⁵ *Design* is the combination of elements that create the form, plan, space, structure, and style of a property. (USNPS).

⁶ The front of house (FOH) retains a great deal more architectural and design integrity than does the back of house (BOH). Consequently, the FOH design elements have a significantly more important impact on the character of the Amphitheater.

Amphitheater Design Panel

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- Truss structure supporting the roof
- Thin roof edge height and specific pitch: aperture of 14'; main roof slope of 4.75/12; perimeter low slope roof of 3/12.
- Concave, curved ceiling of V-groove board over the center space, surrounded by flat V-groove board ceiling
- Perimeter lights at roof edge with round, bulbs that provide warm light
- Clerestories over stage
- A large pipe organ (the "Massey Organ"), and a housing addition, at the back of house, circa 1906-1907
- A chorus area flanking the Massey Organ on both sides
- A 270-degree perimeter that is open to the outdoors
- Terraced, simple bench seating, with sloping aisles
- Organization of the seating and aisles, i.e. their frequency and circulation patterns
- The shape, dimensionality, and proportionality of the bowl

*Moderately Important Design Informants:*⁷

- Chamfered corners and multiple wall planes at the back of house
- Second floor window pairing at the back of house, east elevation
- Fire Doors (original) separating Massey Organ from Amphitheater
- Symmetrical design of the existing back of house
- Cedar wall shingles on the back of house
- Bracketed, paired porch columns at the back of house; these are two-dimensional, as is appropriate for the situation

Somewhat important Design Informants:

- Layered quality of expressing each BOH floor separately
- Floor-to-floor height: Existing BOH Floor to Floor Heights: Porch Floor to 2nd Floor = 13'-2" , 2nd floor to Eave height 11'0" , New BOH Floor to Floor Heights: Porch to 2nd Floor = 13'-2" , 2nd Floor to Third Floor = 10'6" , 3rd Floor to new Eave Height = 14'-10"
- Residential type windows and other residential elements at BOH
- Simple wood railings at back of house
- Wood lattice at back of house

⁷ Because the BOH has less architectural and design integrity than the FOH, these moderate-to-less important features are considered **design informants**, rather than design elements or features.