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Take a peek inside our new arts center

The center will be built in stages, with the symphony-opera-dance theater put off until more money can be raised

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Orlando's new performing-arts center released details of its three theaters' interior designs on the same day its board voted to build in stages, with construction going ahead on the 2,700-seat and 300-seat theaters scheduled to open in late 2013. The third theater — an innovative 1,700-seat multiform hall planned for symphony, ballet and opera — will be put off until more money is raised.

The largest theater, to be named by the Walt Disney Co. because of its \$12.5 million gift, will recall the tented outdoor spaces of early amphitheatres, with upper walls the blue of the sky. Wood surfaces will be mahogany, with the balconies faced in woven copper.

"The feeling is you're sitting outdoors under the stars," architect Barton Myers said of that theater, which will be used for amplified performances such as Broadway tours and rock concerts.

The smallest theater, for community arts groups, has been designed in a horseshoe shape with a thrust stage. The balconies will be warm aluminum with bits of embedded back-lit glass that will cause them to sparkle. Overhead, the lighting bridge will feature contemporary paintings whose patterns may be repeated in fabric of the theater's 300 seats.

The designs are another indication that backers of the arts center are moving ahead with plans to break ground in the early spring of 2010.

Backers hope the groundbreaking will make the \$383 million project eligible for state and federal funding — and will persuade donors to contribute. Rita Bornstein, who has helped lead the fundraising drive, said she thinks giving will resume as soon as the project starts, and that there will be a particular interest in getting the multiform hall built.

"That's our passion — that theater — for everybody," she said.

The decision to go forward with the project in stages did not come without dissent. Board member Philip Kobrin voted against the motion, saying he would rather the project build the multiform hall first.

"It sort of dashes the whole idea of what we started out to do," he said.

The Broadway hall is going first for several reasons, said arts-center president Kathy Ramsberger: It's less expensive, it's expected to produce more revenue, and the money for the multiform hall is not there yet.

"Even though the symphony might have to stay at the Carr [Performing Arts Centre] for a while, the pressure to build that great hall will still be there," said arts-center chairman Jim Pugh.

Kobrin asked if the center could "dumb down" the concert hall — design it to be less costly — and go ahead and build it.

"The ballet and the symphony would be using a hall that's not perfect for either one," Ramsberger said.

The center's projected revenues have fallen short because of the drop in Orange County's tourist-development tax revenue. The county pledged \$130 million to the project but now has only about \$10 million available.

Pugh said the county should find other ways to supply its share.

"I don't know why the county couldn't borrow \$100 million, pay the \$3.5 million in debt service and pay themselves back by selling bonds based on the tourist tax," said Pugh, who runs a development company. "A business person would think in those terms.

"It would be very simple if we had some strong leadership over there. We should put some pressure on them to do what they ought to be doing."

It's not clear whether the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra, the Orlando Ballet and the Festival of Orchestras will continue to perform at Carr rather than moving into the 2,700-seat amplified hall.

David Schillhammer, the Philharmonic's executive director, said his board and musicians would work with the arts-center staff to figure out the best option for the orchestra.

The arts groups "want there to be some type of commitment to make sure the entire building gets built," Ramsberger said. "What they're fearful of is, what happens if there's another curve ball and the whole building doesn't get built?"

The planned multiform hall, which will change from concert hall to opera house to flat-floored banquet room, will echo some of the textures of the Broadway house, with cherry wood and copper shining throughout. A pair of huge reflective copper oculi, like the rings of Saturn, will be focal points on high, while copper-banded balconies will ring the room. That theater has been

designed with state-of-the-art acoustical features, which, along with its transformation abilities, make it more expensive to build than the largest hall.

"It transforms from spectacular concert hall to spectacular opera house," Myers said. "It could be one of the great concert halls in the world. We're keeping our fingers crossed."

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