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## FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre

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One building – multiple purposes: that describes the FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre in St. Catharines, Ontario. It's an ambitious project, and for the companies involved it presented various challenges that called for creative solutions.

The City of St. Catharines wanted a facility for a variety of arts entertainment: film, music, dance and theatre. The city also wanted this new building to attract visitors. It's the second of a two-pronged approach to downtown revitalization. Stage one was Brock University's Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts, housed in a renovated downtown factory. (See Award's June 2015 edition.) Together, the new city-run facility and the Brock campus would create an academic and cultural hub with shared spaces where people could learn and perform. Brock students would use two of the four venues in the city's building – the film theatre and Cairns Recital Hall – for lectures, practices and performances. The public would visit the city building to take in shows, and perhaps while there, patronize other downtown businesses. “

Anyone familiar with small to medium-sized Ontario urban centres knows that municipalities are rethinking how downtown areas work,” says Gary McCluskie, principal of Diamond Schmitt Architects. “This Performing Arts Centre in conjunction with Brock University was a smart solution to help inject life into St. Catharines.”

Success for the municipality, Diamond Schmitt and others would call for plenty of work to solve a range of challenges. Consider, for example, the plan for the interior of building. It would house four venues: Partridge Hall, a 780-seat concert hall; the recital hall with 304 seats; Robertson Theatre, a black-box performance and event space for 200; and the film theatre, seating 200.

The architects tried different configurations to fit the four spaces. “It was sort of like using a Rubik’s Cube, turning the areas in the design to get them to work in unison,” says McCluskie.

The key to finding the right configuration was creative positioning. Diamond Schmitt situated the film theatre beneath the black-box performance space. That put the theatre on the same level as the Brock University building, which sits midway down the steep valley slope that characterizes the St. Catharines landscape. By putting the film theatre on that lower level, students would be able to access it easily.



The design made sense. Unfortunately, it didn’t work in terms of dollars and cents at first. The construction team realized it would have to make changes to meet the client’s budget. According to Tim Joyce, associate at structural consultant Blackwell Structural Engineers, the project would cost significantly less with just one lateral system instead of three. The building would be as strong and sound yet it would require much less material and labour.

That solution helped bring the costs in line with the budget, but it introduced a new problem, sound interference. Noise could travel between the recital hall and the black-box theatre, potentially ruining audiences’ enjoyment of performances. “We had to make sure the wall was much better acoustically,” says Russ Cooper, principal acoustician at Jaffe Holden acoustics. “It’s

actually a double wall between those two spaces with resilient rubberized connections, so structurally they connect yet acoustically they're isolated."

Clearly, creative planning played an important role. Another big step had to do with the schedule. Bird Construction Group faced tight timelines and terrible weather. "The foundations were going in during the winter," notes Mike Pyne, project manager. "That was a pretty rough season for us, so we worked extended hours to make up for time when we just couldn't pour."

Despite that hard work, "the schedule took a beating," Pyne says. Brock University needed access to the building for September, so Bird prioritized the work to complete the film theatre and the recital hall first. Then the company turned to the rest of the facility, completing it all by November.

Today, the FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre graces downtown St. Catharines with glass and honey hued masonry walls, accentuated with colour-changing architectural lighting designed by electrical consultant Mulvey & Banani International. Specialty lighting is an interior feature as well, notes Mulvey & Banani senior associate Remus Banulescu. "We showcase different architectural features of the building including wooden scallops in the concert hall and columns and feature walls in the recital hall," he says.



The venues all have special features. The recital hall, for instance, sports vertical bands of two-layered serge wool attached to motorized, computerized tracks on the ceiling. Production managers can reconfigure the material to tune the acoustics for different performances. "Some ensembles would play with certain curtains in place, others only halfway," says Cooper from Jaffe Holden.

Performance lighting, staging and other equipment likewise suit different user groups, says Bob Campbell, associate principal at theatre consultancy Fisher Dachs Associates. "It has to be sophisticated enough to work for professional acts, yet easy enough for a faculty member to come in, turn the lights on and set the room up for a class." The interfaces for those systems enable a Brock University professor to push a button for an appropriate setting; yet a professional theatre manager can customize the settings, too.

The result is a multifaceted structure for multiple users, just as the city envisioned. "The FirstOntario Performing Arts Centre is unique both in design and in partnerships," says Steve Solski, executive director of the facility. "Diamond Schmitt's multivenue design allows for everything from symphonies and choirs, to theatre, film and music to take place simultaneously. The partnership with Brock means 500 students a day can utilize the teaching space, enhancing the synergy of entertainment, culture, outreach and education this facility is designed to do."

#### LOCATION

250 St. Paul Street, St. Catharines, Ontario

#### OWNER/DEVELOPER

City of St. Catharines

#### ARCHITECT

Diamond Schmitt Architects

#### GENERAL CONTRACTOR

Bird Construction Group

#### STRUCTURAL CONSULTANT

Blackwell Structural Engineers

#### MECHANICAL CONSULTANT

Crossey Engineering Ltd.

#### ELECTRICAL/SECURITY/ IT CONSULTANT

Mulvey & Banani International Inc.

#### AUDIO VISUAL/ ACOUSTICAL CONSULTANT

Jaffe Holden

THEATRE CONSULTANT  
Fischer Dachs Associates

TOTAL SIZE  
95,000 square feet

TOTAL COST  
\$60 million

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