

DECO IN DOWNTOWN LAS VEGAS: THE SMITH CENTER DELIVERS DURABILITY AND AUTHENTICITY TO A CITY BUILT ON FANTASY

BY STEVE KNIGHT

Photographs by Steve Hall with Hedrich-Blessing

“Much of Las Vegas is conceived and designed as an escape from somewhere else. The Smith Center is conceived to embody the soul of Las Vegas, not the fantasy-scape that people visit, but the place where people live and work.” - Gregory Hoss, Principal of David M Schwarz Architects



View from across Symphony Park showing Reynolds Hall with the carillon tower on the left and the Boman Pavilion building on the right, with center pedestrian mews in between.

BUILDING A CULTURAL LIFE IN LAS VEGAS

Las Vegas is an interesting place. You can find almost every architectural style represented there, both inside and out, except those that reflect the real Las Vegas. On the Strip, we have Paris, Venice, Rome, New York, a medieval fortress, buildings that might well feel more at home in Los Angeles or Dubai rather than Las Vegas, but no real “Las Vegas”. We have

both the interior and exterior of The Opera Garnier but in different places; the exterior, appropriately enough, is at Paris, but the interior, oddly, is several blocks down the street in Venice. For roughly the last forty years, Las Vegas has been an importer of culture rather than a creator of it.

Now home to over two million people, Las Vegas has greatly matured over the last couple of generations. It is now a place very interested in developing the cultural institutions one associates with major cities. The Smith Center for the Performing Arts was built for the citizens of Las Vegas and is intended to be one of those institutions. It is a new multi-purpose performing arts facility designed to host music, theatre, and dance companies and serves as the home of the Las Vegas Philharmonic and Nevada Ballet Theatre.

THE SMITH CENTER: FINDING AN APPROPRIATE EXPRESSION IN LAS VEGAS

Our first step in designing The Smith Center was to look for an architectural style that was indigenous to Las Vegas and somehow represented something singular to the city and its history. Las Vegas has been built up and torn down so many times now that there is very little of its history left, aside from a history of destruction and renewal.

In our search for the “real” Las Vegas it was obvious that the greatest achievement in the area was the Hoover Dam. Not only is it an architectural icon, but the dam and the workers who built it were so central to Las Vegas becoming what it is today that it seemed like the obvious choice. Had there not been those five thousand workers a year for all those years, to feed Las Vegas’ growth, it is unclear whether Las Vegas would have won out in the sweepstakes for a gaming capital of the United States.

Like most of our firm's buildings, The Smith Center draws its architectural vocabulary from many and diverse sources. The predominant influences in the building are Art Deco and Moderne, much like the Hoover Dam. The two primary styles find their origins in the beginning of the machine age. Art Deco was born as the transition from Art Nouveau, a fluid floral style, into a more linear and machine like expression. Moderne took Art



Twilight view of the complex.



Above: View of the interior courtyard.



Left: Detail of the carillon tower.

Deco and simplified it to a more streamlined image, and was often used to express speed or power in many built structures. The Hoover Dam was built at the intersection of these two design movements.

There are several physical parts of the Hoover Dam that provided inspiration for the design of The Smith Center, including the elegant massing and articulation of its water intake towers; the care taken with concrete, stone and terrazzo finishes; and the incorporation of art, iconography and ornamentation on both the exterior and interior.

BUILDING AND SITE

The \$470 million venue houses three performance spaces. First, Reynolds Hall, a state-of-the-art 2,050-seat multi-purpose auditorium with 23 boxes on four levels, is intended for first-run Broadway shows, symphony, dance, theatre and special attractions. This building also provides two significant lobby spaces that accommodate large groups for pre-, post- and non-performance gatherings. Second, and housed in an adjacent building called the Boman Pavilion, one finds a major component of the complex: an intimate 300-seat venue, called Cabaret Jazz. The third venue, also housed in the Boman Pavilion, is the 250-seat Troesh Studio Theater which serves as a black box theater as well as a rehearsal space for music and dance companies. The campus is also home to a 1.7 acre green space fronting Reynolds Hall and the Boman Pavilion, which provides an additional outdoor venue to The Smith Center.

The arrangement of the site makes a balanced composition on the park and lets each of the two buildings have its own presence. The facing corners of the Boman Pavilion and Reynolds Hall invite you into a walkway that leads to a private interior courtyard. Those two buildings form two sides of this courtyard. The final enclosure is created by the Donald W. Reynolds Children's Discovery Center. The courtyard itself serves all three buildings and acts as the heart of the project, a central gathering place.

The composition of facades facing the park is quite asymmetrical. The addition of the Carillon Tower on Reynolds Hall, which houses 46 bells weighing almost 15 tons, visually moves the center of the project back towards the center of the block, making for a balanced composition as it addresses the park.



Street corner view of the Boman Pavilion with the brick-clad Donald W. Reynolds Discovery Museum in the distance.



Detail of the curved corner entry with stainless steel art panel in the foreground.

ORNAMENT & MATERIALS

The incorporation of ornament and detail into facades and interiors is an integral part of our design process. In public buildings like The Smith Center, we believe that detail helps break down the somewhat overwhelming scale of facades and spaces, making them more approachable. Additionally, detail provides a level of visual richness that we believe is appropriate for significant buildings like this one.

We were fortunate with this project to have had such a rich palette of iconography with which to work, both in terms of the unique location of the building and the uses there. Nevada is known as the silver state; we took this designation to heart and incorporated a collection of stainless steel, aluminum and aluminum leaf details throughout the project. The exterior and interior stair and balcony railings in this project are notable, as are the three dimensional stainless steel panels that decorate the exterior façade (which tell the story of how the dam gave life to the desert), the bar fronts in the lobbies (which express the sun's rays) and many of the air grills (which use mountain motifs in their design).

The iris was the favorite flower of Mary Smith, one of the project's main donors. We developed several unique variations of the iris to use in hand-painted friezes in the main lobby and some of the other front of house public rooms.

You will also find many references to the arts throughout the building: in the Cabaret Theatre we developed return air grills with a piano motif; in Reynolds Hall, the end stanchions incorporate the lyre; the Upper Lobby has stylized base clefs in the carpet border and ceiling frieze; and the exterior stainless panels on the east façade include musical instruments in their design.

The choice of materials and colors in The Smith Center is the result of a series of discussions, quarry visits, mockups and several studies with our client. The desert in this area is comprised of two very dramatic and different colors, the red of Red Rock and the sand tones of much of the rest of the desert. We looked at stones in both hues. Our original plan was to use Nevada Metaquartzite (the red hues) for the exterior cladding but we were not able to satisfy ourselves of its structural integrity. We then decided, after an exhaustive search, that it was wiser to use a more tradi-



Reynolds Hall Auditorium—
View looking towards stage
with the orchestra shell in
place.



Above: Reynolds Hall Auditorium—View from the
stage.



Left: Reynolds Hall auditorium—Ceiling detail.

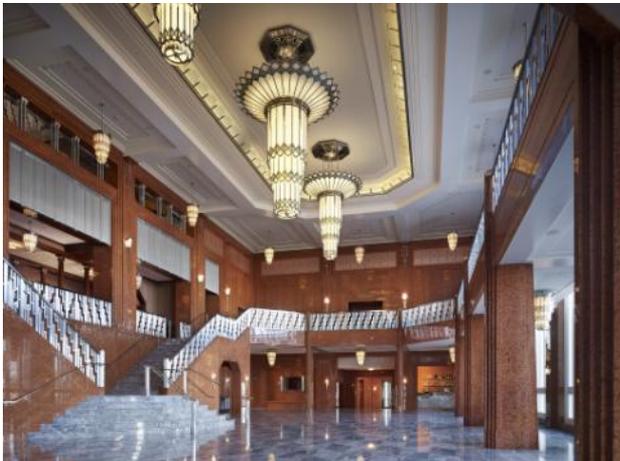


Reynolds Hall-Balcony parapet detail with stepped sidewall plaster in the background.

Below: Reynolds Hall Auditorium—Detail of seat end stanchion with stepped forestage in the background.



Below: Reynolds Hall-Grand Lobby with marble floor, stone clad walls, stainless steel railings and custom designed chandeliers.



tional building material and settled on limestone, which picks up the sandier hues of the desert.

Not having been able to use the red tones for the exterior, we decided to use them on the interior. We found two beautiful Italian marbles that we all agreed would be stunning for the walls of the Grand Lobby in Reynolds Hall: Rosso Asiago and Rosso Verona. These color stones are quite reminiscent of the reddish rocks one sees in some of the mountains in and around Las Vegas, and the color of these stones also provides an appropriately warm backdrop. For the Reynolds Hall auditorium the client chose a cognac colored chair fabric that we used to develop the entire color scheme for the room. We developed about 40 uniquely mixed shades of paint based on this fabric color and ended up using over 20 of these on the walls, pilasters and ceilings of the hall. The configuration of the hall, its coloration and detail make this room a unique performance space.



Reynolds Hall-Detail from the main stair upper landing with stainless steel framed laylight above.



Reynolds Hall-Founders room paneled in Santos rosewood and American burr walnut.

The Smith Center opened with a gala celebration and concert in March of 2012. It continues to receive accolades in the local, national and international press. Journalists and the community continue to speak of the Center's elegance and sense of permanence, noting it will change the landscape of Las Vegas and what is to come in the future. And one thing is certain: The Smith Center will be around for a very long time to play a

part in that future.



Boman Pavilion—Upper lobby with terrazzo floor, Venetian plaster walls, suspended mezzanine and custom designed chandeliers.

A LITTLE BIT ABOUT OUR FIRM AND OUR WORK

David M. Schwarz Architects is a Washington, DC-based architecture firm founded in 1976. Our early work included several preservation and adaptive reuse projects in Washington DC's historic neighborhoods. One, the Penn Theater conversion, won the first ADSW Preservation Award in 1984. We now maintain a design-oriented practice with a national reputation and have completed projects across the country. We design a wide variety of building types, including houses, civic buildings, retail, sports, healthcare and performing arts facilities. For more information, visit www.dmsas.com

"I stepped into the Grand Lobby and had to remind myself I still had my feet planted in downtown Las Vegas.....in the lobby of a cathedral to the arts that's meant to stand for generations to come. The lobby sends that message with Italian stone, 19-foot-tall chandeliers and sculpture.....The Smith Center is telling you it is here for the long haul. For you, for your children and their children. In Las Vegas, that message is nothing short of game-changing." - John L. Smith, reviewjournal.com