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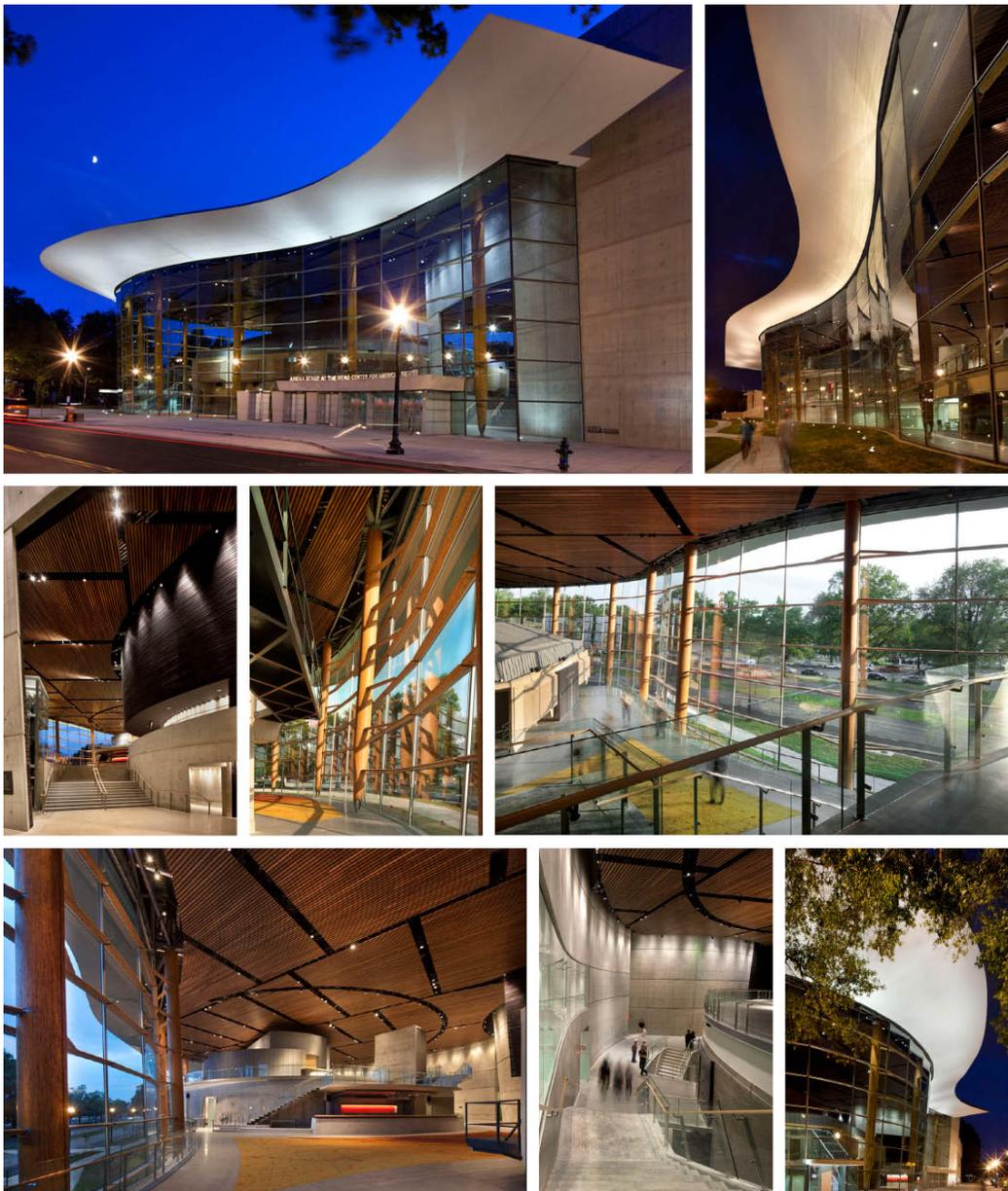
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Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater to Open October 25, 2010

New building by Bing Thom Architects creates a vibrant cultural destination in Southwest Washington that will be one of the country's leading centers for the production and development of American theater

Named one of the 10 best recent buildings in Washington, DC by the Urban Land Institute



Washington, DC – After almost a decade of planning, design, and construction, Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater will reopen on October 25, 2010 with a gala event featuring President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama as honorary chairs and D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty and his wife Michelle Fenty as honorary co-chairs. The new building, designed by Bing Thom Architects, one of Canada’s most renowned architectural firms, re-imagines this legendary theater and re-creates a cultural destination in Southwest Washington. With the opening of this new facility, Arena Stage will be the second largest performing arts complex in Washington after the Kennedy Center and will be one of the country’s leading centers for the production, presentation, development and study of American theater.

Artistic Director Molly Smith says, “The moment we have been waiting for has arrived—we are heading home. Arena Stage’s beautiful new Mead Center for American Theater will be ready to welcome audiences and artists this fall.”

As one of the most important and trailblazing regional theaters in the United States, Arena Stage has a rich history. It began in the 1950s and, like many theater companies, started in found space. By the late 1950s, the company had grown and was strong enough to commission Harry Weese (the legendary architect who went on to design the entire Washington Metro system) to design a theater to its specifications. In 1961, what is now known as the Fichandler Stage (named for Arena Stage’s founder Zelda Fichandler) opened—the first “in the round” permanent theater to be built in North America. This theater and a modest support building were followed by the Kreeger Theater in 1971, a modified thrust stage, also designed by Weese. Both theaters are considered architecturally significant enough that Washington has listed them as Historic Structures. Despite the strength of Weese’s architecture, Arena Stage suffered, along with the rest of its surroundings, from the brutal “urban renewal” program in the 60s and 70s that decimated the historic neighborhoods of Southwest Washington.

In the late 90s, under the direction of Molly Smith, Arena Stage began to reinvent itself and Bing Thom Architects won the commission to redesign Arena Stage in 2000. Considering the rich history of the property, BTA was faced with the challenge of maintaining the original listed historic structures while effectively doubling the size of the overall facilities, improving the acoustics and creating an innovative design that lives up to the strength of the original.

BTA devised an ingenious plan that saves and reuses the two original, historic theater buildings—while adding the Arlene and Robert Kogod Cradle, a versatile new theater. This new complex has reconsidered the building typology and inverted many of the typical assumptions of theater design. For example, the administration areas overlap with the passageways between the construction shops and the theaters. Not only is this arrangement unusual, but these uses have been put on public display, visible from the street for all to see. Similarly, the “kitchen,” the common room where all artists and staff relax and interact, is also visible through screened openings that look into the public lobby.

By wrapping all three buildings in an insulated glass skin and topping them with a heroic, 475-foot-long, cantilevered roof, BTA combines the old and new to create an imaginative and forceful theatrical compound that has already become a catalyst for the revitalization of Southwest Washington DC. This new enclosure provides critical acoustic improvements by isolating outside noise while still maintaining the integrity of the historic buildings. The glass is held in place by a system of 18 large, heavy timber columns (each one between 45’ and 55’ tall and each supporting more than 400,000 pounds of load on average) that also support the roof. Made of an engineered wood product called Parallam, the columns have an elliptical shape to reduce their visual impact, and are spaced 36 feet apart so that the building still feels quite transparent. This is the first structure to employ heavy timber on this scale in modern Washington, and also the first application of this efficient form of hybrid wood and glass building enclosure in the United States. The roof cantilever above salutes the Washington Monument, summoning visitors and establishing Arena Stage as one of the preeminent landmarks of the new Washington.

The powerful and unique performance spaces that established Arena in its early life have been improved and expanded. The Fichandler and the Kreeger have been refurbished, each to attract specific audiences – the 683-seat, in-the-round Fichandler to re-invent major musicals as well as classic plays, while the 514-seat, fan-shaped Kreeger, will present intimate classic and contemporary works, as well as small-scale musicals. A new venue—the 200-seat Arlene and Robert Kogod Cradle Theater—will nurture new and developing plays. The Kogod Cradle is a radical breakthrough in experimental theater spaces. Located in the heart of a spiral shaped structure, the oval shaped room successfully breaks theatrical and acoustic convention. From its spiral entry to the character of the walls defining the space, this room will be a new venue that is as adventurous as the work that will be performed in it.

Architect Bing Thom states, “The design of Arena Stage was inspired by Molly Smith’s desire for ‘a theater for all that is passionate, exuberant, profound, deep and dangerous in the American spirit.’ In particular we are grateful for her courage

and for giving us the opportunity to design a powerful new theater form for the Kogod Cradle. Together we have created a home for American theater that will allow audiences to interact not just with the art, but also with each other. We are convinced that the positive energy that will come from this building will send ripples—not just throughout Southwest Washington but throughout the region and artistically even further.”

Not only does the new Arena Stage provide a 21st-century home for the theater and revive Southwest Washington, DC, but the center will also be a responsible and sustainable addition to the area. As Bing Thom says, “Buildings are not islands; they interact with and impact their surroundings in ways that architects are only beginning to address, and it is at this macro level that Arena is exemplary. The initial decisions made on the project’s location and its role in the urbanization and revitalization of a key area of the City are as relevant as ever in both the sustainability and the urban debates.” The retention and adaptive reuse of existing buildings in a location with close proximity to transit have a considerable impact towards reducing the carbon footprint of the project as a whole, both initially and throughout its life. The grouping of three theaters at a single location generates immediate and potential savings in the form of a shared lobby, administrative and production space. Furthermore, BTA paid close attention to technological concerns by creating efficient interior temperature zones and incorporating a chemical-free water treatment system.

As BTA principal Michael Heeney states, “Architecture is a sort of stage set for life.” It is at the Mead Center for American Theater’s Arena Stage where BTA will open a new stage set for revitalizing the life of southwest DC’s residents.

BTA’s work at Arena Stage is already having an impact on the neighborhood. Art collectors and philanthropists Mera and Don Rubell have purchased the historic Randall School site, four blocks from Arena Stage, and have hired Bing Thom Architects to design a museum/hotel/residential complex. Other development around Arena Stage is also beginning to take shape in this long overlooked area.

And, just last week, a distinguished jury assembled by the Urban Land Institute named Arena Stage one of the 10 best new buildings in Washington, DC. The jury’s selection of Arena Stage was unanimous and enthusiastic.

About Arena Stage

Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater is a national center for the production, presentation, development and study of American theater. Under the leadership of Artistic Director Molly Smith and Managing Director Edgar Dobie, Arena Stage is the largest company in the country dedicated to American plays and playwrights. Founded in 1950 by Zelda Fichandler, Thomas Fichandler and Edward Mangum, Arena Stage is one of the nation’s original resident theaters and has a distinguished record of leadership and advancement in the field. Arena Stage produces huge plays of all that is passionate, exuberant, profound, deep and dangerous in the American spirit, and presents diverse and ground-breaking work from some of the best artists around the country. Arena Stage is committed to commissioning and developing new plays, including the first, second and third productions of new works, in addition to the creation and testing of best practices for new play development through the American Voices New Play Institute. Arena Stage impacts the lives of more than 20,000 students annually through its work in community engagement. Now in its sixth decade, Arena Stage serves a diverse annual audience of more than 200,000. www.arenastage.org

About Bing Thom Architects

Founded in 1980 in Vancouver, Bing Thom Architects has executed a wide spectrum of projects in Canada, Europe and China, from single-family residences to the design of entire cities. Principals Bing Thom and Michael Heeney share a fundamental belief in the transformative power of great architecture to uplift, not only the physical, but also the economic and social conditions of a community. The firm’s belief in this power has become the grounding philosophy for the office, and has resulted in memorable architecture that consistently taps into something beyond aesthetics. This year, BTA will complete the firm’s first major US project, the new Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater in Washington, D.C., to be followed by the opening of the East Trinity campus of Tarrant County College in Fort Worth Texas, which is the first phase of the Trinity River Uptown plan, the largest urban redevelopment currently being undertaken in the United States. Some of the firm’s other recent and current projects include Central City and Surrey City Center Library, both in Surrey, British Columbia; and The Chan Centre for the Performing Arts in Vancouver. This coming year, Princeton Architectural Press will be publishing [Bing Thom Works](#), the first comprehensive monograph on the work of BTA. Bing Thom Architects has also been the recipient of numerous honors and awards, including the 2010 Architectural Firm Award from The Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, the most prestigious honor that can be awarded to a Canadian architectural practice. For more information please visit www.bingthomarchitects.com