



Shalin Liu Performance Center in Rockport, MA, designed by Epstein Joslin Architects. PHOTO: ROBERT BENSON

Concerted design

La Jolla Music Society confident architectural firm will create performing arts center that is unique while blending with community

JAMES CHUTE • U-T

The La Jolla Music Society's decision to build a new performing arts center was prompted by the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's plans to convert Sherwood Auditorium into gallery space. ■ But don't call the Music Society's proposed 500-seat concert hall an auditorium. ■ "I think it's sad when concert halls become simply auditoriums," said architect Alan Joslin of Epstein Joslin Architects. "There's a magic we seek in them, something that really reaches for a higher level of experience, something that's moving." ■ Epstein Joslin Architects will be making magic for the La Jolla Music Society.

The La Jolla Music Society has hired the Cambridge, Mass.-based firm to design its new \$40 million performing arts center at 7600 Fay Ave. in La Jolla, between Pearl Avenue and Kline Street.

With the projects, like the firm's Shalin Liu Performance center in Rockport, Mass, and Joslin's work as a lead designer on the Boston Symphony's Seiji Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood, and the Music Center at Strathmore in Bethesda, MD, the firm is renowned for its expertise in creating performing spaces.

"In our minds, it was no contest, absolutely no contest," said La Jolla Music Society president and artistic director Christopher Beach.

"It was a runaway win for Epstein Joslin architects. "They understood us, they understood the village, they listened to us. And we believe having seen their work that they were best qualified without question to build a performing arts center that was new and exciting and memorable and grounded in the village."



Epstein Joslin principals, from left, Alan Joslin (principal-in-charge and design lead for the La Jolla project), Deborah Epstein (lead for interiors and finishes), Ray Porfilio (permitting, code and technical requirements).

The firm's principals—Joslin, Deborah Epstein and Ray Porfilio—will work with the Music Society in a project that includes a 150-seat cabaret/multipurpose space, rehearsal rooms, a cafe, an open courtyard and the concert hall.

"I like to think of a concert environment as a place that can inspire people to aspire to higher levels of purpose and accomplishment," said Joslin, who will lead the project. "Professional musicians have spent years developing their technique and their ability to express the meaning of a musical composition. For a musician to share that skill and insight directly with an audience in a live and intimate setting represents a vital human endeavor.

"That's very different from simply selling CD's with the goal of topping the pop charts. It reaches much deeper. And as such we hope that this new building enhances and elevates that most important communal encounter."

Intimate spaces

The Music Society initially put out a request for qualifications to 12 firms across the country who had experience building performing venues. It asked for proposals from five of those firms, then narrowed it to two.

For those two, Beach and a group of board members visited recent projects and requested multiple proposals.

"The firms that were invited to submit proposals really only had a very limited amount of time to get to know the Music Society organization before they had to submit their proposals," said Matthew Geaman, a Music Society board member and architect with Joseph Wong Design Associates, the local firm that will partner with Epstein Joslin Architects.

"I thought the proposal Epstein Joslin prepared was ingenious and really showed a deep understanding of the core mission and values of the La Jolla Music Society, despite the limited interaction they had with them at that point."

Among those values is the particular nature of chamber music, which is the Music Society's primary endeavor, both in its regular season offerings and during the summer in its annual chamber music festival, SummerFest.

"One of the aspects of SummerFest, and something that's very important to those who attend, is it's an opportunity to hear this extraordinary music and hear extraordinary performers, but feel as though you are very close to them," Joslin said. "You can reach up and touch them; you are drawn to hear live music because it's a very intimate experience.

"We want to make sure in shaping the hall that the relationship between audience and performer is as intimate

and direct as possible. So, and I think we can improve on what Sherwood provides, you'll probably see things like loge boxes and side balconies, raised seating for the seats toward the back—all with a sense of bringing people close to the performers."

Joslin, however, also acknowledges the social aspect of La Jolla Music Society events and how that will inform the center's design.

"The people who come to SummerFest, they come on a regular basis, they know each other, it's a very social environment," said Joslin. "And so the way we organize space has to be so it supports that, encourages that sense of community, even before the performance, and at intermission, and afterward."



Weill Hall at the Green Music Center, Sonoma State University, CA Alan Joslin a Principal-in-Charge for design with William Rawn Associates, Boston, MA PHOTO SONOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

Gathering places

One of Joslin and his partners' hallmarks in the firm's other projects has been the way they organize space so the interior and exterior elements are seamlessly integrated.

"Performance venues can be very isolated from their environments," Joslin said. "We've had the good fortune of being able to work in these wonderful settings where the outdoor space is as beautiful and as important as the indoor space. So the halls we've worked on have a kind of permeability between the inside and outside.

"La Jolla is especially suited for that kind of relationship."

As much as the climate, the nature of the community will have a profound effect on the building's design and appearance. Joslin noted the eclectic nature of La Jolla's architecture, which ranges from Irving Gill masterpieces to strip-mall quality commercial properties, and the restrained sense of scale that pervades most of La Jolla village.

"That gives us a tremendous amount of freedom in the style we use," Joslin said. "We would like to see this as a contemporary building, not a nostalgic building. We would like to see this building as having a distinction as a cultural building, and at the same time, there's a spirit the community seems to feel."

Indeed, that community spirit will be elemental to the building's design.

"What we like, when it's all done, is that people recognize themselves in the place," Joslin said. "And feel like, 'Aha, you've heard us. This is who we are.'"

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