

Prelude: La Jolla Music Society shares concepts for new performing arts center



Artist rendering of the \$62.5 million Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center (AKA 'The Conrad'), which La Jolla Music Society plans to build at 7600 Fay Ave. (as envisioned from a public plaza at the Boffo Cinema complex currently under construction across Fay Avenue). Dennis Allain

'The Conrad' a marriage of acoustic excellence, civic majesty

BY PAT SHERMAN

La Jolla Music Society (LJMS) offered the public its first glimpse of artistic renderings for the society's planned 500-seat concert hall and performing arts complex in the heart of the Village, during a brief presentation this week before the La Jolla Community Planning Association (LJCPA) at La Jolla Rec Center.

In the coming weeks, the society will submit official plans to the city for its \$62.5 million center at 7600 Fay Ave. Named the Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center — and branded as "The Conrad" — it replaces the acoustically inferior Sherwood Auditorium at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, which the LJMS has used for decades and which will be converted to gallery space as part of the museum's planned renovation and expansion.

The Conrad — to be located directly across from a seven-screen dine-in cinema complex now under construction in the old Jonathan's Market space — will also include a 150-seat cabaret room/multi-purpose theater and offices that replace space LJMS currently rents in the El Patio building on Ivanhoe Avenue.

"This will become the permanent home for La Jolla Music Society; it's something we've sought for more than 20 years," the society's president and artistic director, Christopher Beach, told those attending the April 2 LJCPA meeting. "We're confident The Conrad will quickly become an important architectural landmark, an economic catalyst for La Jolla and an educational and cultural destination for all of San Diego."

After submitting plans to the city, LJMS will begin the community outreach process, seeking public input from the LJCPA and other community groups. The society has created a website, theconrad.org, offering information on the project that will be updated as the society navigates the city permitting process and begins the center's anticipated 18-month construction.

"Our goal is to open in January of 2018," Beach said. "Over the coming months we will be talking to community groups and organizations and individuals to assure we are responsive to any potential concerns. La Jolla Music Society has been part of this community for over 46 years and it's important to us to continue to be a good neighbor and to make certain that this is the very best possible project for our entire community."



La Jolla Music Society president and artistic director Christopher Beach and board member and donor Stephen Baum display Epstein Joslin Architects' winning proposal, which tied each of five early architectural concepts to a classical music composition, provided on CD. — Pat Sherman



Interior rendering of the planned 500-seat Baker-Baum Concert Hall at Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center, tentatively scheduled to open in January 2018. *Dennis Allain*

'Performing Arts Village'

Alan Joslin, a principal with Massachusetts-based Epstein Joslin Architects — selected to design the center from an initial pool of 15 firms — said he envisions The Conrad as a "performing arts village" inspired by the intimate spaces he encountered walking the streets of La Jolla before his firm even submitted its proposal.

"We spent a lot of time out here visiting all the theaters, halls and parks in the area, and walking and photographing in La Jolla to try and understand the ambiance and the unique features of the area," Joslin said. "We catalogued a lot of background material and have used that in the development of our design. ...

"We love the post office building, the Athenaeum and even some of the churches," he said. "They're really charming, but we were worried about doing something that was too nostalgic."

Grand entrance

An open-air, second-story terrace fronting nearly the entire length of The Conrad's Fay Avenue façade will include a trellis-like cover comprised of rectangular, terracotta tubes inspired by wood slats that enclose the 1915 Botanical Building in Balboa Park.

"Imagine at night driving down the street and the entire terrace is lit up from within," Beach enthused. "It's going to be like a great lantern all along the street — the people inside can see out and you can see all the people inside having a great time at intermission and before the concerts."

Concert halls are typically taller than what is allowed in La Jolla, located off a main street (like San Diego's Jacobs Music Center) or situated adjacent a public plaza (like Civic Theatre in downtown San Diego). Creating a space that conveyed major civic significance and splendor on Fay Avenue posed a challenge for the architects.

Joslin said he and his colleagues, including wife Deborah Epstein and Project manager Ray Porfilio, chose to make their statement horizontally, with the long open terrace and street-facing, floor-to-ceiling windows of the cabaret room. Once mature, crepe myrtle and fern pine trees along Fay Avenue will help break up the façade and give the building a sense of height, Joslin said.

"It's more of a cloister type structure," he said. "The world is kind of inside ... so instead of focusing out, the building really kind of embraces an interior world."

Two-story double doors of the concert hall open to a central courtyard from which patrons also access the cabaret space and a donor lounge. Plans for the courtyard include olive trees, a succulent garden and silver sheen shrubs flanking the doorways.

"Something we absolutely love is the ability to just throw the doors open and (have guests) pour outside," Joslin said.

“This terrace across the front has a beautiful sort of horizontal rhythm. It was (German poet and statesman Johann Wolfgang) von Goethe who said ‘Music is liquid architecture; architecture is frozen music,’ ‘This is some of that frozen, rhythmic music.’” – Stephen Baum

La Jolla Music Society board member,
honorary director and music center donor



Model of Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center, which will be located in the heart of the village of La Jolla at 7600 Fay Ave. Epstein Joslin Architects

Balancing aesthetics and acoustics

The concert hall has 350 seats on its main floor and 150 in its balcony — which wrap around the stage for a more intimate experience, akin to that of a European opera house, Beach said. The front of the stage will include steps, in homage to Sherwood Auditorium and to provide people in the first few rows an elevated, clearer view of the stage.

However, no matter how visually appealing its design, the center will only be as good as its acoustics, Joslin noted.

To that end, La Jolla Music Society has secured the services of Yasuhisa Toyota, the Los Angeles-based representative for Nagata Acoustics. Among the world’s most sought-after acousticians, Toyota performed sound sculpting for LA’s Disney Concert Hall, as well as Suntory Hall, Sapporo Concert Hall and Kioi Hall in his native Japan — all of which LJMS’s SummerFest musical director and violinist Cho-Liang “Jimmy” Lin was rapturously familiar with, having performed at or attended concerts there. (Toyota is also in early discussions with the San Diego Symphony to redesign the sound at Jacobs Music Center, the most recent acoustic upgrade to which was done in the mid-1980s, when Fox Theatre was converted to Copley Symphony Hall.)

Although LJMS desired a curvaceous auditorium, a rectangular or shoebox shaped space — like those of Boston’s Symphony Hall and the Vienna’s Musikverein hall — work best acoustically.

To align the aesthetic and atmospheric desires of the LJMS with Toyota’s acoustic requirements, Joslin encircled the inner seating area with wood slats known as a “grillage,” through which sound will flow and reverberate off the walls of the rectangular building and back inside to the audience.

As the audience enters the vestibule of the hall, they will see through the slats to the seating area and stage. Once seated, they peer back out through the grillage to the outer walls, which will be illuminated by LED lighting that can be adjusted in color and intensity to match the mood of the performance (also used on the ceiling and shown in blue on accompanying renderings).

“Sometimes this light will be very bright and then when the performance begins the lights will dim and the focus will be (on the stage),” Joslin said. “The notion is that you feel almost as though you’re outside in the air.”



Interior courtyard of Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center, the La Jolla Music Society’s proposed new home on Fay Avenue. It will feature two-story double doors, a wrap-around terrace, olive trees, succulents and other ornamental landscaping. Dennis Allain

Beach added, “You have the sense that this room is light and floating and open.”

New space, expanded offerings

Former Sempra Energy CEO and LJMS board member Stephen Baum, who with wife Brenda Baker contributed \$10 million to the center, noted that the LJMS will expand its programming at the new center.

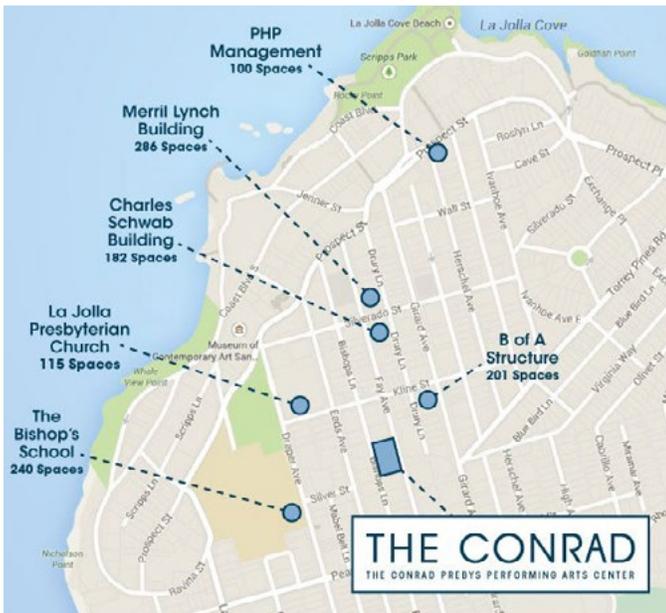
The Conrad's \$62.5 million price tag (of which it has already raised an impressive \$57.5 million) includes the land (which LJMS has already purchased) and a \$10 million endowment to fund future operations. LJMS is also raising money for a \$10 million endowment to expand its educational programming and community outreach. Though large-scale international symphony and dance company performances will continue to be held at larger venues downtown, such as Jacobs Music Center, the Civic Center or Balboa Theatre, SummerFest performances and other LJMS offerings will now be held at the The Conrad.

"We have a business plan for attracting other presenters than we've normally done," Baum said, noting that some of last year's most well attended performances included a ukulele concert and the American debut of Siro-A, likened to Japanese version of Blue Man Group.

"This is an evolution for the music society, because we're going from a concentration on classical music, dance and some jazz to a much broader array of entertainment for a broader community," Baum said. "We're trying to reach different demographic groups, different interests. The idea here is a big spectrum of entertainment. Not to diminish (LJMS's roots as) La Jolla Chamber Music Society, but music, it's an evolution. ... The Conrad is all about entertainment, education and commercial activity." More information at: theconrad.org



Rendering of the 150-person capacity cabaret room proposed for The Conrad on Fay Avenue. It includes floor-to-ceiling windows and a movable stage. An adjacent catering kitchen will facilitate use of the space for galas, receptions and other events. *Dennis Allain*



La Jolla Music Society will provide as many as 200 parking spaces for patrons of The Conrad in the adjacent Bank of America parking structure at Fay Avenue and Kline Street, as well as more than 500 spaces at nearby garages noted on this map. The society worked with traffic engineering firm Kimley-Horn to develop its parking plan, which is still being fine-tuned. The Conrad will also offer valet parking for evening performances. *More at theconrad.org*

Toyota, who first attended a LJMS performance in the late '90s while living in Japan, at the invitation of former SummerFest musical director and close friend Heichiro Ohyama, said La Jolla's 30-foot height limit on new development was the greatest challenge he faced. For maximum quality acoustics, he said a 500-seat hall would ideally have a 40-foot-tall ceiling (ceilings of The Conrad's concert hall and cabaret space are each 30 feet). To compensate for a lower ceiling height, Toyota worked closely with Joslin.

"I think we've overcome the limited ceiling height acoustically ... in other ways," said Toyota, whose concurrent projects include the 2,000-seat Elbe Philharmonic Hall, under construction in Hamburg, Germany. "This was one of those challenges to us. ... It took some time, but still I think we did a very good job."

To make sure the structure and acoustics meshed, Joslin would e-mail design specs to Toyota in Los Angeles, which Toyota would run through a computer program that calculates sound reverberation for the proposed dimensions.

"We basically would say, 'How about this?' and they would run their model and say, 'If you would shift those walls by so many degrees it would be a great improvement' or 'if you make the ceiling irregular it would improve the conditions over here,'" Joslin explained.

For lectures, film screenings and jazz or rock performances, where less reverberation is desired, a curtain can be pulled behind the grillage to dampen the sound.