

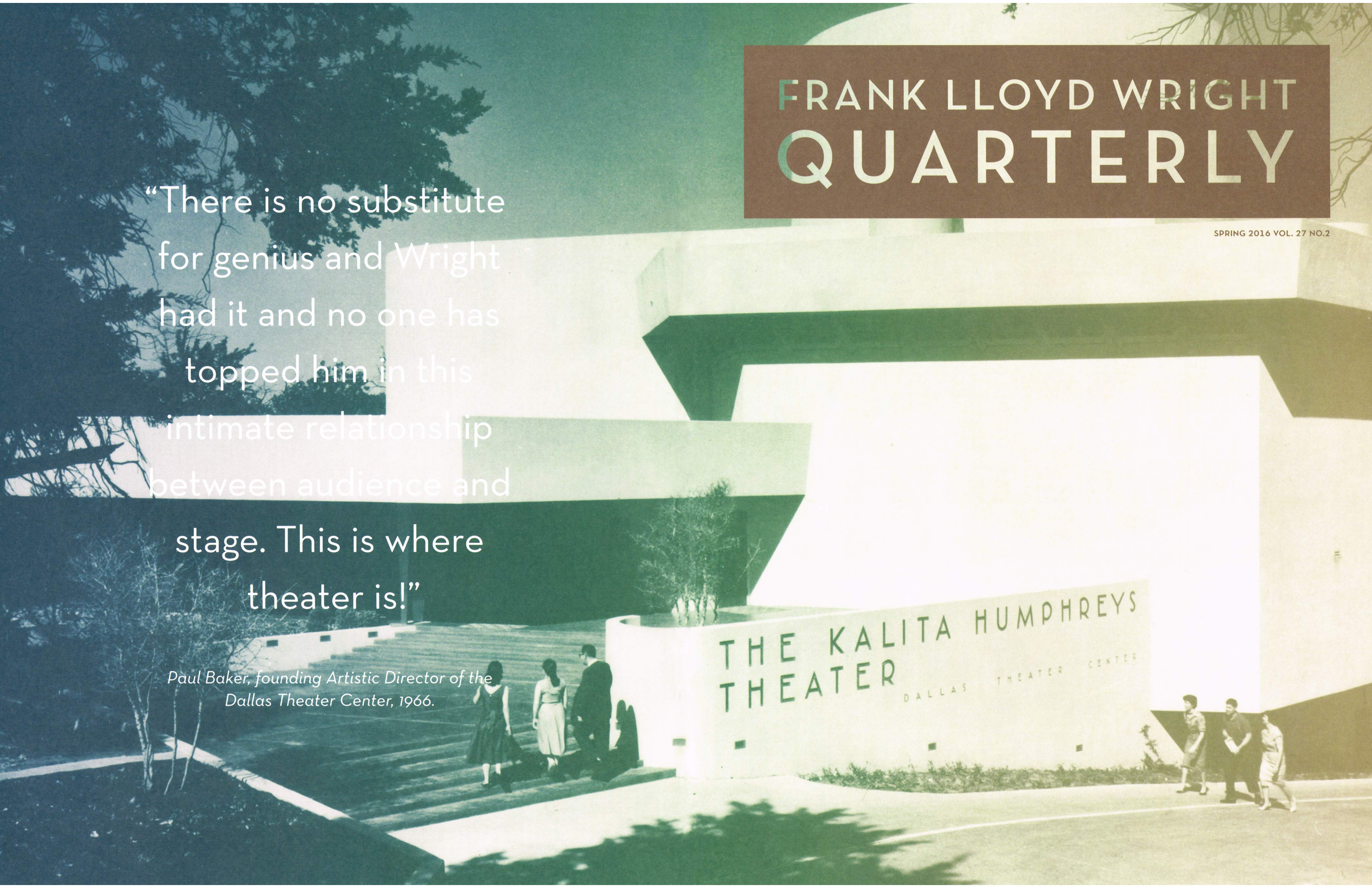
FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT QUARTERLY

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“There is no substitute
for genius and Wright
had it and no one has
topped him in this
intimate relationship
between audience and
stage. This is where
theater is!”

*Paul Baker, founding Artistic Director of the
Dallas Theater Center, 1966.*

THE KALITA HUMPHREYS
THEATER
DALLAS THEATER CENTER



OF TIME AND THE THEATER

By Ann Abernathy

How Frank Lloyd Wright's "New Theater" became a Dallas Treasure

The Kalita Humphrey's Theater (KHT) is the ultimate realization of Frank Lloyd Wright's vision for the "The New Theater," a concept that evolved over decades, but only realized in Dallas at the end of his life. When the Dallas Theater Center's (DTC) building committee approached Wright about designing their new space, he said, "I wanted to be an actor when I was young and I became busy with other things. I do not have a theater in the world which I have designed. Yes, indeed I will be there... if you people have the money I'll build it."

It was a perfect storm of circumstances that brought the theater to Dallas. There, the concept of The New Theater was transformed into a modern, sculptural space, externally expressive of inner function and integrated into an exceptional landscape. When the KHT was finished in 1959, it was "hailed as the most innovative and fascinating theater in the country."

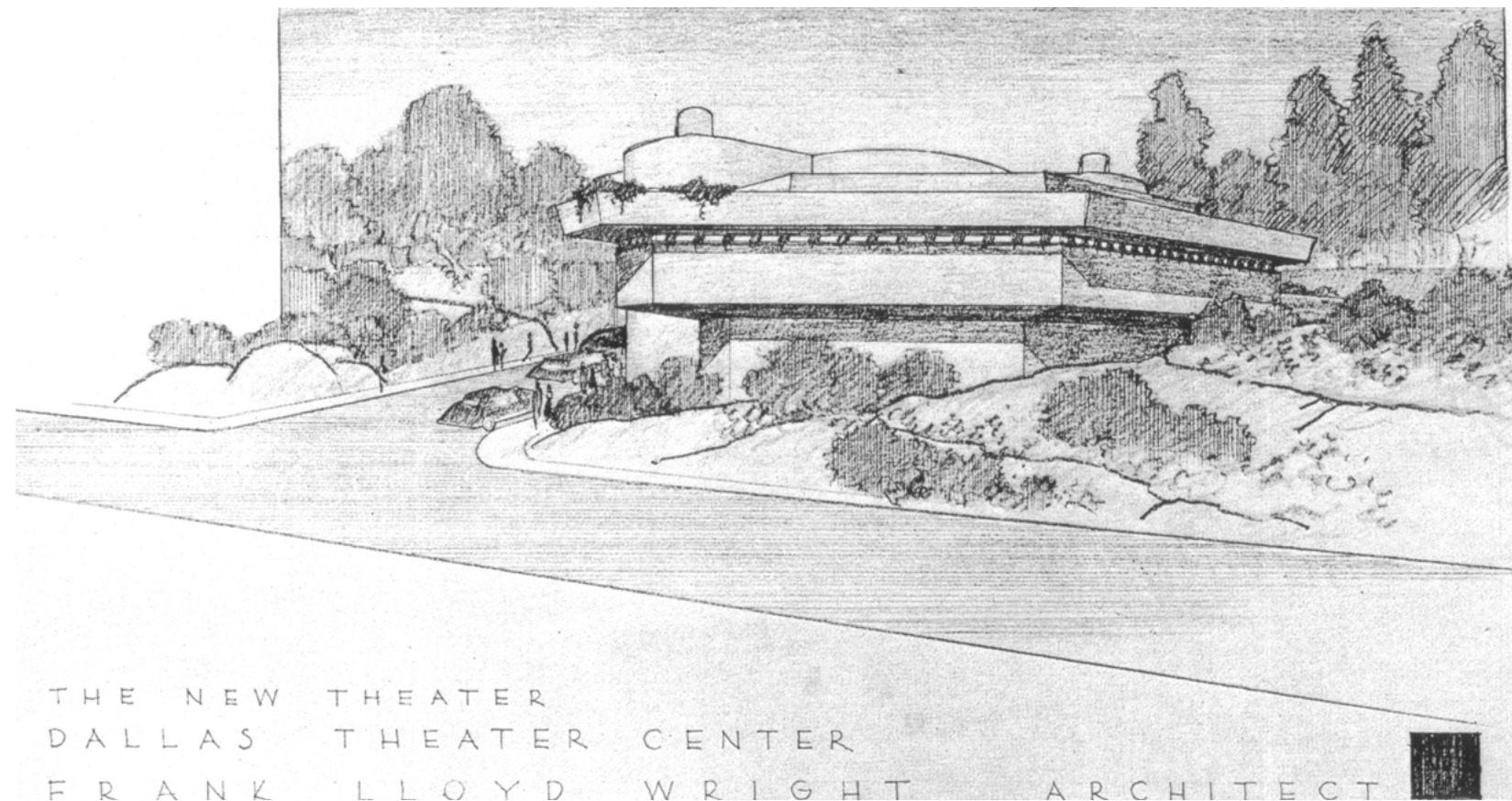
DALLAS GRASPED THE OPPORTUNITY

The story of the theater is part of the enduring heritage of Dallas's culture. Beatrice Handel and John Rosenfield initiated the idea of a civic-supported theater in 1954, and the concept was nurtured by an impressive list of business and cultural leaders who shared a modernist spirit. At a fund-raising kick-off in Dallas, Mr. Wright said, "The time for this theater is now... We tried to do this same thing in Hartford, Connecticut fifteen years ago, but it failed because the people there would not grasp its benefits to their community or its tremendous significance to the theater of America." Fortunately, Dallas seized the opportunity.

Set in a coveted thirteen-acre park of primordial beauty within the city, the KHT's site sloped from a high bluff of the Austin chalk formation down to a winding creek revealing along the way the landscape's underlying shale strata amidst tangled indigenous vegetation. Wright was



LEFT: Robert Stecker, President, Dallas Theater Center Board CENTER: Frank Lloyd Wright RIGHT: Paul Baker, Director, Dallas Theater Center. Photo Courtesy: Dallas Theater Center files. Circa 1955-1958.



The New Theater was named for Kalita Humphreys, an actress who had worked with Paul Baker. Circa 1957.

inspired by the steep site, but it created a limitation that shaped the building - it was only 1.2 acres, a small plot for a medium-sized theater.

The theater's director would be the legendary Paul Baker, who fearlessly re-invented theater in Waco where he headed the Baylor University Drama School. Baker wanted to invent a new tradition for the dramatic arts that nurtured the playwright, the designer, the director, and the actor. Two aspects were key: the program would include a resident repertory company and also a graduate degree program.

Both Wright and Baker believed the creativity of each individual could have a transformative effect on society. The resulting collaboration between these two visionaries was at the heart of the KHT's design and construction. While the execution of their unique beliefs involved some conflict, their collaboration ultimately produced an intimate, dynamic theater space that would break down the barrier between actor and audience.

EVOLUTION OF WRIGHT'S NEW THEATRE

Wright said he conceived his ideas for The New Theater around 1913. The revolving stage and side stages would be the first step in the "liberation of the theater from its shackles of the traditional picture-frame stage." But elements of his vision can also be found in the theaters (both built and unbuilt) that he drew even before the turn of the century and over the following five decades.

Wright credited his mentors in the office of Adler and Sullivan for his knowledge of acoustics. Their Auditorium Theater in Chicago, 1887-1889, had a ceiling composed of successive elliptical arches. Similarly, Wright's ceiling in the Kalita Humphreys Theater was a primary acoustical element employed to provide a responsive acoustic, its wide hard-plaster arched surfaces emanating out from the stage providing opportunity for overhead acoustical reflections.

In an un-built theater for Aline Barnsdall in Chicago, 1915, and the several un-built designs for the Barnsdall Theater



The complex articulation of the Entry Terrace created the only area of the building where the definition between inside and outside space was blurred, in contrast to the closed form of the theater auditorium. (Outdoor spaces, juxtaposed with landscape features, such as the entry grotto, cannot be fully appreciated in the absence of the original rock that has been removed for later additions and parking). Photo courtesy: files of Bill Carner, Melody Hamilton, archivist. Circa 1959.

at Olive Hill, 1915 -1922, the space of the audience chamber and stage unified by the ceiling sets was rendered as three-dimensional constructions, and the proscenium arch (the framed opening around the stage) was partially removed.

The first plans that showed the basic template used at the Kalita Humphreys Theater, with its round semi-thrust stage and flanking scenery ramps, appeared in 1931 for the unbuilt New Theater for Woodstock, New York. A series of drawings for this theater explored a range of theater partis that melded elements of ancient Greek and Roman amphitheater shapes, the thrust stage of the Elizabethan era, and dynamic features of the Japanese Kabuki Theater stage (also used for the stage within Wright's Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, 1915). Together, these traditional forms were integrated into a chamber of spacious unity, creating the atmosphere that Wright espoused and modern dramatists sought. One version, an elegant template of 60-120 degree angles and inscribed circles, was startlingly similar to the KHT. Wright also experimented with overhead lofts, lighting coffers, catwalks and various stage lifts. Here

again, he developed the concept of ramps flanking the stage that enabled scenery to be transported from the basement up to the stage revolve to create what Wright called the "Stage Mechanique." For the New Theater for Paton Price in Hartford, Connecticut, 1949, Wright used a plan very similar to that of Woodstock.

Wright's ideas were also shaped by other experimental theater types at the time, including arena theaters in the round, a type which Wright disparagingly called the "circus." He would later deride Paul Baker's use of it in Waco saying that it lacked "organic simplicity." Wright eschewed the multi-form theater with movable elements, as envisioned by Walter Gropius Total Theater in 1926, as unsuitable for true theater.

The Grady Gammage Theater in Tempe, Arizona, was a large, free-standing music theater and orchestra hall, a significantly different building typology. Not only the construction but also the drawings were completed posthumously and stamped by William Wesley Peters.



In 1989, paved parking was added both uphill and downhill, causing the architecture critic of the local news to refer to the building as a "forlorn ammonite in a sea of asphalt." Photo courtesy: Ann Abernathy, 2012.

The Kalita Humphreys Theater has the distinction of being the only extant, free-standing theater that was fully designed by Wright and under construction before his death and that fully realizes his vision of the radical new style of The New Theater. It was the first of the post-war avant-garde theaters in the U.S. after the war, and as Paul Baker described, it was "the first to be built in completely flexible design... and will be the 'best theatrically' of any in the United States."

THE NOT-SO-PERFECT STORM

As early as 1959, W. Kelly Oliver, the Taliesin supervising architect, wrote to the DTC suggesting that their program could only be accommodated by acquiring more land. Barely a year after its construction, the theater began to undergo additions and alterations to accommodate the repertory company and its education programs. In 1968 a new wing was constructed of light steel frame with a stucco skin over the partially demolished Balcony Terrace.

In 1974 the City of Dallas acquired the theater and later added an administration building. After Paul Baker's departure the building's limitations engendered increasingly negative press, reversing public perception of its worth. Directors needed the stage to operate more like a proscenium theater with a modern, amplified acoustic and neutral, flexible setting for scenic design. Ultimately in 2009 the DTC moved to a new multi-form theater located in Dallas's downtown arts district, though it still maintains a presence at the KHT.

Designation as a Dallas historic landmark in 2005 protected the building in its current state and increased local recognition, but many local residents are still not aware of this unique Wright-designed theater. Realizing the theater and its surrounding parkland were in need of major physical and aesthetic improvements, the city of Dallas funded a master plan for the theater and contiguous site, which was completed in 2010. Conclusions were vetted through a public process and produced these collective goals:

- *To maintain the Kalita Humphreys Theater as a working theater that realizes its unique qualities;*
- *To restore/rehabilitate and maintain the building to its original period, as an example of great modern architecture of organic design in a park setting of great value; and*
- *To increase awareness of the cultural asset locally, nationally, and internationally*



Aerial of Theater. Photo courtesy: Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation. Circa 1959.

A theater participant in the master plan expressed hope for a new future: "Why would you take a unique theater and try to make it just like every other theater? As an alternative kind of space, it could be exciting and revelatory in that uniqueness."

“The entire building was drawn on a 60/120-degree equilateral parallelogram grid and the circular features of the stage and flanking towers were inscribed into this grid.”

- Frank Lloyd Wright

THE BUILDING AS ORIGINALLY CONSTRUCTED

Character-Defining Features - Exterior

When Wright first visited the site in August 1955, he noted the vertical fall of about thirty feet. A natural swale along the north lot line became the route for the driveway, a dramatic space between exposed limestone outcroppings and the proposed building. An early grand scheme included a ceremonial bridge across the creek to connect the secluded site to the busier boulevard. Other versions of the site plan located parking on the opposite side of the rail line accessed by a tunnel, but, ultimately, no more land was acquired. Patrons had to park on the access road below and trudge up a steep driveway to their entrance, contributing to the perception that the building design was not only borrowed from another site but also backwards.

The vertical stacking of uses on the small site was necessitated by even the most basic functional requirements for the theater's operations. The full fly-loft - requested by Baker - added to the height of the KHT's central cylindrical tower, rising 66 feet above the street on the downhill side, which became a prominent feature facing the boulevard. The dramatic tower advertised the theater's presence from a distance, “dominating [the site's] wooded acreage with easy grace.”

Modulating the height, the concrete monolith was stratified

by cantilevered terraces wrapping the vertical towers. The outdoor terraces were gratuitous habitable areas that utilized the space of flat roofs and gave patrons and actors expansive vistas of the skyline and the meandering creek. Recalling Wright's design of the Kaufman residence, Fallingwater, the uphill deck of the KHT was at the grade of the adjacent bluff. That same level on the downhill side, however, was over fifty feet above the creek. In Wright's renderings the soaring concrete decks, draped with vegetation, appeared as extensions of the natural rocky ledges. The point was visually clear - the building was a built-topography fully integrated into its natural setting. Oliver, the Taliesin apprentice who supervised the project, confirmed, “It was meant to grow out of the hill.”

Wright used the plastic potential of concrete reinforced with steel to create angular planes and cylindrical forms. The reinforcing steel of the building was a dense network that integrated all volumes. Even the ribbon windows that wrapped the building, underpinning the terraces that appeared to float above them, were formed of cast-in-place concrete. Since the vertical forms were plumb, and the sloped forms were planar, it was possible for the entire building to be solid reinforced concrete (not gunite). The

contractor, Beck Construction executed perfect pours, and the surface was then hand-honed with pumice.

Wright's choice of concrete had other benefits as well. It provided the mass to block the sound from the adjacent railroad and the flight path overhead, protecting the all-important theater acoustics. Concrete within and without, the theater was insulated by its thermal mass and largely fireproof.

In October 1958 work on the foundation proceeded, and construction reports revealed that the building foundation was completely set into solid rock which had to be blasted out with dynamite. About this monolithic theater, with characteristic hubris, Wright said that “Someday this theater will mark the spot where Dallas once stood.”

Economy of Means, Austerity

Because of the limitations of the site, Wright's design had every space packed as efficiently as possible, according to Oliver. Wright's first priority was to deliver a superior medium-sized theater space. With only one main off-axis path to the public entry, the building became a tightly wound spiraling shell. The functions within, including the stage loft, flanking ramp towers, three floors of cantilevered dressing areas, and the prow of the audience chamber, were clearly expressed on the exterior, stripped to bare essentials and plane surfaces revealing a striking minimalism for Wright.

The indirect route to the lobby involved a process of discovery. The visitor entered to the sound of the gurgling fountain, in the grotto-like space between the rock and the building, filled with lush native plantings and sheltered under a concrete slab. The low entry was guarded by only two impossibly thin, gold columns.

Performance space in 1960 described by W. Kelly Oliver as “the golden bowl”. Photo courtesy: Bob Kornegay, Dexter Press. Restoration by Steve Clique.

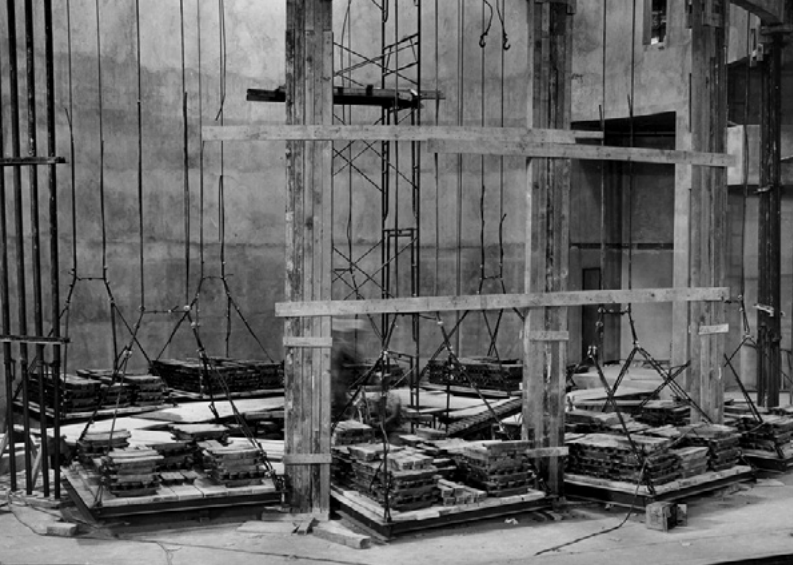


Character-Defining Features - Interior

The entire building was drawn on a 60/120-degree equilateral parallelogram grid (one unit having sides of 6'-11 1/2"), and the circular features of the stage and flanking towers were inscribed into this grid. This geometry organized not only the floor plan but also details of the faceted columns, ribbon windows, and built-in furniture. (The Guggenheim Museum, on the drawing boards at the same time, was designed with circular forms in a square grid.)

Once inside the visitor encountered the interesting space between the circular tower and the angled periphery. Following the ribbon of high windows, with the plush built-in gold banquettes below, the visitor was led to a single set of double doors. In this sleek, swanky space, one can understand why, when Paul Baker requested space for “dispensing machines of various kinds,” Wright responded by writing, “Paul! Do you really visualize the cheapening effect of a food and drink bar at the very threshold of the temple? It would reduce the atmosphere of the whole edifice to the level of a hot-dog stand!”

Upon entering the auditorium from the relatively constricted space of the foyer, the visitor was “deposited at the edge of a golden bowl,” as Oliver wrote to Olgivanna Wright on the theater's opening night. The space expanded up to the swelling ceiling coffers and beyond to the diaphanous gold curtain in the panoramic volume of the audience chamber. The original rows of seating (now removed) were uncommonly wide, and the original row-seats were mounted to the risers, creating even more foot room. Their beautifully detailed armatures repeated the angular geometry of the unit-system. The effect reflected Wright's mantra that “spaciousness is a virtue.”



Load testing of the stage loft cantilever. Photo courtesy: Henry C. Beck Company, Contractor. August 14, 1959.

The Performance Space

In the impressive volume of the auditorium, human scale and intimacy were maintained by the ability of the audience to surround the low projecting stage, and the actors to surround the audience by means of side stages and multiple entry points. With angled seating the audience viewed the actors at a more interesting angle rather than “en face.” The theater is considered a “panoramic modified-thrust stage” in contemporary parlance.

Baker, in his initial meeting with “the 86-year old prophet of organic building design,” was pleased that Wright acquiesced on the matter of a wider stage noting that “[Wright] saw no distortion of it in a slightly roomier arrangement to a forestage. I’m happy.” Here Wright was able to “free the legitimate stage from its present peep-show character and scenery loft, establishing a workable basis for presenting plays in the round, performers and audience together in one room, allowing staging more like sculpture than like painting...”

While audience and actor did not share one ceiling, as in earlier Wright theaters, the lack of a proscenium arch over the round stage created the effect of a shared space. To accomplish this, Wright created a structural tour de force in concrete unique to this theater. He removed the front lower portion of the cylindrical concrete stage-loft that was over the semicircular stage so there were no sides to frame the view. The remaining 127-ton upper stage loft, heavily reinforced, was cantilevered. The bottom of the back-half of the cylinder that remained was supported on six columns in the basement, and two side piers attached to the flanking ramp towers. The cantilever was integrally tied to and balanced by three floors of backstage dressing rooms, and when load tested the cantilever deflected no more than one half inch.



Elevating the rake, adding partitions, extending the balcony, and increasing the seating capacity reduced the volume of the space and created a tunnel effect at the rear of the auditorium. 2009. Photo courtesy: Steve Clique.

Multiple routes for actors enlivened performances. Like mice in Swiss cheese, the actors could descend to the basement via the orchestra stairs (known as vomitories), reappear in the front music or rear technical balconies, process down the audience aisles to any part of the forestage, and disappear through the side stage “mouse-holes.” The stage revolve was, and is, used frequently for dramatic effect and quick, surprising scene changes.

Acoustics

The auditorium’s original design yielded an exceptional live acoustic and sound amplification rarely used over the KHT’s first two decades. The hard plaster ceiling coffers, suspended and slightly sloped, powerfully enhanced the theater’s sound by increasing overhead acoustic reflections. Angled walls cut unwanted reverberation. For a smaller cast, children’s performances, lectures, or teaching, overhead baffles and a bisecting screen on the round stage would have been able to modulate and reflect sound. As Wright noted on a presentation drawing, the theater’s acoustics and atmosphere were “equally good for theater, chamber music, lecturing, or soloists.”

Theater Equipment

The greatest area of conflict between Wright and Baker, never fully resolved, was the design of the flanking stage ramps. First developed for Wright’s theater in Woodstock, the ramps were to enable very quick scene changes easily. Materials could be brought in to the basement scenic workshop, and scenes could be moved up a ramp to the stage behind a bisecting screen. The stage could then be revolved and the previous set struck and returned to the basement via the opposite ramp. Unlike stage wings the ramps were to remain uncluttered, and therefore non-combustible. The domain of stored scenery was the basement. The controversy about the ramps was settled when a stage elevator replaced the stage right ramp after Wright’s death in April of 1959. The story that this construction was covered during one of his visits is apocryphal.

Including flown-in scenery was not Wright’s plan for the simple mechanical stage operation, but nevertheless,

the loft was raised and outfitted with six (out of the recommended fifteen) state-of-the-art, synchronous winches and an automated console. Lighting control systems designed by George Izenour were finally made usable by technology developed locally by Texas Instruments.

In the open slots between the semi-circular coffers of the auditorium ceiling, stage lights could be hung from continuous steel poles. Combined with the balcony lighting rails and additional lighting positions in the fly loft, it was possible to light the stage from virtually every angle. The lighting arrangement was praised by drama critic Virgil Beavers, who described the “lights of different colors from all points of a fabulous lighting system during the show.”

Opening Night

The theater opened on December 27, 1959, with a stunning performance of “Of Time and the River” that evoked the passage of time using the rhythmic movement of the stage revolving and layered three-dimensional sets. In a 2005 interview with Paul Baker, he recalled his reaction. “Dallas has built the most beautiful theater in America, because we came in with a live idea and we all worked together,” he said. “And when you walked in there and looked at that space, you fell in love with it.”

The auditorium was not a flexible multiform theater that attempted to be a solution for all staging. It was a multi-use space that accommodated many disciplines brilliantly. Actors who experienced the theater in its original configuration say that this was the most intimate medium-size theater they had ever known.

RESTORATIVE IMPROVEMENTS

The *Master Plan*, funded by the City of Dallas and completed in 2010, advocates restoring and/or rehabilitating the building exterior and interior to its primary period of significance between 1959 and 1960. Later alterations would be removed, interior circulation

patterns restored and code and safety issues addressed. In the theater spatial volume, acoustical properties, the panoramic stage, and sightlines would be restored, using modern technology to make them more flexible and to recreate the intent of the technical systems, improving operations and dramatic possibility.

The theater’s current support building, which intrudes on the theater’s historical sight lines, would be replaced with a fully- accessible support building better integrated into the site. Parking areas would be improved, and the original topography and landscaping recreated to the extent possible in all areas connected to the KHT.

The current challenge is to have the *Master Plan* formally adopted by the City. The *Master Plan* recommends that a non-profit group representing the plural mission move the plan forward with public-private funding for its implementation in order to restore for Dallas citizens an important part of their heritage.

A great work of architecture, an incubator for the arts, a place of pastoral beauty, and a testament to the modernist spirit that brought Frank Lloyd Wright’s only theater to Dallas, the Kalita Humphreys Theater at Turtle Creek, is an enduring treasure.

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A practicing architect since 1979, Ann Abernathy received her masters degree in architecture from M.I.T, and degree in art history from Wellesley College. She has taught architectural design at M.I.T and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She authored the book, *The Oak Park Home and Studio of Frank Lloyd Wright*, prepared the nomination for the Kalita Humphreys Theater landmark designation, and was project architect for *The Dallas Theater Center Master Plan*. Ann is a principal with the firm of Abernathy| Architects in Dallas. References for this article provided upon request.

“Of Time and the River”, 1959. Courtesy Dallas Theater Center files. Photo by: Eliot Elisophon.



FROM THE
FIRST ANNUAL
PROGRAM OF
THE DALLAS
THEATER
CENTER.

BOOK DESIGNED BY
ROY FRIDGE. BUILDING
IMPRESSION BY MARBURY
BROWN, ARTIST,
NEIMAN MARCUS.

