

# Bass' Second Act

With major renovations done, Bass Concert Hall is ready for the next chapter in the University's performing arts history ★ by Brett Campbell

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**A**LTHOUGH STAN BOLES, BAr '70, has lived and worked in Portland for the last 35 years, he still keeps up with some of his old classmates from the UT architecture school. One day in 2001, one who lives in Austin called to tell Boles that the University would be renovating Bass Concert Hall. You might be interested in this project, he said.

Boles, principal in Portland's BOORA Architects, specializes in cultural arts and higher education projects, having planned theater spaces and buildings on 25 university campuses and other sites. So he and the firm were an ideal choice for a job that evolved from a simple touch-up into an ambitious \$14.7 million overhaul that brings the 1981 building into the 21st century, equips it for a new mission, and makes it a much more attractive showcase for the arts.

The impetus for the overhaul came from the city fire marshal, who insisted that the 1981 structure be brought up to modern safety codes. "We'd been putting that off out of consideration for community groups that used the hall, so we kept it open," says fine arts dean Douglas

Dempster, "but finally the fire marshal ran out of patience." The community arts organizations — Austin Symphony, Austin Lyric Opera, and Ballet Austin — found a new home at the city's Long Center for the Performing Arts, which opened last March and whose smaller halls were a better match for their audiences. Bass Hall, whose 3,000-seat capacity was already too large for student productions, received a new mission — mostly to host big touring shows, such as Broadway musicals. Audiences of that size would overwhelm Bass' already-cramped lobby, which the required safety improvements would further narrow. And it lacked the amenities modern audiences expected, including wine and snack vendors that, like the popcorn and soda sales at movie theaters, provide enough extra revenue to keep the shows profitable.

Then-director of the Performing Arts Center Pebbles Wadsworth recognized that, with the building shut down anyway, this was a rare opportunity to fix a number of other shortcomings. A complete overhaul would have exceeded \$50 million — six times the initial budget — but for a few million more than originally bud-

geted, the University could bring the building up to date and reconfigure it for its new role. So the University chose to go beyond the basic safety fixes and give the building a major facelift.

A top priority was improving the concert hall's sound environment to make it suitable for the amplified touring productions it would host. The building acoustics were altered and several hundred thousand dollars of new speakers installed. Other technical improvements (lighting, rigging, etc.) will allow the hall to be used for complex modern theatrical productions. And the front third of the house was refurbished to provide a more intimate feel.

#### **A Friendlier Face**

The most obvious improvements announce themselves even before the audience enters the hall. A major drawback of the old building was its opaque, frowning face. Passersby had little indication of the excitement on stage. The need to expand the usable lobby space allowed BOORA to create one of its signature effects. "In a lot of our projects, we try to let the building's public spaces be transparent and express the public procession and ceremony



and excitement of going to the theater," Boles says. Stand outside BOORA's 1987 glass-facaded Portland Center for the Performing Arts, for example, and you can see crowds convening for performances, chatting, sipping wine.

The Pacific Northwest's frequently cloudy yet temperate climate encourages BOORA architects to capture as much light as possible and to connect indoor and outdoor spaces. Improvements in glass and environmental technology make it possible to use much more glass without losing insulation.

So for Bass, the firm designed a glass front that faces a handsome new entrance plaza. Bass' new face "not only provides access to daylight but also conveys to people driving or walking by that 'this is an exciting place to be,'" says Tom Pene, who with Boles and fellow BOORA partner Amy Donohue comprised the firm's creative team.

The bumped-out, transparent facade; atrium; and other changes doubled the now-airy lobby's square footage, and its bright lighting and new lighter-colored carpets and interiors make it a welcoming setting. The remodeling also increased the number of bathrooms, provided space for concessions, and added room for pre-show events and art exhibits, including sculptures by the likes of Louise Bourgeois and Sol LeWitt. New gathering areas with sweeping views of the campus allow "moments of intimacy," says Donohue, that encourage people to linger and chat. Bass Hall has been transformed to an inviting community space.

For Stan Boles, who was born in San Antonio and grew up in Houston, it also provided a kind of summation of a long, successful journey. "Since my work has focused on the performing arts, it was a dream come true to be able to go back to my school and give them a building that represented what my career has been all about," he says. "I think that's every architect's dream."

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## Panoff chosen to lead PAC

After a seven-month international search, Kathleen Panoff, currently executive director of the Modlin Center for the Arts at the University of Richmond, has been chosen as the next director of the Performing Arts Center. The appointment, effective Aug. 1, also comes with the title of associate dean of fine arts. Says fine arts dean Douglas Dempster, "Kathy is equally well known by artists and arts managers for her superb judgment in arts presenting as she is respected for her administrative and business acumen." She will be taking over the post once held by Pebbles Wadsworth and Interim Director April Holmes. Panoff has had a distinguished career in the performing arts, having served as the managing director of the Cincinnati Playhouse before founding and running the Modlin Center for 13 years. She has been a development officer for the Celebrity Series of Boston and WGUC-FM, fine arts public radio in Cincinnati, and owns a private consultancy in fund-raising. She is a practicing flutist and singer with a bachelor's and master's degree in music education and conducting from the Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music. A native of Virginia, she began her career as a music teacher in schools in Texas, Ohio, and Virginia.