

MELTED ARCHITECTURE

FOUR ALBERTA MUSIC HALLS

by Trevor Boddy



PAUL PIVERT

A theatre
for music
must
present
creative
possibilities

The undulating exterior walls of Cardinal's Grande Prairie Theatre were shaped by acoustic and sightline requirements

While I was writing *The Architecture of Douglas Cardinal* in the mid-1980s, a documentary film producer asked my opinions about Alberta's most famous architect, then designing the Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec: "What do the forms and spaces of Cardinal's work mean, how would you characterize his work?" I remembered a metaphor developed by German art historians a century ago that Cardinal had liked very much when I told him of it: "His architecture is frozen music." I asserted in my most authoritative Herr Professor voice. Bingo! The interview ended, and the film was made, naturally entitled "Frozen Music." It was more about Cardinal's persona than his portfolio, and the style of music chosen to accompany the film's

very fine wordless visual essay on Cardinal's buildings was a wonky New Age noodling. Surely my own metaphor and musical analogue was more descriptive of the musical and architectural precedents for his sinuously curving, dramatically emotional buildings: "Why not Gopher Baroque?"

These linkages between architecture and music came home when I reflected on Alberta's recent bold new theatres for music. If architecture can be thought of as frozen music, can music be thought of as a kind of melted architecture? When rhythm, space, proportion, colour and tone are essential qualities of both disciplines, surely a new theatre for music must present some creative possibilities not found in other forms of architecture. Over the past year, a major theatre for music has opened in both of Alberta's major cities; the Francis

Winspear Centre for Music in Edmonton and the Rozsa Centre at the University of Calgary. It helps to know how they were made before enjoying the pleasures—both architectural and musical—they extend.

A crystalline wonder box constructed of hopes for better times, the Francis Winspear Centre for Music is one of the most positive things to appear in downtown Edmonton in many years. Since opening in September of 1997, the 1,900-seat Francis Winspear concert hall (and the "arts district" that surrounds it) is a citadel of light in the murky downtown Edmonton landscape. The Winspear's essence is symbolized by its tapering tower dominating 102 Avenue, "a turning point for the changeable urban grid around it, and a symbol of the hopes we have for the project," according to design architect Doug McConnell of the Edmonton office of Cohos Evamy Partnership. Art is the centre of those hopes, this glass tower being filled with a massive hanging aluminum and glass sculpture entitled "Each for the Other" by Calgary artist Petronella Overes.

After a decade of planning and an increasing resolve by the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra to leave the hulking 1955 multi-purpose Jubilee Auditorium for a custom-built music hall, the new building initiative was spurred on by the gift of \$6-million by Edmonton businessman Francis Winspear. Multi-purpose auditoria have gone to the same celestial home as multi-purpose food processors, abandoned in favour of single-purpose gourmet devices everywhere. As is often the case for Alberta's competitive sibling cities, efforts were also fired by a sense of jealousy amongst musically inclined Edmontonians about the acoustic success of Calgary's shoe-box-shaped Jack Singer music hall. Long before an architect or builder was selected, the Edmonton Concert Hall Foundation engaged the very same acousticians responsible for the Calgary hall, Artec of New York. Acoustics are the essence inside the hall. After bids from a number of Alberta architects, the contract was eventually awarded to ex-Torontonian, now LA-based, Barton Myers in association with the design firm founded by Calgarians Marty

Cohos and Michael Evamy. However, it took only until the first preliminary design cost estimate of 1992 for this team and the Edmonton Concert Hall Foundation Board that had supervised them both to get the axe. According to Edmonton construction executive Ric Forest, a key member of the new board, the combination of Artec reporting directly to the first board and Myers/Cohos Evamy as architects had produced a scheme which was "55-million dollars and heading to 60." Matching provincial and federal allocations of \$15-million each plus Winspear's six put a firm lid on the budget in a city with limited corporate funding resources to exploit. Architect Doug McConnell of Cohos Evamy scrambled, forming a new design-build alliance with Oxford Developments but without Barton Myers. Artec was also along, but now subordinate to lead architects Cohos Evamy in order to better control costs. Says Forest: "Doug—the lowest guy on the totem pole took a leadership role, he was just so passionate." Forest's committee produced a one-page contractual specification for the Winspear—the architectural equivalent of a session of parliament without paper—then never met once during construction, similarly revolutionary in not generating a single "change order" for design revisions. Oxford as developer, PCL as contractor, and Cohos Evamy as architects were simultaneously responsible for all aesthetic and constructional decisions, while at the same time having agreed to absorb any cost over-runs caused by such reconsideration above the \$31-million fixed contract. While these arrangements would have made it possible for the team to deliver mere linoleum floors flanked by concrete block walls and still technically meet the terms of the one-page "spec," the Winspear Centre instead boasts a more-than-adequate carpet and tile inside and Manitoba tyndallstone on lobby walls plus polychrome brick outside. In a demonstration of the same community spirit that powers Edmonton's summer arts festivals, I think all involved in Winspear looked on this as something of a "loss leader." In a different context, these contractual arrangements have at least the potential—if exploited by any of the partners—to produce architectural turkeys.



ELLIS PHOTOGRAPHY

The Churchill Square entrance elevation of the Francis Winspear Centre for Music

After his Winspear experience, Forest is more skeptical than ever about conventional contract relationships that allow “architects to manoeuvre a lay building committee board into spending unnecessarily...and then board members’ wives end up picking the colours.” He goes on to assert that fixed-cost contracts and the shared responsibilities of design-build can compete “in terms of functionality and image” with conventional commissions, while design-oriented stars like Myers offer only “a few twinkles on the top.” But Myers’ Edmonton “twinkles” include the design of the two most internationally acclaimed buildings Alberta has ever produced, the 1974 HUB Mall at the University of Alberta, and Winspear’s neighbour, the 1976 Citadel Theatre. In contrasting his early Edmonton triumphs and his recent frustrations there, Myers asserts “there was an architectural enthusiasm generated by Expo 67, an ambition and confidence that died in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the developers took over.”

The Winspear Centre is actually four side-by-side buildings isolated for acoustic and construction phasing purposes. While Myers’ strategy for the Citadel was to animate the surrounding streets by setting the activities of theatre lobbies as close as possible to the perimeter, McConnell was forced to push his lobbies back from Churchill Square because Light Rapid Transit tunnels below there would have increased soundproofing costs.

Visual access to these lobbies is increased, however, by eliminating that cliché of concert halls “the feature stair” and instead boosting the size and interior finish quality of flanking fire-code-mandated stairs, saving money along the way. The inside of the concert hall itself is the terrain of Artec’s Bob Wolff and Russell Johnson, and it is clearly the progeny of their earlier Jack Singer Hall. Over the protests of the acousticians, a million and a half needed dollars were saved by making the reflective canopy over the orchestra fixed rather than moveable (although structural provision has been made for the hoist mechanism if future fund-raising is successful). The acoustic principles of the Winspear include concrete macro-shaped (walls repeatedly scalloped vertically to disperse sound) and micro-shaped (controlled irregular edges at a much finer scale to increase absorption). Artist Philip Derrah’s nearly eight-by-four metre painting entitled “Calix” dominates the lobby. In the upper circle lobby is Ken Macklin’s sculpture “Playing Hookie” and in the exterior forecourt Peter Hide’s “Full House”—both unusually seductive forms from the “Edmonton Steel School.” These and other art commissions and purchases were picked by a committee that included University of Alberta fine arts professor Douglas Haynes. They are a welcome inclusion in the otherwise sometimes austere Winspear. Architects often don’t need to try so hard when they work in tandem with artists. The various platforms and

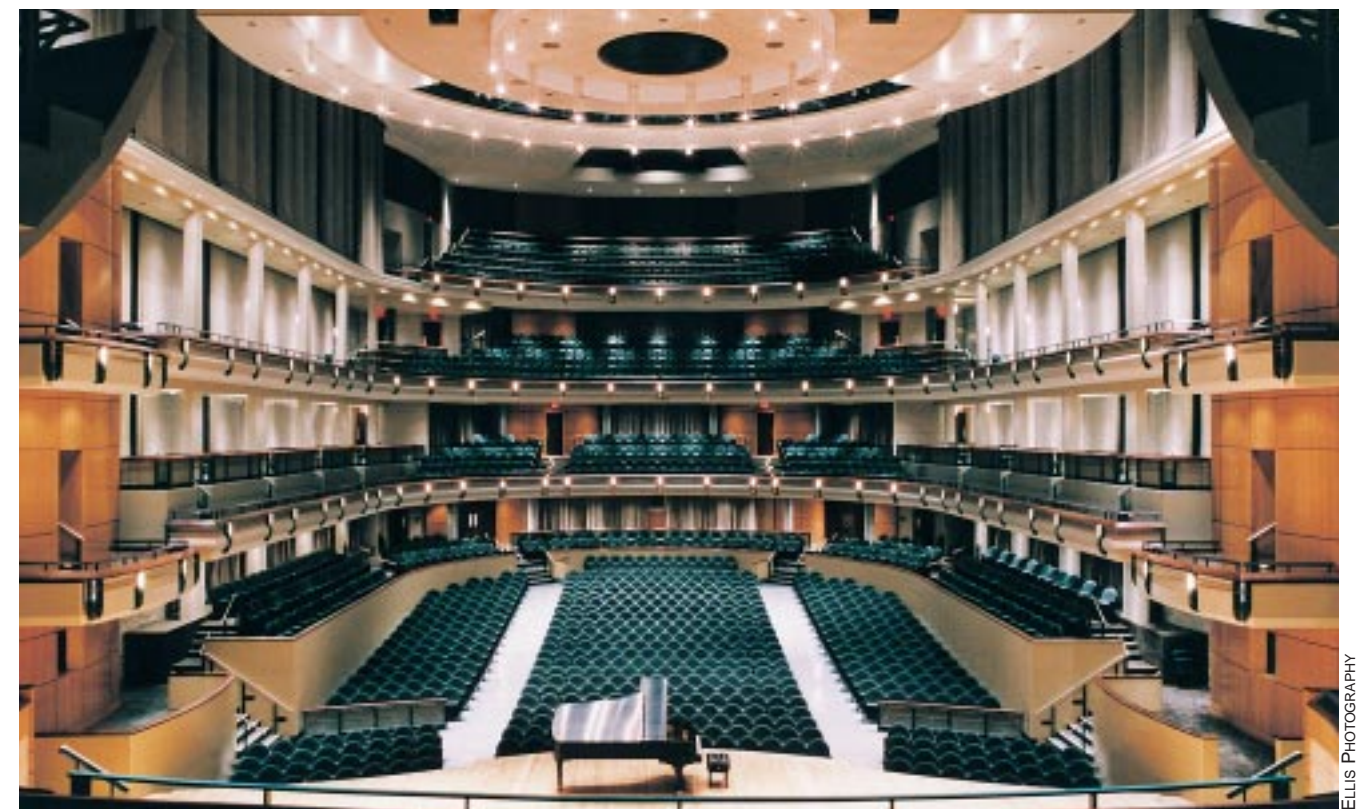
bold crystalline stair and tower pavilions along Churchill Square are effective in breaking down the building’s scale. Also deftly handled is the dimensional marking of the otherwise unadorned concrete walls of the concert hall itself. Finishing a building tour with Doug McConnell, I told him about my strong enthusiasm for the loading dock elevation, an almost accidental and literally back door tour-de-force. I was much reassured when McConnell—ever-eager and self-deprecating—told me with a wry laugh that the visual artists mentioned above “had said the same thing on a site visit a year previously.” Architectural twinkles are where you find them.

Just a few weeks after the Winspear opening, the first performances at the University of Calgary’s Rozsa Centre were heard in November of 1997. The building was made possible by a large donation from Theodore and Lola Rozsa, Hungarian immigrants who made a fortune in oil, but who never lost their Budapest bred love of musical culture. If solely musical discriminations are brought to the question, the Rozsa is the smaller but more delectable sonic bon-bon. The recital hall for the University of Calgary’s music department makes for interesting acoustical comparisons with downtown Calgary’s

Jack Singer and Edmonton’s Winspear which share Artec of New York as their acoustician. The approach of Rozsa acoustician Niels Jordan of Copenhagen, working with Culham Pedersen Valentine architects of Calgary, could hardly be more different. Jordan works directly with the architect within his or her own design language, anticipating acoustic issues while strictly conforming to the chosen visual language of the designer. There are some good biographical reasons for Jordan’s deference to architects: Jordan Akustik—one of the first such firms in Europe—was founded by Niels’ father in 1946; Niels cut his teeth as site acoustician for fellow Dane Jorn Utzon’s Sydney Opera House; he has subsequently worked with architectural *capo di capi* Philip Johnson on projects including the Lincoln Center New York State Theater and the acoustically acclaimed Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto. Jordan is one of the few respected acousticians who can work with the architectural world’s big egos.

Even when the planned retractable seats-on-stage are installed, the Rozsa Centre’s Eckhardt-Gramatté Hall will have a seat count of just under 450, less than a quarter of the Winspear’s. Not only was the Eckhardt-Gramatté to be a rehearsal and performance space serving students and

Artec’s acoustically shaped concert hall of the Francis Winspear Centre for Music



ELLIS PHOTOGRAPHY

WINTER 1999



For Culham Pedersen Valentine's Rozsa Centre, cheap stucco walls and steel roofs paid for the red false truss and cedar slat acoustic treatment by Niels Jordan

faculty as well as touring professional musicians, but it was also to double as a needed recording studio for the music department. Key rooms for recording equipment and operators are accommodated in one of the building's most delightful architectural features: two splay-angled walls on either side of the stage, covered with gridded birch sound-reflective panels, their windows and acoustic/lighting portals arranged into slightly different face-like patterns on either side; music students, clearly appreciating the anthropomorphic gesture, have already started inventing names for each face. The rest of the music hall is ringed by a rough-finished cast concrete skirt, upon which are set bright red-orange wood columns supporting a similarly painted wooden truss above. These are included in Fred Valentine's design to impart visual rhythm, not actually to hold up the roof (the structural work is done elsewhere, invisibly, as Canadian building codes seldom permit exposed structure, especially ones made of flammable timber). Set behind the column line on all four sides are adjustable acoustical panels, covered with louvered cedar slats. The room is rich, warm, human-scaled and demanding, much like the precious instruments that are played to such fine effect there. Serving as lobby during performances and an international student's lounge at other times is the Husky Great Hall (nothing to do with malamutes but rather the sponsoring oil company) flanked by two octagonal, skylit gallery-cum-breakout rooms. For all of these, the concrete floors are painted a dried blood colour—a bold move as successful as the painted trusses inside the Eckhardt-



Gramatté Hall. The exterior of the Rozsa Centre is where its major problems lie. The Husky Hall and flanking pavilions are roofed with standing-seam painted metal roofs, fine for a ski resort (or for the 1988 Canada Olympic Park where Valentine designed a number of key buildings), but questionable on a university campus. Because of budget constraints, Valentine was the first architect to break with the pink pre-cast concrete cladding that has defined the University of Calgary's look for 30 years in favour of white-painted stucco panels as cladding. Fred Valentine is frank and direct in accounting for his cladding choices: "To get the seat count, acoustic ambience and interior finishes the client required, we simply could not afford brick, stone or concrete, and stucco is better than the alternatives, concrete block or metal sheeting." Given the low importance of campus architecture to the present generation of campus administrators, we will likely see a lot more block or stucco, or else find our best architects go begging to manufacturers to donate proper materials, as has now happened on a number of Canadian campuses. A native of Calgary, Fred Valentine received his B.Arch. from the University of Toronto in 1963, followed by a Master's from Harvard two years later. He then spent 13 years with Parkin Associates. The project that brought Valentine to Calgary remains his masterpiece, a tower for the Nova Corporation, a prismatic Late Modern design with a quality of detailing rare for Calgary, and a considered urbanism and generosity of public space even rarer.

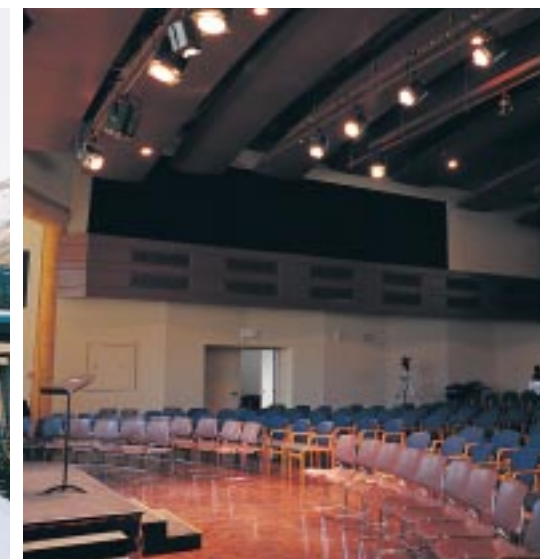
What do the Rozsa and the Winspear say about the state of the arts in Alberta, especially what was once called, without grimacing, the "mother of the arts," architecture? Both are tributes to their architect's ingenuity, and both McConnell and Valentine have had to struggle mightily with tough budgets. Neither will be widely recognized as a standout piece of public architecture. Winspear is more successful in its attempts to link into the city, while Rozsa will remain peripheral to the main points of action on the University of Calgary campus. What the Winspear and Rozsa share is a deferral of all other architectural and urban goals to enhance the experience of music itself. Unlike their predecessors, both halls were conceived with the public performance of music as their most important function. The Winspear is likely a few hundred seats too big for its acoustic good, with some spots in the hall, especially at higher levels of seating, clearly inferior. The designed-for adjustable stage canopy would help. The Winspear contains three quite separate architectures—the crystalline exterior, the homey and monochrome lobbies, and the Artec-shaped main hall. There is no underlying structure between them, no sonata form, just three quite disparate verses. Like its young architect, the Winspear had Beethovenian ambitions, but likely got Erich Korngold, a fine composer who did too much too soon. McConnell is still a 'chamber' rather than 'symphonic' architect.

Similarly the Rozsa should be thought of as a chamber work, with its intimate scale, fine materials, and handsome treatment of its interior walls as sounding chambers. By setting its ambitions lower (no need for a multi-instrumental sonata if a duo or call-and-response solos will do), the

Rozsa accomplishes more inside. The interior of the theatre has a strong sense of priorities and a compelling if uncompromising character, like a late Schubert quartet. The delights of this very fine room come as an even greater surprise when served up within a hokey, suburban exterior box whose best musical analogue might be a jingle for a Ford Malibu.

The real accomplishments of both Valentine and McConnell become evident when compared with the astonishingly bad new theatre in the equally embarrassing new Music Department building at the Banff Centre. The building was designed by Dave Edmunds of Calgary's Graham-Edmunds, who has informally been anointed campus architect by the current Banff Centre administration after winning a design-build competition for a conference-residential building in 1991. This competent, rustic variation on 'motel village' is a money-making proposition to build up cash flow to subsidize the same institution's important Centre for the Arts. Two Banff Centre commissions followed for Graham-Edmunds without extensive consideration of other architects: a monster ranch-house style new dining room that needlessly defiles the quietly fine Donald Cameron Hall, and the new music facilities, built on top of a large multi-story parking structure. The siting and access to and from the building are a mess, this being the first Banff Centre structure to be automotive rather than pedestrian-oriented (try finding a way in when coming up the hill from Cameron). Things get worse inside, with the music hall set with a large picture window arrayed behind the stage, with a direct and inescapable vista into, wait for it, the Banff Centre's building and grounds department's collection of front-end loaders, dump trucks and

Drop-off forecourt and Recital Hall interior at the Banff Centre's new Music Building



A calypso
vision of
curving,
vaulting roof,
dancing rows
of purple
seats



PAUL PIVERT

The finest interior space ever crafted by
Alberta's most famous architect, Douglas Cardinal

maintenance bric-a-brac. Finding no other architectural rationale for this siting and obligatory view, I can only speculate that perhaps the current leaders of the Banff Centre think of this view as a celebration of what their town has become. With its akimbo geometries, bizarre collisions of cheap materials, and generalized higgledy-pigglediness, the design of the music building finds the architect struggling to use acoustics to rationalize a country and western variation on the short-lived 1980s architectural movement called Deconstructivism. If music can be thought of as 'melted architecture,' what is the musical comparison for this Banff Centre building? There is only one, as short-lived musically as Deconstructivism was architecturally: Cowpunk.

While this was only a waste of Alberta taxpayers' money, what does one say when Alberta's most significant contemporary theatre, a singular masterpiece by its most world-acclaimed architect, sits forlorn and abandoned? For want of operational funding and needed renovations (the building is now a quarter century old), Douglas Cardinal's theatre at Grande Prairie Regional College now sits unused. In a design process that cost him a marriage, a near-bankruptcy and indirectly, the death of his father, Cardinal struggled long and hard first to locate Grande Prairie College near the town centre to facilitate community use, then saw repeated re-designs and changes in priorities by

the provincial government, at one early point the project being saved through advocacy by Socred premier Ernest Manning's executive assistant and son, Preston. The best architectural interior ever produced by Cardinal, the theatre is a calypso vision of curving, vaulting roof, dancing rows of purple seats, a balcony stair right out of "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari," plus finely sculpted handrails and air ducts. Artists with the right creative imagination loved performing in the space, including jazz saxophonist P.J. Perry, a Red Deer native who has followed Cardinal's career from the beginning, and who was "wowed by the feel of the room, both musically and visually, because there isn't a difference." Cardinal has not done well by the Alberta that made him. His finest building—St. Mary's Church in Red Deer—is newly encrusted by an addition in a mock-Cardinal style by a local architect, over his strenuous objections. Now Grande Prairie has building additions by lesser talents and his beloved theatre is dark. It says much, perhaps too much, about contemporary Alberta culture that we have abandoned the emotionally demanding innovations of our architectural 'Stravinsky,' but continue to give public commissions to the architectural equivalent of a Punk band.

Architectural historian and critic Trevor Boddy is author of Modern Architecture in Alberta and The Architecture of Douglas Cardinal.