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Welcome to the Dallas Center for Architecture Blog!



A couple of times a week, we'll post tidbits of interest to the architecturally inclined. Perhaps advance notice of (and subsequent reports on) events here in town. We'll kick things off with a report on last Thursday night's wonderful talk by Ann Abernathy, AIA on the Kalita Humphreys Theatre.

The Kalita Humphreys Theater turns 50 years old this December. (It's just slightly "younger" than the Guggenheim in New York.) Completed in 1959, unfortunately months after architect Frank Lloyd Wright's death, the Kalita has been the primary home of the Dallas Theater Center for all of those 50 years. But that's about to change. DTC will soon become the resident company at another architectural wonder—the Rem Koolhaas-designed Wylie Theater at the Dallas Center for the Performing Arts. (They'll still be a presence at the Kalita though, and other groups are already announcing plans to perform there.)

So what's to become of the Kalita? (Which still creates fond memories as well as much debate and discussion as seen by two recent posts on [KERA's Art & Seek](#).)

Ann Abernathy, AIA, is project architect for a master plan for the City of Dallas-owned building, being done by Booziotis & Company architects and a national team of consultants.* While she rightfully didn't pull back the curtain on that process, she DID share a lot of wonderful history and observations as a part of [Preservation Dallas'](#) Summer Sizzler series last week. While it will be much better spelled out by Abernathy and her team in the master plan and subsequent public meetings about it, here are a couple of tidbits gleaned from the talk and the discussion afterwards:

- There are actually interesting similarities between the Kalita and the Wyly. A site little bigger than a residential site adjacent to Turtle Creek meant that Wright had to “stack” the theatre vertically—lobby at grade, theater cascading down the hill, and support spaces like technical support below that. The Wyly will reverse that—the audience enters below grade and ascends to the theater; support spaces (costume shop, offices, rehearsal studios, et al) stack on top of that.
- The Kalita was actually intended to be the anchor of an Arts District, the 1959 version. Plans for a flanking concert hall and art museum never came to fruition.
- The other Frank Lloyd Wright building in Dallas (did you know there WAS one?) is actually from the same period. The Gillin House was completed in 1958.
- A standard complaint about the building is that the design was “pulled off the shelf.” Abernathy did a wonderful job of showing how the design was indeed based on previous drawings that Wright had done (he had a long-held interest in theater design), but also how it had been beautifully adapted specifically for the rocky Turtle Creek site. (As for the complaint that the building is “backwards,” there’s not enough space here to explain, but suffice it to say that the original design minus subsequent additions makes perfect sense for the site. I’m sure that we’ll learn more on that front from the master plan.)
- The interior of the theater, while it has proven a challenge to subsequent directors and new technology, was perfect for original DTC artistic director Paul Baker and his team. And clearly Wright was profoundly influenced by his knowledge of Kabuki theater (the architect had a well-known love of all things Japanese); one rendering in Abernathy’s presentation showed the stage with Japanese drama being performed on it.
- And, as for the apocryphal story about the stage elevator which had to be hidden by boxes for a visit by Wright, Abernathy pointed out that it was impossible. Felled by a stroke in 1958—well before the concrete for that area was ever poured, Wright never visited the site again.

Stay tuned. There is much more to be learned about this great architectural jewel. And there will be plenty of discussion on how to move forward. The Dallas Center for Architecture plans to be well-involved in that discussion and hopes you will join us.

* Consultants on the project include: Theater Projects Consultants, Akustiks, Quimby McCoy, Schirmer Engineering, Charles Gojer Engineering, Accessology, Stewardship, Inc., John Thorpe and Associates, and MESA. Also integral to the process has been Kelly Oliver, AIA, who was the original supervising apprentice.