



STAGE TECHNOLOGY

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Case in point

Adding flexibility to performing arts centers can be a way to fulfill a venue's mission and reinforce sustainability

In today's competitive live entertainment industry, more performance spaces are becoming multipurpose to better fulfill their needs while improving their long-term sustainability. Opening its doors in September 2014 and located in downtown San Antonio, Texas, the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts is a tremendous example – capable of serving its mission and of sustaining its operations. The main auditorium has a fully automated seat and floor transformation system that changes the configuration of the parterre area. The computerized transformation, which can be performed by a single operator and takes approximately 30 minutes,

can produce multiple configurations that have a permanent look and feel.

This modern, flexible facility had no need to request any annual subsidies during its first year of operation and had absolutely no trouble attracting audiences through a broad variety of events. According to concert industry trade publication Pollstar, the Tobin Center's ticket sales from January 1 to March 31 of 2016 saw it rank among the top entertainment facilities – it was the number-one theater of any size in Texas, and ranked 16th in the USA and 22nd in the world. Among venues with fewer than 2,000 seats, the Tobin Center ranked first in the world.

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An architectural experience

Designed by LMN Architects of Seattle, in partnership with San Antonio architects Marmon Mok, the Tobin Center's exterior combines the 1926 Spanish Mission-style façade of its original incarnation, the Municipal Auditorium, with a striking new structure covered with a metallic LED-lit veil. On the inside, it features a traditional main performance hall with proscenium arch and orchestra pit lifts, offering comfortable seating for 1,738, optimal sightlines and acoustics that, according to Connecticut-based Akustiks, which supervised the installation, rank among the country's best venues.

This state-of-the-art venue is equipped with a Gala Systems fully automated mechanical floor, which enables the building to be truly mixed use. The Gala Systems technology is also suitable for use in other industries, such as education or business, and provides the best-fit solution for all 10 of the Tobin Center's resident companies, while working within the limited available footprint. The technology enables the main performance hall to host various types of events and suit frequently fluctuating audience sizes – by transforming itself from a raked seating layout to a flat floor space, with many sub-configurations in between. As president and chief executive Michael Fresher told *The New York Times* in 2014, at the Tobin Center we can “do a corporate breakfast or lunch, push the button, the seats pop back up, and do a concert at night.” Such a versatile space, capable of quick changeovers, lends itself to a highly efficient use of every square foot and is key to hosting activities for San Antonians of all ages and backgrounds.

Efficient and sustainable

Kept full all-year round, the main hall hosted 212 events during the 2014-15 season. By contrast, fixed audience chamber seating facilities, better suited for certain types of cultural events, are typically underused in the USA, averaging 124 events per year between 2009 and 2012 (according to a 2013 National Center for Arts Research report). That is an average of only 2.4 shows per week compared with four at the Tobin Center.

According to Duncan Webb, president of consultants Webb Management Services, there is room for further growth in rental capability. This is less about the expansion of cultural activities and more about non-traditional events such as awards ceremonies, cabaret shows, conventions, corporate banquets, city events and teaching



seminars, programed during weekdays and held in a single day – all of which have the potential to generate additional earnings.

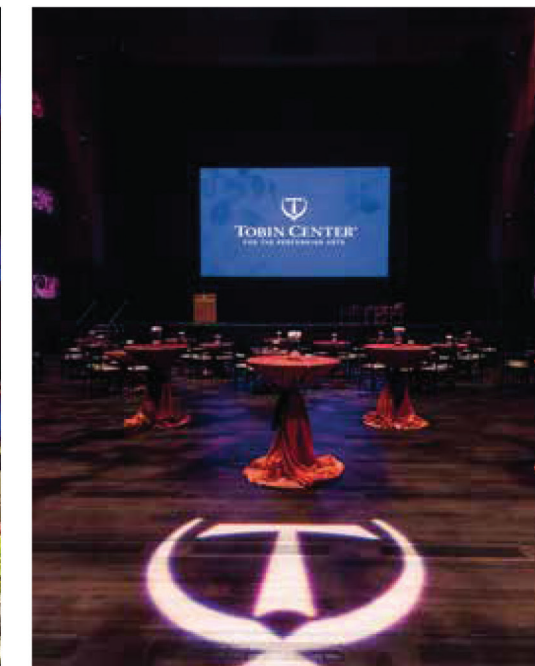
With some exceptions, funding sources have been scarce for performing arts centers following the global recession, and the pressure in the industry to generate earned income from ticket sales, tuition, tour fees, food revenue and other sources has increased accordingly. It is a very rare accomplishment for a performing arts center to maintain a sustainable operation in the current economic climate – and even more so to produce a surplus. In the case of the Tobin Center, revenues exceeded costs by US\$400,000 to US\$500,000 for the first six months of 2015.

“Our model is to rely less on philanthropic gifts and more on operations. That is playing out as we planned,” Fresher told the *San Antonio Express-News* in 2015. But according to a 2016 report by Webb, the financial success of multipurpose halls also comes from additional sponsorship opportunities, notably those brought by resident companies' supporters – although it may not be the principal source of revenue as in the Tobin Center's case. Obviously the higher the number of resident companies, the higher the income. Showcasing multiple events and live performances in venues customized to meet their exact requirements and to satisfy the audience's expectations helps managers considerably in their efforts to reduce subsidy dependence.

Community spirit

With 10 resident companies (including symphony, opera, ballet, chamber orchestra, theater, choral and youth music/theater organizations), world-

This page and opposite: **The Tobin Center for the Performing Arts can be configured to host a variety of event types, diversifying its programming**



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class performing artists (from Paul McCartney to The B-52s) and local community groups (such as the San Antonio Film Festival, Tobin Kids Series and Annual Open House), the Tobin Center definitely plays a dynamic role within the local community. But with its built-in flexibility, the venue has also been able to accommodate a wider range of programs, including rehearsals and private events, corporate luncheons, flat-floor concerts, fashion shows, banquets, charity balls and weddings.

At the same time, the Tobin Center was able to draw more attendees on a daily basis, strengthening support within the community (by providing space for local events) and expanding education reach – around 50,000 students attended performances on school field trips during the first season alone. According to Tami Kegley of the *Rivard Report*, the center's management team feels that “the Tobin Center offers so many events and performances, utilizing each and every space to the fullest, that it is truly a venue that has something for everyone – every passion and, yes, every budget”.

Success on multiple levels

The Tobin Center offers a striking architectural experience and a world-class performing arts presentation, rendered possible by a state-of-the-art venue with mixed-use development, enhanced with 10 resident companies, mission fulfillment and expanded audience reach achieved through high occupancy rates, long-term financial sustainability, and international recognition.

The establishment of the best possible technical transformation of venues (in terms of speed and functionality) is a key element for performing arts centers such as the Tobin Center, which is aimed primarily at serving cultural works but secondarily at other areas of activities, such as education or business. By providing flexible modular space with the Gala transformable systems, which are suited for a very broad variety of events and future demands, the Tobin Center has been overwhelmingly embraced by the entire city, reinforcing its multifaceted cultural identity and helping revitalize the downtown area. *San Antonio* has even been identified recently by *The Huffington Post* as one of the USA's five “secretly cool cities”. The enterprising and adaptable Tobin Center definitely has had a hand in its success. ■