Barton Myers is the architect of eight built theater projects designed and constructed over a period of forty years from 1973, the start of design for the Citadel Theater in Edmonton, Alberta, through the 2014 completion of Phase I of the Dr. Phillips Performing Arts Center in Orlando, Florida. The sophisticated and celebratory design of theaters forms a significant chapter in Myers’s career.

Myers absorbed ideas from the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Architecture and his mentor Louis Kahn, ideas which in turn were derived from beaux arts concepts of urbanism. Myers comes out of an architectural tradition that views individual buildings as integral components of the larger urban context and therefore sees urbanism as architecture at a larger scale. Each of his theater buildings exists first and foremost as a component of the total environment, not primarily as an isolated object. Even when the projects have been in relatively isolated places, for example, the Tempe Center for the Arts in Arizona and the Barry Zukerman Amphitheater north of Toronto, Ontario, the forms are not separate from the surroundings but rather respond to, reinforce, and complement them. When his theaters are placed within an existing urban fabric, they actively enhance, engage, and enrich the civic context while simultaneously restating and reinforcing the urban structure.
Myers's theater architecture follows from an evolving tradition of Western theater design in which changes over the last four hundred years have primarily been driven by two factors. The first is the ever-increasing technical control of the environment for both audience and performer, and the second is the proliferation of demands by the forms of performance as the underlying art forms themselves evolved. For example, grand opera generates significantly different demands than chamber music or film projection, and experimental hybrid presentations present further challenges. Technical control has been focused on the basic elements of the theater: sight, hearing, and comfort for the audience, and the technical magic of the performance. The proliferation of performance genres has brought with it the need for multiple theater types and theaters that can accommodate multiple forms of performance. These escalating technical demands have in turn required an army of specialists in theater seating, rigging, sound, room acoustics, and theater lighting in addition to the normal complement of engineering consultants needed for any major architectural project. Myers's design team for the project in Orlando, for example, included twenty-seven specialty consultants. Consequently, a contemporary architect engaged in advanced theater design requires the organizational and leadership capabilities of an effective general or business executive.

In his own writing about the design of theaters, Myers has broken down the key elements of his focus into context, arrival, lobby, theater room with all its technical requirements, and back of house, with the added considerations of art within the architecture and the craftsmanship of construction.¹ The first three of these elements relate largely to the civic presence of the theater and the following two—theater room and back of house—respond to the requirements of the theatrical performance itself. These considerations help elucidate the intent and the impact of Barton Myers's theater architecture.

The Citadel Theatre, the first of Barton Myers's career, presented a number of interesting site complications that Myers characteristically turned into real advantages. Principal among these were the presence of an underground parking structure occupying a portion of the site and easements for related vehicular and pedestrian circulation through an edge of the project area. Additionally, as with several of the other projects under consideration here, a programmatic expectation for the performance complex was to bring positive civic activity to a stumbling downtown. The urbanistic sensitivities of Myers's philosophical background prepared him to incorporate all the varied technical performance requirements and large scale hopes for the life of this three venue complex.

The Citadel contains a 600-seat proscenium theater, 300-seat recital and film theater, and a 250-seat flexible space now primarily used as a cabaret. Throughout his theater architecture experience, Myers expanded on and refined each of these theater forms: the proscenium theater with its multiple levels and sculptural side boxes, the recital hall that can also properly be used for film projection, and the rectangular flexible hall with shallow balcony seating within the side walls.

A public pedestrian mall inserted into the central body of the Citadel theater building allows everyone to experience, even in passing, a sense of inclusion. The indoor mall serves as well as a brief respite from the extreme weather of this city on the northern plains. This is architecture that truly engages the civic wholeness. The dramatic multi-story lobby serves all three venues of the Citadel Theatre. This is a design strategy that Myers uses in all his theater complexes, and a declaration, at the very start of his theater design career, of his commitment to the celebration of social gathering.

Comparing Myers's Citadel Theater in Edmonton with the roughly contemporaneous Minnesota Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis, completed in 1974 and designed by Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer, illustrates differences between modernistic urbanism and the urban design tradition from which Myers springs. While both projects are functionally successful and use similar rhetoric to describe the general goals of social inclusion and civic benefit, the architects of Orchestra Hall distance it from the day-to-day life of the surrounding city by cladding the lobby and office portions of the project in silver aluminum and reflective glass panels, placing a car drop-off as a separator from the path of the public sidewalk, stationing free-standing monumental air ducts for the mechanical system in front of the exterior lobby wall, and turning the imposing masonry mass of the performance space at an angle to the city grid. The orthogonal orientation of the Citadel Theater, on the other hand, actively reinforces the city grid and brings public service functions—as any city building might—right to the sidewalk. A glass canopy projects over the public sidewalk; the lobby opens seamlessly to the enclosed public mall. Stylistically both of these designs would be labeled modern architecture but the architectural traditions informing them were quite different.

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¹ Barton Myers: Works of Architecture and Urbanism
V-1
Citadel Theatre, Edmonton, Alberta: exterior, 1976; A. J. Diamond and Barton Myers, R. L. Wilkin

V-2
Citadel Theatre: interior of theater
V–3
Citadel Theatre: detail of exterior wall and glass canopy over sidewalk

V–4
Citadel Theatre; Vacant Lottery site plan, 1978; Barton Myers Associates
Citadel Theater lobby
The design of the Portland Center for Performing Arts project was awarded in 1982 to a team of three architectural firms: Barton Myers Associates, ELS, and BOOR/A. The project split neatly into two largely separate pieces, with BOOR/A and ELS addressing the north side of Main Street with the renovation of the 1928 former movie palace into an approximately 2700-seat multi-use venue. The south side of Main Street was assigned to Barton Myers. His charge was to provide two theaters, a 900-seat intermediate theater (now called the Newmark Theatre) and a 360-seat flexible showcase theater (now the Dolores Winningstad Theatre), and associated office, ticketing, and related support spaces.

With a somewhat better budget, Myers’s work in Portland is more assured while employing some similar design elements to those seen in the Edmonton project, in particular, what was becoming a signature move, a lobby that served multiple venues. The lobby at Portland, topped by an art glass dome by artist James Carpenter, glorified the vertical in a truly festive way, providing a public space that supports the thrill of seeing and being seen. The lobby experience in Portland continues Myers’s commitment to civic inclusion by opening out to the block of Main Street, directly in front of the theaters, which was designed so that it could be closed off, acting as an extension of the activities of the program on both sides. Monumental pylons on the Broadway end of the block announce this possibility. A suspended glass canopy over the specially designed paving on Main Street, demarcating the extent of the outdoor lobby, was designed as part of the project but unfortunately has not been built.
Portland was the first project that Myers worked on with Theatre Projects, the consulting firm with which he would work on all of his subsequent theaters except New Jersey. The elegant Edwardian style 900-seat Newmark Theatre at Portland is crowned with a domed chandelier, reminiscent of the lobby’s glass dome. Side balconies with two levels of boxes allow all the seats to be close to the stage. This multiple balcony approach is one he uses in all of his proscenium theaters. Larger and richer in form, texture, and decoration, the Newmark Theatre is clearly an evolution from the proscenium theater in Edmonton. Similarly, the courtyard Winningstad Theatre extends the approach taken at Edmonton’s flexible hall but is like Newmark, larger and more elaborate than its antecedent.
V–8
Portland Center for the Performing Arts: exterior view at the entrance to Main Street court between the new (shown) and old theaters

V–9
Portland Center for the Performing Arts: exterior view on opening night

V–10
Portland Center for the Performing Arts: lobby dome with glass sculpture by Jamie Carpenter
Ancient Greek theaters were typically built into existing hillsides, making logical use of the mountainous terrain. The Romans adopted the form of Greek theaters but often built their theaters in concrete, partially or completely above the natural grade. The 1,500-seat outdoor theater in Earl Bales Park, now called the Barry Zukerman Amphitheater, follows what is essentially the Roman development of the Greek outdoor theater with the lower portion of the seat form built into a natural hillside. The remaining seats seamlessly extend the lower seat forms into a concrete structure that forms an enclosure for the whole. The area below the structured portion of the seating provides space for the dressing rooms, audio amplification, lighting booth, ticketing, restrooms and the like. Paying homage to the spirit of ancient Greek theaters, Myers blends his design into the natural landscape, creating a surrounding semi-circular grove, and providing a ceremonial path leading naturally to the proper entry sequence. It is instructive to see what he does not do. He does not emphasize the construction, i.e., the new artifact within the landscaped environment. Rather he blends the new elements in harmony with the natural context. He makes a place in the park that is at once its own place and clearly a part of the park. The design problem in architecture often presents itself as a series of choices.
V-13
Earl Bales Outdoor Theatre: view of amphitheater seating

V-14
Earl Bales Outdoor Theatre: exterior showing Myers's expansion for back of house facilities
The program of Barton Myers’s project for the Stratford Festival Theatre in Stratford, Ontario was to consolidate and expand the back of the house facilities for this storied festival theater. Originally covered by a tent with seat forms built into the hillside, this summer Shakespearian venue had in the mid-1950s been enfolded into a permanent structure that directly referenced the former tent. In late 1983 Myers was commissioned to add to the now iconic Festival Theater in order to consolidate, expand, and modernize the company’s widely dispersed support facilities.

Although this is not one of his major theater projects, consider the choices Myers made when carrying out the brief on this modest job. He consistently chose to enhance the sense of place, the specific ethos of this institution, and subordinated any expression of his new work to the image set by architect Robert Fairfield’s 1956 design of the Festival Theatre. The extensive new back stage areas are worked into the slope of the surrounding hillside so that they read very much as a base on which the theater itself rises with its distinctive tent-like shape. The roof of Myers’s expansion provides a gracious promenade terrace for theater patrons that overlooks the adjacent park. This respect for the continuity of the past informs Myers’s choices not only here at Stratford but in all of his urban theaters.

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V–16
Stratford Festival Theatre: section through existing auditorium and Myers's low addition

V–17
Stratford Festival Theatre: evening photograph with Myers's addition in foreground
Prior to the passage of California’s infamous Proposition 13 and related regressive taxation legislation of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Cerritos had been a typical California sprawl suburban town. During the tax reform era, the Cerritos city leaders were among the first to realize the implications of the new regulations and moved quickly to encourage the kinds of tax-generating activities that would keep income flowing to the civic coffers, such as shopping centers and the well-known, strikingly successful Cerritos Auto Mall. These choices have allowed the City of Cerritos to pursue an active path in city building including the construction of a civic arts center, while developing an urban expression that has distinct characteristics of the classic American suburb with a new kind of downtown that is essentially a civic manifestation of the shopping mall. The site for the theater complex is in the middle of this suburban core, at the edge of a shopping center parking lot and across a divided highway, Bloomfield Avenue, from the Cerritos Civic Center.

Myers’s consistent commitment to a civic urbanity is clearly expressed in this new and different context. Regional highways provide the scale for the structure of the Cerritos site, fronted by the amorphous foreground of an enormous parking lot with a hotel plunked down in its center. His response to these site constraints was to fashion this project into a village of building elements and related plazas and landscape that reach out to both the civic center and the shopping center. As a total mass, these manifested parts seen together provide an architectural whole sufficient to establish its proper place in the overall scale of highway and shopping center. Upon approach, the pedestrian-scaled building components articulate
The Theaters

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V-19
Cerritos Center for the Performing Arts: section through multi-purpose theater, lobby and conference center

V-20
Cerritos Center for the Performing Arts: section and plan for various theater configurations
the functions and aide comprehension of the new vastly improved neighborhood for the existing hotel, shopping and civic centers.

There are two primary venues within the Center. A remarkably flexible performance space—the apotheosis of the multi-purpose theater—that can morph into five different seating-floor-wall configurations provides excellent performance spaces for audiences of more than 1700 to less than 900. The second venue is a 5100 square foot conference center used extensively for corporate meetings, weddings, and a host of civic events. Myers's belief in the importance of placemaking is illustrated not simply by the building’s urban design but also by the care and sophistication with which he designed the actual room experience for each of the flexible hall’s configurations, each iteration given its own architecturally satisfying coherence.
New Jersey Performing Arts Center

New Jersey Performing Arts Center, Newark, New Jersey: aerial view of exterior before a performance, 1997; Barton Myers Associates, Wilson Woodridge Architects
A basic consideration in all architectural design is to find the proper relationship between the building form as a whole and the articulation of its component parts. New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC) reaches a dynamic balance at all scales between the parts and whole, dramatically defining this civic arts district within the City of Newark with its adjacent plaza, park, and riverfront. More restrained with simpler, more constrained massing than the village of buildings at Cerritos, NJPAC is more articulated than the earlier Citadel and Portland designs. Like these earlier projects, however, NJPAC is an urban beacon that engages the city. The complex relates directly to a civic plaza into which the activities of the Center extend, successfully bringing new life to a troubled downtown.

Once again, an impressive public lobby coordinates entrance access to all the venues, in this case the 2700-seat Prudential Hall, the 500-seat workshop-style Victoria Theater, a public restaurant, and conference facilities. The central cylindrical entrance tower organizes the entire access and sequence, acting as a way finding marker for those approaching the theater complex and effortlessly redirecting the patrons along their proper paths within. Myers’s tower is reminiscent of similar devices in Baroque churches such as Santa Maria della Salute, Venice, where the domed octagonal central rotunda disperses visitors to each of the six surrounding chapels and toward the altar.5 Edwin Luytens’ 1903 Papillon Hall with its entry sequence of the circular Basin Court similarly adjusts the directional flow to cloak room, entry hall and to servants’ entrance.4 Myers knows his history.

Immediately upon entering NJPAC, Myers’s commitment to architectural craftsmanship can be seen in the exquisite detailing of the structural truss system spanning the lobby, as well as in all the other visual and tactile elements such as railings, hardware, signage, and paneling. This emphasis on craftsmanship continues into the elegant Prudential Hall which is crowned with a dome and art glass sphere chandelier, the work of artist James Carpenter. The many layered components making up Prudential Hall produce a rich and coherent room, reinforcing one’s sense of being in a special and particular place. The NJPAC lobby experience is dynamic and festive, a great place to see and be seen.

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V–25
New Jersey Performing Arts Center; site proposal including context

V–26
New Jersey Performing Arts Center; site plan

V–27
New Jersey Performing Arts Center; exterior detail of the steel and glass bridge
V-28
New Jersey Performing Arts Center: interior of Prudential Hall with chandelier by James Carpenter
Like Beethoven’s eighth symphony, nestled modestly between the monumental seventh and ninth symphonies, Myers’s Tempe Center for the Arts nestles not just chronologically between the major statements of NJPAC and the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts in Orlando, but also conceptually between those intense urban statements. Unlike most of Myers’s other theater projects, the site for this building is separated from the urban fabric of the city, although less than a mile from Tempe City Hall, in parkland adjacent to Tempe Town Lake, a man-made lake created by damming the Salt River. The site is further separated from the urban grid by Rio Salado Parkway, a regional highway.

The performance component of the program is also smaller than all his other major theater projects. The building includes a 600-seat proscenium theater and a 200-seat studio theater. Importantly, the program also includes an art gallery, a community room, and a flexible lobby complex. The technical challenges of the theaters were exacerbated by the location of the principal flight path directly overhead, originating from the very active Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport two miles away. This condition of the site put extreme pressure on the design for noise isolation and also brought with it unusually strict fire marshal requirements generated by the Federal Aviation Administration.

At Tempe Center for the Arts the natural environment was the primary contextual influence as it was for Myers’s outdoor theater in Earl Bales Park, rather than the civic life that influenced his downtown projects. Like the amphitheater in Earl Bales Park, this project takes a circular form.

The outer concrete walls, topped with a copper band, and soaring roof form together create a primary shell in which the individual programmatic components are arranged. The image-defining roof structure envelops the theater’s fly space in a shape that references the mountains to the north and northwest and gives a crisp silhouette against the intense blue of the desert sky.

It also shields the performance spaces from the aircraft noise and provides insulation against temperature extremes of the desert. The concrete walls are solid and relatively closed to the path of the insistent desert sun. Glass walls open the building to the north, giving dramatic views across Tempe Town Lake and to the mountain beyond.

The lobby, which runs along the northern portion of the enclosed space, from the west entrance at
the parking lot past all the programmed functional spaces, continues uninterrupted to the east entrance, and reaches out towards the landscaped park beyond. The massive triple-glazed north wall of the lobby affords views of the 300-foot long reflecting pool and Tempe Town Lake, emphatically recognizing the symbolic importance of water in the desert. The lobby space feels much like an outdoor public street or square with the two theaters, the community room and art gallery all presenting architecturally distinct facades on to this space. While the lobby is noticeably animated, the interior development of each theater is more restrained than NJPAC or Portland. In the larger theater, the balcony forms are continuous curves rather than the articulated side boxes typical of the earlier designs. The crowning structural dome, while intricate, is a centered and still circular form. Similarly, the other major spaces are clearly defined, crisp, clean, and playing against the activity and variety in shape, texture, and color of the elements of the ‘public street’—the lobby. Tempe Center for the Arts becomes an arts village, its own lively community.

Myers’s design for Orlando, Florida is not yet completed, therefore, judgments about the project must be provisional. Even without the tactile reality of a finished project, however, there are useful observations to be made about Myers’s latest theater design. It appears that Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts, with the completion of phase II anticipated in 2019, will crown Myers’s career with his largest, most complex performing arts design. The project site includes two whole contiguous city blocks in downtown Orlando. The north-south running Magnolia Avenue bisects the
site with the buildings of the Center to the east. Myers created a new public plaza and outdoor performance space, named the CNL Arts Plaza, to the west, stretching from the front of the Dr. Phillips Center at Magnolia Avenue through to Orange Avenue, connecting the Center into the plaza in front of Orlando City Hall.

The key program components of Phase I, which opened in 2014, are the 2700-seat multipurpose Walt Disney Theater, the 300-seat Alexis & Jim Pugh community theater, a grand coordinating lobby along the west front, the DeVos Family Room that spans Magnolia Street, and—facing south onto Anderson Street—the School for the Arts. Completing the northern portion of the project, Phase II, scheduled to start construction soon after the opening of Phase I, will comprise a flexible 1700-seat acoustical hall designed for orchestra and ballet and a rehearsal hall serving the whole complex. The project was split into two phases when financial support slowed during the recent economic downturn; the enabling legislation required all funds to be in hand (not just pledged or anticipated) before construction contracts could be let.5

Delays in funding and attendant political wrangling apparently caused changes in the project’s client structure and consequently, after all the design had been completed, Barton Myers Associates was released from the construction project team. How this will affect the final building construction remains to be seen. In theory all the design is in the design documents. In practice there are many choices made during construction that can impact the final building. This change brings with it the fear that, unlike NJPAC, a project wherein a sophisticated client actively supported the architect’s
design intent, Dr. Phillips may have a difficult time realizing the highest level of craftsmanship. Nevertheless, the urbanistic qualities of the project, as well as the technical functioning of the venues, will no doubt be carried through as expected.

As an architectural form, Orlando is the most compact of Myers’s urban center theater projects. Here he arrives at a tighter balance between the statement of the whole form and the indication of the parts, while clearly but subtly differentiating the individual components within the overall mass of the building. Like all his urban theaters, Dr. Phillips Center’s form comes right down to the sidewalk, defining the urban space while opening directly off that public sidewalk, unlike, for example, the excluding separation of New York’s Lincoln Center or Los Angeles’ Music Center. Further emphasizing this sense of civic inclusion, a hallmark of Myers’s theater work from Edmonton forward, the design enfolds Magnolia Avenue into the composition. Crowning the Center’s principal face, the west façade that fronts on Magnolia and the Arts Plaza, a great cantilevered canopy arches over the sidewalk entrance and the street itself, providing shelter, marking the entrance, and indicating something of the coordinated wholeness of the Performing Arts Center.

Because Orlando is still under construction, its effectiveness as architecture, performance space, and urban catalyst cannot actually be observed. However, Myers’s previous projects can be and they have been consistently successful. The Citadel Theater continues to blossom: empty lots surrounding the theater have been developed bringing additional life to the Churchill Square district of Edmonton. The theater’s success has prompted an addition. The Portland theaters prove their success by consistently producing outstanding revenues. Newmark Theater, according to the February 2014 issue of *Venues Today*, a leading publication in the industry, was listed number sixteen in the world for revenue in the under 2000-seat venues. Personal experience has demonstrated to this visitor that both the Cerritos and the Tempe projects, even with their semi-suburban siting, are each engaging, even inspiring, both as architecture and as an audience experience. And according to social media, they are popular places to get married, suggesting the breadth of their appeal to many segments of the community.

NJPAC over the fifteen years it has been open has uniformly received praise for its architecture, urban design, and performance space quality. Related development in the area has restarted after being delayed by the 2009–11 economic downturn.

Lawrence Goldman, founding NJPAC CEO and then CEO of the NJPAC development company, recently wrote: “Barton did not a good, but a spectacular job on NJPAC. He gave New Jersey and the region an amazing gift, and this is a widely-held view.”

The theater projects designed by Barton Myers have been consistently successful as theaters, inspiring as architecture, welcoming as social gathering centers, and exemplars of informed urban design. Myers’s human-centered architecture evokes memory, function, culture and the making of places, not just spaces. His humanistic theater work comes out of a coherent tradition of architecture and urbanism worthy of appreciation and emulation.
V–35
Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts: interior of Disney Theater

V–36
Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts: exterior under the canopy at night

V–37
Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts: Magnolia Avenue main entry