

# Architects make a pitch to redesign Boettcher Concert Hall

By Marc Shulgold

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*The city's Division of Theatres and Arenas and the Colorado Symphony Orchestra invited the public to presentations June 26 and 27 from the six architectural finalists being considered to redesign Boettcher Concert Hall. The firms are being evaluated by an 18-member Architect Selection Panel. Rocky classical music writer Marc Shulgold is reporting on the presentations.*

**Friday – Noon: The aftermath** The 18-member panel went off to deliberate and, it was hoped, to arrive at a ranking of the six finalists. Jack Finlaw, director of the city's Division of Theatres and Arenas, indicated that no announcement would be made until well after negotiations between the city – led by Bill Vidal, Manager of Public Works – and the first-ranked team have inched toward completion. If all goes smoothly, he said, an announcement could be made sometime in July. After that, an acoustician will be named (though the city will announce a “short list” of finalists on Tuesday). The Boettcher team will then be completed with the naming of a theater consultant and a cost consultant – most likely by September, Finlaw said.

**10:15 p.m.: Skidmore, Owings and Merrill** At last, the sixth and final presentation arrived – and it was as compelling as the LMN performance that preceded it. Led by the energetic, passionate Leigh Breslau from the Chicago-based firm, the SOM team (augmented by the locally based Anderson Mason Dale design firm) also offered small 3-D models (with a video camera projecting the images on the screen) that addressed multiple possibilities, as LMN had done earlier. Breslau raised some eyebrows as he lifted a small sheet of wood representing the park area bordering Speer and replaced it with a new structure that could, he offered, sit adjacent to the existing concert hall. This would permit the Colorado Symphony to continue performing in Boettcher while construction of the new hall took place nearby – thus eliminating the CSO's search for a temporary home elsewhere. Breslau said he understood the city's requirements about open space, but said that a compromise could be worked out.

“We're shooting for a timeless building,” he stated, making the strongest, most impassioned sales pitch of the two-day series. “We do beautiful architecture at a good price,” he promised.

Breslau said there were three possible levels of intervention in the Boettcher project: repair, renovation and re-invention – the first being the simplest and cheapest, the latter being the most complex and most expensive. The choice of which option to follow depended on budget concerns and the wishes of the design team, he added.

“The possibilities are endless in a renovation process,” Breslau noted. But the goal remains the same – “bringing people here, getting them used to being (in the Boettcher neighborhood) more.”

He ended his presentation with unbridled passion for this project, noting that it is potentially more exciting than his firm's renovation of Symphony Center in Chicago. He drew chuckles (and a compliment from CSO president Doug Adams) when he extended his arms out and told the panel, “I'm begging you to select us.”

**8 a.m.: LMN Architects/David Tryba** The second and final day of appearances by architects named as finalists in the Boettcher Hall renovation began with a compelling presentation by the team of LMN (based in Seattle) and David Tryba (based in Denver). Mark Reddington, principal designer with LMN, pointed with pride to his firm's two Seattle-based concert halls – McCaw and Benaroya. He described the latter, which serves as home to the Seattle Symphony, as “a lantern in the city,” noting that the entrance had become a gathering place for the community. That's what is needed in

the redone Boettcher Hall, he suggested. As had been a common theme in Thursday's first day of presentations, Reddington described the architect's task as "designing an experience for the user."

While other presentations had involved slides of computer-generated conceptions (the goal here is not to offer a finished design), the LMN/Tryba team brought some three-dimensional models of possible renovations. One of them would welcome visitors with a glass façade facing downtown, another with a similar wall of glass looking toward Speer Boulevard and the mountains (similar to concepts offered on Thursday), while a third extended the glass theme along a lengthy stretch extending all the way back to the Performing Arts Complex Galleria. In each case, the hall's capacity would be 2,000 seats.

Tryba, who stressed his strong and lengthy ties to the Denver community, suggested that the new Boettcher should be the anchor on the west side of the complex. The team shrugged off a statement made at an earlier presentation that the roof of Boettcher would have to be raised in order to accommodate a desired height of 72 feet. That height, the panel was told, was necessary to effectively house a revised "shoebox" layout. During the question-and-answer period, it became clear that the members of the selection panel were considerably impressed with the presentation.

**Thursday 3:15 p.m.: Grimshaw:** The New York-based firm took a novel approach in its presentation, opening and closing with panoramic views of the Rocky Mountains looming over the Denver skyline. "The environment shapes our architecture," said managing partner Andrew Whalley, who added that he draws much of his inspiration from Nature.

The team of nine specialists took turns with the microphone, delving into the various details of designing a quiet, acoustically ideal room that serves as the center of an open and accessible building.

Though some of their concepts were bold and unexpected – including a modest suggestion that Boettcher be torn down, replaced by a large plaza and relocated to another part of the Performing Arts Complex – the Grimshaw team paid homage to the oft-maligned concert hall.

It was even suggested that the new design could incorporate "great" elements of the existing facility, such as the rings that provide seating near the ceiling. The intimacy of the room was also praised. It was suggested that it's still possible in a reconfigured "shoebox" design to retain the current distance of 80 feet from the farthest seat to the stage.

Though Grimshaw has an international reputation for designing novel, cutting-edge buildings that house factories and corporations, the presenters pointed to their experience with performing arts spaces by showing renderings of the new Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center in Troy, New York.

That said, this process wasn't just about renovating a place for an orchestra, Whalley stressed. It's about integrity. "We need to bring truth to (a hall's) functionality," he said.

**1 p.m.: Diamond and Schmitt Architects:** The firm's eight-person team invited the selection panel to think outside the box -- literally. Led by Jack Diamond, the contingent from the Toronto-based firm offered a series of illustrations that would call for additional height inside the renovated concert hall. Thus, the roof would have to be raised, allowing for the preferred height of 72 feet from floor to ceiling (the current height is 57 feet).

Diamond emphasized that the detailed – and quite attractive – depiction was merely "a demonstration of how we work (as a team). This is not a design."

Nonetheless, the concept contains elements that Colorado Symphony and city officials have indicated would be welcome: a full-length glass façade facing Speer Boulevard, a restaurant (located at ground level by the park bordering Speer) and a superior acoustic box for the concert hall.

That box would extend above the existing roof and consist of a concrete enclosure, isolating the concert sound from the surrounding lobby area. Chuck Keyes described the process of adding a new roof over the existing one as "structural replacement," which would permit uninterrupted construction inside the building regardless of weather conditions.

Diamond also described a revolutionary heating and cooling design, necessary because of the massive loss and gain in temperature due to the southwest-facing glass façade. A thermostat would automatically adjust the amount of light and

heat coming through the glass, through a series of shades that would also protect against high winds. Such a system is found in Europe but, to the best of his knowledge, has not yet been adopted in the U.S.

As his predecessors had done in today's presentations, Diamond addressed the philosophy of a concert-hall design, noting that patrons will "move beyond the city when they step into the hall, where the whole world changes." The audience, he said, "has to have a sense of itself, to see and be seen. We have to make this an occasion. It's got to be fun and exciting."

He suggested that an informal performance space in the lobby, for possible lunchtime concerts, would draw people in who might otherwise not attend a symphony concert.

"What's most important is to gain a transparency, an openness and a friendliness. But even beyond that, a concert hall has to reflect the quality of life in a city."

In his photo illustrations of projects that Diamond and Schmitt have been involved in, Diamond showed drawings of the Detention Center, being constructed as part of Denver's new Justice Center, and the Visual Arts Complex at the University of Colorado.

**10:15 a.m.: David M. Schwarz/Architectural Services:** David Schwarz, who heads the Washington D.C.-based architectural service that bears his name, relied on his high-profile experience in building and renovating concert halls during his presentation to the selection panel.

Schwarz showed detailed photographs of the newly constructed Bass Hall in Fort Worth, Texas, and the renovated Severance Hall in Cleveland, Ohio, projects for which his firm has drawn wide acclaim.

But the focus of his talk was on Denver and on its concert hall.

"In each city, we need to ask what the public attitude is: about their concert hall and about their city. So, what is the public attitude in Denver? And how will that change?"

"A concert hall is a good litmus test of how a city thinks of itself. But we must also consider that a city will change. So we have to provide a flexibility in our design, so (the hall) will last a long time. There's no reason this shouldn't last 300 years."

Rather than offer computer-generated drawings of a redone Boettcher Hall (as the first team from Zeidler had chosen), Schwarz and his four-member team explained how they develop and implement designs.

Craig Williams, who heads the firm with Schwarz, explained that the process will be headed by a triumvirate: the architect, the acoustician and the theater designer.

"David and I will be the lead architects, but we want to emphasize the collaborative spirit of the firm. Architectural and acoustical elements (in a hall's design) are one and the same."

Mindful of the importance of cost in such a massive project, Schwarz stressed the importance of coming in "on schedule and on budget," assuring the panel: "We know how to do it."

Should his firm be given the Boettcher project, Schwarz pointed to Denver-based Don Ruggles, who was seated next to him, as a key player in maintaining a local presence as the planning and work proceed. Schwarz also emphasized his willingness to be actively involved in raising funds for the project. Between \$30 and \$40 million will have to be raised privately.

"I'm an architect, but I'm also a prop," he said with a smile.

Beyond such practical considerations, Schwarz spoke about the significance of a concert hall as enriching the cultural life of the community, and the importance of maintaining traditions of symphonic music and the traditions of Denver.

“How do you talk about the ceremony of the symphony?” he asked. “We also need to find a way to combine Denver’s love of the outdoors with Denver’s love of music.”

As to the specific shape of the hall, Schwarz pointed out that any design presents challenges to be overcome. “When you choose a shape, you choose a set of problems. But with the look of the city and the arts complex, there is a diversity of architecture that offers plentiful opportunities and options.

“We’re populist architects. We very much want the community to embrace our buildings.”

Schwarz summed up the numerous possibilities and challenges of such a project: “If it’s better than (the current) Boettcher Hall, everyone will celebrate it.”

**8 a.m.: Zeidler Partnership Inc.:** “All design is about a search, a process,” said Mike Nelson, who led a seven-member team from Zeidler in the first of six presentations about the redesign of Boettcher Hall.

Nelson and his associates offered an outline (not a specific design) for the renovation of the hall, which has served as home for symphonic music in Denver since 1978.

Most prominent in Zeidler’s approach to the design, Nelson commented, was that west-facing side of the building — currently a solid brick wall, but in Zeidler’s conception, eventually a ground-to-roof glass façade.

Architect Tarek El-Khatib described the finished product as “a jewel within a jewel, a painting in glass.” He suggested that the interior of the glass-lined lobby could house a four-level restaurant, each level overlooking the expanded interior of the lobby.

Many of the team members are based in Denver, Nelson pointed out, stressing that Zeidler (based in West Palm Beach, Fla.) will use those local connections to help with planning logistics and would increase communication with the local citizenry.

Among those living and working here is Martha Bennett, who outlined the three priorities in the Boettcher project: Fix the acoustics, create great patron experience and create a great musician experience. The emphasis, she said, is on the music that will be heard and enjoyed.

In a series of computer-generated drawings, the team examined the existing building, from basement, discussing plans for an expansion of the existing space, to the roof that would, literally, be green — a “live planted roof,” with shaded areas and a series of photo-voltaic cells, Bennett proposed.

Much of the talk was about philosophy, with El-Khatib alluding to the “polite” respect the new hall would have with other structures in the Performing Arts Complex. “We want to create a minimal, quiet architectural language,” he said. “We don’t want (the final look) to be comical.”

Nelson showed photographs of other Zeidler-designed performing arts facilities, including the Kravis Center in West Palm Beach, the Toronto Center for the Arts, the Long Center in Austin, Tex. And the Fox Cities Performing Arts Center in Appleton, Wis.

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