

CASE STUDY

**SMALL IS  
BEAUTIFUL:**

SCALING DOWN THE LONG CENTER FOR  
THE PERFORMING ARTS IN AUSTIN



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This case was prepared for a class discussion rather than to demonstrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation, and is based on seven interviews with staff, board members, and community leaders involved with the Long Center for the Performing Arts project as well as internal documents and the public record. The authors would like to thank all of the people who graciously agreed to be interviewed.



Credit: Long Center at night, Photo credit: Alfie Photography / Shutterstock.com

In the early 1990s, a small group of civic leaders and arts patrons in Austin, Texas, began discussing the construction of a major new performing arts center. A city that prides itself on its counter-culture ways, liberal politics, and educated population, Austin is filled with bumper stickers calling on the locals to “Keep Austin Weird.” With the University of Texas, the state capitol, the second largest high-tech concentration after Silicon Valley, a relaxed social culture, and a reputation for being a live music mecca, civic pride runs deep in Austin. Yet tailoring a performing arts center’s size, budget, scope, and programming to local audience tastes, donor preferences, and local culture was a difficult task.

In the summer of 2003, two trustees of the planned-but-still-unbuilt Long Center for the Performing Arts came to convince their largest donor, Joe Long, to become the board's chairman. The chair was vacant after the resignation of the Long Center's second chairman in four years. The previous board meeting was a turbulent discussion of the dwindling options for how to make a new performing arts center in Austin a reality. The Long Center needed money—over \$140 million to start executing its ambitious plan—but only \$60 million had been raised and the campaign had stopped generating new pledges. Several of the trustees, including the chairman, left the board. The existence of an independent performing arts center in Austin seemed more in doubt than ever, and the remaining trustees thought Joe Long was the one person who could save the project.

The two trustees who came to propose the chairmanship to Long were Marvin Womack and Steve Davis. They thought that the project could be salvaged if scaled down in ambition and budget. This change in scale would require a drastic and difficult shift in paradigm. The board, staff, and leaders of the three founding companies—Austin Symphony, Austin Lyric Opera, and Ballet Austin—would have to start the design and planning process almost entirely from the beginning and reevaluate many strategic choices, from the question of adaptive reuse to the operating model for the future to the number of stages and seats. They would have to weigh many strategic priorities, including artistic excellence, community support, and financial sustainability of the future center and its founding companies, as well as carefully assess their existing capabilities and resources. Promises made during the first design process—such as the promise to build a rehearsal hall and to deliver world-class acoustics—would have to be reconsidered. The Long Center was a decade-old dream for many of its constituents, including donors and artistic companies who would perform there. All of them would have to be convinced to make significant compromises in how they saw the future home of the performing arts groups in Austin. Davis and Womack thought that Joe Long was one of the few people capable of succeeding in this difficult job.

Long is a tall, gray-haired man who speaks with a slight Texas accent. He came from a small town, went to the University of Texas at Austin on an ROTC scholarship, and made a large fortune in banking after serving in the Army, working as a teacher, running a dairy farm, and studying law. He has a reputation as a shrewd and tough businessman, a calm, confident man who valued structure and data over emotions and instincts in decision making. Even in Austin's informal culture, his peers call him "Mr." out of respect and deference. He had been a Long Center trustee for several years, but according to Davis, at the last meeting Long had told him "he was not prepared to waste any more time on this."

In order to convince Joe Long to assume the chairmanship of the Long Center board, Womack and Davis arrived with back-of-the-envelope calculations of how much could be cut from the construction budget and how much more could be raised. Joe Long listened but gave them no immediate answer, taking the evening to think about the matter further and to consult his wife, Teresa Lozano Long. He realized that the decision he was making was whether the Long Center project would continue at all. "I felt like if it was going to get done, I was going to have to do it," he said.

The idea for the Long Center was born out of the Ballet, Symphony, and Opera's fear of becoming homeless. A hall with the correct seating capacity is important to all performing companies, who depend on earned income from ticket sales to sustain their operations. A hall that is too large for a given company's audience leads to a loss of intimacy and has a pronounced psychological effect on both the performers on stage and the audience members sitting in a half-empty theater. A hall that is too small necessitates longer runs of each production in order to collect sufficient revenues. These longer runs may not be possible due to scheduling conflicts at the venue. In Austin, the only venue of sufficient size for the Opera, Ballet, and Symphony was the Bass Concert Hall on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin.

When Bass Concert Hall first opened, the University courted the Symphony and the Ballet to become resident companies there, and thereby increase Bass Hall's cultural cachet. When Austin Lyric Opera was founded, Bass Hall became its home, too. Now, however, the companies found themselves being crowded out of the schedule by university performances and touring, national, lucrative acts like Broadway shows. The dates the companies could now secure frequently fell on the days of the football games at the stadium about 200 yards away, when parking was scarce and rivers of orange-clad Longhorn fans streamed down the streets to either the game itself or to one of the hundreds of tailgating parties in the surrounding area, where beer and brisket ruled the day. The patrons of the Opera, Ballet, and Symphony found getting to Bass Hall under those conditions difficult. Moreover, with Bass Hall in increasingly high demand, rental fees suddenly doubled, and University officials began suggesting that Bass Hall could not continue being the home for these independent classical companies much longer. In the short-term, the companies faced the prospect of being homeless for two seasons as Bass Hall planned to close for mandatory fire safety renovations and lobby expansion. The companies dreamed of a home of their own, where they could have first priority in reserving dates and where they, rather than the University or the city, could be in charge of their destinies.

Three trustees of these companies known as the Three Js—Jo Anne Christian, Jare Smith, and Jane Sibley—saw a new performing arts center not affiliated with a university as crucial to the groups' survival in Austin. At some point, all three served as chairwomen or presidents of the boards of their artistic companies. Jo Anne Christian, whose husband had been the White House press secretary during Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency, is a lawyer with a memory her friends describe as a steel trap. Jare Smith

is the youngest of the three as well as a trustee of Ballet Austin and the co-chair of the capital campaign beginning with the summer of 2003. Jane Sibley is legendary in Austin not only for her leadership at the Long Center and the Symphony, but also for her historic home with a heart-shaped pool in central Austin and her custom of wearing a feather in her hair.

To make their dream a reality, the three Js started small, by inviting a few business leaders to have lunch with them. They continued this lunch campaign until they stirred up enough interest to incorporate a nonprofit, which after several name changes would become known as the Joe R. and Teresa Lozano Long Center for the Performing Arts. A board of trustees was recruited. Several professionals, including a local architecture firm, TeamHaas, offered their services pro bono.

By 1998, the proposal took concrete shape. The Long Center asked the city for the Palmer Auditorium, which occupied a large lot overlooking the Lady Bird Lake in Central Austin. The Palmer had hosted performing arts events before, but was now used mostly for charity events and smaller conventions like the city's summer camp expo. The building's green dome, a familiar Austin landmark since 1958, seemed as beloved by some city residents as it was hated by others. The Long Center proposed to gut and renovate the Palmer as a new performing arts center using private funds that were to be raised in a \$40 million capital campaign. After opening, the Long Center would operate the building under a 50-year, \$1-a-year lease arrangement, but the city would still be the legal owner. The city council was concerned about the size of the Long Center's future operational deficits, and the Long Center proposed to raise a \$10 million endowment as well. The council reasoned that at a 5 percent annual draw rate, a \$10 million endowment would be sufficient to cover the projected operating deficit of \$500,000. This city estimate was not based on any operational forecasts, but on the benchmark of the existing Palmer Auditorium's annual deficit of \$500,000. Furthermore, the city asked the Long Center to build a smaller venue for use by Austin's smaller performance groups. For its part, the city council agreed to spend \$46 million of municipal bond money to build a new events center nearby, as a replacement for the Palmer, and a parking garage that could be shared by both facilities. Cliff Redd, the current executive director at the Long Center, described this deal as the city giving the Long Center "the most important piece of dirt in the city," but attaching not just strings to their gift, but "ropes enough to lift the Titanic." This proposal was approved by Austin voters in a 1998 referendum.

Initial rounds of fundraising went well. Joe and Teresa Long pledged \$20 million to the effort in 1999, thus giving the project an air of credibility. Over \$25 million came from “Dellionaires,” including Michael and Susan Dell, as well as other present and former Dell employees. In 2000, \$40 million was pledged.

Meanwhile, a board-appointed owners’ representative committee was working with the professional consultants on a building program—the list of required features for the building—and a design. The consultants included a top-tier theater consultant, Fischer Dachs and Associates (FDA), acousticians, cost consultants at Donnell Consultants Incorporated (DCI), and two teams of architects—Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill (SOM), a national, award-winning firm; and the local TeamHaas.

The scope of the project expanded as more ideas for improving the project were generated. “You get people’s vision machines going. Everybody who was in that room was in the ‘yes’ mood,” said Cookie Ruiz, the executive director of Ballet Austin. With fundraising going well, at the architect’s request, the board approved an increase of the construction budget to about \$80 million, though a lack of clarity about whether the \$80 million was supposed to cover hard construction costs alone or the total costs of the project persists among project leaders. In addition to a large 2,000 seat hall for the Symphony, Opera, and Ballet and the 250-seat black box theater for the smaller groups, the Long Center trustees now planned to build a third theater of 750 seats. The main hall would have a crystal chandelier and world-class acoustics. A rehearsal hall would be included in the facility. The architectural concept by SOM also retained the Palmer’s distinctive architectural features, like its dome, at significant cost. “They [SOM] did what we asked them to do,” said Joe Long. “They designed a world-class facility. I think like a lot of architects they were just accustomed to designing, and cost wasn’t a factor.”

Cliff Redd was less charitable. Redd was a lifelong Texan and fast-talking arts impresario fond of colorful language. He said that the first design suffered from “overdesigning” and “overreaching.” He said: “You’re dealing with the Symphony, Opera, and Ballet who are coming out of the situation where they feel like they have been maligned, where they didn’t have the tools they needed to do what they needed to do, and so they want everything.”

This design was approved by the board in 2001, and SOM was paid \$8 million for their work. The other consultants were paid another \$4 million. A total of 1,100 pages of blueprints were printed and sent out for contractor bids, the lowest of which came back with the construction price tag of \$115 million in 2002. An additional \$25 million would be necessary to cover consultants, financing costs, capital campaign costs, and the \$10 million endowment promised to the city. Donors not involved with the board were “furious.” To the trustees themselves, the new price tag felt like a “train hitting the wall,” and the project was beginning to look like “a Rubik’s Cube that may not have a solution,” said Redd. After paying the architects, the Long Center had \$12 million remaining in cash and \$35 million in outstanding pledges. The board faced the prospect of raising another \$90 million in order to cover its ambitious plan.



At this point, external conditions and community sentiment toward the project worsened. The 9/11 attacks and the dot-com crash sent the national economy into a recession that heavily affected Austin, with its high concentration of high-tech companies and jobs. Moreover, the community was becoming increasingly skeptical about the project. Austin is the self-titled “Live Music Capital of the World” because its blend of hip-pie and hipster culture had supported a thriving country and rock music scene for decades. But the Symphony, Opera, and Ballet were perceived by some as art forms that belonged to the “establishment.” As Redd pointed out, “Austin’s core value is, we have this adversity about the Man. Our parents and grandparents were Man-averse. That’s why Austin is so quirky. Anything that represents a lot of authority, they are just not about it.” David Fleming, the CEO of the Long Center from 2000 to 2003, described this sentiment as follows: “Many people in town scratched their heads and said, ‘I don’t have any interest in symphony, opera, and ballet. Why is this center being built for them?’” The plan for the Long Center included smaller venues for the more avant-garde groups that were in keeping with Austin’s countercultural bent, but the perception of elitism still proved difficult to combat. Moreover, raising \$90 million looked like an impossible task, and the community began to doubt the Long Center would ever be built.

The trustees and staff pressed ahead. For a while, the board counted on construction bonds pitched to them by Bank One. The bonds would cost \$6 million, but would, Bank One sales people suggested, ensure not only a timely groundbreaking but also provide an arbitrage opportunity. The bonds would bear a low, tax-exempt interest rate, costing the Long Center a mere 4.5 percent. Surely, the Long Center could get a higher rate of return on past and future donations in the stock and bond market. The difference between the investment income and debt payments would boost the Long Center’s budget. The conditions of the pledges received in the past posed an obstacle, however, and before the deal could be completed, the stock and credit markets contracted. The bond financing proved unworkable.

At the time, the failure to secure bond financing was seen by many trustees as an aggravating setback. Yet with the benefit of hindsight, the failure of the bond deal is now regarded by some as a tremendous stroke of luck that freed the Long Center from making large, annual debt payments out of its operational funds. Director of finance Dwayne Cooper joined the Long Center after an accounting career in the private sector once the bond discussions with Bank One were already underway. He thought that the promise of bonds had enabled the costs of the first design to go unexamined. Joe Long said he had always thought the bonds a “harebrained idea.”

Once it became clear that no loans would be forthcoming, the Long Center trustees and staff tried other strategies. In the early part of 2003, they tried to reboot the capital campaign. They hired consultants to train trustees and staff in fundraising and held several special events, one to raffle off a donated Porsche. But an aura of failure had already attached itself to the project. The new campaign was not any more successful than the old.

In Austin in particular, this aura of failure was a kiss of death because the city had seen several high-profile constructions stall. The concrete shell of the building that Intel had abandoned after beginning construction in 2001 took up the entire block a short walk from the downtown offices of the Long Center. Even two-and-a-half years after Intel stopped construction, the naked cement rib cage was still an eyesore in the middle of downtown. A few blocks northeast was the Austin Museum of Art, which by then had tried to build itself a new home twice. Both times, the museum failed to execute on its plan, and both times, Austin philanthropists, large and small, did not receive refunds. These experiences made the Long Center’s potential donors and community stakeholders jittery. Not only was little additional money forthcoming, but some donors refused to make further payments on pledges before ground was broken.

By spring, starting over and formulating a different building program and developing a different design started to look like the only option for ever making the Long Center a reality. This was the undertaking that Steve Davis and Marvin Womack were now asking Joe Long to lead. Long weighed several arguments as he considered the matter on the evening of Davis and Womack’s visit. First, they had convinced him that his assuming the chairmanship was the only way the Long Center would become a reality. His primary concern was the risk that sufficient funds could not be raised and that debt would need to be assumed. “I wasn’t going to be a part of a project that borrowed money. That didn’t interest me at all,” Long said. Another issue was a personal interest in not seeing any more of his philanthropic funds go to waste if the Long Center building effort failed. “Let me just say that it would have saved me a hell of a lot of money if we hadn’t gone forward,” Long said. “It would have saved me \$7 or 8 million.” The Longs’ \$20 million pledge was conditional on progress toward the Long Center completion, and if the project stalled now, only the \$12 million they had already given in cash would be lost. A net of \$15 million had been spent by the Long Center so far on operational costs and fees of architects and other consultants.

The strongest argument for taking the chairmanship and making sure that the project continued was the likelihood that if the Long Center failed, then all cultural capital projects would fail in Austin for the foreseeable future, just as several had already in the recent past. The community faith in the cultural sector's competency needed to be restored. Long was also concerned about seeing other donors' money go to waste. "I wasn't concerned so much about the large contributors, I was concerned about the small ones. Of course, we spent a lot of the money, so it wasn't there to refund. I knew that was going to leave a real dirty taste in a lot of people's mouths." Last but not least, he was confident in his own abilities. "I wasn't accustomed to failing at anything," he said. "I wasn't about to fail at this."

The next day, Joe Long announced he'd accept the chairmanship, with one condition: Steve Davis was to head the owners' representative committee in addition to staying on as treasurer. Davis had just retired from an engineering career and was looking forward to free time, but he agreed. "I thought he'd be able to prevent what happened the first time," said Long. He thought that Davis and the other members of the committee "could watch the architect and the engineers and ride herd over them and keep them within the budget because that had to be done." The owners' representative committee was expanded from being made up of three board volunteers and two staff members to a committee of 12—six trustees, three staff members, and the three directors of the Big Three classical art groups. Jo Anne Christian, one of the project's original Three Js, became a member. (Her fellow Js—Jane Sibley and Jare Smith—continued serving on the board.)

From August through December of 2003, the committee met weekly to work on the new program and design. Many of the negotiations over the new hall's features could not be resolved in the meetings, and discussions continued during phone calls and electronically, through email and instant messages. Cookie Ruiz of Ballet Austin remembers one exhausting, four-hour-long conference call between the consultants and the executive directors. The goal was to cut half a million so that another half a million feature could be added. Many decisions were just as grueling.



The redesign process started with Davis and two other trustees, as well as key Long Center staff like David Fleming, the CEO who resigned in September of 2003, and Dwayne Cooper, the director of finance, asking all of their consultants to fly to Austin for a meeting on June 9, 2003. The Long Center representatives informed them that the design on which the consultants had worked for three years was being abandoned. The Long Center also sought opinions on how to get the project quickly back on track. Could the design and construction process be expedited? What could be built for a construction-cost-only budget of \$33.5 million, which was what the Long Center could afford with the \$47 million it already had?

The main hall that the Long Center could afford to build for \$33.5 million seemed dire. This building program became known by the owners' representative committee as Program Zero. The meeting's minutes described the resulting building: "All of the 2,100 seats would be on one level, which would make it harder to see the stage from the back of the hall. The audience chamber would be sized wide and low. This would produce a chamber with a low volume ratio that would result in poor acoustics, particularly when the symphony performs." The space would have acoustics comparable to a high school auditorium, albeit one of the very best ones. The seats would be made of plastic and not metal or wood. The hall would have a tiny lobby, if any, and an insufficient number of restrooms for all of the patrons. Performance equipment would be limited to lights and rigging, and much of the mechanical equipment needed by production staff of resident and touring companies would have to be stored off-site.

This program satisfied none of the trustees or founding companies. This left the owners' representative committee with two questions:

- 1) What are the minimum requirements for a performing arts center that is worth building?
- 2) Is this building program financially feasible?  
Can the additional money to improve on Program Zero be raised?

The committee proceeded by debating every issue long enough to reach a consensus. At the beginning of the committee's work, Davis and the other members reviewed the Three Js' original vision: to provide an artistic home, primarily for the three founding companies. Over time, the committee developed three guiding principles to refer to as they considered what the new hall should look like: fiscal responsibility, universal support, and essential need. The members also weighed the possibility of postponing each design element until a future, more prosperous time.

On occasion, emotional attachments to design features already promised during the previous process came up in the committee or board meetings. These were the moments when Joe Long's presence and leadership—and the deference he inspired among his peers—were crucial in keeping the design on track. If a non-essential feature was requested, he would challenge the trustee to find the money. "You want that chandelier, you pay for it," Ruiz remembers Long saying. "I'll take your check right now." Since he had recently suffered a hip injury, he had in his possession a walking cane which he sometimes thumped against the floor to emphasize his point. Objections tended to be withdrawn quickly.

The project cost was driven by four decisions that the owners' representative committee needed to reconsider: the number of venues within the Center, the architectural aesthetics, the quality of acoustics in the main hall, and the extent of adaptive reuse. All were considered important to project success, and the committee's goal was to find an optimal compromise between them that would permit the Center to be built within budget.

#### **NUMBER OF VENUES**

The first decision made by the trustees was which of the four venues included in the 2001 SOM design should now be retained. Program Zero—the building program that could be executed using only the \$47 million the Long Center already had—allowed for the construction of the largest main hall only, significantly lower in quality than desired by the founding companies. All of the other venues would require funds beyond the \$47 million. However, the \$47 million included the money from the sale of the naming rights for three of the four venues.

Rationales for the venues' existence varied. The 2,300-seat main theater was largely intended for use by the three founding companies. The naming rights were given to Michael and Susan Dell in exchange for their \$10 million gift. The founding companies would have priority scheduling, thus limiting the hall's potential as a rental for lucrative performances such as Broadway tours. Between the three of them, the Opera, Symphony, and Ballet planned to use the hall for 89 performances a year as well as rehearsals and load-ins. The three classical companies would pay some of the highest rental rates in the nation among nonprofit artistic groups, most of whom benefit from subsidized rents. The Long Center planning documents also anticipated 55 days every year when Dell Hall would be rented for performances and commercial events by outside groups. Additionally, the Long Center planned to program its own presented series of performances in the main hall, with 38 performance days. Dell Hall was the venue that would cost the most and, in the trustees' opinion, had the largest claim to existence. Most of the donors who had given thus far were the trustees of the three classical companies and intended for their money to go towards building them a new home.

The 750-seat Topfer Theater was to be named for the Topfer family in exchange for their \$5 million gift, as well as advocacy of the Long Center to the community of newly wealthy Dell executives. The Topfer Theater was in-

tended to meet the need for a medium-sized performance space in Austin, for both groups that were already looking for such a space and for smaller groups that would not otherwise have an opportunity to grow in the future. No other theaters of Topfer's size existed in Austin. "That's a reason to do it," said Davis. "But it's also a good reason not to do it, because there's usually a good reason there aren't any around. That's a strange theater size for a proscenium theater with a fly tower." The Topfer would be used by Ballet Austin 14 days of the year for its productions of contemporary pieces, for which the group expected smaller audiences than for its classical fare. Youth theater would have a home at the Topfer theater, too. "It was a tar baby," said Ruiz. "If we didn't know where else to put something, we stuck it in there." The Topfer was a place of possibility, a place for artistic growth, where cultural experiences that did not yet have a home in Austin could be offered.

During the 2001 design process, the Topfer was also projected to produce an operating surplus for the Long Center according to the planning documents, which projected the theater would be in use 300 days of the year. Ruiz questioned this assumption. "I remember one particularly snarky call where one of the consultants called and said, 'I hope you know there are 45 groups that are ready to book out the entire calendar.' And I said, 'Really?'" Ruiz asked for the list of prospective bookers, noting that unlike other consultants, she was from Austin. Ruiz found that many of the groups who promised to rent the Topfer were struggling to draw audiences and pay for space. Some used the Ballet Austin building rent-free on the weekends.

The 225-seat Rollins Theater was meant for smaller community performing groups, of which Austin had over 200. The black box format was conducive to intimate, small-scale storytelling. Based on conversations with leaders of the community groups, Long Center staff and consultants estimated this theater would be rented 42 weeks and five days out of an average year by 39 external groups. This was the community theater that the Long Center promised to the city council, and the council expected the rental fees for half the events here to be either waived or significantly subsidized by the Long Center. Ruiz questioned whether this theater was financially sustainable. "I was keenly interested in the business model behind everything. And I clearly understood the cause and effect between my rental rates and what else was happening there," she said. She was afraid that the Rollins Theater would result in operating deficits that her group would be expected to cover with higher rents. "I took a lot of abuse for that," she said.

The owners' representative committee discussed the possibility of finding a partner to build and operate this theater, as well as the option of building it off-site or postponing its construction to a later phase. Joe Long intervened in these discussions early to say that both the promise made to the city and the space for community groups were crucial, worthwhile objectives. The project cost of building the Rollins Theater was \$6.4 million. The theater built for this money would be the best theater of its size in Austin, but far from world-class. The Long Center had a naming gift of \$5 million for this space from Debra and Kevin Rollins, another "Dellionaire" family.

The rehearsal hall was envisioned as a space that would make the Long Center more flexible, permitting more simultaneous performances. The hall would also boost the operating budget of the Long Center by providing rental and catering income from private events. Depending on the desired equipment and acoustics, this hall could be added to Program Zero for \$2-4 million.

#### **ARCHITECTURAL AESTHETICS**

Few vocal proponents of architectural aesthetics remained on the board. One of Davis's first acts as the head of the owners' representative committee was to study how much architecture costs at a typical performing arts center by looking at recently completed projects with the help of the DCI cost consultants. "One of the things we discovered was that in a typical performing arts facility, 'architecture' represented 40 percent of the costs of the project," said Davis. "It's what I'd describe as something without particular function but principally designed to improve the visual appeal of the facility."

The need to be budget-conscious eliminated the possibility of a large architectural statement. However, a Program Zero building would be a rectangular box, and several of the trustees wanted the new locus for artistic performances to look more appealing than a warehouse. The question of whether the Long Center could afford to spend anything at all on aesthetics remained.

#### **DELL HALL ACOUSTICS**

Most of the trustees and members of the owners' representative committee thought that superior acoustics were essential for the main hall where the Symphony, Opera, and Ballet would perform. "We all agreed that for the large hall we wanted the best acoustics we could possibly afford and we were willing to trade off many things in order to realize that," said Steve Davis. Joe Long said he "insisted we have world-class acoustics." "The place we did not

skimp on is the place where art is created," said Ruiz. Acoustics for unamplified musical forms like symphony and opera are considered black magic by people who work in the performing arts. Acoustics are usually designed by highly paid specialized consultants, and even these experts are frequently uncertain as to the exact level of acoustic excellence the building will achieve until they hear the first performance. Despite some unpredictability in the final result, many leaders in performing arts swear by the benefits of an acoustically superior building, where the audience experiences the sound as clear, warm, and enveloping, and musicians perform better because they can hear one another from opposite ends of the stage. One performing arts center director who was a retired singer mentioned that in an acoustically perfect hall he felt as if it were lifting him up as he sang. Experiences like this lead many directors to hope that superior acoustics will boost their halls' competitiveness.

However, some doubt the value of capital expenses on acoustics. David Fleming, the former Long Center CEO, had in the past seven years become one of the skeptics. "I've had battles with acousticians who have argued with me that this [the acoustical level] needs to be an 8 and not a 7. Millions of dollars ride on this decision, and that's hogwash. It's not a question to be asked. It's a question that justifies the existence of acousticians. It's not a question that makes a difference in the operations of a performing arts center."

To some extent, Davis saw Fleming's point. He thought that 90 percent of people probably are incapable of hearing the difference between good and great acoustics. He said many audience members will be persuaded by what others tell them about the quality of a given theater. Nonetheless, professional musicians are likely to fall in the 10 percent who know the difference and perhaps perform better because of it. Thus, Davis was a stalwart supporter of acoustical excellence during the committee discussions.

Program Zero provided for a hall with the acoustics of a high school auditorium, and many trustees did not consider such a space worth building. The acoustician suggested multiple improvements. Going from a noise criteria (NC) rating of 30 to 20 would bring the Long Center in line with many of its peers in how far distracting noises like coughing and candy wrapper crinkling carry within the audience chamber. Going further, from an NC 20 rating to NC 15, would put the Long Center in the 80th to 85th percentile for noise attenuation in performance halls. Concrete shielding for the roof and grout filling for walls would protect the audience chamber from external noises like thunder and traffic. A shaper orchestra shell, though more expensive, would have a significant effect on how far sound would carry and how enveloping it would feel

to both musicians and audience members during symphony performances. Without a shaper shell, JaffeeHolden Acoustics believed that Dell Hall's potential for acoustical quality would be limited to a maximum grade of 8 on a scale from 1 to 10. Tiered seating—like parterre, boxes, and balconies—would help the space feel more immediate by minimizing the distance between stage and farthest row of seats. Tiered seating, just like higher quality wooden seats, would also provide reflective surfaces for sound, thus allowing it to travel further and to feel warmer to a greater portion of the audience. Acoustical banners and moveable forestage pieces would enable some acoustical tuning of the building between events to improve the sound of each individual discipline. All together, these improvements to Program Zero would cost \$16.7 million.

#### **ADAPTIVE REUSE VS. NEW CONSTRUCTION**

Another major decision for the owners' representative committee was whether to reuse some of the existing Palmer Auditorium or to raze this building and start anew. DCI said that an adaptive reuse would cost \$1.4 million less than new construction, but another source estimated that the cost of reuse could exceed the cost of new construction by \$2.5 million. This kind of uncertainty about costs is endemic to adaptive use projects, since the exact condition of the existing building is never completely certain. Both the schedule and the cost of new construction can be more reliably predicted.

Another argument for complete demolition of the Palmer was that the master plan of the site would then have more flexibility for future additions of venues and other spaces. The backstage spaces would have a more efficient layout in a new construction. A deeper stage to accommodate larger sets would also be possible.

On the other hand, the adaptive reuse option also presented several advantages. First, Austin's environmentally conscious population was likely to see "recycling" a building in a positive light. Everyone involved with the fundraising effort agreed. "We had a shot at telling a rejuvenated story," said David Fleming. "The worst thing would be to tell the public, 'We really failed on the first go-around. Everything's trashed, we have to start from scratch.' We'd rather be saying, 'You know what, we want to be true to our values, our core values, from the artistic standpoint. And we have to do this on a more economical basis and in keeping with a recycling ethic that is valuable to us.'" Second, the reuse of the Palmer would result in a larger building, with a covered "porch" about 30,000 square feet in size where the audience could go on a nice day to enjoy a view of the lake and downtown Austin. Additionally, the reused building would contain another eight thousand square feet in reserved, unfinished space that could be easily renovated into classrooms or office space later. These additional spaces were valued by the owners' representative committee at about \$1.7 million. Last but not least, working with the existing structure could potentially result in a more aesthetically pleasing building for the same price if existing elements were imaginatively used.

Building a new performing arts center requires making compromises. Abundance of funds can obviate these compromises and require fewer difficult decisions about trade-offs. In the case of the Long Center for the Performing Arts, however, financial restriction and the necessity of concessions factored in the project's eventual success. They required the board to achieve clarity about the new organization's priorities. The mistakes of the first design made the trustees more knowledgeable and capable of undertaking the second. Yet, the protracted, iterative process required absolute doggedness. Few of the project's leaders had anticipated the scope of the responsibilities they eventually accepted. Many paid a large personal cost—Cliff Redd, for example, attributes his recent heart attack to the stress.

By the end of 2003, the Long Center owners' representative committee produced a building program that would cost \$50 million to build and \$10 million to design. An additional \$17 million would be needed for the endowment, staff salaries, consultants, and other soft costs. The Long Center still had \$12 million remaining in cash and \$35 million in outstanding pledges, most of which would need to be re-earned. The board set out to raise an additional \$30 million for a total of \$77 million. Donors had to be convinced that the new plan was feasible and right for Austin.

Only two venues were included in the final building program: Dell Hall and Rollins Theater. The medium-sized theater that was supposed to be named after the Topfer family was omitted. The Long Center's relationship with these major Austin donors was difficult to rebuild.

Other features of the building program recommended by Davis and the committee included the decision to reuse parts of the Palmer; inclusion of many, though not all, of the acoustical improvements recommended by Jaffee-Holden Acoustics; and some enhancements of the lobby finishes. Joe Long added \$2 million to his gift to pay for the latter, for a total gift of \$22 million. Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill were not rehired. The new design was largely completed by Zeidler Partnership Architects and Austin's TeamHaas, which was bought by Nelsen Architects during the construction.

Joe Long hand-picked a new executive director, Cliff Redd, to replace David Fleming, who had resigned in 2003 so that he could return to his core specialization of running existing performing arts centers. Redd proved to be an effective spokesman during the capital campaign. Together, Long and Redd hosted dinners at Long's home, where prospective donors were invited for presentations. Long addressed allegations of wastefulness during the first design campaign by saying that the \$12 million spent on the

first, abandoned design was covered by his and his wife's gift. A native Austinite, Redd was finely attuned to local attitudes and chose to stress civic pride and the building's environmentally friendly adaptive reuse during his pitches. Overall, \$82 million was raised. The \$5 million surplus was used by Redd for a reserve fund to cover future deficits and to renovate some of the unfinished empty space that resulted from the Palmer's reuse, into on-site administrative offices. Otherwise, he and most of his staff would have had to commute to the building.

Many of the project's leaders are satisfied with the Center's new design. Cookie Ruiz calls it "a monument to what the city has created in a post-9/11 world," noting that the lavish SOM plan would have felt out of step with cultural changes. Joe Long felt the 2003 crisis and the need to start over improved the project. "In retrospect, that [cutting the mid-size theater and the rehearsal hall] was a wise thing to have done because I'm not sure the city could have supported four venues." Overall, he is happy with the result. "I never go over there that I don't have three or four people that I don't know tell me how grateful they are that we got this done and built the Center. I get people stopping me on Congress Avenue."

Yet some parts of the old design are still missed. Ruiz said on opening night she dreamt about the sumptuous lobby designed by SOM. Others wonder whether some of the design elements would have permitted the Long Center to be more financially sustainable. Dwayne Cooper wishes he had the catering kitchen included in the original plan for the rehearsal hall. He thinks its availability would have increased the Long Center's rental income from private events. The "porch" the Long Center inherited from Palmer Auditorium as the result of the adaptive reuse has the best view of the Austin skyline in the city, and Cooper thinks the space would be a desirable location to host dinners. Davis notes that the committee looked several times at models of capital costs and operating revenues for the kitchen during planning, but that the projections never looked attractive.

The Long Center opened in March of 2008, just as the worst economic recession since the Great Depression was beginning. Attendance and revenues for the Long Center, as well as for the founding companies, have been lower than expected. For its first fiscal year, the Long Center had an operating income of \$1.6 million, expenses of \$3.8 million, and gift income of \$1.6 million. The Long Center chose not to draw on the endowment due to market conditions. (The endowment is currently \$6 million, with \$4 million in pledges still outstanding.) Thus, the Long Center finished the year with a deficit of \$600,000, which was offset by rent deposits and sales of tickets for future events in

the amount of \$700,000. For now, the question of the long-term financial sustainability of Austin's new performing arts center continues to keep the leaders of the Long Center up at night.

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