

Making a scene

Down on Cleveland's waterfront, a new performance shell has helped revive the Flats entertainment complex

By Sally J. Peterson

Only two years old, the Scene Pavilion in Cleveland already has hosted such entertainment greats as B.B. King, Aretha Franklin, Maria Carey, and Earth, Wind, and Fire in its new tensile-membrane, canopy-roofed amphitheater. The summer of 2002 marked the grand re-opening of the all new pavilion in Cleveland's Flats entertainment complex. Owner Jacobs Investments wanted to improve on an existing site. The stage had been open since 1987, but Jacobs shut it down for a complete facelift just before the 2002 season, and put in \$5 million worth of renovations in just a few months.

A pavilion plan

The main feature of Scene Pavilion is its custom-designed, tension-fabric structure. Instructions from the owner to the architects and engineers were daunting: build something that's dynamic, that plays well with light, and that will hold up through the snows and winds of many a Cleveland winter.

Local architects Richard L. Bowen & Associates Inc. set to work with the concept phase. "The Flats used to be an old industrial area with rivers and historic bridges," Bowen said, "so we took our inspiration from the free forms of the surrounding rivers and bridges." The exterior of the structure is almost a reflection of the reversed curves of the bridges, and at the same time it calls to mind the nautical feel of sailboats on the lake. "On the inside, we wanted the structure to be it very comfortable, very community oriented, yet very intimate," Bowen said. "What's more intimate than huddling under an umbrella—or several umbrellas—with a friend?"

Bowen & Associates came up with six different concepts to present to the owners. Jacobs Investments chose the one they liked, Bowen made adjustments to fit the client's budget, and the project got underway in the fall of 2001.

Enter Geiger Engineers, which immediately honed in on the complexities of the site, located on the banks of the Cuyahoga River and adjacent to the shores of Lake Erie. "This was an extremely tight site in terms of scope of the



A comfortable structure: "What's more intimate than huddling under an umbrella with a friend?"





The pavilion design was inspired by the free forms of surrounding rivers and bridges.

structure, which was very tall,” said David Campbell, principal & CEO of Geiger Engineers and engineer of record on the project. “We knew we’d have to place a lot of struts and guys in a limited space.”

Ready, set, build

“We started by taking the old structure down to the ground,” said Bowen. “We cleared the site of almost everything but some ticket houses and concessions stands.”

“It’s a very cool sort of place out there along The Flats,” Campbell noted. “A kind of natural enclosure that makes it very special and also very, very difficult to work in.” The amphitheater sits on river mud, which was another complication, as all the foundations had to be deep. Additionally, the site is surrounded by what Campbell called “recent industrial archeology,” including a historic metal bridge that’s no longer in use, a viaduct that used to be part of a bridge, and an old powerhouse that’s also been converted into an entertainment venue. “The space created by these industrial artifacts was a real challenge,” Campbell said.

“We had to cram on a certain number of seats, restrooms, etc., and the clients wanted no columns blocking views,” Bowen noted. “It was an unbelievably constrained space to begin with, and had a lot of utility easements going through it, too—things like a 2.75m main in a 3.66m easement. It was crazy.”



Campbell agreed with that assessment. “We did the entire project from design to completion in about eight months. It was a bit nutty.”

But it was worth it, both say. The Scene Pavilion now sports an almost complete makeover. The stage and grandstands have been rebuilt to better accommodate both artists and audiences, while the tensile roof assures shelter during summer showers. Physical improvements in addition to the roof include a larger stage house, new grandstands, addition of both sky boxes and box suites, and state-of-the-art lighting systems.

Fabric foibles

Seaman Corp. was chosen to supply the translucent white PVC fabric. Its Shelter-Rite Style 9034 DC 184 was chosen for strength, flexibility, and availability. “We needed a fabric that was translucent enough so that color glows through the sails. No matter where you are, on the river or on the bluff, it makes you want to go down to the pavilion and see what’s going on,” Cleveland resident Bowen said. “You can see through the whole back of the stage—downtown Cleveland, passing barges, fireworks off site. There’s a wonderful open feeling to the space, but it’s closed in enough so that audiences don’t get rained on.”



The 33,240 sq. m pavilion has a seating capacity exceeding 4,500 and is used for events such as corporate meetings, music premiers and graduations.



"We used more than 6,660 sq. m of fabric on this project," architect Bowen said. "We could have done it with less fabric, but it wouldn't have been as exciting." A Bright White Tedlar® top finish made the fabric virtually self-cleaning and resistant to UV rays.

The tensioned roof fabricated by FabriTec Structures, Bowen said, features a primary sail and two overlaps. "The double-layered canopy is an architectural element that has a unique look but made the erection process very challenging," Campbell added, noting, "The upper and lower canopies want to behave somewhat differently, and that added to the difficulty of the installation, as well."

Situated as it is between river and lake, the pavilion required that any installation had to attach the roof fabric to support poles before lifting the poles into place. "The fabric is quite strong and needs to be, both for snow and for wind, due to the location," Campbell said. "Choice of fabric was a big issue for everybody—architect, engineer, and owners. It looks good, and it's worked well."

Lighting was another of the unique requirements of this rebuild. The idea was to make sure that the beauty of those light shows projected through the structure out into the surrounding community, which

was yet another reason for choosing the Shelter-Rite fabric.

"Fabric translucency was important, because the client wanted it to serve a dual purpose," said Kim Seaman of Seaman Corp. "The fabric was to transmit sunlight through the canopy 'sails' during daylight hours, and to transmit light shows outward from within the venue at night. In addition, the reflective white surfaces make it easy to bounce bright lights off the fabric. And finally, the pitch of the canopies and softness of the fabric allow for absorption of sound."

Behind the scene

The pavilion, formerly called Nautica, was renamed Scene Pavilion in April 2003. The new name pairs Cleveland's leading entertainment publication, Scene Magazine, with national concert promoter House of Blues Concerts Inc., which handles all talent buying and sponsorship services for the pavilion owned by Jacobs Investments.

"Scene has been covering entertainment in Cleveland for more than 30 years, and every week we put 100,000 copies on the street," said Scene Magazine publisher Ramon Larkin. "So the new Scene Pavilion is a natural fit for both of us."

The Scene Pavilion now hosts corporate meetings, sales presentations, charity functions, movie premieres, award ceremonies, graduations, and private parties. The 33,240 sq. m facility has an overall seating capacity of more than 4,500. That capacity can be rented in its entirety, or include just the floor seating area (approximately 90 sq. m), or just the stage (approximately 24m by 12m), or any combination necessary to accommodate a client's needs. This flexibility allows seating to be arranged in a variety of patterns from theater-style or classroom, from cabaret to banquet.

Sally J. Peterson frequently writes about design for Fabric Architecture.

Project data

Client: Jacobs Investments

Architect: Richard L. Bowen & Assoc.

Engineer: Geiger Engineers

Fabricator: FabriTec Structures

Fabric: Shelter Rite 9034 DC 184, by Seaman Corp.

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