

MCALLEN PERFORMING ARTS CENTER: BUILT FOR THE FUTURE

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It was a long, hard road to build the McAllen Performing Arts Center (MPAC), but since its grand opening in November 2016, this striking venue has cemented itself as a gathering place and focal point for the community, as well as the premier entertainment facility and cultural arts hub in South Texas.

"We have a venue that is one-of-a-kind in the whole state of Texas. It's symbolic that the Rio Grande Valley has arrived both in population and commerce and we are the entry point for both Mexico and the United States," McAllen Mayor Jim Darling said. "This beautiful facility is going to bring unforgettable experiences for the entire family."

The ultramodern and exquisitely designed building was built to replace the plain, boxy McAllen Civic Center, stuck in its 1960s modular style and limited functionality.

The history of the MPAC and the Convention Center District, where the facility is located, kicked off around 1977 when city leaders began to examine the future of the outdated McAllen Civic Center.

"City leaders realized we had outgrown the McAllen Civic Center and started looking for other locations. They wanted something bigger that could handle more elaborate events,"



said Omar Rodriguez, director of McAllen's Convention Center Facilities.

City commissioners opted to purchase a vacant 40-acre tract of ranch land on the outskirts of the city, eyeing it for the future venue.

"The current site was chosen because it was the first large tract immediately available," Mayor Darling said.

After years of intricate research, a series of studies and public debate, the City moved ahead with the arduous process to replace the Civic Center with a state-of-the-art venue.

The issue was presented as a referendum to the citizens of McAllen. In 2002, voters approved building a new Civic Center, as well as an Auditorium Complex, relocating both to the newly selected location.

The construction brought the conventions, expos, weddings and other such events, and lured citizens and visitors with restaurants, retail shops, and hotels. Commercial development exploded, transforming the once empty lot – now referred to as the Convention Center Campus – to a modern, upscale entertainment complex, with five signature hotels featuring over 500 hotel rooms; major restaurant chains; dozens of retail shops; and a park featuring a pond for boating and outdoor community events.

"Our McAllen Convention Center takes care of the civic and meeting events. It is a great large space for banquets, conventions, and other events, and the McAllen Performing Arts Center brings in shows that have never been possible before in South Texas," continued Rodriguez.

However, identifying the funding sources for the MPAC construction involved a creative and lengthy process to be able to cover the nearly \$45 million eventual price tag. A two-percent venue tax charged to hotel occupancy was authorized by voters in 2011, as well as being partly financed by a \$15 million bond package approved by voters in November 2013. Construction on the 1,828-seat \$44.9 million facility began July 24, 2014.

"It is incredible that in 1960, our city forefathers built an 1800-seat theater for a population of maybe 30,000. That was unheard of, but the region filled it with over 50 years of experiences," Rodriguez said. "When our consultants came in to examine the possibilities for the McAllen Performing Arts Center, they said let's keep it the same so our theater is extremely large, but it provides a more intimate experience."

ERO Architects of McAllen designed the 93,000 square-foot facility that features state-of-the-art equipment in acoustics, audio, and lighting. The new venue also includes stage support that offers unobstructed views, perfect sound with



a magical house experience, and stage presentation. The lobby features a grand wooden staircase. The colors and textures of the theater interior draws heavily from the Rio Grande River as it winds its way towards the Gulf of Mexico.

The rich, vibrant colors found in the seating materials and house curtain represent McAllen *bougainvilleas*. The mesquite millwork throughout the towering facility pays homage to mesquite trees throughout McAllen, as well as "pecky pecan," a nod to the Texas state tree. There are restrooms at each of the four levels and elevators to the upper balconies. Quite impressive is the stage which is more than eight stories tall.

"The McAllen Performing Arts Center, while a very technically-advanced building, is also an extremely warm and inviting one," said City Manager Roel "Roy" Rodriguez. "There were challenges in constructing the facility to include the components required of a state-of-the-art performing arts venue to make them seem simply like design elements, rather than obvious industrial features. It is easily one of the most complicated, yet extraordinarily amazing projects I have ever been involved in."

The McAllen Civic Center was demolished in October of 2016. One month later, the MPAC officially opened with a diverse line-up of shows including Annie, the Russian Ballet, Valley Symphony Orchestra, and the coup that brought Mayor Darling to the stage: world-renowned crooner Tony



Civic Center would be outgrown, but the McAllen Performing Arts Center now allows the community to see these shows that they might never see," Rodriguez said. "It doesn't replace the Broadway experience, it brings the Broadway experience to McAllen."

Perhaps Mayor Darling put it best: "People do not expect a facility like this to be in McAllen. But I tell them, this is exactly McAllen. We have arrived." ★



Bennett. As he was presented with a Key to the City, Bennett looked around and simply stated, "They don't build them like this anymore. This is a beautiful theater."

"It really has come full circle. Our original theater was a one-floor auditorium. We now have two balconies, a parterre, and an unmatched audience experience," Rodriguez added. "You feel like you're part of the event."

The auditorium is equipped with adjustable acoustics to accommodate popular music to symphonic orchestra; a robust acoustical shell with a celestial ceiling; and four levels of seating, including 550 seats in the orchestra level, 500 seats in the parterre level, 400 seats in the first balcony level, and 350 seats in the upper balcony, meeting Americans with Disabilities Act standards.

"I predict that this facility, as beautiful and majestic as it is, will win awards in the industry," Rodriguez said.

The stage house can fully accommodate the intricate sets of traveling Broadway shows.

"What the MPAC does for the region is attract entertainment and traveling tours for our local and international visitors. Shows touring through San Antonio and Houston can now come and perform here. We are equipped to handle some of the biggest shows in the nation like *Wicked*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and *Lion King*," Rodriguez added.

The signature facility is anticipated to draw in more than 200 first class performances a year, featuring music concert tours, comedy acts, symphonic orchestra and band concerts, as well as popular family shows.

"Our city leaders had the vision to see that the McAllen

