

Sharing the dance floor

Local companies counted on having NTC Promenade's Luce Auditorium as a focal point, but now may have to split time in classic building

By Janice Steinberg

Two years after opening at the former Naval Training Center on Point Loma, Dance Place San Diego is more than just a site for local classes and rehearsals. The 11-studio building at NTC Promenade has become the face of dance in San Diego to artists from around the world.

German choreographer Pina Bausch came to Dance Place to rehearse her lecture-demonstration for the Kyoto Laureate Symposium last spring. Touring Cirque du Soleil artists took classes and raved about the light-filled, airy space at San Diego Ballet, which is one of three resident companies, along with Jean Isaacs San Diego Dance Theater and Malashock Dance.



Jean Isaacs, artistic director of San Diego Dance Theater, and Alan Ziter, executive director of the NTC Foundation, at Luce Auditorium. A just-released study questions whether dance can support a potentially refurbished Luce at NTC Promenade. (Eduardo Contreras / Union-Tribune)

Members of London's Random Dance are teaching a master class in Isaacs' studio next Sunday. And after visiting the building, Andrea Snyder, the executive director of Dance/USA, is in talks with Dance Place about holding a national conference there.

"Very few collaboratively designed dance centers exist in other cities," says Snyder, who's based in Washington, D.C. "In this economic climate, working together, sharing space and resources, and creating a destination that aligns with surrounding facilities is a win-win situation."

Dance Place's growing visibility is a success story for the NTC Foundation, which made the dance building one of its first six renovations (out of 26) at NTC Promenade, the 28-acre district at the former Navy facility dedicated to the arts, culture, science and technology.



Members of the San Diego Ballet rehearse in the studios at NTC's Dance Place. The company would be the prime user of a refurbished Luce. (Eduardo Contreras / Union-Tribune)

The \$4.8 million, 23,000 square-foot building is also succeeding financially, with the resident companies joined by some 50 groups renting studio space by the hour.

The elephant in the room is Luce Auditorium. The auditorium, adjacent to Dance Place, is indeed a behemoth, a cavernous 20,000-square-foot structure built in 1941, standing smack in the deafening Lindbergh Field flight path, and treasured as a historic site in which Bob Hope entertained World War II troops.

The Luce is also a potential gem, a palace of Spanish Revival architecture intended in the original vision for Dance Place to be reborn as the city's first performance venue custom-designed for dance. By the time the dance building opened, however, financial considerations had led the NTC Foundation, the nonprofit entity created by the city to administer NTC Promenade, to entertain an offer from a group that wanted to use the Luce for a commercial pirate-themed dinner theater.

Community members opposed the pirate-themed theater and raised \$65,000 for a feasibility study of what it would take to make the Luce a cultural arts facility. The NTC Foundation

commissioned Tom Hall to conduct the study; a principal in the Del Mar consulting firm Albert Hall & Associates, Hall is also the former managing director of the Old Globe Theatre.

Hall completed the feasibility study in June, and Alan Ziter, executive director of the NTC Foundation, planned to present it to the public last fall. Instead, the study got backlogged behind other NTC Foundation projects and has had not been made public – until now.

Multiple possibilities

In the study, developed in conjunction with Bay Area theater consultants Landry & Bogan, Hall presents five concepts for the building. Among the scenarios are a fixed-seat, 500-seat theater; and a multi-use facility with a primary space, which could be configured as a 485-seat theater, a cabaret-style venue, or a meeting room, and secondary space that could house one or two additional smaller theaters.

Because of the auditorium's historic value, the plan is to construct a building within a building, preserving the integrity of the outer shell. Projected renovation costs are relatively low, from \$8.5 million for the multi-use scenario to \$10.1 million for the more traditional theater.

That's the good news for the dance companies. However, Hall also looked at financial sustainability, and he didn't find enough potential use to recommend making Luce a venue devoted exclusively to dance.

Based on surveying some two-dozen arts organizations, he estimated that the Dance Place companies would be able to use the Luce no more than half the year. That led him to ask whether any other groups might also have a half-year need. The most likely candidates were the dozen or so film festivals that take place here.

“We have a burgeoning film community with a lot of diversity and really great stuff going on,” Hall says. “But it's sort of hit a ceiling in terms of its growth because it tends to be spread out all over the city and disparate in its approach and possibilities.”

Ziter – with the help of Andy Friedenberg, director of the Cinema Society of San Diego – convened a meeting in November for representatives of the film festivals, and the idea of using Luce provoked mixed reactions.

Lee Ann Kim, executive director of the San Diego Asian Film Foundation, is dubious about what she sees as the NTC Foundation's "dream arrangement," that the film festivals would collectively operate the Luce and move their offices to the NTC Promenade.

"The majority (of festivals) don't even have a real office, they operate out of someone's home or garage," Kim says. "Honestly, I told them I don't think it's possible."

On the plus side, using the Luce as a cinema center would raise visibility and create opportunities for cross-promotion, says Ethan van Thillo, executive director of the San Diego Media Arts Center and founder of the San Diego Latino Film Festival. There's also the benefit of permanence, not losing a venue because a theater chain has been sold or has decided to stop hosting a festival.

For Friedenberg, "I love the idea of everyone being under one roof – and with a vision of building a state-of-the-art, first-class cinema facility."

A state-of-the-art cinema facility is unlikely, however, to be an ideal venue for dance. For instance, Friedenberg would like stadium seating, and he figures it would be easier to share space with dance than with live theater because "with theater, you need dressing rooms, rehearsal space, a large proscenium. I don't know that you need that in dance."

In fact, dancers do need such things, and trying to broker a marriage between dance and cinema may be a fiasco. For Javier Velasco, the co-director of San Diego Ballet, "Too often, I've been in buildings designed to get as many different kinds of use as possible, and they end up not serving anything excellently."

At a standstill

Whether a dance-cinema partnership could work is clearly a key question to explore in the next phase of planning for the Luce.

Another issue, before abandoning the idea of dedicating the building to dance, is the need to involve a broader swath of the dance community. Hall's study, which was a preliminary assessment, surveyed only the Dance Place residents, two presenters and one other major company, City Ballet of San Diego. Missing from the list were California Ballet, Eveoke Dance Theatre, Culture Shock and the choreographers based at the universities.

For now, the process is at a standstill, with the feasibility study not yet submitted for review by the National Park Service and the State Office of Historic Preservation – which was supposed to happen early last fall.

The delay has occurred because of too many other projects in the pipeline, Ziter says. Of the 26 buildings at NTC Promenade, the foundation has so far renovated and opened six. A seventh, in a former barracks, is set to open in May; it's the first of four buildings for the Promenade's Art & Design Center, geared toward studios and galleries and related retail locations. And another 15 buildings are nearing the construction stage.

"Our goal is to get more buildings open that are rent-producing," Ziter says. "That gives us the opportunity to focus exclusively on any fundraising to go toward projects or special initiatives like Luce Auditorium, which is so unique."

Ironically, dance has turned out to be rent-producing. Dance Place is one of NTC Promenade's most financially successful projects, Ziter says. The building is supporting itself, covering its \$60,000 operating cost (in 2008) and the interest on its construction debt. Income sources are rent paid by tenants – the dance companies, the San Diego Actors Alliance, a media coaching company and a wellness studio – and hourly rentals of the six studios managed by the NTC Foundation.

And the dance companies argue that given Dance Place's success, moving Luce higher on the priority list could actually provide financial benefits to NTC Promenade and Liberty Station's restaurants and shops, making the area come alive at night.

In John Malashock's view, Luce is critical to the concept he envisioned when he spearheaded the drive to create Dance Place several years ago.

“There is no building more important to NTC Promenade than Luce Auditorium,” he said recently. “It will be a focal point of activity, in many ways the most prominent structure there. And it will make it truly a performing arts complex.”

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