

# High five

A 'cultural renaissance' in Canada has led to Aercoustics' involvement in five major projects

**Right: The Queen Elizabeth Theatre in Vancouver**

**Below: The Esplanade Arts and Heritage Centre in Medicine Hat, Alberta**

A acoustic consultancy firm Aercoustics Engineering, based in Toronto, Canada, says it is seeing a cultural renaissance in its home country – which has led to its involvement in five major projects in the region.

“In the 1990s, Canada paid down government deficits faster than any other country in the G7. That money had to come from somewhere and cultural infrastructure was often the victim. Thus, at the turn of the millennium there was a lot of pent-up demand for new venues, leading to the country’s so-called cultural renaissance. In western Canada, the demand was even higher, spurred on by Vancouver’s upcoming 2010 winter Olympics,” explains acoustician John O’Keefe, a principal at Aercoustics.

One of the projects that Aercoustics has been involved in is the Esplanade Arts and Heritage Centre in Medicine Hat, Alberta, which includes, among other things, a 700-seat multipurpose auditorium. It opened in October 2005 and has been hailed by many for its good acoustics – including tenor Ben Hepner, who said, “Acoustically, it’s one of the best places to perform in Canada.” The building was designed

by Diamond & Schmitt Architects, with Fisher Dachs Associates acting as the theatre consultants and Engineering Harmonics in charge of the sound system and A/V design. Acoustic technology developed during the project garnered Aercoustics the coveted Schreyer Award.

Other western Canadian work on Aercoustics’ plate includes Simon Fraser University’s School for the Contemporary Arts, opening in January 2010, and the recently opened Vancouver East Cultural Centre (both projects involving architect Thom Weeks and his team at Proscenium Architecture + Interiors), as well as a new recital hall and teaching space for the Vancouver Symphony. “We certainly seem to have hit our stride!” says O’Keefe.

The most challenging building for O’Keefe however was the renovation of Vancouver’s Queen Elizabeth Theatre. Built in 1959 with an addition in 1962, it features the 2,929-seat main auditorium and 668-seat Playhouse Theatre. Working again with Proscenium Architecture + Interiors, O’Keefe considers it “our masterpiece”. He’s speaking in the sense of the old European guilds – to become a master craftsman, an apprentice would have to produce a piece of work that demonstrated everything they had learned. “In hindsight, it’s as if Thom and I have spent our whole careers getting ready for this one piece of work. Everything we know – and more – is in that room,” says O’Keefe.

The first step was to stop noise transmission between the two buildings. “We literally cut the building in two,” says O’Keefe. Completed in 2006, this was the first of four construction phases, all carried out during the summer when the theatres were dark.

O’Keefe says the biggest challenge came from Rae Ackerman, director of Vancouver Civic Theatres. “Rae kept reminding us that our fees were directly related to seat count. The more seats we lost, the less we got paid! 2,000 seats is often thought to be the maximum for good acoustics. That’s a lot less than the 2,900 that Ackerman wanted,” says O’Keefe. “However, there are rooms with more



Tim Griffith

than 2,000 seats that still have good acoustics – the Berliner Philharmonie in Germany and the Christchurch Town Hall in New Zealand are two that we took a lot of lessons from, although by the time we finished there was more of Christchurch in the hall than Berlin.” By that, O’Keefe means the large reflectors that now hang above the audience. These redirect sound to arrive at the audience from the sides sooner than it otherwise would. These were installed in the summers of 2007 and 2008 and have created a more intimate sound. “That’s pretty hard to do in a 2,900-seat room,” says O’Keefe, who also notes that Vancouver Opera, one of the venue’s principal tenants, is also happy with what they’ve heard so far, praising the improved warmth of the sound. The construction concluded this autumn with work on the lobby and final touches inside the auditorium. ■

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Proscenium Architecture + Interiors Inc



Queen Elizabeth Theatre Renovation, Vancouver | Four Season’s Centre, Toronto | Victoria Hall, Petrolia | Vancouver East Cultural Centre Renovation | Young Centre (Soulpepper Theatre), Toronto | P.C. Ho Auditorium, Toronto | The Orpheum Renovation, Vancouver Princess of Wales Theatre, Toronto | Orpheum Tower Recital Hall and Music School, Vancouver | Dofasco Centre for the Arts, Hamilton Canon Theatre, Toronto | Ron Maslin Theatre, Ottawa | Evergreen Cultural Centre, Coquitlam | Bell Light Box, Toronto International Film Festival | Ruth Seaton James Theatre, Bermuda | University Centre, Regina | Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Toronto | CanWest Global Theatre, Winnipeg Rawlinson Centre for Arts, Prince Albert | Isabel Bader Theatre, Toronto | Rimex Auditorium, Riyadh | T. Gil Bunch Theatre, Brentwood College | National Arts Centre Renovations, Ottawa | Gravenhurst Opera House | National Archive Auditorium, Ottawa | Hummingbird Centre, Toronto | Prince Salman Auditorium, Riyadh | Showplace Theatre, Peterborough | York Woods Theatre, North York | Canadian War Museum, Ottawa | Royal Conservatory of Music, Toronto | Davenport Hall, London Ont.