



Maxwell MacKenzie Photography



Above: Exterior (left) and interior (right) of the F. Scott Fitzgerald Theatre lobby, by Schick Goldstein Architects. Opposite, clockwise from top left: the lobby, rear entrance, and main stage of the BlackRock Center for the Arts, by Bowie Gridley Architects.

Public Places, Public Spaces:

Performance Spaces

by Michael Tardif

To borrow a phrase from the title of a popular tune written by Rodgers and Hammerstein for Act I of their Broadway musical *Carousel*, theaters are bustin' out all over. The number of new community theatres that have opened in the metropolitan area has some theater leaders concerned that the market may be getting oversaturated. But if enticing architecture has a role in filling these houses, the future of the theatre in DC and its suburbs, particularly in Montgomery County, Maryland, is very bright.

In Rockville, the **F. Scott Fitzgerald Theatre**, located on the grounds of Rockville's Civic Center Park, continues to look as fresh and new today as it did following its 1996 \$483,000 renovation. Originally designed by **W. Kent Cooper, FAIA**, of Georgetown and completed in 1960 at a cost of \$240,000, the 1996 addition by **Schick Goldstein Architects, PC**, of Dupont Circle, more than doubled the size of the lobby, transforming it into an entertainment venue in its own right. (Theater boards and general managers today can only ponder wistfully these modest construction and renovation costs.) The lobby is now large enough to comfortably hold a standing, mingling crowd of theater patrons even when the house, which seats 500, is sold out.

The design of the lobby is a single, simple design gesture. The ceiling rises in a fan of exposed timber trusses

from the existing lobby up to and beyond a large wall of pale green plate glass, and is supported by a row of concrete and exposed timber columns that branch out to support the roof beams, beautifully echoing the dense stand of mature trees that surround the building. From the outside, the building sparkles by day, reflecting the pattern of nearby trees as they wave in the breeze, and completely dissolving the visual boundary between inside and outside. By night, it glows like a lantern. From the inside, day and night, the space is a platform, a stage, for the park-like setting that spreads before it. The intimate theatre, which has excellent sight lines and acoustics, is treasured by Rockville's five city-sponsored groups and groups such as the National Chamber Orchestra that call other places home.

A little further north, in Germantown, **Bowie Gridley Architects** of Georgetown recently completed the new **BlackRock Center for the Arts**, the centerpiece of the new Germantown Town Center. The center features state-of-the-art visual and performing arts facilities and will serve as a catalyst for cultural arts programs throughout the area. Reflecting the rural heritage of the site, the exterior forms are conceived as a village of barn-like forms and motifs assembled in the additive fashion of farm structures. But any association with rustic origins



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Exhibit Gallery, BlackRock Center for the Arts.

ends at the front door, which opens into a bright, modern, colorful, two-story lobby complete with an earth-cast black stone monolith for which the Center is named. Another rough stone column supports the canopy roof of one of the entrances. A total of five earth-cast monoliths can be found throughout the building, the result of a collaborative effort between the architect and noted public artist **Thomas Sayre** of **Cleanscapes**. Rather than simply “placing” art in the lobby to satisfy the public art requirement, the architect/artist collaboration integrates the art into the fabric of the building.

The BlackRock lobby is on axis with and provides views of Sugarloaf Mountain, the most dominant geographic feature in the area. A gracefully curving stair leads to north-facing art studios and administrative offices on the mezzanine level. A terrazzo floor of vibrant color and organic forms is an abstract representation of the history of the region, symbolic of the transition from indigenous hunter-gatherer societies to grain cultivators and processors to the current industrial and post-industrial age. The completed first phase includes a fixed-seat proscenium theater, a black box studio theatre, a dance studio, an exhibit gallery, a scene production shop, a green room, a box office, art studios, and administrative offices. A future second phase will add 20,000 square feet that will include a 500-seat theatre and additional support spaces.

Closer to DC, the **Round House Theater** settled into new, \$7 million quarters in downtown Bethesda in 2002. The building is the result of an auspicious arrangement between Montgomery County and Chevy Chase Bank, which recently built a new





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headquarters building next door, at the corner of Wisconsin Avenue and East West Highway. In exchange for being permitted to build an office building of greater density, the bank agreed to pay the full cost of construction for the theatre, and to build a small urban park between the tower and the street.

The building was designed, including the interiors, by **Brennan Beer Gorman/Brennan Beer Gorman Monk Interiors (BBG-BBGM)**. The theatre typically seats 360 people on two levels, though up to 400 can be seated depending on the configuration for a given production. A shallow proscenium apron stage shortens the distance between the actors and the audience. The color palette of the theatre is womb-like, with soft olive walls and plum-colored seats, further enhancing the intimacy of the setting. The lobby, by contrast, is bright and sunny, with a two-story wall of glass and painted walls of cherry and butterscotch that glow during evening intermissions. Round House has since been joined in its Bethesda neighborhood by a 10-screen art-house Landmark Theatre and Imagination Stage, a children's theatre and performing arts school, both just a few blocks away. 🏡



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Left and above: the light-filled lobby and the main stage of the Round House Theatre.



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The digital design visualization (above) and an actual photograph of the completed building are nearly indistinguishable.