

Solange De Santis

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The Rose Theatre rejuvenates a Canadian city

By Solange De Santis

On Nov. 13, when the mayor of Brampton, Ontario, a city of some 400,000 people located about 25 miles northwest of Toronto, won reelection, she held a news conference and made an unusual statement.

Susan Fennell was coasting to a third term in office and she named her proudest accomplishment so far. She didn't cite land development or transit, roads or sanitation. She said she was proudest of building a theater.

The C\$55 million (US\$48 million) Rose Theatre Brampton rises on an oddly-shaped parcel of land tucked behind some old buildings just off Brampton's historic intersection, Main and Queen. It's so new (opening night was Sept. 29) that some finishing touches were still being applied in mid-November, but Fennell exuberantly declared on election night that "the downtown is rejuvenated."

The 64,000-square-foot building, which includes an 880-seat main theater and a 160-seat studio space, represents a big step for Brampton, a city with a beguiling history. Incorporated in 1853, Brampton's nickname is the "flower town," since for decades its greenhouses supplied cut flowers across Canada and abroad. The nurseries are gone, but the city takes its floral heritage seriously, winning landscaping awards over the years and giving its new theater the name of a classic bloom.

The city financed the entire construction, noted Steve Solski, Brampton's manager of arts, culture and theatre. Nearly a decade ago, as Ontario's electric industry restructured, Brampton sold its utility to the provincial operator, Hydro One, and that "gave the city C\$300 million to work with," he said in an interview.

While raising funds for construction costs weren't a concern, there were questions about the quirks of the site and Brampton's readiness for such a facility. Toronto Star architecture critic Christopher Hume, writing after the theater's opening, praised the building, but also noted that Brampton "has been buried beneath decades of suburban blight. All that remains after the strip malls, subdivisions, big-box stores, highways and unrelieved sprawl is the barely-beating heart of a place that's like countless others."

In less than two decades, Brampton has doubled in population, attracting a significant number of immigrants, including more than 60,000 South Asians, particularly Punjabi Sikhs. However, if a suburban venue can attract novice theatergoers and compete with Toronto attractions, just a half hour's drive away, then the Rose Theatre may be the answer. There were several Toronto-based major players, including architects Page + Steele and theatre designer Novita.

Approaching from Main and Queen, a gently sloping plaza landscaped with numerous beds of flowers (in season) and shrubs leads up to the rotunda of the theater's main entrance and a curved, two-story gallery of windows looking in on the lobby.

A stylized rose motif is the theater's logo and accents the interior in several areas, including trash receptacles. The rose theme is also reflected in the theater color scheme, which ranges from dark red to brick to sand.

The exterior is clad in sandstone, "a material as rare as it is beautiful," wrote Hume. Inside, the budget allowed for luxurious decorating materials. Wall paneling is African mahogany; countertops at the bar and washrooms are polished onyx from Pakistan. Translucent beige onyx light fixtures give the lobby a golden glow.

The sweeping curves of the lobby continue into the auditorium, where the orchestra is broken into five "communities of seating," as designer Brian Arnott of Novita calls it. The horseshoe-shaped hall has a warm, embracing feel as each section creates a greater sense of intimacy. "With drama, if people are seated more than 60 feet from the stage, they can't see subtle gestures. So we needed to get the distances as short as possible," he said.

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Novita has built more than 100 theaters and Arnott is a well-known lecturer on theater design. He said he dived back into his history books. "I go back to the 18th century, the great era of theater architecture. This room represents my take on what are best practices over the centuries."

The auditorium is isolated from the exterior of the building and mounted on 560 rubber pads to muffle outside noise. A busy railway runs directly behind the theater, a 500-space parking garage is located underneath and downtown streets supply the usual buzz and sirens. However, in the theater, "each frequency can be heard. If we hadn't blocked the train rumble, the low frequency portion of your performance would be muddied or obliterated. And you won't hear the high-frequency fire engines," Arnott said.

Unusually, the sound board is located in the middle of the auditorium in a pit, although it can be moved elsewhere. "In order to do a complex mix, you might have 30 mics onstage. The sound engineer's ears need to be in the same space," said Arnott.

One of the city's mandates for the building was flexibility. It had to accommodate drama, music and dance, corporate and civic events – and broadcasting. "It is fully wired for digital broadcast. Awards shows, for instance, can go live to air from this building," said Arnott. Brampton's Sokski says that "technically, anything that can fit into a theater anywhere on the planet, we can fit here." In addition, the rotunda and lobby can be used, separately or together, for luncheons, dinners or presentations. The smaller studio space can be configured for events such as corporate receptions, or, with movable chairs and stage, intimate performances.

The main hall features a ten-story fly tower and a modular band shell for orchestra performances that doesn't roll into place onstage but moves on air cushions. The stage features a resilient floor for dance, although "major 19th-century opera or ballet works would want a wider opening," said Arnott. The stage measures 95 feet by 45 feet, with the proscenium opening measuring 46 feet wide.

In the theater's programs, Mayor Fennell is listed at the top of various program sponsors, as "legacy donor." It is Brampton's job now to fill the theater with shows people want to see, but the construction of the Rose Theatre has already met one goal. As theater manager Solski said, "We wanted to have our own unique identity."

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