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Historic Museum of Fine Arts Façade Revealed

WPA-built façade will be the entrance to the reimagined Arkansas Arts Center

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. – With construction underway on the Arkansas Arts Center’s MacArthur Park building, a piece of Arkansas history is once again visible from 9th Street. The 1937 façade of the Museum of Fine Arts – the precursor to the Arkansas Arts Center – was uncovered last week as construction crews cleared debris from the construction site.

When the reimagined Arkansas Arts Center opens in 2022, the façade will once again be the entrance to the Arkansas Arts Center, welcoming visitors through the north courtyard. Representing the institution’s proud 80-year legacy, the historic façade will play a prominent role in the MacArthur Park building’s new identity.

“Revealing this important piece of historic architecture is a striking symbol of what we hope to accomplish through a reimagined Arts Center,” Executive Director Victoria Ramirez said. “The Arkansas Arts Center will be the cultural beacon for the region and a source of pride that reflects who we are as a people and who we aspire to be: an Arkansas Arts Center that embraces both our history and our future.”

Beyond revealing the 1937 façade, Studio Gang and SCAPE’s design for the reimagined Arkansas Arts Center lends a new, highly visible architectural identity to the space. Reorganizing and ordering the current program and architectural envelope, Studio Gang has designed a pleated, organic architecture that connects the new north-facing city entrance with the new glass pavilion and south-facing park entrance to create an open axis public gallery through the building, connecting the program components of the Arts Center. Drawing inspiration from Little Rock’s unique regional ecologies – including the banks of Fourche Creek, the bluffs of Emerald Park, and the agrarian landscapes of the Mississippi Delta – SCAPE’s landscape design features inviting outdoor spaces that contribute to the AAC’s role as a cultural beacon for Arkansas.

The Museum of Fine Arts, designed by architect H. Ray Burks and built by the Works Progress Administration, was the precursor to the Arts Center. Remarks from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt were read at the 1937 dedication of the museum in MacArthur Park – or what, at the time, was known as City Park. The limestone façade, designed by Little Rock artist Benjamin D. Brantley, is inscribed with “Museum of Fine Arts.” At the top of the two central pilasters, two carved relief figures – Painting personified on the left and Sculpture on the right – identify the museum as a space of art and creativity.

The façade was built into the interior gallery walls as part of the 1982 renovation to the Arkansas Arts Center, where it was visible in the Winthrop Rockefeller Gallery until the building closed for construction earlier this year. By 2019, the Arts Center’s MacArthur Park building was made up of eight additions to the 1937 structure. In 1957, the Little Rock City Council granted the museum authority to expand its

physical footprint – and with that expansion, the Museum also expanded its mission and changed its name. Winthrop and Jeannette Edris Rockefeller joined the Fine Arts Club and Junior League of Little Rock to create an Arts Center that would serve the entire state. Rockefeller led the fundraising campaign for the new Arkansas Arts Center, emphasizing the role of residents in contributing to build an institution that would serve all of Arkansas. Businesses and individuals from all parts of the state – including children who saved nickels and dimes in jars – made donations. In 1960, the Little Rock Board of Directors adopted an ordinance officially establishing the Arkansas Arts Center, and the new building opened in 1963. The building was also renovated and/or expanded in 1971, 1981, 1982, 1989, 2000 and 2001.

The current renovation will be realized through a \$128 million special fundraising campaign, *Reimagining the Arkansas Arts Center: Campaign for Our Cultural Future*. At the October 1 groundbreaking ceremony, capital campaign co-chairs Harriet and Warrant Stephens announced that the campaign has raised more than \$122.7 million of its \$128 million goal.

“We remain incredibly grateful to all of the donors to-date, the City of Little Rock, and the State of Arkansas for saying ‘yes’ to Art, and to the Arkansas Arts Center,” Campaign Co-Chair Harriet Stephens said. “The project is grand in scope and impact and will need the participation of many to reach an ambitious goal. As we anticipate the Grand Opening in 2022, we look forward to involving many more people in the campaign.”

The project will result in a comprehensive reenvisioning of the AAC by renowned architect Jeanne Gang and her practice, Studio Gang. The new AAC will include a revitalized landscape, designed by Kate Orff and SCAPE, which will expand the connections between the architecture and MacArthur Park. Both Jeanne Gang and Kate Orff are MacArthur fellows who have received prestigious MacArthur “Genius” grants. The campaign will also provide transition and opening support, and endowment funds. Scheduled for completion in early 2022, the project will strengthen the Arkansas Arts Center as the region’s leading visual and performing arts institution.

“The new Arkansas Arts Center will stand as a noted architectural treasure in the heart of Arkansas, serving even more young people and adults, and attracting visitors from throughout the city, state, region, and nation,” Campaign Co-Chair Warren Stephens said. “The Campaign is an excellent example of the transformative power of a successful public/private partnership.”

Studio Gang is an architecture and urban design practice headquartered in Chicago, with offices in New York, San Francisco and Paris. Founded and led by MacArthur Fellow Jeanne Gang, Studio Gang’s award-winning work ranges in scale and typology from the 82-story Aqua Tower to the 14-acre Nature Boardwalk at Lincoln Park Zoo, both located in Chicago. Gang has been recognized for a design process that foregrounds the relationship among people and their environments, and is the only architect named to TIME Magazine’s list of the 100 Most Influential People of 2019. Studio Gang is currently designing cultural and civic projects across the Americas, including an expansion to the American Museum of Natural History in New York, a new Center for the University of Chicago in Paris, a new United States Embassy in Brasilia, and a Global Terminal at O’Hare International Airport in Chicago. This is Studio Gang’s first project in Arkansas.

SCAPE, founded by landscape architect and MacArthur Fellow Kate Orff, is a design-driven landscape architecture and urban design studio based in New York. They believe landscape architecture can enable

positive change in communities through the creation of regenerative living infrastructure and public landscapes. SCAPE works to integrate natural cycles and systems into environments across all scales, from the urban pocket-park to the regional ecological plan. They do this through diverse forms of landscape architecture – built landscapes, planning frameworks, research, books, and installations – with the ultimate goal of connecting people to their immediate environment and creating dynamic and adaptive landscapes of the future.

During construction, the Arkansas Arts Center has moved from its current facility in MacArthur Park into a temporary location at the Riverdale Shopping Center at 2510 Cantrell Road in Little Rock. Classes, education programs, and performances will continue at the temporary location from Fall 2019 through the new Arts Center's planned Grand Opening in 2022.

GENERAL INFORMATION

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