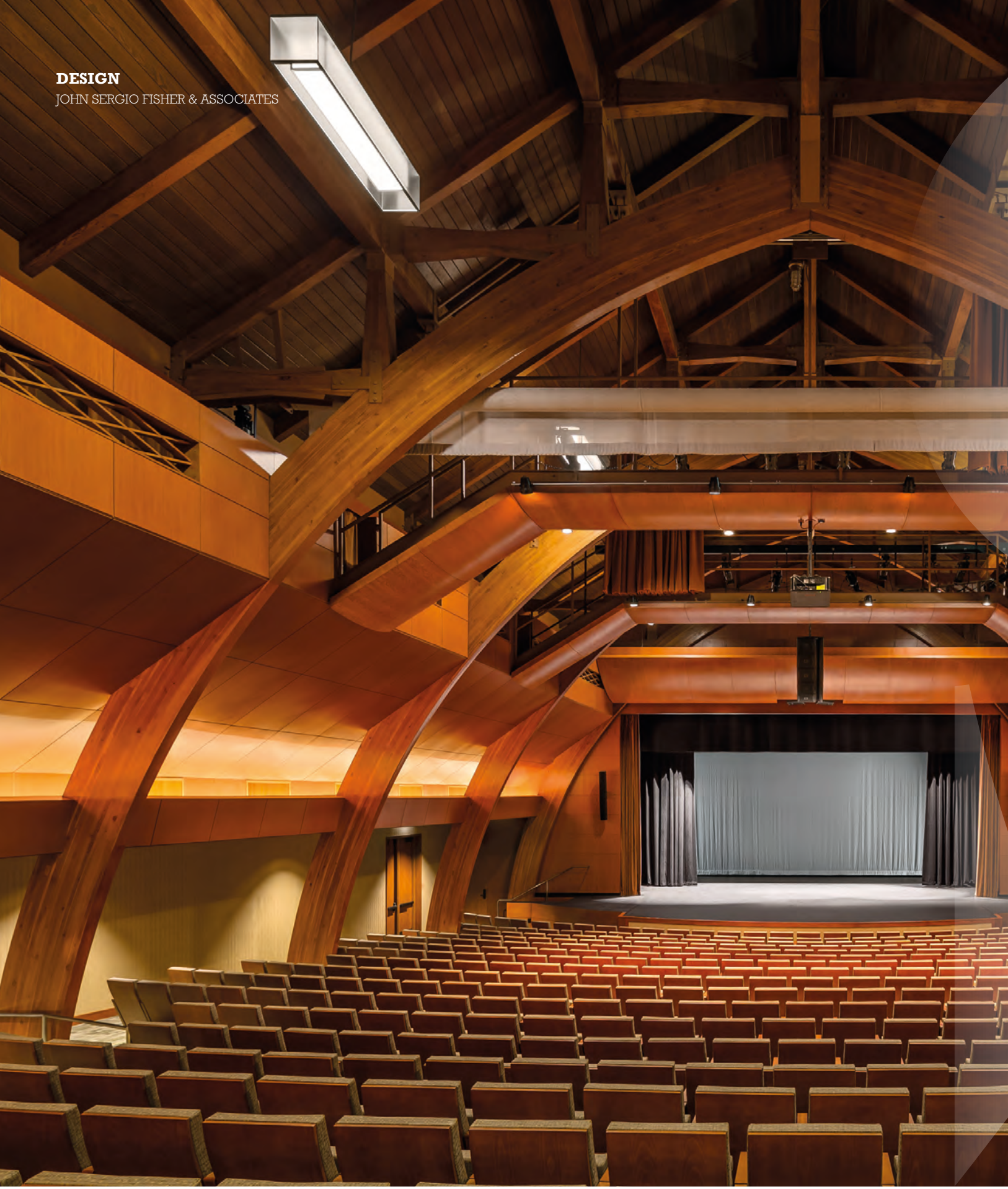


DESIGN
JOHN SERGIO FISHER & ASSOCIATES

econd life

An old church has been transformed into a performing arts center to serve students and community at the AGBU Vatche & Tamar Manoukian High School

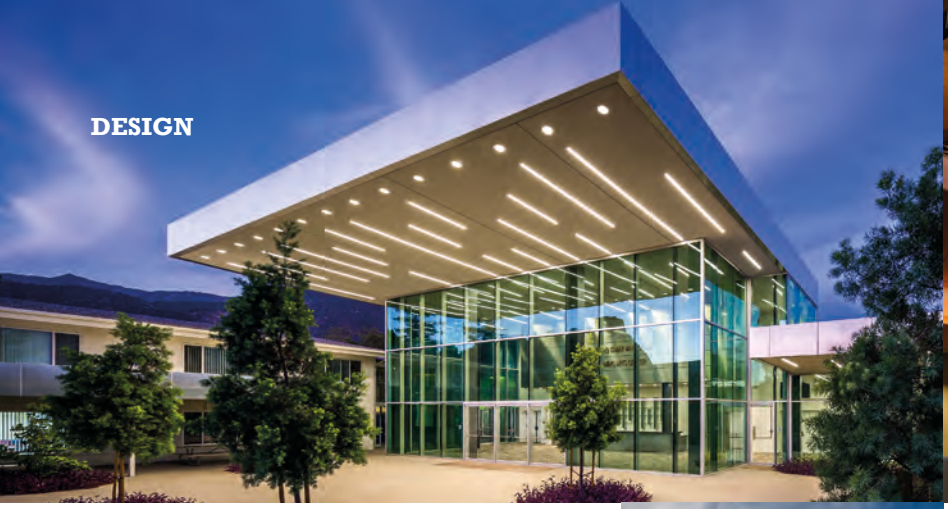
In 1991 the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) purchased the Nazareth Church campus in Pasadena, California, USA. The site comprised a school building, a gymnasium, a multipurpose hall and a 27,600ft² (2,564m²) sanctuary with capacity for 500 people. AGBU used the campus as a community center, and in 2006 established the AGBU Pasadena High School. In 2009 these entities were renamed AGBU Vatche and Tamar Manoukian Center and High School respectively, in appreciation of a large donation made by Vatche and Tamar Manoukian. These benefactors funded the conversion and renovation of the sanctuary into a performing arts center.

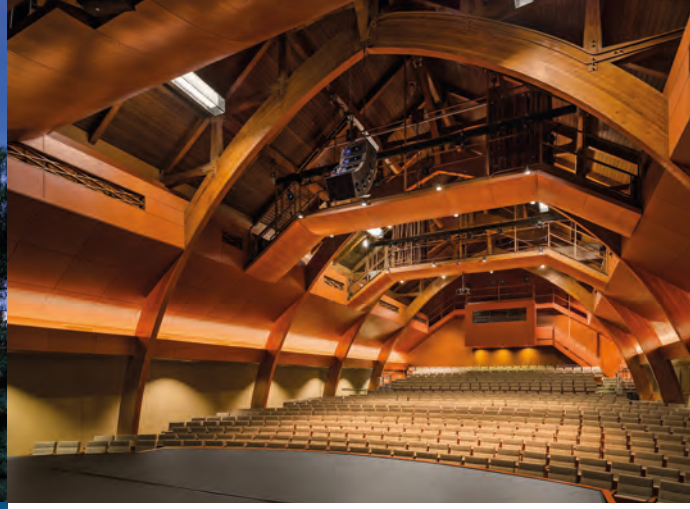
Sinanian Development acted as the design/build contractor while John Sergio Fisher & Associates was the architect, and also the theater and acoustic consultant, working out of its office in Los Angeles, USA.

The goal of the project was to create a state-of-the-art performing arts center for music, musicals, plays and school convocations with excellent acoustics and the best theater system possible within the constraints of the church structure. The goals also included excellent back of house amenities for the performers and a grand lobby expansion.

Structural changes

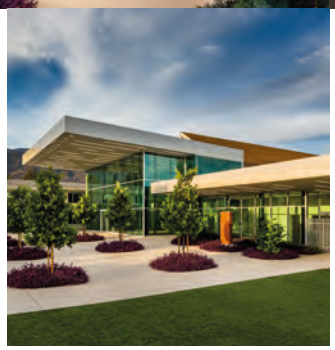
The center aisle pew seating was replaced with performing arts continental seating, increasing capacity to 600. The facility has a newly constructed sloped floor in the orchestra section and stepped risers in the parterre section to provide excellent sightlines. The ceiling structure remains the same, with glulam arched beams that now support two catwalk lighting positions for front of house lighting. A control room suspended from the existing structure is at the top of the stepped seating at the rear of the hall, which has acoustic absorption panels on the walls to prevent the echoes that occurred when the building was a church.





There was a social hall below the audience chamber, which has been transformed into a secondary gathering space, acting as a multipurpose/banquet room with a stage where the baptismal font was located. A portion of the room has been given over to a full-depth orchestra pit for the theater above, with has a Gala Systems lift that rises to provide additional seating or to give the main stage a thrust. The lift also moves the grand piano, which is stored in the lower level, to the stage.

The space below houses dressing rooms including star dressing rooms, along with a green room and kitchen. The lower level was made accessible by the installation of an elevator and the stage has a wheelchair lift that cannot be seen from the audience chamber. The biggest design challenge was the conversion of the altar area into a stage with motorized rigging, because of the Gothic arched cross-section.



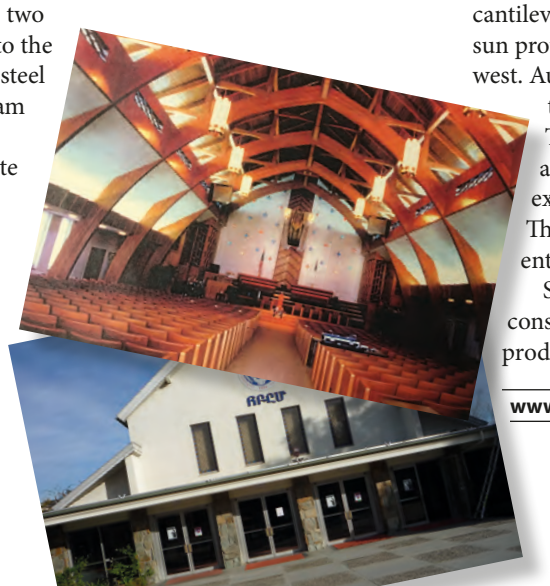
Above and top left: **The new foyer features a dramatic roof with a cantilevered overhang**
Top right: **The venue now seats 600, but a motorized roll drop can cut the space in half for more intimate productions**
Below: **The sanctuary before its transformation into a performing arts center**

Modern rigging

The rigging system consists of an array of 10 motorized general-purpose line sets plus three electrics battens, which are also motorized by means of drum hoists. The main drape is a motorized traveler curtain. Due to the limited fly space, dead hung battens were installed below the galleries to host the legs on a swivel so that the legs can be perpendicular to the proscenium opening and increase the wing space at the stage.

The motors are staggered between the two fly galleries to balance the loads applied to the structure. The fly galleries consist of two steel tubes spanning from glulam arch to glulam arch with a steel post going down all the way to the basement and a checkered plate on top to enable anchorage of the drum hoists. Custom support brackets were engineered to mount the head block and loft blocks to the original roof structure.

In terms of theatrical lighting, the main theater is provided with 92 circuits distributed at the stage floor boxes, stage electrics and connector strips at the front of house catwalks. Also above the control room are two rail-mounted follow spots.



The stage draperies are basic arrays of travelers, borders, projection screen scrim and a cyclorama. At the house there is a series of walk along draperies on the side walls and at the catwalks, used for variable acoustics.

The venue has a powerful AV system consisting of a center cluster and right and left line array at the proscenium. There are also multiple speakers positioned in the audience chamber for a surround sound and a video projector suspended from one of the catwalks. The AV system includes backstage communication and video feeds to the dressing rooms, green room and lobby.

Multifunctional solution

The audience chamber also has a motorized roll drop to visually cut the audience in half when required for smaller productions. Since the venue hosts drama, musical theater, dance, choir and orchestral performances, which all require different reverberation times, this is accommodated by adjustable acoustic draperies at the catwalks and side galleries. The RT60 ranges from 1.0-1.7 seconds.

The entrance and façade of the facility have been transformed by the addition of the new grass-enclosed lobby, which has a 26ft (8m) cantilevered overhanging roof. This provides sun protection, required because the lobby faces west. Audience restrooms were added adjacent to the lobby, along with meeting rooms. The tall lobby has a large concession front and back counter and opens up to an exterior plaza, which features many trees. There is also a transitional lower height entry lobby that serves the street drop-off.

Since opening, the facility has been constantly in use by students, traveling productions and the community. ■

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