



Guest view: The Aud turns 50

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This year, the Utica Memorial Auditorium is celebrating 50 years as an unmistakable feature of Utica's cityscape.

The auditorium is a proud product of 1950's architectural trends, when concrete facades were popular as a "modern" design element. In its gray cylinder-like form, the auditorium was designed to stand out among the brick box buildings it stood alongside; a lasting achievement of post-war urban architecture and modernization.

Beyond its curbside appearance, there is much more to the story than meets the eye.

The auditorium idea was hatched by Utica Mayor John T. McKennan, who made its construction a pledge during his first year of office in 1956. McKennan, a former basketball player who played in his youth at the Steuben Park Armory formerly located just above Hopper Street, felt Utica needed a better venue for events, sporting events in particular. Turning to City Engineer Frank M. Romano and other key members of his administration, they set out to build a structure better than the rest and, looking back, they may have succeeded.

The right team

Frank M. Romano, who on more than one occasion was called the "sparkplug" of McKennan's administration, was certainly the right man for the job. In addition to his regular duties as city engineer, he served as superintendent of buildings and chairman of the city planning board. Romano, who was often quoted as saying "Utica is the best city in the United States," set out to ensure that Utica would receive the best facility that modern engineering could offer at the time.

Gehron & Seltzer Architects of New York City were ultimately chosen by the administration to design the facility. Gehron & Seltzer Architects, who had previously designed several buildings at West Point, designated Gilbert Seltzer as the lead architect for the Utica auditorium project. The Gehron & Seltzer design team also included Frank Delle Cese, a respected local architect, and Lev Zetlin, a talented structural engineer. What Zetlin was going to contribute to the project was ground breaking.

A special structure

Structural engineer Zetlin faced a very large problem and that was the notoriously soft soils in this part of the city. Therefore, there was a need to construct a building that was lighter than conventional structures of the time period. This insight led Zetlin to explore "cable structures" as a solution. In 1956, long-span cable structures were limited to suspension bridges with one exception, the Dorton Arena in North Carolina which was known to deflect wildly in high winds. So, it was Zetlin's goal to design a cable structure less prone to wind-induced movement.

At one point, Zetlin considered installing fluid shock absorbers on cables such as those used in automobiles. Eventually, he arrived at the two-cable system concept. Zetlin wrote: "I reasoned that if I used two cables with different natural frequencies working against each other through connections, and both oscillating at different harmonics neither would vibrate. The result was total shock absorption."

With this discovery, Zetlin designed the second cable-suspended long-span roof in the world and the first to employ a restrained, two-cable method, which was later referred to as "double layer bicycle wheel roof system."

Form and function

Besides the lighter-weight construction, the cable structure offered a number of side benefits. Most importantly, high-strength cable would cost much less than ordinary structural steel and the 250-foot clear span eliminated the need for interior columns providing spectators with an unobstructed view of any event. Also, a traditional dome of rigid construction would have had a much higher profile than the cable suspended roof. The lower-profile structure reduced the amount of space to heat and cool and lessened potential echo.

Gilbert Seltzer wanted something better than bleachers for the lower seating that were to be pulled out from below the upper level seats for hockey and basketball events. He drew up and commissioned what was likely the first upholstered telescopic folding seat system.

Constructing a landmark

The land for the site was dedicated on April 15, 1957, and the project budget was reported to be \$3.7 million. In today's dollars, that cost would be approximately \$42 million. There were no major cost overruns associated with its construction. The auditorium was substantially completed by the end of 1959 but interior work continued into 1960.

The first event held at the auditorium took place on March 9, 1960. The event was the "Industrial Exposition of the Mohawk Valley."

Dedication ceremonies for the auditorium were held on the first day of the exposition.

A missing tribute

By the end of 1959, New York state investigations of party boss Rufus Elefante had weakened the Democratic Party's political domination in Utica. McKennan decided to return to his law practice and the Democratic mayoral candidate would lose to Republican Frank M. Dulan.

Despite all the fine thinking and contributions they made, McKennan and his key staff were left off the invitation list of the March 9, 1960, dedication. Even worse, a 6-foot tall brass plaque containing the names of McKennan administration officials, including Frank Romano, Gehron & Seltzer Architects, Frank Delle Cese and Lev Zetlin, would eventually disappear after Dulan took office.







The final say

One last anecdote mentioned by Seltzer was that in the whole time he was completing the design of the auditorium he longed to have the input of an auditorium director who went un-appointed until the near completion of the structure. Gilbert feared that the new director, Roy Saunders, would have a "should have done" list but, when asked, Saunders simply replied "there is not one thing I would want different." After 50 years, it is time to again thank these individuals who gave us this milestone structure; a true civil engineering achievement and historical landmark.





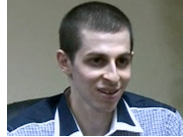

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