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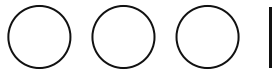
LIFESTYLE

# Jones Hall is undergoing a \$25.5M upgrade to improve sound and replace aging infrastructure



Andrew Dansby, Staff writer

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International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees workers remove Houston Symphony instruments and gear, Tuesday, May 31, 2022, at the Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts in Houston, to get the space ready to start renovations.

Over the span of a month, Jones Hall served as the setting for an emotional farewell to Houston Symphony music director Andres Orozco-Estrada and a grandiose welcome to his successor Juraj Valcuha.

Rather than Mahler's "Resurrection" symphony or Beethoven's Ninth, the sounds emanating inside the downtown hall this week are from construction, the first step in an endeavor called "Overture to the Future," a multi-year, multi-million-dollar update of the performing arts space that opened in 1966. In a city known for tearing buildings down, Jones Hall will – like the Alley Theatre a few years ago – be the beneficiary of a significant renovation rather than demolition.

"You see these beautiful buildings around town with names like Cullen and Jones, people who helped build these spaces and gave them to the city to benefit the citizens of Houston," said Meg Booth, CEO of Performing Arts Houston, which hosts many of its events at Jones Hall. "For that reason, there wasn't interest in tearing it down and starting over. It's about hanging onto that history, the history of that gift and preserving it for future generations."





The Gemini II sculpture at the Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts in Houston, Tuesday, May 31, 2022.

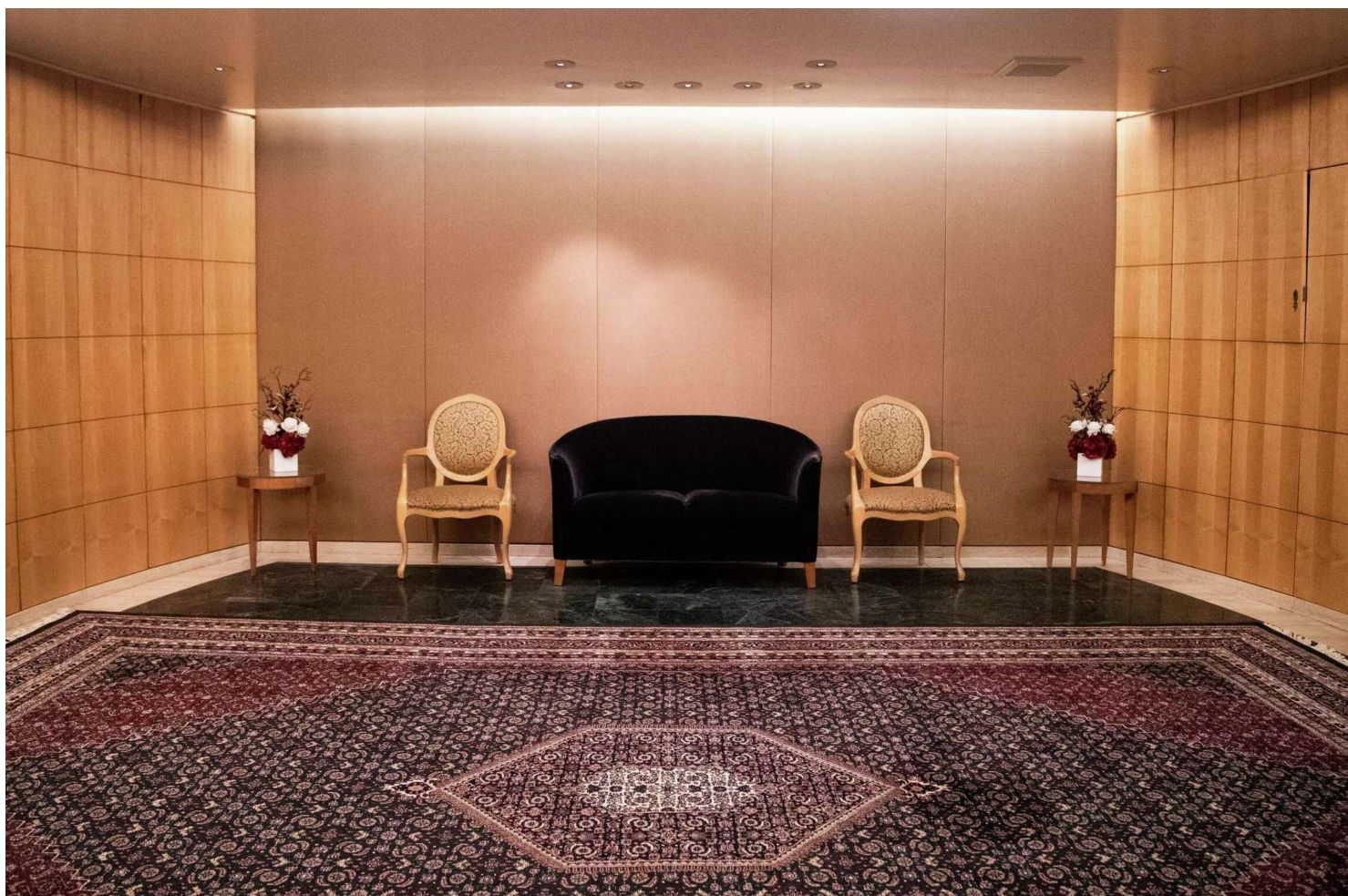
Marie D. De Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

But for that gift to keep giving, the aging Jones Hall desperately needed to be updated. The Foundation for Jones Hall is overseeing the project. Over the course of a year, the Overture to the Future campaign raised more than \$25.5 million from numerous donors for the work. The approved project has a final goal of \$50 million.

“Buildings like this need a lot of help,” said Stephen Chu of Ennead Architects, the design architect for the project. “The strongest design elements we wanted to retain. We see the beauty in those. But we need to build upon them, too. There are effects of aging, like mechanical systems that are way out of date. The patron experience expectations and performance needs are both out of date. What we’re looking at: Jones Hall needs to remain a vital state-of-the-art performing arts hub for downtown Houston. But it has to be current. We need to push how this building can be more welcoming to performers and patrons.”

Today Jones Hall has the look of a molted exoskeleton. Workers struck the stage Tuesday while both the Houston Symphony and Performing Arts Houston are between seasons. The dramatic removal of items from inside the space allows for this summer’s upgrades to begin. Among the work slated for summer 2022: the stage floor will be refinished, and the orchestra pit floors will be rebuilt; a problematic hydraulic lift for the orchestra pit will be replaced; electrical and plumbing work will be updated; and the audio network inside the hall will be upgraded to improve the sound for both performers and visitors.

These improvements follow work done in 2020 and 2021, which included the creation of two new aisles along the center orchestra to accommodate audience flow and an upgrade of its acoustics. Further acoustical work is coming in 2023, along with a renovation of the lobby, which will be expanded, and its Green Room, which will be rescued from its antiquated mix of mirrors, wood and antiquated furniture.



The Green Room at the Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts, Tuesday, May 31, 2022, in Houston. The Green Room will be renovated.

Marie D. De Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

A specific completion date hasn't been pinpointed. Jared Wood of Studio Red Architects said the whole process could have been done in a calendar year, but added, "with the symphony and Performing Arts Houston's schedule, we don't have that luxury."

“It makes it more complicated to not have a clean slate, but it’s more interesting, too, when you’re working with the bones that are there,” Wood said. “To do a new project from the ground up costs a fortune. But there’s a great foundation to start from here. To get to work on this is special. It’s one of the most famous buildings in downtown.”

Mahler’s music was in the room when Jones Hall was first used by the Houston Symphony. Under the direction of Sir John Barbirolli on Oct. 2, 1966, the symphony performed Mahler’s Third Symphony and Ravel’s second “Daphnis et Chloe” suite.

Jesse H. Jones, an entrepreneur who once owned the Houston Chronicle, had envisioned the city’s first purpose-built performing arts facility. Caudill Rowlett Scott designed the \$7.4 million space in the formalism style. Owned by the city and managed by the Houston First Corp., Jones Hall has been home to the symphony since then, as well as serving as a space for Performing Arts Houston (formerly Society for Performing Arts), Houston Grand Opera and Houston Ballet. .

“We learn from built work,” said Scott Pfeiffer of Threshold Acoustics. “In the ’60s there was a break from tradition and an intention to experiment with the belief that we had all the science we needed to answer certain questions about sound. Turns out we didn’t. That’s not meant to be unfair to our predecessors. It was a time of breaking free from norms. But now we have a long period of time to analyze and reflect upon.

“Jones Hall was also built when primacy was placed on audience sightlines and putting listeners closer to the stage.”

Pfeiffer said he has “been working one way or another with Jones Hall since 1993,” the year a grand study was conducted on ways to improve sound in the venue. He described some of the hall’s sonic quirks, including a sweet spot for sound in the first few rows of the balcony.

“Something special happens there,” he said. “Those people aren’t paying the most money for their seats, but they have some of the best seats in the room.”

In addition to reshaping the walls and improving the ways the sound moves around the room, the venue will benefit from lighting, rigging and electronics upgrades. The days of performers navigating a stage with cords and cables duct-taped to the floor will soon be over.



The Gemini II sculpture at the Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts in Houston, Tuesday, May 31, 2022.

Marie D. De Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

Visual projections and livestreamed events are among modern necessities unimaginable in the 1960s.

“It’s easy to get used to newer buildings with drywall,” Wood said. “There, it’s easy to cut holes. But this space is brick and concrete. It wasn’t designed for us to do the

things we're doing today. That's been part of the challenge. Looking at it all and wondering, 'Why did they do this?' and then piecing it all back together in a way that makes it a better experience."

Striking from the outside, Jones Hall is a curious structure from the inside, with its tiered lobby corkscrewing upward and around the performance hall.

Wood said a lot of the work getting done this summer will be invisible to audience members when they return for the 2022-23 seasons. But this summer's improvements are still a crucial phase.

"The hydraulic orchestra lift isn't something a listener would necessarily notice," he said. "But it's so important to get that floor level. There are times a musician may be sitting on a crack where the lift comes up. So that will be easier to change over in the future. So much of what happens this summer is building a backbone of infrastructure for what we're going to do next summer."

In the summer of 2023, Wood says, seats will be replaced and some of the doors throughout the hall will be closed permanently, which should create a better environment for sound inside. The Green Room will be expanded and given a more modern look. The lobby will undergo significant changes: the bar and restrooms will be expanded, updated and made more accessible. ADA improvements are also being implemented throughout the venue. "We're trying to eliminate some of these small hidden paths in the space."



The Jesse H. Jones Hall orchestra pit gets lowered, Tuesday, May 31, 2022, in Houston, with gear on it that will be transported and stored as the performing hall is renovated.

Marie D. De Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

In addition to the hall renovations, both the Houston Symphony and Performing Arts Houston begin their 2022-23 seasons with significant changes. The symphony's first season with Valcuha as music director begins with Verdi's Requiem on Sept. 16.

After 55 years as Society for Performing Arts, the organization announced it would be



rebranding with its upcoming season, which begins in August. Performing Arts Houston's first Jones Hall show will be in October.

Booth has heard positive feedback from musicians about last year's upgrades. "We've heard that the sound is clearer, less muddy," she said. "People already sound excited about it."

The work requires a vast collaborative effort led by Ennead Architects working with Studio Red Architects, theater consultant Auerbach Pollock Friedlander, Threshold Acoustics, structural engineers Walter P. Moore, MEP engineers Collaborative Engineering Group, Bellows Construction, Forney Construction and the Building Committee of the Foundation for Jones Hall Board.

Those involved in the process are hopeful work would be complete by 2024, but a concrete final date has not yet been set. The renewed space will "take what's great about Jones Hall and build upon that," Chu said. "It will remain a vital player in Houston's performing arts world. In that part of downtown, it has been and will continue to be a centerpiece."

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