



**DEBORAH F. RUTTER,** President of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, talks to Brunswick's **CARLTON WILKINSON** about the Reach, the center's historic \$250 million addition.

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## REACH

# MONUMENTAL

AT THE BEGINNING OF JULY, AT THE TAIL END OF A massive construction project creating the first significant expansion of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts since it was first opened in 1971, the center's President Deborah F. Rutter pointed out a slot in the floor.

"I said, 'What is that for?' And they said, 'Well, that's for the gate,'" Ms. Rutter recounted during an interview in her office. "I took that gate out four years ago. They forgot to take it out of the design."

A fixable oversight, but it served to highlight how much the project has changed direction during her five-year tenure. When the idea of a gate first came up in design talks, "I asked, 'Why is that like that?'" Ms. Rutter recalled. "And they said, 'That's when you want to close it off.' I said, 'I never want to close it off.'"

Dubbed the Reach, the newly completed addition extends the main Kennedy Center facility along the Potomac out toward the Washington Monument, visible in the distance. On its surface, the expansion sports a vast lawn and public garden—a green roof for the lower level. Rising up out of that underground are three towering white pavilions, curved structures of gleaming concrete and glass that seem to undulate in harmony with the wind and the water. Visually and functionally, it is a public invitation.

Myriad thoughtful structural details, developed

in collaboration with architect Steven Holl, reinforce that sense of public purpose. A new footbridge over the highway connects the facility to the riverfront pathway and the National Mall. Approaching from that direction, strolling visitors can immediately see the bustle of artistic activity inside through glass walls and strategically placed windows that also serve to provide natural light.

Each pavilion contains giant spaces that can be reconfigured to many uses, including classrooms, workshops, rehearsals, performances, multimedia presentations and organizational events. One area, the Moonshot, is a makerspace where visitors and classes can explore the craft and invention behind arts events. One pavilion exterior doubles as a video wall that in summer will show films and simulcast live performances to audiences on the lawn.

The Reach's opening festival in September showcases these uses in hundreds of events: performances by the cross-generational jazz duo of Esperanza Spalding and Wayne Shorter, who will be developing

A workman finishes the floors inside the Skylight Pavilion, one of the three towering halls within the interconnected Kennedy Center addition.

their new jazz opera “Iphigenia,” funk master Bootsy Collins, hip-hop stars Arrested Development, opera diva Renée Fleming and the National Symphony Orchestra in a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. Other events include a John Coltrane-Inspired Jazz and Meditation Service; a Virtual Reality Lounge; screenings of “The Muppet Movie”; sculptures by Joel Shapiro, Deborah Butterfield and Roy Lichtenstein; programs featuring the arts of indigenous cultures; dance performances; visual art; comedy; hands-on activities and more.

Kicked off in 2013 by a \$50 million donation from Kennedy Center Board Chairman David Rubenstein, co-founder of the Carlyle Group, the campaign’s initial target of \$125 million was raised twice. It now stands at \$250 million.

Kennedy Center’s main building is built of white marble (a gift from Italy), and decorated with red carpeted stairways and enormous chandeliers. Designed by architect Edward Durell Stone, it serves as the nation’s “living memorial” to President Kennedy and is one of the most visible and active facilities in the country, with thousands of events each year for the orchestra, the Washington National Opera and many international, national and local organizations.

“If we’re trying to think about the future, you can’t rely on this building that was built in 1971,” Ms. Rutter says. “The social construct was completely different. We need to be thinking about what is responsive to the social construct today and into the future.”

Cultivating community was a big part of her earlier work as the President of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association and, before that, as Executive Director of the Seattle Symphony. Trained as an orchestral violinist, she earned an MBA while working for orchestras in Los Angeles. In Chicago and Seattle, she is credited with helping reinvigorate both orchestras and turn financially troubled circumstances into success stories.

Ms. Rutter spoke to us about the journey that led to the Reach, the day-to-day challenges of such a large undertaking, and her hopes for the future.

“I don’t know what my speeches will be about after the Reach is open,” she said. It could get boring, she was told. “Yeah. Exactly. Looking forward to that.”

**Were you aware of the scope of the Reach project when you took the job?**

No. In the interview, there was a passing comment, “Oh, and we’re doing this project, an education center across the street. Have you ever been involved with a capital project?” And I said, “Well, actually, yes. In Seattle, we built a concert hall.”



Architectural detail draws attention throughout the Reach. Above, sunlight from a triangular skylight creates diamond patterns on the angles of a corner stairway.

I’ll tell you, when I was interviewing for the Seattle job, it was exactly the same thing. They asked, “Can you run the orchestra? Are you a good leader?” and, in passing, “Oh, by the way, there’s this idea to build a concert hall.” And then it becomes the focal point of your work for the first five years that you’re there.

**Did you have a Day One list, things you knew you wanted to accomplish?**

Before I started, the internal project manager said, “February 9, you’ve got to be there. We need your help. We need you to sign off on the design drawing.” And I said, “OK. I’m happy to. But send me the program: Why are we embarking on this project? And what is it we’re trying to achieve?” And they sent me a piece of paper that listed five spaces and basically, the size of the space. That was it.

So I said, “We’ve got to have a little bit of time to think about this.” I put a pause on the design. It was a really magnificent opportunity because this was



February 2014. I wasn’t even supposed to start until September. Over the course of three months, we had a series of meetings. It was a great opportunity for me to get to know my staff and to really talk about what we needed to do, how we needed to approach the work—what was good about the center, what didn’t work so well. The whole aspect of it being friendly, welcoming, beautiful, light-filled, easily navigable, those are obvious things. But the in-depth conversation that we had involved thinking about the future—why are we building a new building just to lock the front door and have rehearsals and workshops? Really, we needed to throw the doors open. That’s where all of the arts are headed, to this more participatory, immersive experience.

**How did your experience with the orchestras in Seattle and Chicago prepare you?**

I’m a big believer that these institutions exist for the benefit of community. So there was a deeper investment in activities that took place outside of those performance spaces to engage and bring people in. If you can build trust and relationship and vitality in that relationship with your audience and your community, your institution’s going to thrive. The more you go inward to try and say, “Well, if I save this penny here or if I do this project there...” you’re not growing. It is not like investing, spending money to make money. It is about knowing that you exist because of your audience.

I use a lot of business in my thinking about it. People say, “Oh, she’s the one who talks to us about program margin, return on investment, balance of individual elements, how many people will you reach, what’s the impact of this program,” and so on.



The park acts as a green roof for the lower level spaces. A pedestrian bridge connects to a public trail along the Potomac that leads to the National Mall.



President Deborah F. Rutter views the project as creating a vast open doorway for the nation’s cultural center.

But the driver is, we are here as a resource. How do we really embed ourselves deeply in our community?

I worked hard on building collaborative relationships in Chicago and Seattle. Here, in the beginning, people were a little bit suspicious, but as soon as they had the invitation and the opportunity to learn from one another, it exploded.

**Did having a background as a musician help your relations with the orchestras?**

I’m not a professional musician. I wasn’t prepared to make that commitment. But I do know exactly what it feels like to be on that stage. So I think that helps. But the greater part of it may be that I am more comfortable with a room full of people who have different perspectives. I’m a “more people at the table rather than fewer” person, and we need more diverse opinions than having just my singular perspective.

**As the nation’s cultural center, the Kennedy Center has no real peer institution in the US. That means you’re under a lot more pressure to get it right. Was that something you fretted about when you were taking the job?**

No, that was the exciting part. I love orchestras, but I knew that it could be more than just the one evening of music. Here, I knew that there were ways in which you could tell a bigger story that could reach across the patrons who appreciate one art form or another.

I had two motivations for coming here: One was to do the programming that’s possible and to build a festival that really celebrates those different art forms that we have on a big and small scale every year. And the other was to be in the nation’s capital to demonstrate the importance of the arts and arts education.

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF THE KENNEDY CENTER

So, no, I didn't really fret about it. It was a great, fantastic new opportunity. And I absolutely was not thinking that I was embarking on a major construction project until I got into the job.

**Was there any point where you were thinking, oh my God, this may not work?**

Oh, very, very, very often. I came to the project after the institution had identified the architect and they had gone a long way on the drawing and acoustics and landscape—all of the team was already in place. But they had started without a clear program.

But I really believe there's this magic that happens when you get really creative people together around a problem. Steven Holl's design as originally proposed could be tweaked quite a bit based on our input. And he loved landscape and light. All the things that I love, he actually was providing in any case and he had an imagination for what could happen, too. He was very responsive and he would always have some fantastic solution.

But I will tell you, along the way, there were complications—planning for a concrete building where no two walls are the same; building with two construction firms on the site at the same time. Anytime you do a project, there's a moment where you say, "Why in the world did we do this?" And it gets messy. Absolutely, we had that moment. But I couldn't be more thrilled with the way it turned out.

**Has divisiveness in the political sphere impacted your work at the Kennedy Center?**

Typically when you are an executive of a nonprofit organization, you have a lot of board members who care deeply about your mission and, by and large, you really don't have more than an inkling about what their political leanings are. At the Kennedy Center my board is appointed by the President of the United States, often as a way for the President to say thank you to them and to ask them to continue

**"WHETHER YOU CAN AFFORD AN EXPENSIVE TICKET OR COME FOR A FREE PROGRAM, THIS IS YOUR CULTURAL CENTER."**



Attention to detail created some innovative solutions. Large, white acoustical tiles in a "crinkle concrete" pattern were designed specifically to enhance the sound in the Reach's spacious rooms.

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to serve their country. So all of my board members up until last September were Obama appointees—not just Democrats, they were Obama people. Now I have a blend of Obama and Trump appointees on my board.

We are non-partisan—not bipartisan, but a non-partisan institution. We are a federally funded building because we are the memorial to JFK, but we are a private nonprofit presenting the programs in this center. I work really hard as does everybody on staff to make sure that the work we're doing is not political. The biggest impact, ultimately, is the budget issues, the continuing resolutions that fund the government. We're anticipating the next budget for a fiscal '20 and what will happen with that.

The divisiveness is actually something we're trying to respond to by creating spaces like the Reach, welcoming to all people, all art forms. Whether you can afford an expensive ticket or come for a free program, this is your cultural center. We're here for all people. That's how we're responding.

**The glass walls seem a part of that inclusiveness—transparency literally interpreted.**

I have a 21-year-old and, watching her, I think about what audiences of the future really want to engage with. My daughter loves to get dressed up, get out her handbag and go to a show. But she really wants to know how the show is made, who are the people behind it, what is their life story. That transparency is part of what social media can give you.

I want them to come to the Reach to see it happen, to go into the Moonshot to see and learn how you do the makeup for this extraordinary dance program or go to the dance class and see how difficult it is, how hard it is for an orchestra to actually put the program together, or just see the magic that comes from bringing artists together.

**Looking at the project from here, with the Reach about to open, is there one aspect in particular that you're especially proud of?**

I think how we plan to enliven the spaces—because the spaces are really, really, really beautiful. And the Reach will change the look of the Kennedy Center and the look of the city. I hope it inspires more creative architecture in the city.

And I am really proud of the way our collective team has really embraced this concept of this is a place that's for the people, the way we have come together to do this. We know why we're doing it; it's about serving the audience. And that is what makes me proud. ♦