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INVESTING IN THE ARTS

TWO DYNAMIC NEW PERFORMING ARTS FACILITIES AT BYU

by David Vinson, PhD



Known locally as “Happy Valley,” the Utah Valley is home to the mid-sized city of Provo. An unmissable marker of Provo is Y Mountain and its corresponding mountain trail—a trail which leads hikers and bikers alike to a hillside letter in the shaped of a large block Y that serves as insignia for Brigham Young University. BYU’s campus is an idyllic space for its more than 33,000 students. The main campus in Provo resides on nearly five hundred and sixty acres nestled at the base of the Wasatch Mountains. The BYU campus is also the setting for more than three hundred buildings designed in a wide range of architectural styles, each reflecting the fashion of its time. Navigating campus grounds takes one on a journey of natural discovery, whether by way of BYU’s sprawling greenhouse, its pristine flowerbeds and cultivated greenery, or its gorgeous variety of trees.



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In 2004, The Princeton Review ranked BYU's Harold B. Lee Library as the nation's "greatest college library," a remarkable accomplishment and clear indication of BYU's ambitions as a top-tier research institution. Such commitment to excellence and growth is not easily sustained, yet BYU continues to adapt, develop, and grow to meet the needs of students and faculty. In recent years, BYU has embarked on a series of major construction projects, both in terms of renovation and of building from the ground up.

Coming Soon: BYU's Newest Addition to the School of Music

Construction of BYU's new School of Music building began on 15 June 2020. As originally noted by the university's *The Daily Universe*, embarking on a major construction project during the pandemic resulted in "every shortage imaginable," including that of concrete, PVC

pipe, copper wire, and even labor. The good news: such obstacles were addressed, managed, and overcome. Announced in March of this year, construction will be completed by Fall 2022, and students can attend classes in the building the following semester.

The need for a new School of Music facility has become obvious over the years to those who frequented the current one. BYU's current School of Music is located in the Harris Fine Arts Center (HFAC) building, which houses the Department of Design, the Department of Theatre and Media Arts, the Department of Art, BYU Production, and the School of Music. Enrollment numbers in each department are growing every year, yet the structure of the HFAC has proven difficult to expand. Several challenges have come to fruition. For one, too few rooms are available for use, meaning that musicians must either coordinate room usage or spread out to different rooms in different

buildings across campus. Moreover, safety concerns have emerged. Artists and designers in the HFAC use paints and turpentine, and the fumes from both can spread to other parts of the building. Another safety concern is the building's lack of proper acoustics in ensemble rooms. Without appropriate wall padding, performers' ears can be damaged by sound levels that swiftly amplify and reach punishing volumes. Occupants must wear earplugs as they practice in the rooms, and one can imagine how doing so would hinder the experience and practice of playing an instrument. Because the HFAC is made of concrete, sound also runs along the floors, reverberating across the building.

The new School of Music facility is a remarkable upgrade on the HFAC, and will surely serve not only as an ideal recruitment tool for prospective students, but will also benefit both current students and the larger

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Not only will the BYU students of music enjoy their very own facility, but soon the same can be said of those majoring in other arts-related fields. BYU has recently embarked upon a major investment in a new Arts Building. The university's board of trustees approved plans to build a new Arts Building where the Franklin S. Harris Fine Arts Center currently stands.

BYU community. The 170,000-square-foot building contains four levels, featuring multiple mid-sized spaces for practice and recitals. A major draw will be its 1000-seat concert hall. The hall is built in a vineyard style, allowing for a centralized performance space that is designed so that tiers of audience members are placed above the stage. De Jong Concert Hall, BYU's current space for such performances, lacks large seating options. Moreover, microphones must be hung throughout to allow for sound to carry, which is not only unsightly but can create a distracting high-pitched sound. Thankfully, the meticulous vineyard style design of the new concert hall allows for the acoustics to rise naturally and without filters or microphone application. The new concert hall will also be equipped with a beautiful, large pipe organ that could become a fine showpiece for the university.

Current practice rooms at the HFAC are located in the basement which has no access

to natural light—hardly a space for inspiration. The new practice rooms are designed with windows and will be dispersed on the upper floors near faculty offices. Being in close proximity to their mentors allows students to reach out with ease for guidance or creative instruction. Moreover, considering the extensive amount of time students spend in practice rooms, an added benefit of the design is that the bright spaces are far better for students' mental health.

Breaking News: BYU's Forthcoming Arts Building

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currently stands. The building houses four of the College of Fine Arts and Communications' six academic units. Construction will begin following the demolition of the HFAC in the spring of 2023, and the project is expected to be completed toward the end of 2025. As the new Arts Building is constructed, the college will temporarily occupy the former Provo High School, located not far from campus.

The new Arts Building will house offices for the college in addition to the departments of Art, Design, and Theatre and Media Arts (TMA). It will serve as home to classrooms, galleries, performance spaces, media viewing rooms, a 180-seat cinema for the film program, as well as a production studio. It will likewise house a large collaborative hub for Department of Design students, plus multiple art and design galleries, a combination lobby and student gathering space, and a six-station lactation room to accommodate students, their families, and other patrons. One concern with the present-day Arts Center is that faculty and staff are spread over five floors and located at the far ends of the building from each other. According to Ed Adams, dean of College of Fine Arts and Communication, the designs for the new building address this issue by creating "proximity and more opportunities for collaboration and student mentoring."

The new building will also contain a main stage theatre equipped with spacious backstage areas. It will hold an audience of eight hundred and offer a more up-close, personalized experience for both audiences and performers. Another distinctive feature will be a meditation garden on the east side of the building. This outdoor area will provide students refuge, rest, and a space for creative thinking.

Beacons of Excellence

One of the lasting traditions of BYU is its cultural emphasis and support of the fine arts. Historically, the music department has a record of excellence, producing some of the finest musical talents in the country. The new School of Music facility promises not only to preserve this rich tradition but to develop it further. Similarly, BYU's Department of Art has proven itself a vibrant community of artists and scholars. The department has an open structure that allows students to move freely between disciplines, and students develop fluency in the traditions of art just as they are actively pushed towards experimentation and developing their own artistic voices. The forthcoming Arts Building will allow students an even better opportunity to thrive in creative learning spaces. The arts and music programs are beacons of excellence for the university, and it will be fascinating to trace the ways in which BYU's students, faculty, and staff benefit from the new facilities.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. David Vinson has a PhD in English with specializations in transatlantic literature and cultural studies. He is a committed scholar, teacher, and dad. If you ever meet David, avoid the subject of soccer. His fandom borders on the truly obnoxious.

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