The John F. Kennedy

Center for the Performing Arts

Photographs by Richard Braaten

Visiting the Center

Nearly 200 years ago, George Washington expressed support for the fine arts through a proposal that would have located a national cultural center in this nation's new capital city. Through the years, Federal encouragement for the arts remained a matter of considerable interest to other Presidents, among them John F. Kennedy.

Plans for a national center for the performing arts were solidified in 1958 when President Eisenhower signed a bill authorizing a center, donating park land for it, and creating a board of trustees. In 1961, President Kennedy named a national chairman, Roger L. Stevens, who began an extensive campaign that raised nearly $13.5 million.

After Kennedy's death, Congress appropriated $15.5 million for construction of the center, provided that $2 million could be raised by private contributions. Congress stipulated that the center be established as a bureau of the Smithsonian Institution and named the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts; the building would be his national memorial in Washington, D.C. President Johnson signed the bill into law in 1964.

In the following years, funds were donated by individuals, groups, and organizations across the nation, and by governments around the world. As a result of this generosity, the amount needed to qualify for Federal funds was exceeded. The names of many donors are inscribed on the walls of the Hall of States.

Construction of the Center began in 1966, and on September 8, 1971, the building was officially opened.

The Center's three theaters are located on the Main or Plaza level. Each was designed to make the most effective possible setting for audiences and performers alike.

The Eisenhower Theater, host to the world's finest actors, playwrights, and theatrical companies, is named in honor of President and Mrs. Eisenhower for the roles they played toward establishing a national cultural center. The decor of this 1,200-seat theater includes paneling of East Indian laurel and a red and black stage curtain, Canada's gift to the Center.

The Opera House is designed for ballet, opera, and musical theater. A red and gold silk stage curtain from Japan and a star-burst chandelier from Austria enhance the glowing red decor. The Opera House seats 2,300.

The Concert Hall, seating 2,750, is known for its magnificent acoustics. The gold and white decor is highlighted by crystal chandeliers from Norway. The Filene Memorial Organ was a gift from Mrs. Jouett Shouse.

The American Film Institute Theater, where classic films are shown daily, is also located on the ground floor, near the entrance to the Hall of States.

The Hall of States displays the flags of the United States and its territories in the order in which they entered the Union. In the Hall of Nations, the flags of all the nations recognized diplomatically by the United States are hung in alphabetical order. Information desks, box offices, and souvenir counters are located in each hall.

Both halls lead to The Grand Foyer, the large lobby area serving the three main auditoriums. The Foyer extends along the Potomac River side of the Center 192 meters (630 feet), a dimension that makes it one of the world's great rooms. The focus of attention is a bronze bust of President Kennedy sculptured by American artist Robert Berks. Eighteen chandeliers, gifts of Sweden, and mirrors, gifts of Belgium, decorate the Foyer. While these halls may be explored at leisure throughout the day, acquaintance with the Center and an understanding of its physical and cultural presence are heightened by the free tours that are offered daily by volunteers of the Friends of the Kennedy Center from 10 a.m. to 1:15 p.m.

On the Roof Terrace is an outdoor walkway from which visitors may view the capital city and its major monuments and memorials. Reception rooms and exhibit areas are also on this level, which can be reached by an elevator from the Hall of Nations. Cuisine appropriate to a variety of personal tastes and budgets is available at three restaurants on the Terrace.

Parking for 1,450 cars is provided on three levels below the auditoriums. Elevators and escalators lead from all parking levels to the main entrance areas in the Hall of States and Hall of Nations. Public transportation is available by taxicabs and regularly scheduled bus service, with stops at the entrance to the Hall of States.

The Kennedy Center is a living memorial to the late President, and its guiding principle is to present all forms of the performing arts. Half-price tickets are available for performances on a limited basis. The elderly, full-time students, those who are handicapped, retired persons over 65, enlisted military personnel grades E-4 and below, and those with low incomes are qualified. The program is administered by the Friends of the Kennedy Center.

All performing arts policies of the Center are set and directed by the 45-member Board of Trustees, 30 of whom are appointed by the President of the United States for 10-year terms. The balance are heads of various Federal agencies and serve as ex officio members. The performing arts and special events are programmed and financed by the board through a chairman.

The Kennedy Center's educational programs are administered by the Alliance for Arts Education and the Friends of the Kennedy Center. Program support is received from the National Park Service and the regular tenants of the Center, which are the National Symphony Orchestra, Washington Performing Arts Society, and Opera Society of Washington.

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Administration

The National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, maintains and protects the Kennedy Center as a presidential memorial and provides security, information, interpretation, and other services necessary to the non-performing arts functions of the building through funds appropriated annually by the Congress.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior