Wes Guy and
New Birth at JAW:
Playwrights Festival,
Portland Center
Stage, 2013. Photo:
Patrick Weishampel

Books

E. Andrew Taylor

Cultural Structures, Strategies, and Subtexts

Building for the Arts: The Strategic Design of Cultural Facilities
by Peter Frumkin and Ana Kolendo
Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 2014

> Although architecture may appear to be rooted in pragmatism, it is a powerful and extraordinarily revealing expression of human psychology. . . . It also reflects the ambitions and insecurities and motivations of those who build; because of that, it offers a faithful reflection of the nature of power, its strategies, its consolations, and its impact on those who wield it.
> —Deyan Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex*

> Bad architecture is in the end as much a failure of psychology as of design. It is an example expressed through materials of the same tendencies which in other domains will lead us to marry the wrong people, choose inappropriate jobs, and book unsuccessful holidays: the tendency not to understand who we are and what will satisfy us.
> —Alain de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*

Architect and urban planner Daniel Hudson Burnham famously said (or was later paraphrased to say): "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood and probably themselves will not be realized. Make big plans; aim high in hope and work."[1] As the force behind such civic megaspaces as the city of Chicago and Washington, DC's National Mall, as well as Union Stations in Chicago, Washington, Pittsburgh, and El Paso, Burnham knew about big plans. In *Building for the Arts: The Strategic Design of Cultural Facilities*, we see in sometimes tragic detail why cultural facility projects *must*

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be big to attract attention, funding, and favor, and why they are so difficult to control once the blood is stirred.

A curious tension runs through Peter Frumkin and Ana Kolendo's strategy guide for cultural construction. It springs from the yearning for order and reason the authors bring to the subject, and that readers will likely bring as well, set against the relentless evidence of power, politics, wealth, and happenstance delivered by each richly written case study. The text speaks confidently about strategic alignment, but the subtext swirls with dramatic irony.

To be fair, much of this curious tension comes from the complex intersection where the book's subject lives. Planning, funding, building, and operating new or expanded arts facilities combine urban planning and architecture, sociology and psychology, economics and acoustics, politics and power, all at a significant scale and intensity among players who generally have not had a rehearsal before the show. All in all, *Building for the Arts* makes a solid contribution to understanding this highly complex work, even if it forces the strategy frameworks from time to time.

A 1994 "National Cultural Facilities Study" by the Nonprofit Facilities Fund (now the Nonprofit Finance Fund) first captured many of the dynamics described here, concluding that

> while arts organizations operate under tremendous constraints, they frequently undertake projects in ways that contribute directly to their problems. And despite lessons to be learned from such experiences, the field as a whole lacks a mechanism to do so. Among the prevalent practices:
>
> - Arts managers are often entrepreneurial, willing to take risks and most have a flair for drama. They seldom approach facility projects with the idea of incremental growth as a guiding principle.
> - Arts managers work in a highly competitive environment. They undertake their projects in isolation and lack (or avoid) advisors who question assumptions, challenge myths or share information learned from other projects.
> - Arts managers lack "early money," so they tend to commit to a project prematurely in order to spur fundraising. The process is turned around: it not only skips planning, but makes it difficult or impossible to back down from an early mistake.
> - Because fundraising is fluid and often runs concurrent with construction, decisions about projects are made out of context and in free-fall, spurred by momentary fundraising successes and uncontested by solid planning.[2]

Twenty years later, *Building for the Arts* reaches many of the same conclusions, offers deeper details, and strives to bridge some of the communication gaps, all with strikingly larger lessons to draw from. The Nonprofit Facilities Fund's 1994 study gathered ninety-three projects costing a grand total of $635 million among them. That amount would not cover the two largest projects in this book—the AT&T Performing

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Arts Center in Dallas and the Modern Wing of the Art Institute of Chicago—and would be a drop in the bucket of the cultural construction boom that was yet to come.

According to *Set in Stone: Building America's New Generation of Arts Facilities, 1994–2008*, the report of the study from which this new book evolved, there were some 725 significant cultural facility projects in the United States between 1994 and 2008, with a total construction cost of around $16 billion. The average cost of these projects was $21 million, and the median cost was $11 million, suggesting a number of large projects in the mix.[3] This scale of construction makes them civic projects rather than just organizational projects, demanding input, support, and authorization from a wide array of stakeholders. And the bold funding requirements lead them to animate and activate their community's network of wealth and power—for good and for ill.

Frumkin and Kolendo interweave twelve studies of cultural facility projects, which provide both the source and support for their narrative about successful strategies. Nine of the studies were built from intensive field research, including seventy-eight interviews with current and former executives, trustees, public officials, and artistic and community leaders, as well as insights from public records and internal documents. Three studies were constructed from public sources. The twelve examples represent performing and visual arts venues, in large and small cities, triumphant and troubled, of varying scales of construction. Regardless of size, all of the studies represent a "big" investment or bet for their organizations and supporters. The relative scale brings drama, consequence, and often intrigue to their process, all making for a fascinating if often horrifying read.

	Metropolitan Statistical Areas: Small (<2.5 million people)	Metropolitan Statistical Areas: Large (≥2.5 million people)
Museums	• Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, VA • Austin Museum of Art	• The Art Institute of Chicago • Contemporary Art Museum of the Presidio, San Francisco • Lorton Workhouse Arts Center, DC Metro • The Spertus Institute, Chicago
Performing Arts Centers	• Gerding Theater at the Armory for Portland Center Stage • Long Center for the Performing Arts, Austin, TX • Sandler Center for the Performing Arts, Virginia Beach,VA	• AT&T Performing Arts Center, Dallas • Harman Hall for Shakespeare Theatre Company, DC • Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre, Atlanta Metro Area

Case study selection grid from Peter Frumkin and Ana Kolendo's *Building for the Arts*. Courtesy of the University of Chicago Press

The book's structure draws from the authors' proposed framework for "strategic design," which lives in the tension or alignment among four cornerstones: mission, community, funding, and operational capacity. Arts organizations often seek facility projects to advance or enhance their *mission*, and their missions often come up for negotiation along the way. To move their projects, they must engage with many layers of their *community* for input, authorization, resources, or partnership. These buildings require *funding* for the "hard costs" of mechanical design and construction, the "soft costs" of architectural design and consultants, and the eventual bump in operating costs in the new facility, once opened. And they need *capacity* to consider, control, and complete a complex civic project and to run it effectively at its new scope and scale.

The four central chapters take each of these cornerstones in turn and offer the case

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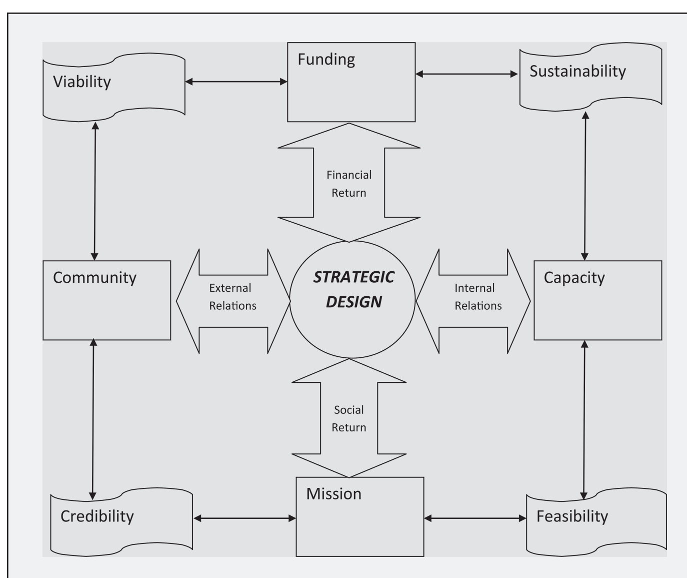
studies to tease out and talk through their dynamics. The preceding chapters explore the idea of strategic design and the elements of building decisions. The closing chapters summarize and synthesize the four cornerstones to consider their strategic alignment and to offer a summary "fifteen rules for the cultural builder to live by" (230–41).

The stories themselves are the stars of this book, rendered in extraordinary detail and depth, and with just the right touch of dramatic flair. Four of the cases are adaptations of those already available through the research-rich Set in Stone website (cultural-policy.uchicago.edu/setinstone/). But even these are integrated and expanded in important and revealing ways. The case studies range from the audacious but adaptive process informing the Modern Wing of the Art Institute of Chicago to the slow-motion train wreck of the Taubman Museum of Art in Roanoke, Virginia, which began as a small, frugal, and focused museum and ended as a modern architecture megaplex with an abandoned IMAX theater space and much of its floor plan below the flood plain.



Framework for strategic design from Peter Frumkin and Ana Kolendo's *Building for the Arts.* Courtesy of the University of Chicago Press

Other cases describe a wide spectrum of alignment, misalignment, and misalliance, with some groups muscling through and others getting lost along the way. The Portland (Oregon) Center Stage theater company, for example, begins its facility journey with an artistic and programmatic challenge—unable to produce the work they want in a large and inflexible city-owned venue—and ends with a well-suited building but with expenses and outstanding loans as their new constraint. The Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, DC, evolves from a classical theater company with exclusive use of its venue to a presenting organization that shares its space—confusing and exhausting its board, staff, and donors along the way, but eventually (perhaps) finding a new balance. The Long Center for the Performing Arts in Austin, Texas, overcomes frequent and persistent setbacks with a relentless focus on costs and benefits and a collective commitment to make hard choices.

Each story captures the personal, social, political, and financial struggle underlying these initiatives and the complex balancing act they demand. These stories contribute important insight and context to a relatively thin published knowledge base in the field. There is continual connection (although oddly the book is missing a reference) to the essential work of the Nonprofit Finance Fund and its founder, Clara Miller, which formed the early foundation for this type of case-informed inquiry.[4] And there is strong alignment with related work recently completed in the Nonprofit Finance Fund's Leading for the Future initiative around "change capital."[5]

But while the case narratives are rich and rewarding, and the literature references

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The Orchestra-level lobby of Sidney Harman Hall, Shakespeare Theatre Company, Washington, DC. Photo: Tom Arban

are robust, the strategy narrative can occasionally feel stiff and awkward. The four cornerstones of mission, community, funding, and operational capacity (reminiscent of the Nonprofit Finance Fund's "iron triangle" of mission and program, capital structure, and organizational capacity)[6] offer a useful map to navigate the issues and an effective structure for the book. But it is frequently obvious that the map does not correspond to the terrain. On the ground, projects can be insanely convoluted and cluttered, even as the map seeks structure and pattern—sometimes where there is none.

As an example, the authors are overly fond of the two-by-two matrix (I count six of them), which strives to contain a multitude in four quadrants. This is particularly problematic in the four boxes mapping an organization's (mis)alignment at a project's beginning and at its end. In truth, each organization began its journey aligned in some ways and misaligned in others, and those alignments shifted to an equally complex and evolving state after the project. Further, it seems possible that many of the "misaligned" projects were actually elegantly aligned with a hidden or flawed agenda.

Elsewhere, the authors try to compress the potential purposes and goals for cultural facilities (and other forms of culture) into a "simple taxonomy" that is vastly too simple: "transcendent," involving the power of the art itself, and "worldly," involving the deployment of art for a different public good. This creates more of a trap than a map and gives cultural leaders and communities little room to think broadly.

There is nothing wrong with a strategic lens, and this book is at its best when the lens and case narrative find common focus. But the vast and compelling evidence the authors assemble suggests that oversimplifying and overseparating the strategic challenges of these complex initiatives can be just as damaging as charging forward

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Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, VA. Photo: Timothy Hursely

with no strategy at all. Several of the summary "rules for the cultural builder to live by" (230–41) suffer from this disconnect. The directives to "fund operations and endowment as you go," "start [the] project when all the money is in hand," "wait to announce the building budget until you are certain you have a solid number," or "have a plan B for major swings in the local economy and changes in local politics" are improbable or impossible given the very examples they have presented. It is a bit like instructing someone about to climb a mountain to avoid inclined terrain.

As organizational theorist Russell L. Ackoff framed the challenge of being too specific or distinct in strategy or action: "Managers are not confronted with problems that are independent of each other, but with dynamic situations that consist of complex systems of changing problems that interact with each other."[7] Ackoff called these situations "messes." And the cultural facility projects described in this book could be poster children for his definition.

Overall, however, the book does an outstanding job of making sense of the temporary collective insanity cultural facility projects represent, and often *have* to represent to be achieved. There are tools and frameworks here that every board member, artist, manager, funder, architect, citizen, or public official involved in cultural facility initiatives should know. And there are enough stories of triumph and tragedy to block any such leaders from claiming their projects are entirely unique in the world. The trick is in balancing the many truths and many demands of these initiatives with an adaptable bundle of frameworks and frames.

Modern architecture pioneer Le Corbusier wrote that a house is a machine for living in. By extension, cultural facilities could be considered machines for cultural production and experience, or mechanical and structural backdrops for the human activity they contain. Through this lens, their construction is wide open to intention and design, and their process is ripe for strategy and clarity. They are machines, after all, and machines are subject to their designers' oversight and will. But as architecture scholar and urban planner Bill Hillier warns, the perspective of buildings as "machines" can often block our true understanding of their nature and of the processes that form them:

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> The paradigm of the machine sets up the built environment as no more than an inert physical background to the behaviour and experiences of people. . . . This blinds the enquirer to the most significant single fact about the built environment: that it is not simply a background to social behaviour—it is itself a social behaviour. Prior to being experienced by subjects, it is already imbued with patterns which reflect its origin in the behaviours through which it is created.[8]

The inescapable subtext in *Building for the Arts* is that cultural facilities are built from subtext as much as from stone. Those who propose, support, design, construct, and inhabit them bring an unending array of motivations, expectations, and perspectives to the task, some explicit, some hidden, some unknown. The "make no little plans" scale of their ambition and expense subjects them to a tempest of wealth, politics, and power, from which some emerge invigorated, but none emerge unchanged.

Cultural buildings are subtext made solid. *Building for the Arts* does not always teach this lesson explicitly, but it teaches it nonetheless.

NOTES

1. Charles Moore, *Daniel H. Burnham, Architect, Planner of Cities*, vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), 147.
2. Ellen Arrick and Ann Seamster, "National Cultural Facilities Study," Nonprofit Facilities Fund, March 1994, nonprofitfinancefund.org/research-resources/national-cultural-facilities-study-1994, 5.
3. Joanna Woronkowicz et al., *Set in Stone: Building America's New Generation of Arts Facilities, 1994–2008* (Chicago: Cultural Policy Center, University of Chicago, June 2012), 9, culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/sites/culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/files/setinstone/pdf/setinstone.pdf.
4. The most compelling precursor to this book's case studies can be found in Tony Proscio and Clara Miller, "Rising in Stages: How Steppenwolf Excelled, First on the Boards, Then in the Boardroom, and Ultimately on the Balance Sheet," Nonprofit Finance Fund, 2003, nonprofitfinancefund.org/files/docs/2010/SteppenwolfWebVersion.pdf.
5. Nonprofit Finance Fund, "Leading for the Future: Innovative Support for Artistic Excellence," nonprofitfinancefund.org/LFF (accessed February 13, 2015).
6. Clara Miller, "Linking Mission and Money: An Introduction to Nonprofit Capitalization," Nonprofit Finance Fund, 2001, 3, kresge.org/sites/default/files/Linking%20Mission%20and%20Money.pdf.
7. Russell L. Ackoff, "The Future of Operational Research Is Past," *Journal of the Operational Research Society* 30, no. 2 (1979): 99.
8. Bill Hillier, *Space Is the Machine: A Configurational Theory of Architecture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 388–89.

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