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## New plan for symphony hall

Atlanta Business Chronicle - by [Maria Saporta](#) Contributing Writer

A master planning effort by the **Woodruff Arts Center** has figured out a way to locate a new symphony hall at the corner of Peachtree and 15th streets, currently a plaza area for the existing campus.

The board of the **Atlanta Symphony Orchestra** on March 9 endorsed shifting the focus for a new concert hall from 14th Street to the new site.

Under the new plan, a “sliver” of the existing Memorial Arts Center would have to be removed to make room for a new concert hall. **Sasaki Associates Inc.**, the planning and architectural firm hired to do the master plan, also figured out a way for the new hall to connect to the existing backstage facilities at the Arts Center.

“Sasaki has brought a solution that we did not think existed before,” said Joe Bankoff, president of the Woodruff Arts Center. “It’s just a remarkable opportunity.”

The ASO had been planning to build a new concert hall on 14th Street in the middle of the block between Peachtree and West Peachtree streets. A \$300 million hall was designed by renowned Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava. The fanciful design included a building with a couple of wings that would take flight during a performance.

About \$100 million in private dollars were raised for the project, but an anticipated \$100 million in state and local funding never materialized, so the new concert hall never came out of the ground.

“I think one of the reasons the project stalled was because there were concerns about whether that was the right site and whether it had the appropriate relationship to the existing center,” said Ben Johnson, retired managing partner of **Alston & Bird LLP**, who is chairing the ASO board.

“The ideal is to have an iconic structure on an iconic site,” Johnson added. “Everybody conceded that the Calatrava design was an iconic design, but there wasn’t unanimity that the 14th Street site was an iconic site. One site may need wings. Another site may not need wings.”

It is not yet known whether Calatrava would design the hall at the new site.

“Calatrava certainly will be among the architects we will be talking to as we go forward,” Johnson said. “We have much hope that he will want to be involved in the process as it unfolds.”

Bankoff said the master planning process is evolving and includes every division in the Woodruff Arts Center — the **Alliance Theatre**, the High Museum of Art and enhanced educational facilities for students.

Larry Gellerstedt, president of **Cousins Properties Inc.**, who chaired the master planning steering committee for the center, said the first decision that needed to be nailed down was where to locate a new symphony hall because of its large footprint.

Four sites were considered in the planing process — 14th Street, above the Arts Center MARTA Station, developer John Weiland’s Museum Tower site across Peachtree Street and 15th Street.

“The big breakthrough was figuring out a way to get the prominence of the 15th Street/Peachtree location,” Gellerstedt said. “The side benefit is that there are huge cost savings by being able to use the existing support infrastructure. The 15th Street option is just an outstanding option for the future.”

Because of the potential cost savings of removing about 60,000 square feet from the project, Gellerstedt said that “this option makes the project more feasible than the previous alternative.”

Bankoff said the center is still working on cost estimates of the new hall and the master plan, which was paid for by the **Robert W. Woodruff Foundation** and the Midtown Improvement District. He hopes to be able to present a more definitive plan to the Woodruff Arts Center board in May.

One of the major advantages of the new plan is that all elements of the center will continue to be part of the same campus with two major bookends along Peachtree — the High Museum on 16th Street and the new symphony hall at 15th.

Bankoff said it will allow the center to continue to build on the notion of creating a cultural village.

The village concept was advanced by Italian architect Renzo Piano, who designed the High’s new addition. In fact, Piano once had proposed putting symphony hall at 15th Street. But his solution would have removed a large part of the front of the existing Memorial Arts

Center, an unpopular idea at the time.

Bankoff also insisted that the master plan was a 25-year plan for the entire center, and not just for the ASO. The hope would be that a new educational facility would be built at the Arts Center MARTA Station and that there would be a new performance venue in the heart of the center for the Alliance Theatre.

The plan would be built out in several phases.

It is still expected that a new symphony hall and a renovated Woodruff Arts Center would require government support. But Bankoff views that it would be an investment to stimulate the local economy.

The center was built in 1968 with an investment of \$8 million, a project that came before the Colony Square development and the rest of Midtown's high-rises.

"The center created \$7 billion in taxable real estate to be constructed," Bankoff said. "The time has come for the region to reinvest in a plan that says this is a creative community."

Bankoff hopes there will be a "combination of political leadership and community will" to reinvest in the Woodruff Arts Center and a new symphony hall.

Still, Woodruff Arts Center leaders recognize that it is a difficult time to launch a major new cultural initiative.

"We want to avoid false starts and unrealistic expectations at a time when all arts organizations are challenged and at a time when funding sources are few and far between," Johnson said.

But it was hard to contain the excitement that officials had about the new master plan.

"This new solution figures out how to take the best address in Atlanta and bring a new vitality to the core of the campus," Johnson said. The hope is that once the economy turns around, Atlanta will be ready to move forward with a new symphony hall and a revived Woodruff Arts Center.

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