



RIVER MUSIC

Acrisure Amphitheater provides Grand Rapids with a major new venue

By: David Barbour



Having opened in May with a concert starring Lionel Richie, Acrisure Amphitheater is poised to change the profile of concert touring in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The \$184-million project, located on a city-owned site, is a sleek, amenity-filled venue that accommodates 12,000 patrons (7,000 seated and 5,000 on the adjacent lawn). It is off and running with a schedule that includes Jerry Seinfeld, The Goo Goo Dolls, Five Finger Death Punch, Hilary Duff, Brandi Carlile, Tim McGraw, Josh Groban, Pitbull, Billy Idol, Mumford & Sons, John Mulaney, and The B-52s.

Acrisure Amphitheater is scheduled to host 54 ticketed events each year while anchoring a redevelopment plan designed to transform 31 acres along the Grand River. The completed development features ten acres of riverfront green space, recreation, retail, and commercial opportunities, and 1,700 housing units for people of all incomes.

According to materials provided by The Progressive Companies, the project's architecture and engineering firm, the City of Grand Rapids has long planned to develop the site. It notes, "The site needed to provide pathways to the river and reestablish public access to the waterfront. The site needed to connect to the city center and continue the character of the built environment and public plazas. The site needed to be a catalyst for continued redevelopment and growth to the south."

The new building is billed as one of only a few truly urban amphitheaters in the US, and, as such, posed numerous challenges, including sound bleed, loading, utilities, and circulation. "Most notably on this site, all four edges of the project have important interactions with the city," the company says. As a result, "The river's edge needed to facilitate a pedestrian experience and connect to trails extending north and south. The design team also found planning efficiencies to create a small pocket park as a place of respite along the trail." On the Market Street side, "by setting any built elements back away from the sidewalk, the design created a large urban plaza that could be both an element to expand the concourse and crowds during events but also serve as public space for seasonal events and public festivals."

Erick Leininger, a senior lighting designer at The Progressive Companies, notes that Route 131, where the venue is located, is the main north-south artery. "As it comes through downtown Grand Rapids, it makes an 'S' turn. There was a plot of land there, just south of the road, where it kept its salt sheds. It was a really underutilized piece of land." The city was already in the middle of conversations about downtown revitalization, he adds, and the salt shed site was identified as a potential location for an amphitheater that could attract bigger-name acts. "It's rare to put such a venue in a downtown area," he notes.

The need for such a venue was real: Grand Rapids



Above and previous: The venue, which accommodates 12,000 patrons (7,000 seated and 5,000 on the lawn) is said to be one of a very few truly urban amphitheatres in the US. The shape of the canopy was inspired by the image of a leaf in the Grand River.

has DeVos Performance Hall, which, with 2,543 seats, acts as the city's Broadway roadhouse and provides a home for the local symphony, ballet, and opera companies. For indoor pop concerts (as well as sports), there's Van Andel Arena, which accommodates 12,000. But there was no comparably sized outdoor venue for summer touring. In an area where outdoor activities like hiking, birdwatching, camping, and water sports (Lake Michigan is nearby) are popular, such a music venue seemed mandated. Indeed, the design reflects this connection to nature. Leininger says: "The form of the building's canopy references back to nature." He adds that the shape is inspired by the image of a leaf floating in the Grand River.

The structure

One central principle for the design team was to ensure good sightlines for all. With a canopy covering thousands of seats, it wasn't acceptable to drop columns into audience sightlines. The solution was a steel-framed structure that spans 360' tip to tip, all supported by two column nodes and the concrete stagehouse. A 30'-tall structure at the major spans in the middle tapers down to a knife edge at the perimeter. The canopy serves as a light canvas for performances, marries into the rigging grid above the stage, and tilts upward as an invitation for all seats to be a part of the event. Major structural loads are all combined in two custom cast-steel structural nodes that ground over six million pounds of force so that the struc-

ture deflects less than 1'.

According to the construction firm Barton Malow, "Topping out was celebrated in March of 2025 following the installation of 2,000,000lb of structural steel placed for the canopy, which stretches a football field wide and long and as deep as a two-story house. Due to its size, the canopy had to be assembled on-site, with four shoring towers used during the erection process before the six permanent columns—three on each side—were installed, converging into two nodes at ground level that provide unobstructed audience views and support a canopy that will enhance acoustics. Each node weighs approximately



Amenities include eight dressing rooms (above), an artists' lounge (below center), and patron restrooms (bottom) featuring occupancy indicator light systems.



venue's acoustic performance."

As the photo on the previous spread shows, the underside of the canopy is an elaborate metal beam structure. "The initial concepts had a full skin on the side, so it was entirely clad," Leininger says. "As a lighting designer, it made me nervous because the columns are so minimal that there weren't many positions for mounting units that could provide uplight. It would have made it really challenging to treat the canopy as a canvas." The decision to abandon the cladding was in part budgetary, but it allowed Leininger to do something innovative. "Coming from the theatre, I said, 'Let's get lighting up there and use it as a truss-warming element'."

Further examination of the design gave Leininger an idea. "I rotated a view of the design in the computer, which had me looking straight up at the underside of the canopy.

16,000lb and is supported by 25 micropiles, each approximately 100' deep. The nodes were manufactured in a Brazilian foundry in partnership with Canadian-based Cast Connex, which provided steel solutions for major projects across the industry, including SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles and the Sphere in Las Vegas."

Another firm, LPR Construction, reports, "The project included cast steel bases anchored with fourteen 2" bolts, supporting three 30" pipe columns sloping outward from a single base to 50' spans. Topping the structure is a football-shaped roof with a 345' clear span and 27' depth."

Cast Connex designed and supplied custom castings that support the canopy roof structure. The company says it "provided a pair of eight-ton tri-column cast steel nodes that anchor the long-span canopy roof. These architecturally exposed structural steel (AESS) components resolve a highly visible and structurally demanding condition, allowing six steel columns to converge seamlessly while maintaining unobstructed views and supporting the



It revealed this distinctive diagonal bracing pattern that our engineers had designed. It really jumped off the screen, and immediately I thought, what if we grazed that, and highlighted the diagrid?"

Ultimately, he says, the canopy lighting system breaks down into three components: "There's a traditional house lighting system; a truss-warming system, meant to provide a wash of light across the structure; and a system mounted to the HSS [hollow structural section] steel diagonal bracing, which grazes light across the narrow bracing to create a layered effect and complete the look." Incidentally, the canopy lighting also serves to light the audience, adding an extra-theatrical note to every performance.

"I've been to a few shows there, and it's fun to see how some of the touring lighting designers are embracing that canvas," Leininger says. "There's a layer of bird netting that goes across the underside, and some of the touring LDs have picked up on that, too, using it to project templates and effects from some of the moving units doing aerial effects. It was a fun canvas for me, and I think it's fun for them, too."

Also, Leininger says, "The canopy lights and the integrated façade lighting, which consists of backlit panels, were designed from a control perspective. Tours can actually take control of the system, allowing them to extend their touring rigs. It's especially exciting with the facades that wrap the entire seating bowl, flanking the house at stage left and stage right and around the audience out on the lawn." The panels, he adds, "really create an immersive environment. To be able to build on the house lighting, extending the stage lighting beyond the stage—that's really exciting, I think."

The house lighting is run on an ETC Paradigm system, with plenty of inputs for touring LDs to hook up their consoles. Leininger notes that he consulted with the well-known concert-touring lighting designer Paul "Arlo" Guthrie (Nine Inch Nails, Olivia Rodrigo, Halsey, and many others) on the system. "I wanted advice about whether touring LDs would take advantage of it if we built it this way. He was pretty supportive; he had some suggestions on how to make it easier."

The canopy is lit using Lumenpulse gear, chosen, Leininger says, for "their robustness and longevity." The units, he adds, "are all Streaming ACN-based, except the house lights, which, because of their integration with the emergency lighting, are basically DMX." The backlit panels were supplied by GVA Lighting. "They have a really interesting system," he says. "It's a 380V DC power supply, which allowed us to feed one continuous façade off a single power supply and a single feed point at one end. It is designed to work on bridges and other long spans." The stage is 10,000 sq. ft. in size and adapts to smaller performances; it features an extendable pit and an IA Stage

SkyAscend self-climbing truss system, which travels a vertical distance of 60' at a fixed speed of 20' per minute with a user load of 2,800lb. The entire assembly, including the hoist mechanics, is designed to be lowered to a comfortable working height for maintenance or for making changes to front-of-house lighting while the crew remains safely on the ground. The house followspots are run on a PRG GroundControl system.

Irwin Seating supplied more than 6,000 Centura chairs throughout the venue, including a premium club area featuring Centura Mesh high-back chairs with custom integrated drink tables.

AV systems

Because of the venue's location, there was considerable concern about sound bleed. Ryan Knox, a vice-president at the engineering and technical consulting firm Salas O'Brien, which dealt with acoustical issues and AV systems, says, "There were quite a few discussions early on about the residences closest to the building." To deal with this issue, he notes, a berm was added to fill in the space, directing sound away from where it isn't wanted.

A house loudspeaker system directs sound to patrons seated on the lawn in back. "The integration of the poles and the placement of the system work better than in a lot of venues," Knox says. "The poles are fairly elegant architectural designs with big speaker arrays hanging off them." Leininger adds, "Those designs were a heavy lift. We didn't want the standard poles, so we have a custom curved design."

The speaker system consists of an L-Acoustics K3 compact, full-range, two-way active dual-12" line source speaker system; the units are designed for mid-size events of 1,000 to 10,000 people, delivering large-format performance in a smaller footprint. Key features for this application include Panflex, which provides quick access to four horizontal directivity patterns; L-Vents, a progressive laminar vent design, which is said to minimize turbulence noise and boost low-frequency output; and the company's well-known Wavefront Sculpture Technology. The speakers are IP55-rated for protection against dust and low-pressure water jets. Control is provided via a DiGiCo SD9 console.

In terms of video, Knox says, "We put in many broadcast cabling production tie lines. There are also video screens and a video server to play B-roll or advertising and such." Of course, he adds, "Any sort of cameras and switching is either rented or brought in by the tour." The house video screens consist of Absen Polaris PL 3.9 V3 LED tiles, using NovaStar processing. The PL V3 Series' die-casting magnesium cabinet features a dual-layer design that, the company says, delivers a combination of strength and lightness; 500-by-1,000mm panels weigh just 26.46lb each and 500-by-500mm panels come in at 15.43lb each. The company says the product's advanced construction effectively resists warping,



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minimizes vibration transmission, and extends product lifespan, making it suitable for long summer runs.

Other amenities

In addition to regular seating and the lawn, patrons can opt for the three-level Market Deck, which comes with its own cash bar; the three-level Riverside Deck, available as a private party option; or the Riverside Lounge, offering comfortable seating, a private bar, and enhanced food offerings.

Another key goal was to provide first-class amenities for the talent and support teams. Eight loading docks are built into the structure. Parking for tour buses is well placed, and various workspaces are provided for touring staff. The venue includes eight dressing rooms, and an artist lounge

complete with an active balcony overlooking Market Avenue, as well as an on-site cafeteria.

Although planning took place during COVID, once construction began, it moved on a fast track. “Winter was coming, and there were many things that the construction team had to do before it froze outside,” Knox says. “There was a significant rush to get a lot of grading, dirt work, and concrete done at the right time. The construction team managed that marvelously. Everything that happened, they took it in stride and figured out how to solve it.”

Acrisure Amphitheater is booked through October, and dates are already being announced for the 2027 summer season. 📶