

# Boston Triangle

By: David Barbour

## MGM Music Hall at Fenway gives the city its first major midsize concert venue

Boston's music scene got something new and necessary last August with the opening of the MGM Music Hall at Fenway. The city can accommodate concerts large and small, but it took a partnership between Live Nation and the Red Sox to create a 5,000-seat venue for a variety of concert acts. The building also contains a substantial events space and houses amenities for baseball fans attending a game at Fenway. Not bad since it was carved out of a triangular parking space adjacent to the ballpark. A publicity release from Walters-Storyk Design Group, part of the building's design team, calls it "snug;" that doesn't begin to cover it.

MGM Music Hall opened with an eclectic series of concerts featuring Godsmack, James Taylor and His All-Star Band, Bruno Mars, and Lil Nas X. Since then, it has hosted, among others, Jack Harlow, Demi Lovato, Arcade Fire, Beck, The 1975, and deadmau5. It is also becoming a popular spot for e-sports such as *Call of Duty League 2*. The new mayor, Michelle Wu, used it for her first state-of-the-city address.

And it seems clear that MGM Music Hall is finding favor with its clients. James Taylor told the local radio station WBUR. "What we love about [playing] arenas is the size of the audience. A large room like the MGM Fenway theatre holds enough

people to get that same energy, but with a clarity and intimacy that you miss in the bigger places. So, this is really the best of both worlds."

According to Jim Sullivan, a reporter for WBUR, the building was conceived as a partnership between

tive, told WBUR. "I think the geometry of the site presented us with certain challenges, but it afforded an opportunity to look at it differently, [making the space] less square or rectangular. We looked at the triangular shape and thought, how do we



The building sits on a triangular space, a former parking lot adjacent to Fenway Park. "It is not in the quietest place on Earth," Morris says. "To the north is a corridor of fun times, including bars, restaurants, and the House of Blues, which are open late. The Massachusetts Turnpike is right there, too. It's a curtain of sound."

Live Nation and the Red Sox in 2017. "They wanted synchronicity between Fenway and the MGM," Sullivan writes, "a similar kind of intimacy, something both ballplayers and fans have long praised about the ballpark." Like everything else, construction was delayed by the pandemic, leading to the opening in August 2022.

Jonathan Gilula, a Red Sox execu-

maximize the boundaries we have to create a special unparalleled experience?"

The space on which the building was erected was previously used by mobile production trucks involved in broadcasting Red Sox games. According to DAIQ Architects, the theatre occupies 86,500 sq. ft. and features four levels. DAIQ has a long-term



relationship with the Red Sox organization, most notably in a multi-year plan to improve the ballpark's infrastructure, life safety, concession areas, and restrooms, while adding new high-definition video boards and advertising signage, in addition to renovations to press areas, premium seating, luxury suites, club seating, and lounge areas. When the time came to design and build the music hall, the firm was the logical candidate.

Dave Sliwinski, principal of DAIQ Architects, says, "The site contained was an existing structure called the Laundry Building. The pointed portion of the parcel was used for a TV truck parking lot. We demolished half the Laundry Building. The part that remained accommodates loading docks and back of house spaces."

Sliwinski adds that one of the biggest challenges was "designing acoustically for three different functions: the theatre, the 500-seat func-



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## CLOSE-UP: NEW VENUE

tion space [known as the Founders' Room], and the ballpark. All three had to be accommodated, especially with the possibility of them all being used at the same time." He notes that Fenway is a very crowded, busy neighborhood. "This impacted the design. There were certainly numerous treatments of walls and surfaces to accommodate the transmission of sound." In addition, he notes, an expansion joint was installed to block the transmission of vibrations between the buildings.

Walters-Storyk Design Group was brought onboard to assist with project programming and master planning of the space, consulting on both internal room acoustics and electroacoustic design, as well as full AV design of the facility, including distributed audio and video systems, sightline review, and acoustic isolation.

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and the House of Blues, which are open late. The Massachusetts Turnpike is right there, too. It's a curtain of sound." Morris also had to worry about sound emissions. "There are residences nearby and that, too, was a huge concern. We didn't just drop a huge concrete box over the whole thing. We had to be very smart and selective about how we approached it."

To guarantee sound isolation, Morris says, "We looked quite closely at things like doors. If you have people going in and out during the show, that's a leak. But we also considered wall thickness and air space. When it comes to isolation, generally, there are the only two strategies that work. We used them in concert with each other. We also looked at the roof. It helped that we are in the North and need a little more structural heft to deal with snow. We also focused on ductwork penetration, making sure it was correctly designed. We also looked at the load-in area."

The layout of the theatre, Sliwinski

says, "was dictated by the shape of the site. The upper two tiers have fixed seating. The ground floor can be standing room, or temporary seating can be brought in. It's an unusual space in that Live Nation also wanted layouts for, say, boxing matches, basketball games, and e-sport functions. It's really intended to be a multifunctional space." The seating was supplied by Irwin Seating.

Making room for refreshments was a priority. "Ten different bars are built into the theatre," Sliwinski says, adding that there are "at least two or three per level. There are also specialty bars, the VIP lounge, and the upper-level terrace." The latter "has a bar that overlooks Lansdowne Street, which is an entertainment zone. The intent was to provide many point-of-service locations to service the participants."

Backstage amenities include eight dressing rooms and the usual production spaces. "We have staff offices, a catering space, kitchens, and offices for the theatre's management along with other technical rooms, such as AV and lighting control booths surrounding the stage," Sliwinski says. "There are also two viewing spaces on the loge level that overlook the stage. They're reserved for special guests who want to see the goings-on." Are there really nights when a ballgame is on, the theatre is open, and the Founder's Room, which has a separate entrance and accommodates up to 500, is hosting an event of some sort? "It's happened at least a few times," he adds.

The venue features state-of-the-art AV infrastructure, utilizing Clair Cohesion arrays designed to accommodate a wide variety of events. The loudspeaker rig includes 22 Clair CO10 speakers set to a 120° coverage pattern, three CO8s set to an 80° pattern, 212 Cohesion 218 subs, and CM14 stage monitors. If it's a bit unusual to see a venue for touring acts set up with its own touring rig, Morris says, "I don't think they wanted downtime of changeovers," espe-



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Photo: Chris Stapleton



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cially since acts move in and out with such regularity. "Having a good house system that people can trust" is one of the room's selling points. "Some acts will strike the Cohesion speakers," he says, adding that most will not. Certainly, the Cohesion products are concert touring standards and most front-of house engineers are likely to be familiar with them.

The same is true of the house console, an Avid S6L-48D, which is used regularly in concert touring. Morris notes the likelihood of more acts preferring to use their own mixers, which are already programmed, but the Avid option exists for anyone who needs it. Indeed, it will likely be popular for other kinds of events, including e-sports. For them, or any other users, a choice of DPA 4018V-B-SE2 and Neumann KK 104 S-BK mic capsules is available, along with a collection of Shure mics: Beta 52As, SM57s, SM58s, and SM81s. Also on hand are

Sennheiser EM 3732 II receivers and SKM 5200-II BK-L-US transmitters, plus Sennheiser EK 2000 receivers and SR 2050XP transmitters for in-ear monitoring.

Also, Samsung, Crestron, and Chief video displays are installed the theatre on all levels in addition to Clair and QSC speakers in the bars and restroom areas. The theatre's AV rack room features Lab Gruppen and Lake amplifiers and QSC processing for the lobby, club, loge, and restroom areas. A Listen Technologies hearing assistance system is also available.

The client, Morris notes, "put a big emphasis on the correct engineering approach, making sure that everything was stripped down to the absolute necessity. They did an excellent job of playing to their strengths while being good stewards of their money. It's not extravagant, but neither did they throw up a little shoebox and bank on

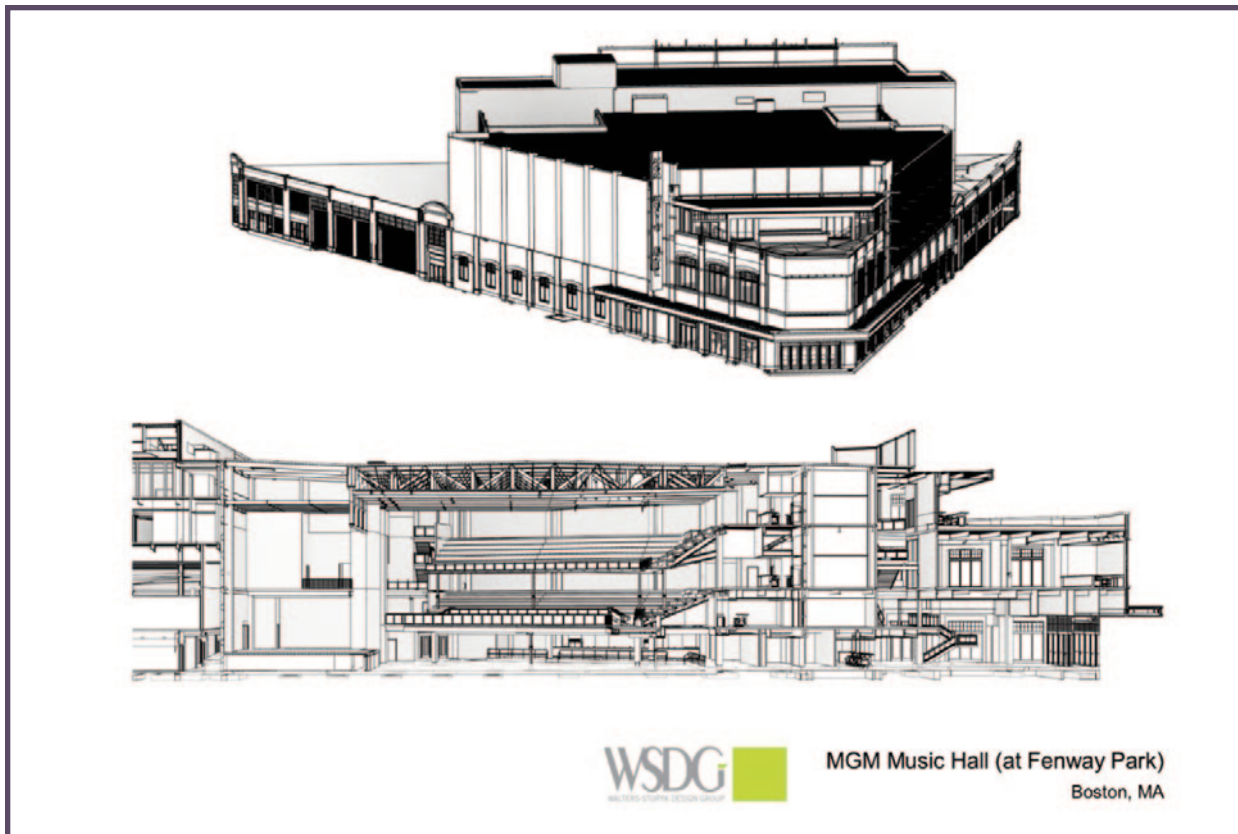
their name getting people through the door." He adds, "DAIQ's understanding of the client and familiarity with the park" were key advantages. "I cannot image doing this project with someone new coming into it. They have great insight into the client and the site, which ensured the success of the project."

## Lighting

Chris Barbee, vice-president of sales and integration at Bandit Lites, the provider of the theatre's lighting package, says, "The venue is a little bit unique for Live Nation. A higher level of production was desired for it because the goal is to get bigger acts than would normally play a room of that size." Therefore, he adds, it was important "to make it friendly enough that they don't have to hang their rigs if they don't want to. We talked to the local Live Nation production folks. Mike Marchetti [director of production,



## CLOSE-UP: NEW VENUE



This cutaway view shows how a venue of this size was fitted into a small and unusually shaped footprint.

New England, Live Nation] has done all of the company's concert stuff at Fenway Park; he knows everyone involved and their expectations." Marchetti made it clear that Live Nation "wanted to step it up a bit, with an extensive package for the venue." The result, Barbee adds, is "a pretty beefy rig for acts that don't travel with lighting. If they do, we have a method to make the changeover easy. There are two sets of motors; one for the rig in play and one for storing the rig behind the upstage black drape. One goes out, flying upstage of the black drape so nobody knows it's there, and the other goes in." To move truss around, Barbee says, "We did four motors on trusses at upstage, downstage, and the front of house. It allows them to get to a bare stage and bare rigging in about an hour."

The system was put to the test in the first week, when Bruno Mars appeared with his own lighting system. "The house rig was put in stor-

age," Barbee says. "Then a local band was booked for the next day, so they had to put the house rig back in. Again, with our system, you can do it in an hour with four guys. It gives them a lot of flexibility in how they use the venue."

The house rig includes 12 High End Systems SolaSpot 3000s, 30 Chauvet Professional R2 Wash units, 12 Claypaky Axcor Beam 300s, ten Chauvet E-260WW Lekos, and six Chauvet Strike 4 blinders. "Live Nation has gone through an evolution of its gear," Barbee says. "We've standardized, over a fairly long period, to gear that is reliable, affordable, and fit the needs of the venues."

However, Barbee adds, "At the time we specified this project, Chauvet didn't have a good spot fixture with the horsepower reliability and acceptability for visiting acts. That's why we went with the High End product, because it's a big venue with a high trim. We also put in a

Follow-Me [followspot tracking] system and used the SolaSpot with it."

The Axcor Beam 300 was chosen, Barbee says, because "we really wanted a beam fixture that was LED. In smaller venues, we've been specifying [Elation Professional] DARTZ 360s, which are really inexpensive but not bright enough to compete with the rest of the rig. The downside to the Axcor is that it only has a color wheel, but it's a good fixture and it has the punch we need."

Speaking about Follow-Me, Barbee says, "We have used it in some permanent installs. The first was at the Muny in St. Louis which did a major renovation [See LSA, October 2019] bringing in hundreds of Chauvet fixtures. This is the first Follow-Me system that we've done for Live Nation." It was a logical solution, he notes. "They knew they would need followspots but they didn't want to kill any seating capacity; it was a very late addition to the project

and, with COVID and back orders, it was a real challenge to have it complete for the opening of the venue. But it has been a great solution for them.” Still, the room is designed to handle other followspot setups, too, Barbee notes. “We added a truss farther out in the house to provide a better angle for the Follow-Me fixtures. This truss has space and infrastructure to allow other systems like the Robe RoboSpot package.”

The house console is an Avolites Tiger Touch. “Live Nation has pretty much standardized the Tiger Touch in its venues,” Barbee says, adding that this practice came in part from the corporation’s purchase of the House of Blues chain, where Avo products were already fairly standard. He notes that it is the right console for a theatre that accommodates acts on all production levels. “Bruno Mars isn’t going to use it,” he says. “His team will bring their own desk. But it doesn’t make sense to spend money on a grandMA when it will be used for only a third of the shows.” The Tiger Touch is “a great busking console,” he notes, making it ideal for such situations. “If an act comes in without an LD, the house guy won’t have programmed anything. If you’re winging it, it’s better to do with a board that costs less and has more functionality.”

In addition to the gear already mentioned, the rig features two The FAB hazers from hazebase, Tyler Truss, Chainmaster chain hoists, an Applied Electronic motor distro, and TMB cable as well as drapes from iWeiss.

MGM Music Hall at Fenway continues to attract a broad range of acts. As of this writing, the upcoming schedule include Bush, Boyz II Men, Dropkick Murphys, Jill Scott, Kool & the Gang, The Pixies, The Postal Service, Death Cab for Cutie, and Lady A. At last, Boston has the mid-size venue it has always lacked and the neighborhood around the ballpark is more happening than ever. 🎵