

US & WORLD

Jones Hall, the building that expanded Houston's horizons

1966: Goodbye, rats and folding chairs. Hello, red carpet and marble.

Steven Fenberg, for the Houston Chronicle

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Jones Hall under construction in 1965. For more vintage photos, scroll through the gallery.
Curtis McGee/Houston Chronicle

Houston evolved from a provincial boomtown in the late 1950s into a sophisticated city during the 1960s. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston pushed the momentum in 1958 when it opened its elegant Cullinan Hall designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. The Manned Spacecraft Center was established in 1961 to explore space and send man to the moon. The first air-conditioned domed stadium in the world opened with great fanfare in 1965. And the gleaming Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts—the first building in Houston’s Theater District and the first building of its size to adjust acoustics with a movable ceiling—rose like a phoenix from the decrepit City Auditorium’s ashes in 1966.

When patrons walked into Jones Hall for the first time, they entered a new epoch in Houston. Their notion of what was possible in Houston instantly expanded as they stepped onto the sea of deep red carpet reaching to off-white travertine walls that soared 66 feet up to Richard Lippold's sweeping and sparkling Gemini II sculpture.

Jesse Jones—Houston's preeminent developer during the first half of the 20th century and one of the most powerful people in the nation during the Great Depression and World War II—understood that a great city needed great art. He had moved to Houston from Tennessee in 1898, when he was 24, to manage his Uncle M. T. Jones's vast lumber estate, which put him in the midst of the city's business and civic leadership.

These leaders knew they would prosper only if their community thrived. So as they were building their businesses, they simultaneously built organizations and infrastructure that would serve people, enhance life and help spur growth in the town of 40,000. Jones embraced this combined approach to public service and capitalism for the rest of his life.

Jones travelled extensively throughout Europe with his family and made treks to the east coast to secure financing for his building projects. During those trips, he saw renowned artists performing in glorious concert halls, and he wanted the same for Houston. So he and others lobbied the city government to build the City Auditorium to attract acclaimed performing artists and touring companies. Jones, the go-to guy when something big needed to happen in Houston, was appointed building chairman.

From the time the Romanesque-style building opened in 1910, it presented the most celebrated performers, from Enrico Caruso to Elvis Presley. The Houston Symphony called it home from 1931 to 1955. Also memorable to some were Morris Sigel's Friday night wrestling matches, which in the 1950s were broadcast to eager television audiences. The Symphony musicians sometimes gasped at what they stepped over the next day to get to their chairs for rehearsals.

Auditorium conditions were less than ideal. Loud industrial fans blew air over blocks of ice in a feeble attempt to cool the cavernous space. Front and center seats were folding wooden chairs, and an occasional rat ran across the stage or audience members' feet.

Even though he had been the City Auditorium's building chairman, Jesse Jones knew as time went by that Houston needed something better. He and his wife, Mary Gibbs Jones, had established Houston Endowment in 1937 to improve life for the people of Houston. Before he passed away in 1956, Jones repeatedly told the Endowment's trustees and his family to please do something about it.

On June 1, 1962, John T. Jones, Jr.—president of Houston Endowment and Jesse Jones's nephew—and the other Houston Endowment trustees went before Houston City Council and submitted a proposal to build and give a performing arts center to Houston. Mayor Lewis Cutrer later exclaimed, "It was the biggest single day in the history of the performing arts in Houston."

He then presciently stated, "This handsome gift places the City of Houston in a position where it can truly become one of the great leaders of art and culture in this nation." And it did.

The Houston Symphony, the Society for the Performing Arts, Houston Grand Opera and Houston Ballet shared Jones Hall for more than 20 years, until the Ballet and Opera moved to the just completed Wortham Center in 1987. The SPA was brand new when Jones Hall opened, and the Ballet and Opera were barely 10 years old, only hinting at what they would become. Jones Hall provided all of them with an inspiring state-of-the-art facility from which they could grow into the cultural powerhouses they are today.

Houston Endowment went all out with Jones Hall. The ceiling, designed by a Yale engineer, moved in five different patterns to accommodate music or the spoken word, and similar systems could shrink the auditorium from 3,000 seats to 1,700 as needed. George R. Fuller

Company, established in 1882, had built the Plaza Hotel, the Metropolitan Opera House and the United Nations headquarters in New York City. In Washington, D.C., the company built the Lincoln Memorial, Constitution Hall and the National Cathedral. And it built Jones Hall in Houston.

Jones Hall's grand opening on October 3, 1966, attracted national attention. Time, Newsweek and Business Week praised the acoustics and marveled at the movable ceiling. A few months after it opened, Jones Hall won the American Institute of Architect's Honor Award, the nation's highest accolade for architectural excellence.

Today Jones Hall is home to the Houston Symphony and the Society for the Performing Arts, and they continue to increase Houston's vitality and reputation as a city that offers the best of the arts. Every year more than 300,000 people go to Jones Hall to enjoy performances, presentations and ceremonies.

On October 22, a ball and concert will celebrate the landmark building's 50th anniversary (see www.joneshall50th.org).

John T. Jones, Jr., said at Jones Hall's dedication ceremony 50 years ago, "This Hall is given without reservation to be used and enjoyed by all. That is the way Mr. Jones would have wanted it." Jones Hall amply fulfills Jesse Jones's vision for the city he called home, and with loving care it will continue to provide remarkable experiences for at least another 50 years to come.

Steven Fenberg was archivist and historian at Houston Endowment from 1993 to 1999 and served as community affairs officer until 2013. He was the executive producer and writer of Brother, Can You Spare a Billion? The Story of Jesse H. Jones, an Emmy award-winning documentary that was narrated by Walter Cronkite and broadcast nationally on PBS, and he wrote Unprecedented Power: Jesse Jones, Capitalism and the Common Good, an award-winning biography published by Texas A&M University Press. He recently wrote Remarkable Experiences: The Jesse H. Jones Hall for the Performing Arts.

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