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FEB. 2, 2009

THE NEW YORKER

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THE SKY LINE

CENTER STAGE

The new Alice Tully Hall bodes well for other Lincoln Center renovations.

BY PAUL GOLDBERGER

Alice Tully Hall, and the Juilliard School complex of which it is a part, were the last elements of Lincoln Center to be built, and when they opened, in 1969, they seemed like an ambitious attempt to bring cutting-edge brutalism to the place. That's probably why so many architecture critics liked them and so many other people didn't. Amid the tepid classicism of so much of Lincoln Center, Juilliard stood out as something totally nineteen-sixties, all cantilevers and boxy geometries. Granted, it was covered in travertine, to match its genteel neighbors, but that served only to make the building seem ill at ease, like a wrestler dressed in a Sunday suit.

The building was a misfit in other ways, too. Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center's main venue for chamber music and recitals, was supposed to be its most conspicuous public element, but the entrance was half hidden behind a stairway that led up to a bleak, windswept plaza. It was also separated from the street by a small, virtually useless triangular plaza, a result of the insistence by the architects, Pietro Belluschi and Eduardo Catalano, on a rectangular building, even though the site, facing the diagonal of Broadway, was a trapezoid. If you were going to Juilliard instead of to Alice Tully, the front door was even harder to find—off the plaza, one level above the street.

So there is a certain justice in the way that this structure, designed with apparent disdain for the traditionalism of its neighbors, has turned out to be the first part of Lincoln Center to be radically rebuilt. (I'm not counting Avery Fisher Hall, the Philharmonic's acoustically challenged concert auditorium, whose interior has been redone four times, but whose exterior remains intact.) In February, Alice Tully will reopen as, for all intents and purposes, an entirely new hall. Large sections of the surrounding Juilliard building have been renovated, and almost nothing about approaching, entering, and being inside the complex is the way it was. The architects, Diller Scofidio + Renfro, have stretched Juilliard's rigid box all the way to Broadway, giving the building a shape that, at last, reflects the outline of the site. They have covered the new Broadway side of the building in glass—including a spectacular dance studio on the second floor which seems to float over the entrance. And they created a new front door by cutting a huge diag-

The interior of Alice Tully Hall feels warmer and more intimate than before. Photograph by Robert Polidori.

onal swath out of the southeast corner of the building. From some angles, it looks as if a giant had wrenched the building out of its foundation by lifting up the corner. When you get close to the door, the corner seems to loom over you, like an enormous triangular canopy. Forty years after Alice Tully Hall opened, it finally has an entrance that you notice.

Architects sometimes talk of design elements as "moves," as if they were playing a game of chess, and when dealing with problematic older buildings the chess analogy is apt. You are more likely to succeed if you craft a strategy consisting of a lot of carefully considered small moves, not one big one. That's one reason for the failure of Frank Gehry's plan, a few years back, to solve Lincoln Center's problems by putting a gargantuan glass dome over the main plaza. Move by move, you have to take your cues from the architecture that is already there, but you can't let the older building dictate everything, either. Liz Diller, Ric Scofidio, and Charles Renfro, along with their associate architects, the firm of FXFowle, have figured out the balance. They joust with Belluschi's architecture, but they never try to kill off the old structure. They manage to be bold and subtle at the same time, making a dull building exciting without warping its identity completely.

Belluschi wouldn't have liked the renovation, an affront to his doctrinaire modernism, but almost every change has made this building better—both more alive and more functional. From Sixty-fifth Street, it looks almost the same, and where the architects have extended the south side to the corner of Broadway they even copy Belluschi's travertine façade—perhaps as a gesture of homage, but also more likely because nothing else would make sense there. Yet from Broadway you see only the new material, and the building becomes another thing entirely, a vibrant composition of glass and metal that looks, and feels, strikingly new. Previously, once you found the door, you entered a cramped vestibule and then walked down several steps to a low-ceilinged, carpeted lobby that felt like a basement. Now, when you pass through the corner entrance, you find yourself in a vast glass-enclosed space—it includes most of the area where the triangular plaza used to be—that is full of light and open to views of the surrounding city.

In terms of its configuration and the precision of its details, this is probably the most urbane lobby at Lincoln Center. It avoids the grandiosity of Philip Johnson's space at the State Theatre and the sappy romanticism of Wallace K. Harrison's Metropolitan Opera lobby. One wall of the new lobby is covered in muirapiranga, a Brazilian wood, set in narrow tongue-and-groove panels. There is a huge freestanding café bar made of Portuguese limestone, with one end sculpted in the form of a flying wedge. It looks like a model of a building by Zaha Hadid, but more elegant. From the lobby, you enter the hall by going down a steep staircase, as before, and the hall, unlike the lobby, isn't bigger, but the interior has been totally redone. At Lincoln Center, gold and red velvet have usually carried the day, but the new hall is panelled in a veneer of moabi, an African wood, and its contours are softer and more rounded than before. The seats are covered in dark-gray suède. It's reserved, but it's not cold—indeed, the gray of the seats and the rust-orange of the wood make the hall feel warmer and more intimate. Like the lobby, the interior of the hall shows how much richness and complexity can be teased out of the modernist vocabulary in the right hands.

It's somewhat amazing that Lincoln Center hired Diller Scofidio + Renfro, instead of opting for any one of several starchitects who were short-listed. Until recently, the firm had focussed as much on multimedia installations as on real buildings, and even though their home for the Institute of Contemporary Art, on the Boston waterfront, finished in 2006, revealed their ability to produce significant architecture, it made clear that they would never have designed anything remotely like the original Lincoln Center buildings. Nonetheless, they have turned out to be exactly what the place needed. So far, their Lincoln Center work—which will include several additional phases of reconstruction, beyond Alice Tully—shows a rare talent for being assertive without being egotistical. The other work will be finished in stages over the next year or two, and it will address some of the key urban-design failures in the original Lincoln Center plan.

Chief among these is the treatment of West Sixty-fifth Street, which separates Alice Tully and Juilliard from the main campus. When Lincoln Center was designed, it was thought that a wide bridge extending the plaza over the street would be the right way to pull the two sites together. In fact, this ruined the street, turning it into a grim tunnel, and it brought no real benefit above. The genius of the redesign is to see the street not as a problem in need of covering up but as an asset whose energy can be harnessed. The bridge is gone, and Sixty-fifth Street is becoming a new spine for Lincoln Center, with street-level box offices, expanded facilities for the Lincoln Center Film Society, and a restaurant contained in a swooping new structure with a public lawn on its roof. The greatest design failing of Lincoln Center was its separation from the rest of the city, and the redo of Sixty-fifth Street will go a long way toward healing that breach.

But the most elegant thing Diller Scofidio + Renfro are doing is at Lincoln Center's main entrance, facing Columbus Avenue. The complex has always been difficult to approach, since you need to cross not only six lanes of traffic on Columbus (fourteen lanes if you count Broadway) but also a small roadway for taxi drop-off—an instance of the tendency of sixties planners to put vehicles ahead of foot traffic. The architects are sinking the roadway and elongating the stairway to the main plaza out over it, creating a grand approach. The stairway will have lots of high-tech gimmicks, like electronic messages in the risers which you will see as you approach—this is a Diller Scofidio + Renfro production, after all—but that's just surface decoration. The really wonderful thing isn't the modern tricks but the classical symmetry. Lincoln Center's plaza will never be more than a weak echo of Michelangelo's Campidoglio, in Rome (the most famous plaza with pavilions on three sides), but by placing this grand staircase on an axis with the fountain and the Metropolitan Opera, the architects have enhanced its strength as a work of classicism. It wasn't such a surprise that they could give modernism new life at Alice Tully Hall. But who would have thought that they could rescue Lincoln Center's classical side, too? ♦

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Video: Paul Goldberger at Lincoln Center.