

The Buildings of Dalhousie University

Dalhousie Arts Centre

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Address: 6101 University Av.

Start Date: 1968

Completion Date:
1971

Architect: C. A. E. Fowler &
Company

Renovation Date(s):
2004

Contractor: R. A. McCulloch

Building History



Aerial view of the Arts Centre, 1977

The Dalhousie Arts Centre grew from the seed of a bequest from Rebecca Cohn. Cohn was a Polish immigrant who came to Canada with her husband in 1906. Perseverant and intelligent, the Cohns prospered in Halifax. Upon her death in 1942, Cohn's executors were instructed to bestow her money on causes they deemed worthy, and, as they considered Dalhousie as a recipient, it was suggested that both the university and the community could benefit from an auditorium. In November 1962, \$500,000 was given towards the project, constituting the largest gift to Dalhousie since Lady Dunn's generosity of the 1950s.



Arts Centre - Exterior, 1975

The Arts Centre got off to a slow start because Dalhousie had always thought of itself as an academic, not a cultural centre. It was not clear what programmes such a building would hold, or how it would be run. The initial project called for a single auditorium as the first phase of a series of expansions, but as other elements were added construction was delayed. Lady Dunn, then Chancellor of Dalhousie, committed \$500,000 to a theatre named for her husband, Sir James Dunn. Funding also came from the Nova Scotia government, who loaned \$2 million in support of what would be the first cultural centre in the provincial capital since 1749. Later, the Molson Fund would contribute \$100,000. In the end Dalhousie shouldered 40 percent of the total cost of \$5.2 million.



Arts Centre - Exterior - Front, 1975

A sod-turning ceremony took place in May of 1968, with construction proceeding under contractor R. A. McCulloch. Construction was slow and ridden with problems, such as a leaky roof, changes to auditorium capacity and disputes over furnishing priorities. November 1971 saw the Arts Centre officially open with a week of cultural events launched by a special convocation. The Centre's first programme commemorated the 200th birthday of Beethoven. Visitors were impressed by the art gallery, sculpture court and open-air theatre on the roof.

Those who spearheaded the Arts Centre envisioned it as a place where both ballet and rock would be at home, where events both 'high culture' and popular would be staged - a vision that was realized and still exists thirty years later. The Centre was directed by a Committee on Cultural Activities, which had subcommittees for

theatre, music, film and the art gallery. The Atlantic Symphony Orchestra performed there from 1969 to 1981, succeeded by Symphony Nova Scotia. By 1976, concerts had multiplied from fourteen a season to sixty-five, with seven percent of the Halifax population going to the Arts Centre at some time each year.

The Arts Centre features the Rebecca Cohn Memorial Auditorium with a capacity of 1075, the smaller Sir James Dunn Theatre, which holds 230, as well as three smaller studio theatres. It continues to draw talented performers from around the province, the country and the world. The Arts Centre was designed with academic use in mind too. The needs of present and proposed courses in theatre history and drama were to be met. There are more than twenty practice rooms, a script library, and construction and plastics workshops for students building sets. The Arts Centre is still home to Dalhousie's Music and Theatre departments.

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Arts Centre - Interior, 1977



"Cohn Era Ends" (side view of Dalhousie Arts Centre and its events sign), March 1, 1989



Dalhousie Arts Centre - Exterior - Front, n.d.

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