GULFSHORE

Art Of Design

The new theater and education center makes a bold statement about the arts in Naples.

PLAYHOUSE

By Artis Henderson

SPEAKS UP

BAKER THEATRE AND EDUCATION CENTER

GULFSHORE PLAYHOUSE

People have started using Naples, Florida, in the same breath as Sydney, Paris and Berlin. With the spectacular new Gulfshore Playhouse Theatre and Education Center, set to break ground in early 2021 and with an anticipated opening date of late fall 2022, Naples has made a play for a spot among notable cities with great works of cultural architecture.

The theater and education space will occupy 40,000 square feet at the corner of Goodlette-Frank Road and First Avenue South. It features a sweeping white facade with rounded edges and a curved shape, unlike the traditional square box of many theaters. The front of the building is outfitted with ground-to-ceiling clear glass. In both color and non-traditional design, it calls to mind the Sydney Opera House and the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. The complex is projected to cost $53 million for land and construction. The theater aims to affirm the state of the arts in Naples and to emphasize the city's forward-looking approach to culture. Gulfshore Playhouse held an international design competition to select the firm that would produce their statement-making new building. H3/Arquitectonica won with their striking interpretation of a theater space set in

A representation of the different activities that might take place once the planned Gulfshore Playhouse's theater and education complex is completed. The theater aims to affirm the state of the arts in Naples and to emphasize the city's forward-looking approach to culture.

Southwest Florida.

"The design is very organic," says Bernardo Fort-Brescia, who is leading the project's design team. "There are certain aspects to it that relate to the sand and the ocean and how you feel when you're along the waterfront in Florida."

He points to the shell-like curves of the building and the way the geometry of the structure mimics lines created in the sand when waves wash ashore. "It's soft. There are no hard cor-

ners." The building is not a literal interpretation of coastal living, but an abstraction inspired by Florida's natural places. "We looked at aspects of the identity of the environment—of the land, of the landscape, of the water—and that all became part of the imagery of the building," Fort-Brescia says. "The form is unique to the area, not San Francisco or Boston. We designed it for Naples."

Fort-Brescia founded Arquitectonica in 1977 in Miami's

Coconut Grove. Today the firm has offices in Miami, New York, Los Angeles, Paris, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Manila, Lima and Sao Paulo. Known for its bold modernism and innovative approaches to material, color and pattern, Arquitectonica has been a major player in Miami's architectural renaissance over the last three decades. Some of the firm's noteworthy urban designs include Miami's Freedom Park, the Virgin Voyages Cruise Terminal at Port Miami, the Icon Bay build-

A rendering of a performance space at the planned Gulfshore Playhouse Theatre and Education Center. "People tell me all the time how Naples is attractive to them because we have this bounty of the arts," says Producing Artistic Director Kristen Coury.

ing and the South Miami-Dade Cultural Arts Center. Internationally, the firm has been behind such stunning structures as Microsoft's Europe Headquarters in Paris, Adaro Energy Tower in Jakarta and the Sky Tower in Abu Dhabi.

H3 has a history in designing performing arts spaces, and the predecessor to the modern company was established by famed theater architect Hugh Hardy in 1962. Based in New York, H3 has designed such iconic theater spaces as the Lincoln Center Theater in New York City, the Denver Performing Arts Complex and the Brooklyn Academy of Music. H3 joined Arquitectonica in 2017.

"I think buildings that are cultural buildings should speak up and talk about the importance of culture in society," Fort-Brescia says. "We see this throughout the world and in the countries of Europe—the great opera house in Paris, the Konzerthaus in Berlin. These are buildings that stand out in the context of the city, and they represent the culture of the place."

Kristen Coury, Gulfshore Playhouse's founder and producing artistic director, says the new space is the theater of her dreams. She calls it a beacon of light, both in actuality and in metaphor. The theater's design features a 28-foot-high curtain wall of hurricane glass which will be lit up on show nights to welcome theatergoers. "Light will be pouring out like a beacon on the

hill," Coury says.

And, speaking metaphorically, she also believes the new theater space will be a draw for the Naples community. She tells a story about a conversation she had with Phil Wood, president of John R. Wood Properties, back in 2004. Wood told her that he knew people who were considering houses in both Naples and Sarasota, but they often chose Sarasota. "Not because it's cheaper or more beautiful," he said, "but because of the arts."

Now, 15 years later, Coury is hearing a different story. "People tell me all the time how Naples is attractive to them because we have this bounty of the arts," she says.

The new Gulfshore Playhouse theater building will have an architectural presence to match its mission. "For me, a theater is a really sacred place," Coury says. "Much like churches today, theaters are usually closed until showtime. I don't appreciate that I can't get into a church if I want to sit down and be contemplative, and I don't appreciate that I can't get into a theater and just see what the lobby looks like." To that end, the theater complex will be open throughout the day, and the lobby will feature a café with snacks and drinks available during the day, not simply at show times. ✕