

# Dramatic lighting envelops Seattle's Marion Oliver McCaw Hall to evoke artists 'dreaming in color'

By Alice Liao

**I**n Seattle, where diffuse daylight is often filtered through clouds and mist, a redesigned civic complex enveloped in color and light recalls a sighting of the aurora borealis. As part of a multiphase revitalization of the Seattle Center fairgrounds, LMN Architects has orchestrated a \$127 million redevelopment of Marion Oliver McCaw Hall, previously called the Seattle Opera House. Framing the complex as a beacon of recharged theatrical energy is a choreographed spectacle of illumination by Leni Schwendinger Light Projects.

The project upgraded the home of the Seattle Opera and Pacific Northwest Ballet by restructuring the interior plan, replacing mechanical and technical systems, and adding amenities such as a lecture hall, café, and lounges. To enhance exterior architectural details while promoting public interaction in the compact plaza between the hall and the nearby Phelps Center, the architects commissioned New York City artist and lighting designer Leni Schwendinger to create a site-specific work. Because the promenade links Mercer Avenue, a major city conduit, to Seattle Center, the display not only draws visitors to the theater but serves as a dramatic gateway to the 74-acre landmark campus.

Nine, 30-foot-tall metal-mesh scrims are suspended at a 90-

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**Project:** Marion Oliver McCaw Hall, Seattle

**Architect:** LMN Architects

**Interior designer:** Sussman/Prejza

**Lighting designer (exterior):** Leni Schwendinger Light Projects—Leni

Schwendinger, principal; Ted

Sullivan, Charles Cameron, Paul

Hudson, Gwen Grossman, Severn

Clay, Anna Souvorov, project team

**Lighting designer (architectural):**

Horton Lees Brogden Lighting Design



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The mesh panels are spaced at 20- to 40-foot intervals. Each panel is illuminated from above by two or three 575-watt metal-halide fixtures (this page and opposite).

degree angle between the new glass facade of the performance hall and the Phelps Center. Schwendinger illuminated the scrims—which range in size from 30 by 70 feet to 30 by 40 feet—using 575-watt metal-halide floodlights equipped with dichroic filters and dowsers. “We wanted to find the simplest way to light the scrims,” says Schwendinger, who favored the fixture for its panoramic beam spread and color-changing ability. The solution capitalizes on the transparency of the mesh panels and their ability to layer color upon color.

The installation, titled *Dreaming in Color*, was inspired by the work of Color Field painters such as Mark Rothko, Helen Frankenthaler, and Jules Olitski, Schwendinger says. The plaza immerses passersby in a dynamic environment of saturated hues. While each scrim is bathed in a single color, when viewed from different angles the nine panels appear as floating, variegated bands whose shifts and mutations are choreographed in four distinct compositions. Creating what Schwendinger calls a “visual musical score,” the compositions of layered light range in duration from 2½ minutes to 10, and vary in rhythm and palette. Color sequences were programmed into a DMX controller that rotates them daily throughout the week. Each night, one composition is shown at the top of each hour and then followed by a longer period during which the scrims are illuminated with white light, “a blank page upon which the compositions can play,” Schwendinger says.

The vibrant play of light penetrates the curved glass curtain wall to lend drama to the grand lobby. Sensitive to the arrival experience of



Scrims suspended by aircraft cables contribute to the floating quality of the color fields (above and left). In the five-story lobby (below), PAR38 downlights accent the grand staircase, which offers a view toward the color-changing, illuminated plaza.

