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## U. of C. has \$100 million idea to raise arts profile

By Blair Kamin and Patrice M. Jones  
Tribune staff reporters  
Published October 4, 2006

Best known for its star-studded lineup of Nobel Prize-winning economists and scientists, the University of Chicago wants to raise its arts profile--and, some say, shed its nerdy image--by erecting a \$100 million creative and performing arts center along the south side of the Midway Plaisance.

To symbolize its ambition and spur fundraising, the university is holding a design competition for the still-unfunded project among five architectural heavyweights, university officials told the Tribune Tuesday. They include Daniel Libeskind, the planner for the reconstruction of New York's World Trade Center, and three winners of the field's most prestigious honor, the Pritzker Architecture Prize.

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Citing a litany of star arts alumni--among them novelist Philip Roth, film director Mike Nichols, composer Philip Glass and the writer Susan Sontag--Danielle Allen, dean of the university's humanities division, said: "We'd like to see a building that will raise the profile of the really exciting--but heretofore stealth--arts world on our campus."

Even the university's competitors hailed the idea, saying it would uplift some arts programs that, in their view, don't merit a four-star rave.

"If someone said to me they were interested in being a theater major and asked me what I knew about the U. of C., I would say, 'They don't have much,'" said Dominic Missimi, executive director of Northwestern University's American Music Theatre Project.

"In doing this, they may round out their appeal for some students. They have something of a nerdy image," said Robert Baker-White, chair of the theater department at Williams College in Williamstown, Mass.

**A nerve center for the arts**

U. of C. officials characterized the proposed 100,000-square-foot facility as a nerve center for the arts, saying it would allow students and faculty in disciplines from cinema studies to computer animation to study, create, rehearse and perform under one roof.

Besides Libeskind, whose addition to the Denver Art Museum opens Saturday, the architects in the design competition include the three Pritzker Prize winners--Hans Hollein of Austria, Fumihiko Maki of Japan and Thom Mayne of Santa Monica, Calif.--as well as New York architects Tod Williams and Billie Tsien.

The architects, who toured the campus Sept. 15, are to present two models and six illustrated boards next month to a jury composed of the original selection committee for the project and additional representatives from the university community, U. of C. officials said. The jury is to select a winner in January.

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Following a well-worn path for architecture competitions, the university hopes this one will jump-start fundraising.

"We are working hard on securing a naming gift," Allen said, adding that university officials have started "several open conversations" with potential donors. Asked if the prospective givers include Chicago's billionaire Pritzker family, sponsors of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, she said: "No comment."

A family member, Thomas J. Pritzker, is on the university's board of trustees.

University officials said that a key fundraising threshold--25 percent of the total project cost--must be crossed before the U. of C. could hire an architect. A little more than \$1 million has been raised, they said, leaving the project about \$24 million short of that threshold.

But Tom Wick, the university's senior director of development, said the university planned to run the design competition at the same time it undertook "the quiet phase" of the fundraising campaign. The idea, he said, is to cultivate "the major donors so that we will be able to close the major gifts in the next few months to meet that threshold."

Meant to house a 350-seat multipurpose performance hall and three black-box theaters, as well as music practice rooms and a recording studio, the art center would be used primarily by students and faculty, adding to rather than replacing the university's Smart Museum of Art and the university-associated Court Theatre.

University officials envision the arts center and a 900-bed dorm that is scheduled to be completed in 2008 at 61st Street and Ellis Avenue as a hub of student life on the southern end of the campus, much as the new Ratner Athletics Center and a neighboring dorm have created a hub on the campus' north end.

Hyde Park role envisioned

The center would provide an amenity not only for campus residents but also for residents of the surrounding Hyde Park neighborhood. "The building should be a gem that the city, and the South Side should be proud of," Allen said.

The center would rise at the western edge of the Midway, the greensward that joins Jackson Park on the east with Washington Park on the west. It would occupy the same block as--and likely be connected to--a landmarked, L-shaped cluster of historic buildings known as the Midway Studios.

The studios, which consist of a barn and a Queen Anne-style three-story home, were the home and studio of sculptor Lorado Taft, whose "Fountain of Time" monument punctuates the Midway's western end. Along with later additions, the studios are the home of the university's department of visual arts.

Other notable modern designs along the Midway are the university's School of Social Service Administration, a black, steel-and-glass box designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and the Laird Bell Law Quadrangle, a modern complex designed by Eero Saarinen that evokes the university's historic quads.

Other campuses have arts centers, but U. of C. officials envision a unique variation on this theme, a place where artists can collaborate with people from different disciplines.

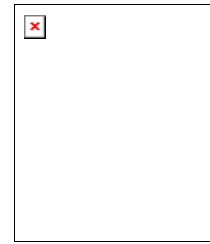
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Chicago theater



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