

Function gets the upper hand over aesthetics

By CHARLES DESMARAIS
Special to The Press-Enterprise

The \$20 million McCallum Theatre for the Performing Arts opens Saturday with what the sponsors, with predictable Palm Springs objectivity, are calling "the nation's party of the decade." Twenty million dollars. Just

Commentary

what can you get for that amount of money today? A recent tour of the nearly completed theater found that the money can buy a building, but you can't buy architecture.

• • •

It's a comfortable enough space inside, done up in purples ("dusty plum" and mauve), teal and birch. Velour seat covers and a tuck-and-roll upholstered ceiling

Function . . .

(From Page C-1)
convey a reassuring, chain hotel sort of feeling.

The primary reason to go to any theater is to see and hear a performance, and on this functional level the McCallum seems more than adequate. Sight lines in the midsize house of 1,166 seats are good, and such technical amenities as lighting and sound equipment seem top-notch.

Access for the handicapped has received particular attention, with radio headphones for the hearing impaired and excellent wheelchair facilities. And no seat in the hall is more than 80 feet from the stage.

The only sound to be heard during the recent visit to the theater came from hammers and saws, but if the acoustics are decent the performing arts center will be Riverside County's best concert venue.

As a conscious work of art, though — a result of considered architectural design as well as engineering — the McCallum is the institutional equivalent of your nearest Jacuzzi-centered condo development.

The approach to the new McCallum Theatre is classic Southern California, vintage 1987. We arrive via one of two major thoroughfares, each lined with modest ranch-style homes. At the intersection of the roads, sticking out of a moat of asphalt parking lots and driveways, it looms: a pile of concrete boxes, virtually windowless but for a huge expanse of glass at the entrance.

Its color is that of Coachella Valley sand, but the concrete masonry facing serves no integrative function. Were it not for a parade of new palm trees and an entryway fountain, the building would look as dry and hot as the vacant lots nearby. But no amount of faux sandstone sheathing would bring its bloated scale into harmony with its neighbors, or its up-ended rectangular form into sync

with the desert landscape.

In a parody of the architectural adage "form follows function," the exterior of the building is a close outline of the spaces inside: towers for the stairwells; a chunky box for the hall; a tall, wide box for the stage and the equipment above.

The foyer is neither a grand entry nor a simply functional hallway. From its truncated proportions, one would guess it to be the space left over after the seating was drawn into the plan.

What can you buy for \$20 million? For right around that sum (\$23 million, actually) the trustees of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles got the most important new work of architecture in California.

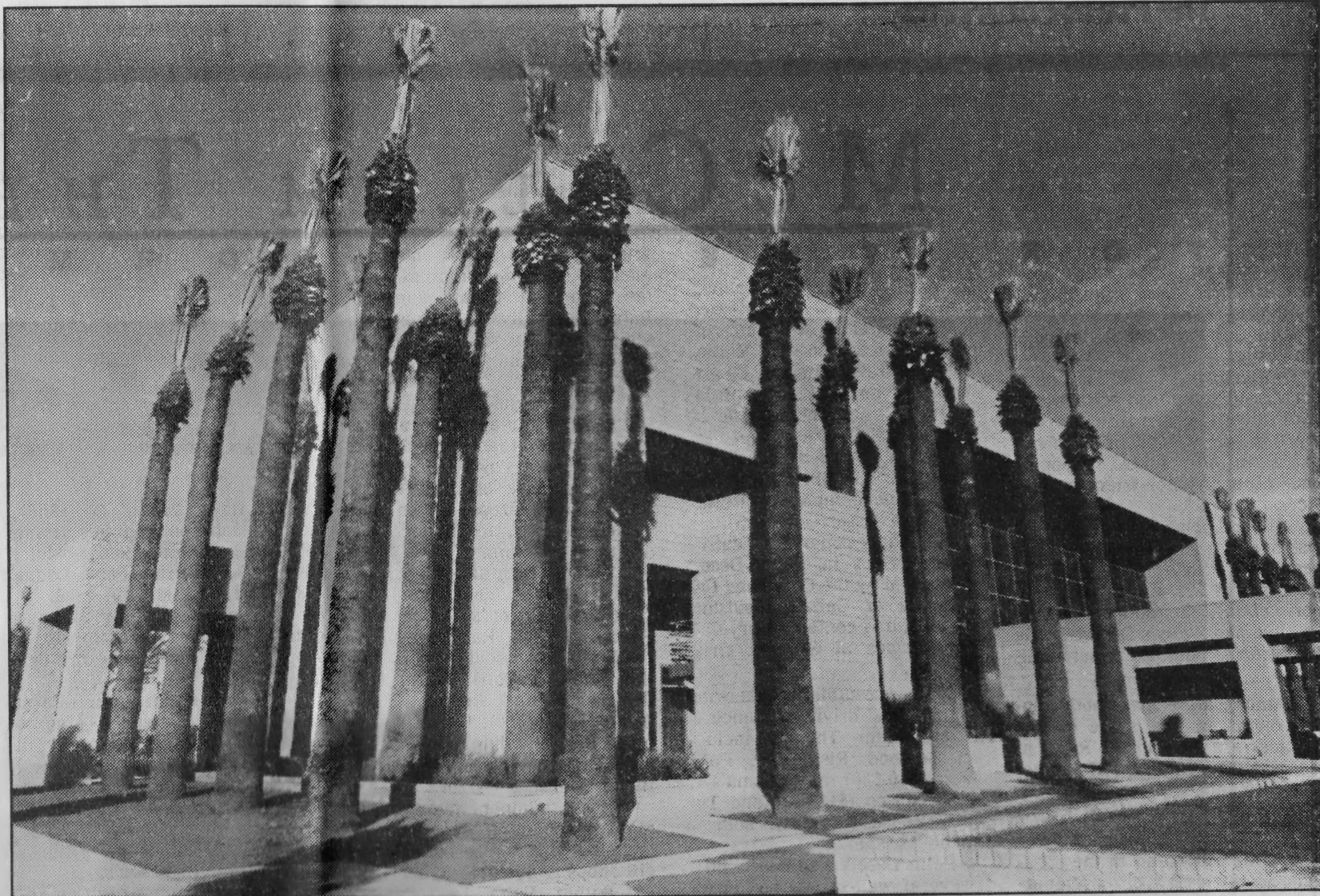
Granted, the technical needs of a museum and a theater are different. There are many other distinctions, too. But both buildings were built by public subscription, and both exist to house the art of our time. Each presented the same opportunity to create a vessel worthy of its contents.

The MOCA building is a gem designed according to Eastern themes (Egyptian pyramids, an Islamic barrel vault, a Chinese entry garden screen), set in a Western corporate environment.

Though no museum could physically overwhelm the downtown corporate towers surrounding the building's site, architect Arata Isozaki developed a design that commands attention through its small scale, and its masterful use of space rather than bulk.

The building suggests the sense of a high-tech village, modern and efficient, yet human in scale. Inside, some of the spaces seem more powerful, more sacred than most churches.

MOCA's great design didn't just happen. An aware and involved board went as far as Japan to find Isozaki, then took the risk of hiring him to build his first American project. The discussion of what kind of building was needed got intense at times, and the



The exterior of the McCallum Theatre for the Performing Arts.

CARLA CONTI/The Press-Enterprise

museum's chief executive officers had to threaten resignation at one point in support of the architect's vision.

By contrast, the McCallum Theatre shows no such artistic conception behind it.

From what we can tell by looking at the building and talking to both the architect and chief executive officer, there was no guiding force of board or staff, no board-designed program, or statement of architectural objectives, no one with long-term responsibility for the theater who took the

trouble to learn about contemporary architecture and demand an intelligent statement.

Neither the architect, Tony Anthony of Anthony and Langford, Huntington Beach, nor the executive director, Michael Grossman, would address architectural issues without diving immediately into technical and engineering matters of the design.

Building function as an instrument for theater is important, surely, but what about its function as a work of art? Architecture can have real meaning: it can chal-

lenge us; it can tell something we didn't know about space, or life, or the world; it can re-enforce the best in us.

To achieve such lofty goal, someone has to articulate them; to say, "we, as an institution, stand for such and so, and we want a building that reflects that."

According to architect Anthony and judging from the theater, there was no such board mandate. Design at its early stages was to left to a panel of theater experts and was the result of a "needs-

assessment study" — both logical planning tools, but no substitute for the hard work of defining an institution's mission and public image.

The trustees of the McCallum Theatre for the Performing Arts will spend \$20 million for their new theater, but they got the building they worked for.

The writer is director of the California Museum of Photography in Riverside and writes an arts column for The Press-Enterprise.