

*War Memorial Building: The Moldable Civic Space of Nashville*

On the heels of the Progressive Era came the rolling thunder that was World War I. Although able to avoid direct conflict for the first part of the war, America finally declared war in 1917, shortly after a draft began, and Tennessee was no exception. A total of 61,069 men from Tennessee were selected, 43,730 whites and 17,339 blacks, helping give rise to the state's nickname as the Volunteer State. The war also gave rise to new industries in the state, known as "war babies", which owed their existence to the war effort including the Old Hickory gun powder factory that brought 20,000 new jobs to the Nashville area.<sup>1</sup> The end of the war brought about much celebration and a desire for the Tennesseans who gave their lives to be recognized for their sacrifice. After much political lobbying, the Tennessee legislature approved funding for a memorial which began construction in 1923. In 1925, the War Memorial Building was dedicated in response to this public desire. The War Memorial Building since then has constantly adapted to city of Nashville's needs. As its function and purpose shifted from bureaucratic and multipurpose, to be a space for political and social activism and then to a historical venue. The building remains a prime example of how a structure must adapt to modern society in order to stay relevant and useful to a city.

The myriad of groups that advocated for the War Memorial helped it be built as a multipurpose, bureaucratic structure. After The Great War ended in 1918, many different groups sought to honor the 3,400 Tennesseans who gave their life in defense of their country.<sup>2</sup> These groups included both the American Legion and the Knights of Columbus who both were very

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<sup>1</sup> "World War I," Tennessee Encyclopedia, last modified December 25, 2009, accessed April 8, 2016, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=1535>.

<sup>2</sup> See Louise Davis, "A 'secret site' recalls Tennesseans who dies in WWI," Tennessean, November 5, 1989. The number publically given during time the War Memorial was being built was 3,400, however, only 2,965 are listed on the plaques outside of the building.

active in the homecoming ceremonies. The Parthenon was originally considered to house the memorial, however, the city at the time was also in great need of new legislative offices and the Parthenon was located too far from the city center.<sup>3</sup> This need was most bluntly stated by the President of the Centennial Club, Mrs. Margaret Johnson Weakly, in her address in December of 1918: "Tennessee is a slatternly woman with a family too large for the house she is in, and so she stows her children as best she may in any dilapidated building, and says to the world 'This is the way we do business.'"<sup>4</sup> This quote is one example of how women were playing an increasingly stronger role in civic life during both the war and in the post-war period.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, there were many arguments about the function and purpose of the memorial, as well as its role in the city. Despite the government needing new spaces for offices, the War Memorial was first privately funded because the Governor A.H. Roberts faced a law suit by Horace Greeley Hill which questioned the authority of the city of Nashville to issue bonds.<sup>6</sup> However, the Tennessee Supreme Court ruled in favor of the governor and the legislature passed an act that allowed for \$2,000,000 worth of bonds to be sold in order to fund the new space which would serve as multi-purpose, civic and bureaucratic space.<sup>7</sup> The original ground floor housed offices for the American Legion, United Confederate Veterans, Fire Prevention Department, fish and game warden, Pure Food and Drug Department, Board of Health, state geologist, space for the Polk Museum, Tennessee Historical Museum, State Archives, a

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<sup>3</sup> See also: Austin P. Foster, "Nashville's Parthenon First Considered; But Present Plan Finally Adopted," *The Tennessee Legionaire*, September 25, 1925, 1.

<sup>4</sup> "Centennial Club," table, 2016, War Memorial Exhibit, Tennessee State Museum Military Branch.

<sup>5</sup> Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004). Isenberg explains how women were one of the primary forces that helped American cities invest in urban planning.

<sup>6</sup> "Horace Greeley Hill," table, 2016, War Memorial Exhibit, Tennessee State Museum Military Branch.

<sup>7</sup> The legislative bill read that the building was to "honor the soldiers and sailors of Tennessee who served the United States Government in the war between the United States and Germany and her allies..."

laboratory as well as a room for the court to meet.<sup>8</sup> The complex also housed the War Memorial Auditorium that would become Nashville's premiere event center for the 80 years.

The design of the War Memorial allowed it to become the place in Nashville that both provided the most space for public gatherings and held the most neutral political ties (the Capitol building both lacked space to gather and was solely associated with Tennessee).<sup>9</sup> Prior to the start of construction in 1923 (finished in 1925), the city held a competition to see who the architect of the building would be. Charles Moore, chairman of the National Fine Arts Commission in D.C. suggested the building be built in the Beaux Arts style, claiming it to be "traditional American architecture."<sup>10</sup> Edward Dougherty was chosen to complete the commission using the Beaux Arts style, which embraced Doric columns and a classical look.<sup>11</sup> This architectural style tied to other well-known buildings such as the Library of Congress' Thomas Jefferson Building. Harkening back to this classical architectural era, the War Memorial created an enduring sense of patriotism that continues to be associated with the building. The courtyard that was built in front of the building provided more open-aired congregating space (often used for protests) than the Capitol Building itself and the auditorium featured "near perfect, world-class acoustics" that became the home of the Nashville Symphony for the next 80 years.<sup>12</sup> In 1931, the state of Victory by Bell Kinney and Leopold Scholz, which sits in the central courtyard of the memorial, was dedicated. Nike, who stands in Victory's hand, represents

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<sup>8</sup> Edward Dougherty, "Blueprint for the War Memorial Building," 1922, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.

<sup>9</sup> The building even won the gold medal of the American Institute of Architecture (AIA).

<sup>10</sup> Timeline for the War Memorial Building, (n.p.: Tennessee State Museum, 2015), 2.

<sup>11</sup> The quote by Woodrow Wilson that lies on the tympanum reads: "America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured".

<sup>12</sup> "History," video file, War Memorial Auditorium, accessed April 8, 2016, <https://www.wmarocks.com/about/history>.

that fame is fleeting and that is something the War Memorial quickly started to experience over the next few decades as its popularity declined.

Even though the War Memorial was thought to symbolize Nashville's identity as a modern city, the building quickly lost its glamor as other buildings started to siphon off its functions as a bureaucratic and civic center. The War Memorial represented the modernity to the citizens of Nashville and was associated with technological advancement such as the "age of the automobile."<sup>13</sup> The building, however, was only one response to the city's growing pains in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1936, another facility moved the Tennessee Supreme Court to its own 56,000 square foot building that also housed the Court of Appeals and the Court of Criminal Appeals which had been in the War Memorial.<sup>14</sup> The Tennessee State Library and Archives received its own space in 1952 and in 1956 there was a fire that originated in the basement of the War Memorial that led to part of the building being closed down. A few years later the entire building was closed down due to the structure not meeting the standards of the modern fire codes.<sup>15</sup> When the city of Nashville and Davidson County decided to become a metropolitan government in 1963, many city departments rapidly expanded to accommodate the new, larger government and outgrew their office space in the War Memorial Building.<sup>16</sup> The empty space was eventually taken over by the Tennessee State Museum in order for them to expand their

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<sup>13</sup> Jack Norman, Sr, *The Nashville I Knew* (Nashville: Rutledge Hill Press, 1984), 30.

<sup>14</sup> "Supreme Court Building in Nashville to Mark 75 Years," Tennessee Courts, accessed April 9, 2016, <https://www.tncourts.gov/press/2012/10/30/supreme-court-building-nashville-mark-75-years>. The building also houses the Court Museum.

<sup>15</sup> The reason no year is listed is because I cannot find the source where I read it (and online research proved fruitless).

<sup>16</sup> See also: "History of the Nashville Fire Department," Nashville Government, accessed April 9, 2016, <http://www.nashville.gov/Fire-Department/History.aspx>.

operations on the ground floor of the War Memorial. The renovation occurred in 1973 even though the whole museum would get its own building in 1981 (the James K. Polk Building).<sup>17</sup>

The culmination of the War Memorial Building's transformation from a public bureaucratic building that was a center of citizen activity to a building that was really only known for its auditorium occurred when Tennessee decided to make the lower levels of the building into legislative offices (which remains their function to this day). The government was to take the 120 offices located on the four floors of the building and make them legislative space, which included adding a kitchen and a dining room. This decision caused many Veterans to protest because it would drastically reduce the space that various veteran groups had to hold meetings. The Veterans (mostly survivors of WWI), led by the American Legion, saw this as a perversion of the space that was originally meant to honor those who served during The Great War.<sup>18</sup> This protest, however, did little to change the mind of the State Legislature. The government went ahead and created the lower levels of the War Memorial into legislative offices and tore up the plaza to create a new parking garage under it at the expense of \$8,000,000.<sup>19</sup> This change was the turning point after which the War Memorial Building had no other function for public use other than the auditorium, which continued to be a public venue for concerts, lectures, performances and events for many years.<sup>20</sup>

The early years of the War Memorial Auditorium demonstrate how it was the premiere meeting space in Nashville for public events and concerts. The hall was built with excellent

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<sup>17</sup> See also: "Blueprint for the Renovation of the War Memorial Ground Floor," 1973, Tennessee State Archive, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN. The Tennessee State Museum at the time received more than 300,000 visitors annually, so its move to the James K. Polk Building greatly reduced the flow of traffic to the War Memorial.

<sup>18</sup> Hugh Walker, "Legislature Eyes War Memorial, Tennessee Veterans Up in Arms," *Tennessean*, January 29, 1967.

<sup>19</sup> Larry Daughtrey, "Plaza Building Completion Date Nearing," *Tennessean*. The clipping of this article did not have a date attached to it, which is why no specific date is listed in either the citation or the essay.

<sup>20</sup> By no function for public use I mean the general public. People can still visit their representatives in the building but are not drawn there for an attraction site, such as when it housed the Tennessee State Museum.

acoustics and immediately became the home of the Nashville Symphony. Especially in its first two decades, the auditorium held speeches by the governors, state officials and the mayors of Nashville because it provided a much larger and more convenient meeting space than could be found in the State Capitol Building. The site even held the inauguration of a Chancellor of Vanderbilt University.<sup>21</sup> As a more patriotic structure and acoustically pleasing venue than the Ryman Auditorium, the War Memorial Auditorium often hosted famous European singers such as Nino Martini who performed there in 1934. The Grand Ole Opry even made the War Memorial Auditorium its home from 1939-1943, after which they moved to the larger Ryman Auditorium. During their time at the War Memorial Auditorium, the Opry inducted Bill Monroe, Ernest Tubb and Bill Monroe in addition to being nationally broadcasted over the NBC Red Network.<sup>22</sup> After this stretch of music fame, the War Memorial Auditorium became a center for political activism that lasted until the later 1970s.<sup>23</sup>

The auditorium was both a platform that existing politicians could use to further their political goals and a springboard for progressive movements and protests particularly during the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1950s the War Memorial Auditorium was used to house three inauguration ceremonies for Tennessee governors as a way for them to make a statement about their patriotism and loyalty to both the United States and Nashville.<sup>24</sup> In addition, during the year of 1960 both John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon used the War Memorial for a speech during their campaign for the Presidency. This was an important step for the auditorium to become one of the progressive leaders in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Prior to the Civil Rights

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<sup>21</sup> This is in reference to the inauguration of Oliver C. Carmichael in 1938.

<sup>22</sup> "Timeline," War Memorial Auditorium, accessed April 9, 2016, <https://www.wmarocks.com/about/history/timeline>.

<sup>23</sup> The comment made here is not to say that the building became any less a musical center during the next several decades. The Symphony still performed at the War Memorial Auditorium regularly

<sup>24</sup> Two of the three ceremonies were Governor Frank Clement, who was elected twice.

Act of 1964, the War Memorial Auditorium held concerts that spread awareness for the black community during this time of civil unrest.<sup>25</sup> Performers during this time included Aretha Franklin, the Moonglows, Roy Brown, Bo Diddley as well as many others. The auditorium even held a gospel concert featuring Henry Edwards to raise funds for the American Cancer Society, which was unheard of at the time.<sup>26</sup> This is not to say that all of the events and performers held during this time were accepted by all of society. The War Memorial courtyard also was the site of protests by Nashville citizens throughout the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was due to speak at the auditorium but was relocated because his speech was deemed too “controversial.”<sup>27</sup> After the large protests of Civil Rights Movement subsided, the War Memorial as a whole saw its political and symbolic value be forgotten as it moved into a period of political stagnation and steady business.<sup>28</sup>

The building complex was in decline during the 1970s-2000s in part because people had forgotten its original purpose to honor those who had served during WWI and the impact the building initially had upon the city. The newspaper articles during this time felt the need to remind people of the history of the War Memorial. These stories prevailed in the 1960s when the legislature was eyeing the office space in the memorial because the Veterans wanted to remind people of its original purpose.<sup>29</sup> The *Tennessean* in 1989 even called the plaques that surrounded the courtyard and the statue of Victory “a secret site” because most people who went to visit the auditorium for a concert in the evening completely missed or could not see the names of those

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<sup>25</sup> This time included the Nashville Sit-ins, which lasted from February 13 to May 10, 1960.

<sup>26</sup> "Gospel-Song Program to Aid Cancer Fund," *Banner* (Nashville), May 2, 1961.

<sup>27</sup> "King's Speech Location Moved to Fish University," *Tennessean* (Nashville), April 19, 1960.

<sup>28</sup> Again, this is not to say that the War Memorial Auditorium experienced any decline in its reputation as a performing venue but rather it became so integrated as part of the city that its glamor had worn off in the eyes of Nashville's citizens.

<sup>29</sup> Walker, "Legislature Eyes War Memorial".

who died during WWI.<sup>30</sup> Although this might be an exaggeration, the Nashville community definitely experienced some decrease in their understanding of the history and purpose of the War Memorial. As the building transitioned into its modern configuration and use, the Nashville community started to see the War Memorial Auditorium as both a symbolic and historic structure in the community despite its performance decline.

When the Tennessee Performing Arts Center (TPAC) took over management of the War Memorial Auditorium the building experience a brief rebirth as a premiere performing arts center before it lost the Nashville Symphony to the Schermerhorn Symphony Center in 2006. From its inception, TPAC was booming with business and was in need of additional space. The state had renovated the auditorium in 1995, giving it refurbished chairs and a refurbished stage.<sup>31</sup> TPAC took the process a step further and spent \$60,000 to remove the permanent seating on the ground floor and convert the space into movable floor arrangement that would make the space much more versatile. The space could now be used for dances, political dinners, weddings, and receptions that were not possible in the past. Once again, the memorial seemed like it was making a comeback as a relevant space for the city.

However, in 2003 the city broke ground for the Schermerhorn Symphony Center, which upon its completion in 2006 completely changed the fortune of the War Memorial Auditorium. Not only did the Schermerhorn Symphony Center take the memorial's regular act (the Nashville Symphony) but also featured the same changeable seating as the memorial, thus making the memorial's new renovation less important to the city as a whole for a performance and event space. However, the one saving grace of the War Memorial is that the Schermerhorn Symphony Center is built in more of a European style that does not have the symbolic presence or

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<sup>30</sup> Davis, "A 'secret site' recalls".

<sup>31</sup> Kevin Nance, "TPAC takes center stage as operator of War Memorial," Tennessean (Nashville), March 2, 1999.



performance history that the War Memorial Auditorium commands.<sup>32</sup> Over the last decade, War Memorial Auditorium has once again struggled to stay relevant and find a way to compete with the myriad of other performance venues in Nashville.<sup>33</sup>

Several conclusions can be drawn from the history and current state of the War Memorial and how it is marketing itself for its 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Throughout the years the War Memorial has been successful in adapting to the cities needs as well as competing as a premiere performing venue in Nashville. Its reoccurring success has out shone many other buildings around the country that have failed to stay relevant in American downtowns.<sup>34</sup> The building still maintains the most political and patriotic ties than any other event venue in Nashville. The removal of the Tennessee State Museum and the addition of the legislative have reduced the tourist and citizen flow into the building to almost nothing, leaving the auditorium to be almost the sole reason that citizens enter and exit the building.<sup>35</sup>

The auditorium appeals to the famous performers that have been housed in its hall as a way to market itself to popular or up-and-coming artists. In addition it hosts Attic Sessions which give up-and-coming artists a chance to be featured in a web series.<sup>36</sup> Through this series that promotes emerging artists it hopes to stay relevant to the performance scene in Music City. The auditorium now must cater to a very narrow niche market. It has to appeal to the performers who want a smaller venue than the Schermerhorn Symphony Center, the people who wish to make political statements and the newlyweds who want a nicer and more intimate reception venue than

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<sup>32</sup> See also: "About the Schermerhorn," Nashville Symphony, accessed April 9, 2016, <https://www.nashvillesymphony.org/about/Schermerhorn-Symphony-Center>.

<sup>33</sup> These include Ryman Auditorium, Bridgestone Arena and the Grand Ole Opry.

<sup>34</sup> See also: Isenberg, *Downtown America*.

<sup>35</sup> In addition to the offices, the Tennessee State Museum Military Branch is located in the basement, but almost seems as if it is in a separate building entirely.

<sup>36</sup> See also: <https://www.wmarocks.com/media/the-attic-sessions>

the Music City Center. Through this market segmentation it should find those to whom it still holds much appeal as a historic center of the city.

Throughout its lifetime the War Memorial has stayed relevant to Nashville by being a multipurpose building, a site for political activism and a symbolic scene in the city. The struggle to keep its importance has intensified in recent years and that has led to an extensive 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary campaign, adequately described by its website title “WMA Rocks.” The structure teaches people that as long as a building is willing to adapt and change to fit the needs of a dynamic city it can maintain a prominent position in the life of the city. The War Memorial continues to seek relevance as a desirable part of the city of Nashville.

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