

Narrative Description

Summary Paragraph

Baker High School Auditorium, built in 1959, dominates the eastern end of the Baker High School campus in Baker, East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana. The dramatic bowed front elevation and angled sides of the auditorium's fan-shaped form boldly announce its plan and function. The building defies assignment to a single stylistic classification and may best be understood as the product of many influences of mid-century modernism. It utilizes steel and decorative concrete, as well as brick in its construction and is capped by a flat roof with a deep front overhang. Although it appears two stories tall from the exterior, it actually contains one story with very high ceilings. It has experienced some deterioration but no direct alterations. Thus, its integrity and National Register eligibility remain intact.

Narrative Description

The classroom and offices of Baker High School, constructed in the 1950s, are overwhelmed by a 1972 addition that renders the main part of the school presently ineligible for the National Register. Because the auditorium stands alone and maintains an individual architectural presence, it is being nominated individually.

Located in Baker, a small, bedroom community located about 20 minutes north of Baton Rouge, Baker High School sits on a flat site facing Groom Road to the north and is separated from this thoroughfare by the school's driveway and parking spaces. On the north side of Groom stands a mixture of commercial and institutional twentieth-century buildings and one small nineteenth-century house. Across Epperson, (the road that forms the campus' eastern boundary) are modest one-story, twentieth-century frame houses. To the auditorium's west sprawl one-story classroom and administrative buildings punctuated by two tall, rectilinear gymnasiums. All of the buildings are connected by covered walkways. The land directly south of the school serves as its track field and baseball diamond.

The Baker High School Auditorium presents a confident and unabashedly modern design, but it does not fit neatly into any one stylistic category. While it embraces the "form follows function" edict of early twentieth-century modernism, the building's windowless, curving textured brick front façade clearly demonstrates the post-World War II shift of abstract modernism away from the smooth, squared lines of the International Style. Unlike the campus' 1950s classroom and office buildings, which take obvious cues from the International style with their stretches of windows, the auditorium eschews the ribbon windows, smooth surfaces, and right angles of that modernist paradigm or of Miesian architecture.

The Baker High School Auditorium presents a broad, windowless, curved front elevation pierced only by two double-door entrances. This potentially severe façade is softened and enlivened by brick laid in a Flemish single stretcher bond with projecting headers. The front elevation is divided into five sections by four slightly recessed steel columns. The two entrances are composed of double doors flanked by sidelights; all with glass on their top portions and solid aluminum on the bottom. These entrances are approached by canopied steel and concrete ramps that angle out from the center of the building, echoing the angle of the side elevations and the interior seating. The main floor level is indicated by a metal ledge extending between the ramps and across the rest of the front façade. It, the bottom half of the doors and sidelights, and the canopy posts and ramp railings are painted red.

The entire sidewalk in front of the auditorium is also covered by a flat-roofed steel canopy that connects to the rest of the school and is believed to have been erected simultaneously with the auditorium. This is not being nominated with the building as it is considered a separate built feature of the campus and is excluded from the nominated property by the designated boundary.

The east and west side elevations of the Baker High School Auditorium are identical. The side elevations meet the front elevation at acute angles and follow the narrowing of the building's plan to the point where the stage occupies the interior space. At this rear portion, the building is squared off, accommodating the fly tower and minimal off stage space. The angled portions of the side elevations are completely smooth, laid in a stretcher bond. The exterior of the fly tower is also laid in stretcher bond, but this portion features the same vertical

divisions of slightly recessed steel columns found on the front elevation. Side entrances to the stage are screened by decorative concrete grilles framed by steel columns that support a sheltering flat porch roof. These grilles add architectural interest to the otherwise plain and functional side elevations.

The auditorium's rear elevation, which faces a separate band building close behind it, is the least distinctive side of the building, but still possesses subtle attention to detail that indicates the skill of its creator. Recessed steel columns like those found on the front divide the elevation into four sections that break its potential visual monotony and lend a human scale to its mass. The tall rear wall of the fly tower is flanked by the two lower stage entrance rooms and porches. Another covered walkway extends from the rear door to the adjacent band room.

Inside, the auditorium is divided into three main spaces: the lobby, the seating area, and the stage. Like the exterior, the interior benefits from a mid-century modernist aesthetic created through the contours of the spaces, the selection of materials, and craft details. The front wall of the lobby is finished with the same Flemish stretcher bond with projecting headers that appears on the exterior. The other walls are composed of plain concrete blocks laid in header rows with stacked joints to the tops of the doors. Above the concrete blocks, a metal grille divides the auditorium space from the lobby and plaster covers the upper part of the side walls. In the auditorium seating area, the concrete block and plaster treatment carries throughout, but the concrete blocks boast a decorative diamond pattern. Original features include pendant light fixtures and the auditorium seating, which has wooden backs and upholstered seats. The floor slopes up away from the stage while the ceiling above gently curves to give the interior a modified parabolic section that completes the acoustical design.

Unused since the student body outgrew its 900 person seating capacity in the 1980s, the Baker High School Auditorium retains an extremely high level of integrity in terms of location, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association on both the interior and the exterior and displays only minor deterioration.

Significant Date: 1959

Architect: N/A

Criterion: C

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph

The Baker High School Auditorium is significant at the local level under Criterion C: Design, in the area of Architecture as a rare example of mid-century modernism in Baker, Louisiana. In this small, bedroom community setting, the Baker High School Auditorium is a remarkable landmark of abstract modernist architecture. Its period of significance is its 1959 date of construction.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Note

It is suspected that the designer of the Baker High School Auditorium was the well-known twentieth-century Louisiana architect A. Hays Town. This supposition is based on a bronze wall plaque from 1950 that attributes the main part of Baker High School to him; as well as the fact of his prominence and prolific work in southeast Louisiana at this period. However, because no concrete evidence of Town's role in the design has yet been found, for the purposes of this nomination the architect of the building is being designated as unknown.

Criterion C: Design

The Baker High School Auditorium does not fit neatly into any one stylistic category, but beautifully demonstrates the evolving modes of architectural expression in the post-World War II era. In the two decades following 1945, the modernist buildings constructed across Louisiana – as well as across the nation – displayed characteristics derived from many different design theories. There were holdovers of 1930s International and Art Deco styles as well as avant-garde Miesian, New Formalist, Wrightian, Neo-Expressionist, and Brutalist creations. Louisiana was not home to any of the top nationally known modernist architects, but does possess works by Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, Edward Durrell Stone, and Richard Neutra. Notable Louisiana architects working in the modern styles included Samuel and William Wiener;

Curtis and Davis; A. Hays Town; John Desmond; Charles Colbert; Burk, Le Breton and Lemantia; and Neild-Somdal-Associates.¹

Baker High School Auditorium's departure from cubic massing and its textured brick walls reflects the trend toward a more organic design basis, yet its rigorous symmetry precludes its designation as Neo-Expressionist. In fact, its strict symmetry, the exposed steel columns that divide the front façade, the delineation of the elevated lobby floor with a projecting metal ledge, and the prominent front overhang of the roof are vaguely suggestive of New Formalism. The use on the side elevations of decorative concrete grilles so favored by New Formalist Edward Durrell Stone adds another touch of this style, yet the auditorium is emphatically not New Formalist. In the brick façade, one might sense a kinship with Wright's experiments with surface textures, but it cannot be called Wrightian. Many buildings of the late fifties pulled bits and pieces from different styles without achieving a cohesive aesthetic. In contrast, the Baker High School Auditorium displays an elegance and attention to detail that stands on its own in defiance of pat stylistic explanation.

Baker possesses few architecturally significant buildings of any era. Although the community was founded in the 1880s in conjunction with the arrival of the railroad, the majority of the community's architecture is that of a mid-twentieth century suburb. There are few professionally designed, architecturally distinctive buildings within Baker. The town's only two architecturally significant National Register-listed properties are the 1905 Baker Presbyterian Church and the 1906 Cushman House. The Baker Presbyterian Church is a one-story clapboard structure in the Gothic Revival style. The Cushman House is a one-and-one-half story, frame transitional residence showing strong influences from both the Queen Anne and Colonial Revival styles. Business needs in Baker are met by strip shopping centers typical of commercial development between the 1950s and 1980s. Most of the city's public buildings and churches also are typical of this period. With very few exceptions, the dwellings are unpretentious and date no earlier than the 1940s. Most of the city's homes are modern slab on grade ranch houses which resemble those found in any other city. Thus, there is nothing comparable to the auditorium in the community.

The Fan-shaped Auditorium

At the time the auditorium was built, there was no municipal center in Baker, so the auditorium was designed for use by the community as well as the school. The design of the building facilitates performance, with special emphasis upon excellent acoustics. Thus, its design incorporated some of the latest developments in architectural acoustic theory. At the same time the International Style was maturing in Europe, there was a reconsideration of volumetric conditions affecting concert hall acoustics. As Michael Barron explains, "In the heady early days of the Modern Movement, science had to provide the logical basis for much design."² A musician-engineer named Gustave Lion conceived elaborate experiments to test the transmission of sound by reflections. Based on his findings, he created an interior design for the 1927 Salle Pleyel concert hall in Paris with a parabolic ceiling and a "modest" fan plan. That same year, Le Corbusier proposed a like plan for the League of Nations Debating Chamber in Geneva. Use of the Salle Pleyel immediately revealed multiple issues with the sound transmission in this particular concert hall design. Experimentation with fan-shaped halls continued in the following decades.

In many concert halls and auditoriums, fan-shaped seating arrangements were employed, concealed within conventional rectilinear building plans. For modernist architects interested in exploiting new construction methods for the creation of innovative building forms, the boxing in of the fan's curves and acute angles would have been a lost opportunity to express the building's function in an artistic and truthful manner. Therefore, renowned modernist architects like Eliel and Eero Saarinen and Alvar Aalto celebrated the fan-shape plan with expressive envelopes. Among the most famous of the buildings that articulate a fan shape with their exterior design are Eliel and Eero Saarinen's 1940 Kleinhans Music Hall in Buffalo, New York; the twin 1957 Alberta Jubilee Auditoriums in Edmonton and Calgary, Alberta, Canada designed by the Alberta Department of Public Works; and Alvar Aalto's 1958 Kulttuuritalo (House of Culture) in Helsinki, Finland.³

The Kleinhans Music Hall was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1989 for its architectural significance as one of the Saarinens' finest works. This building is uniquely composed of a large auditorium and a smaller one. The large auditorium has rectilinear rooms off its stage to the rear and a gently curving lobby at its front like the Baker High School Auditorium. Unlike the Baker High School Auditorium, however, Kleinhans features the distinctive elliptical volume of the

¹ Jonathan and Donna Fricker, "Louisiana Architecture 1945-1965: Modernism Triumphant - Commercial and Institutional Buildings," Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism, Office of Cultural Development, Division of Historic Preservation, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2010, http://www.crt.state.la.us/hp/nationalregister/historic_contexts/modernismtriumphantfinalrevised.pdf (accessed January 23, 2013); Karen Kingsley, *Buildings of Louisiana* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 358.

² Michael Barron, *Auditorium Acoustics and Architectural Design* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2009), 92.

³ Barron, 96.

smaller auditorium extending from the front of the lobby. The use of brick on the exterior of the large auditorium and limestone on the smaller one, further articulates these two spaces. Acoustics were a primary concern in the design of the Kleinhans and careful consideration was given to every feature that would affect sound. The Saarinens consciously strove to achieve a building that would perform as well and be as pleasing to the eye as the finest violin.⁴ The result was a technically and aesthetically superb concert hall.

As a small town, school plant building, the Baker High School Auditorium did not employ all of the advanced materials of the Kleinhans or other famous venues, but its architect's careful use of the fan shape plan with a parabolic ceiling curvature and sloped seating floor made it an acoustical success. For many years, Baker's Children's Theater brought productions like *Hansel and Gretel*, *Alice and Wonderland*, *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown* and *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* to the stage of the auditorium.⁵ All who remember these and other performances in the auditorium attest to the excellent acoustics the design provided.⁶

In Louisiana, another example of an auditorium that displays its fan-shaped plan on its exterior is Lafayette's Municipal Auditorium (now the Heymann Center for the Performing Arts). It was designed by Louisiana architect A. Hays Town in 1957 and completed in 1960. It is certain that Town would have been familiar with the form of the Kleinhans Music Hall when he conceived his plan for Lafayette. During his studies at Tulane School of Architecture, he found Eliel Saarinen to be one of his favorite modernist architects.⁷ The fact that he designed a fan-shaped auditorium for the Town of Lafayette at approximately the same time the Baker High School Auditorium was constructed again suggests A. Hays Town as its likely architect. Town's design for the Lafayette Municipal Auditorium is a clear example of the International style. It features a smooth façade with an expanse of glass wrapping the gentle bow of its front elevation. The Baker High School Auditorium, on the other hand, demonstrates a greater commonality with the Kleinhans Music hall through its use of brick, vertical division of the front elevation, windowless façade, and pronounced front roof overhang.

Conclusion

When the Baker High School Auditorium was constructed, as Pete Heine recalls, "It was really something in Baker. . . . It was unusual architecture and it caught the eye of everyone."⁸

Heine, who served as the mayor of Baker for over twenty years said, "At first it was a shock, but we were all proud of the fact of the architecture and how it was designed because it was so unusual; especially for a little sleepy town like Baker."⁹ The Baker High School Auditorium's unapologetically bold modern aesthetic stands in stark contrast to much of the architecture of Baker. Its architectural and acoustical design is a remarkable example of mid-century institutional modernism and the use of the most up-to-date acoustical theory in the context of the small community. When the auditorium was completed in 1959, it was the architectural crown of the school's campus and a landmark and beacon for the community. It is for this that it is being nominated to the National Register.

Developmental history/additional historic context information (if appropriate)

Baker was established as a town in the 1880s. It began as a railroad stop deriving its name from a plantation in the area and in 1888, the post office of a nearby plantation was relocated to the new village.¹⁰ Homes were soon built around the railroad stop and post office. By the end of the nineteenth century, residents were also seeking locations for a school and church. According to local history, in the 1890s some children of Baker attended school in area homes. Subsequently, classes were held at several different sites including the original one-room Presbyterian church. It seems that Baker High School was established at its present site in the 1910s.

The first buildings on the site were wood frame, but in the early 1920s, an impressive, two-story brick school was constructed.¹¹ For rural communities in Louisiana, such buildings signified a "coming of age" in local education. In the 1910s and 1920s, these buildings were the apex of educational architecture. It should be understood that the progress in education promised by these schools was generally available only to white children. Schools in Louisiana did not become fully integrated until the 1970s. African-American children of the Baker area attended classes on the campus of Leland College, a black college founded during the Reconstruction era that moved to Baker in 1923.

⁴ Carolyn Pitts, National Register Nomination for the Kleinhans Music Hall, Buffalo, New York (History Division, National Park Service, Washington, DC, 1989).

⁵ Caillouet, 105.

⁶ Pete Heine, Jack Milton, Margie Milton, Cheryl Ory and Betty Skinner Tucker, interview by author, Baker, LA, March 6, 2013.

⁷ Sachs, 24.

⁸ Pete Heine, interview by author, Baker, LA, March 6, 2013.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Caillouet, 49.

¹¹ Ibid., 86-90.

By the end of the 1930s, progressive educational ideals combined with abstract modernist aesthetics affected new directions in school plant design and the grand edifices of the previous generation were quickly perceived as inadequate. Baker's own proud brick school and accessory buildings received a rather scathing assessment in a 1941 survey of the parish's schools. The investigators reported, "This school plant consists of one main two-story brick building, a gymnasium, and a three-room frame cottage used for home economics. Out of a possible 100 points, the plant scored 45. To the average person this building appears to be fairly well planned. In many respects, however, it is lacking in essential features which make a good school plant."¹² The surveyors went on to complain about the poor orientation of the windows for natural lighting and several fire hazards, among other topics.

The school plants of the late 1930s to 1960s ushered in a specialization of spaces accompanied by conscious architectural articulation of such. In this atmosphere, auditoriums slowly gained a new prominence in the school plant. The historic context "Louisiana Architecture 1945-1965: Modernism Triumphant – Commercial and Institutional Buildings" sums up the overall picture of mid-century schools in Louisiana thusly: "The majority (perhaps the vast majority) might best be termed 'no style.' Typically they are brick veneer, flat roofed buildings defined by ranges of classrooms with big groupings of metal windows. Auditoriums are articulated as larger squared-off spaces."¹³

The part of Baker High School begun in 1949 and attributed to A. Hays Town fits into this ubiquitous mode of school design. It is now overwhelmed by a 1972 addition, but the character of the 1950s buildings can still be perceived. In 1949-1950, the first building of Baker High School's modern campus was completed and additional acreage was purchased so that the site included twenty-two acres. In subsequent years, an industrial arts building, gymnasium, cafeteria, six classrooms, and a band room were added. The decade's construction culminated with the expansion of the library and breezeway, the erection of covered walkways and the completion of the choral room and auditorium.¹⁴ The classroom and office spaces are one-story brick buildings with large banks of windows located on the preferred north and south elevations for the classrooms. The gymnasium rises above these low buildings and features a low pitched gable roof. For many schools, such a building also served as the auditorium. This was the case at the Zachary Colored Junior High School that A. Hays Town designed in 1950 for Baker's neighboring town of Zachary. Even dedicated auditorium buildings were often given little more exterior design detail than the gymnasium, so the sophistication of Baker High School Auditorium's architectural composition is particularly striking for a small town like Baker.

Historical Note

Former Baker mayor, Pete Heine remembers serving as the Master of Ceremonies when Ernest Tubb played in the Baker High School Auditorium. Baker residents also note that one of the community's most important annual events, the carnival ball, was held in the auditorium.¹⁵ As mentioned above, the local Children's Theater presented musicals and plays in the auditorium.¹⁶ For the town of Baker, the Baker High School Auditorium is a place of many shared memories. As part of a plan to renovate Baker High School, the auditorium is to be restored to use and it is hoped that it will soon again be a place where many new memories will be created for the students and the community alike.

Although this social history indicates the auditorium has local significance in this area as well, not enough supporting documentation was found during the research for this nomination to make this case satisfactorily. There is no archive of Baker newspapers from the period of significance in Baker. Only an incomplete collection of papers is held in another parish and it was beyond the scope of this nomination to search through these. Baker High School yearbooks of this period are likewise dispersed and none were available for study during the preparation of the nomination.

¹² Division of Surveys and Field Studies, George Peabody College, *The Public Schools of East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana* (Division of Surveys and Field Studies, George Peabody College, 1941), 145.

¹³ Jonathan and Donna Fricker, "Louisiana Architecture 1945-1965: Modernism Triumphant – Commercial and Institutional Buildings," Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism, Office of Cultural Development, Division of Historic Preservation, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2010, http://www.crt.state.la.us/hp/nationalregister/historic_contexts/modernismtriumphantfinalrevised.pdf (accessed January 23, 2013).

¹⁴ Elida Caillouet, ed. *Baker: The First 200 Years, 1776-1976* (Baton Rouge, LA: The City of Baker, 1976), 102.

¹⁵ Pete Heine, Jack Milton, Margie Milton, Cheryl Ory and Betty Skinner Tucker, interview by author, Baker, LA, March 6, 2013.

¹⁶ Caillouet, 105.