

# the stage is set

City boosters have  
scripted an urban renaissance  
for Newark—but will the  
New Jersey Performing Arts Center  
be a tough act to follow?

*by Bill Glovin*

As the limousines and luxury cars lined up this past October for the opening of the \$180 million New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, curious spectators gawked from behind police barricades while spotlights scoured the sky, television cameras swarmed, and celebrities strolled by in evening gowns and smart tuxedos. Among the parade of luminaries were Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, and James Earl Jones. Three New Jersey governors—Christie Todd Whitman, Jim Florio (CLaw'67), and Tom Kean—were on hand to see whether \$106.5 million from their budgets had been wisely spent.

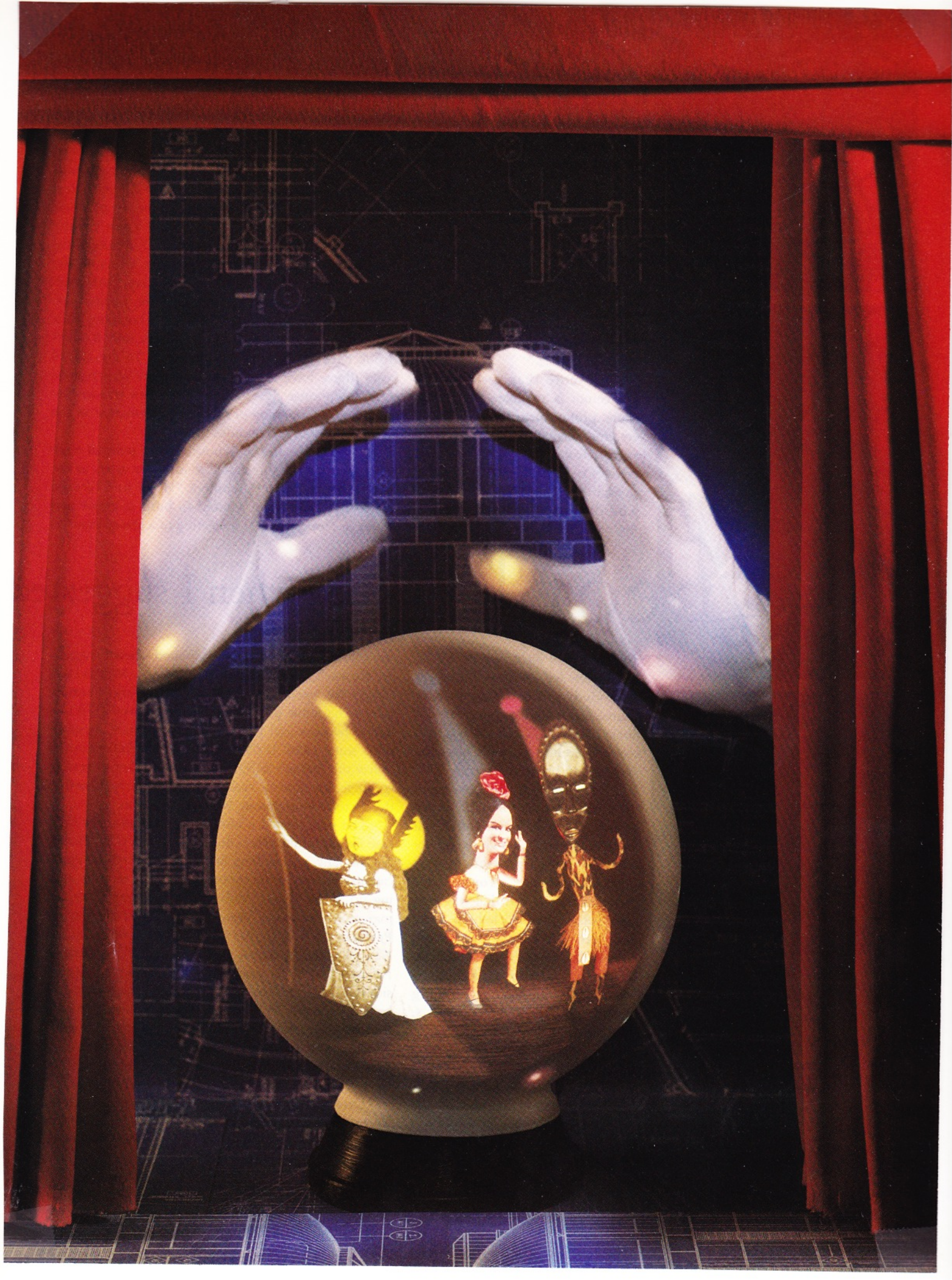
The benefit gala began in the center's glass-walled rotunda, where two cocktail parties—one for big donors and one for other guests—milled under the winding grand staircase. Moving into the 2,750-seat Prudential Hall, the larger of the center's two theaters, attendees settled in to enjoy a diverse program, including performances by some of the biggest attractions in the arts world—Wynton Marsalis, Alvin Ailey dance,

and Kathleen Battle, whose soaring soprano voice opened the program with a dramatic, unaccompanied rendition of the African-American spiritual, "Over My Head I Hear Music." To cap the night, audience members, who had paid up to \$3,000 a ticket, adjourned for a posh dinner dance, complete with fireworks.

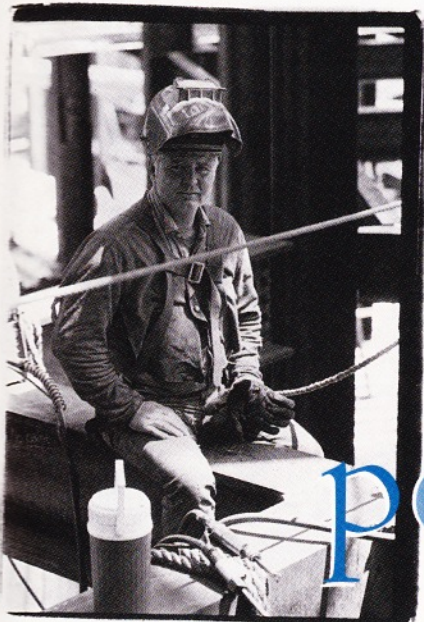
For most who attended, opening night was a chance to indulge in glamor, enjoy the performers, and admire the building's aesthetics. But for several people, including three Rutgers alumni—Raymond G. Chambers, Catherine M. McFarland, and Gail L. Thompson—the evening marked the end of a long and difficult struggle to bring a first-class arts center to Newark. Each hoped that, after the hoopla of opening night had faded, the evening would one day be remembered as the turning point in the fortunes of New Jersey's largest city.

*Illustration by*  
David Pohl  
*Photographs by*  
Dennis Connors









NJPAC'S CREATORS, LEARNING A LESSON FROM NEWARK'S SELF-CONTAINED GATEWAY COMPLEX, DESIGNED THE ARTS CENTER SO THAT VISITORS MUST WALK FROM THEIR CARS ON SURROUNDING STREETS, BRINGING THEM INTO THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

"NJPAC is on its way to being an artistic and financial success, but the broader question is, What next and how soon?" says James W. Hughes, dean of Rutgers' Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy. "The city is now drawing people who haven't been there in 30 years. But it's just the first piece, albeit an important piece, of a puzzle. Look at Lincoln Center in New York City; it took years to transform the neighborhood around it. Likewise, it will be years before we can measure NJPAC's impact."

But more than a successful arts center is at stake: The politicians, philanthropists, civic leaders, and corporate executives who supported the decade-long odyssey to build the center feel the pressure to make Newark's problems disappear, to begin to erase the bleak moments that came to a

County and \$18,714 for the state. In 1995, the city's image spiraled further downward when the public schools—once considered a jewel of the New Jersey system—were taken over by the state.

Despite its problems, Newark still has plenty of assets: some of the nation's largest corporations and banks; higher education institutions like Rutgers, New Jersey Institute of Technology, the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, and Essex County Community College; and cultural and architectural icons like Symphony Hall, the Newark Museum, the Newark Public Library, and Sacred Heart Cathedral. It has one of the nation's busiest airports, a major passenger- and freight-railroad terminal, a booming port, a thriving Portuguese neighborhood, and Branch Brook Park's famous cherry blossoms. In the last 10 years, there have been small indicators of progress: some townhouse development, two new movie theaters, and the opening of the first supermarket in the Central Ward in two decades.

In the 1980s, the city's business and political leaders looked for ways to capitalize on these assets as the New Jersey economy boomed. "Word had filtered down that Gov. Kean wanted to build a major arts center in New Jersey. At a meeting of a group that was

## people laughed when I suggested

head in the summer of 1967, when riots left 26 dead, hundreds wounded, and countless lives in ruins. Since that summer of violence, Newark, fairly or not, has symbolized much of what has gone wrong with urban America.

New Jerseyans who grew up in Newark in better times reminisce fondly about its great industrial muscle, swinging jazz clubs, vaudeville theaters, Thanksgiving Day Parade, and safe, strong ethnic neighborhoods. But that was long ago, before they left behind a city that has seen crime, corruption, and high unemployment flourish; buildings and entire blocks become vacant lots; and major retailing mainstays like Bamberger's, Hahne's, and Sears close their doors. The population, which stood at 410,000 in 1967, dwindled to 275,200 by 1990 as both blacks and whites fled to the suburbs. Still one of the most densely populated cities in America, Newark's per capita income stands at \$9,424, compared with \$17,574 for the rest of Essex

considering locations, people laughed when I suggested Newark," remembers Catherine McFarland (NCAS'80), executive officer of the Victoria Foundation, a charitable group that has given over \$170 million to Newark and Essex County nonprofit organizations since 1924. If Cleveland and Pittsburgh could utilize the nation's \$180 billion arts market to revitalize their downtowns, reasoned the powerful board of the Victoria Foundation, Newark could too.

The state invited a number of cities to make their case for the multimillion-dollar project to C.W. Shaver & Company, a consulting firm that reviewed the applications and visited the contenders. In the months leading up to the Shaver study, Newark's recently elected mayor, Sharpe James, promptly established the Mayor's Performing Arts Center Task Force. Everett Shaw, Newark's deputy mayor and the head of Renaissance Newark, told McFarland that if Newark was to be considered, it needed to take a proactive approach and back up its claim. In 1986, the Victoria Foundation paid for a feasibility study that impressively made the case for Newark and led Shaver to endorse the city's bid. James's administration began to lobby even harder for the project, and two other crucial advocates emerged.

One was the late Robert Van Fissan, chair of Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company. The other was philanthropist Ray Chambers (Bus'64), a modest man who seldom talks about himself or his donations.



Shortly before NJPAC opened, he agreed to an interview with *The New York Times*. That story reported that Chambers, the son of a warehouse-office manager, was born and raised in Newark's West Ward and worked his way through Rutgers–Newark, playing keyboards in a band called the Ray-Tones. After a stint as a tax accountant in the Newark office of Price Waterhouse, he went on to make millions through Wesray Capital Corporation, a private partnership that specialized in leveraged buyouts. Since then, he contributed tens of millions of dollars and much of his time to education and youth programs in Newark, the Points of Light Foundation in Washington, and other worthy causes.

Chambers told Kean that if the center were built in Newark, his Amelior Foundation would pledge \$5 million. More importantly, he and Van Fusan proposed that if the state would provide \$33 million for site acquisition, their fund-raising committee would guarantee matching support from the private sector. With an informal deal struck, the committee transformed itself into a board of directors and established NJPAC as a nonprofit corporation with Chambers as its chair.

At first, Chambers found skepticism among those he approached, but a 1989 economic impact study paid for by the Victoria Foundation projected that an arts center

In the year between the unveiling of a master plan for the site, in February 1991, and the architect's presentation of the design for phase one of the project, in February 1992, the center received \$3 million from the Samuel I. Newhouse Foundation and \$2.5 million from the Victoria Foundation. Donations that were at least \$250,000 began to pour in from Hoffmann-LaRoche, Foster Wheeler, Johnson & Johnson, First Fidelity, and Schering-Plough. State legislators, impressed by the private commitment, started to get behind the project with more state dollars. By the end of 1992, a remarkable \$100 million had been raised, and other, even more significant donations followed.

Groundbreaking ceremonies for the center in October 1993 included Gov. Florio; Jane Alexander, chair of the National Endowment for the Arts; and Kathleen Battle, whose performance would open the center three years later. The presence of children from every county in New Jersey underscored the center's commitment to children's programming and arts education, a condition of the Victoria Foundation's grants. Soon, colorful murals by New Jersey schoolchildren had been painted on construction fences and an electric sign outside the building's shell displayed the names of donors. Even the construction workers in the trenches and on the

## Newark as the site for the arts center.”

in the city would lead to job creation, neighborhood beautification, and cultural enrichment. Soon after, Prudential announced a \$3 million package of support—the first major corporate donation to the center—and AT&T followed with \$1 million. In June, Chambers announced his \$5 million gift, and the state committed \$20 million for the purchase of a 12-acre site across from Military Park on the Passaic River waterfront. In September, a Senate appropriations committee approved \$1.2 million for planning, design, and site preparation. There was now no doubt that the dream would come true—the question the skeptics began to ask was whether an arts center could succeed.

PLANNERS HOPE THAT NJPAC'S STRIKING ARCHITECTURE WILL GIVE NEW JERSEY A SIGNATURE ICON. SAYS NJPAC'S GOLDMAN: "AT NEWARK AIRPORT, YOU CAN BUY POSTCARDS OF NEW YORK'S EMPIRE STATE BUILDING OR STATUE OF LIBERTY, BUT THERE'S NOTHING LIKE THAT TO IDENTIFY WITH NEW JERSEY."





beams felt an emotional connection to the project. The crew's unofficial on-the-job uniform was a t-shirt emblazoned with the confident prophecy, "If We Build It, They Will Come."

The decision to locate NJPAC in Newark was one thing; the energy and vision to make it a reality was another. In 1989, impressed with his consulting work, Chambers asked Lawrence P. Goldman, head of development at Carnegie Hall, to oversee an undertaking that would involve finding creative ways to raise resources; assembling a staff of planners, developers, and programmers; and managing the day-to-day operations of the project.

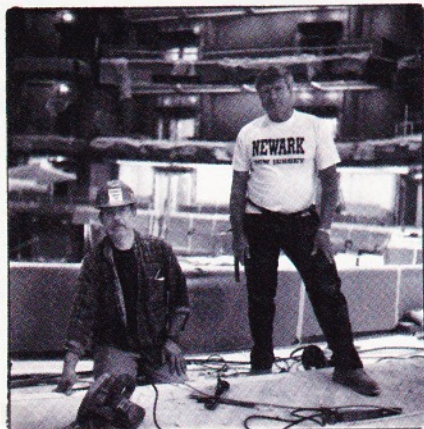
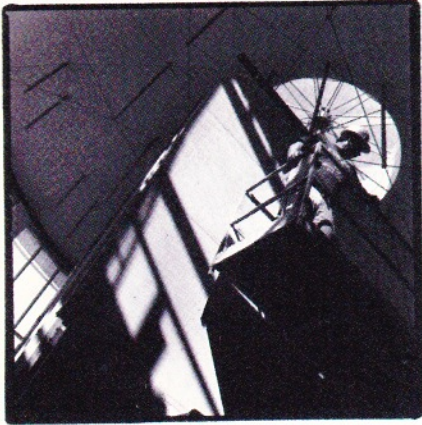
One of Goldman's first tasks was to learn how other cities had used the arts for urban renewal. Among others, he visited Cleveland, the first American city to go bankrupt since the Depression, and Pittsburgh, which had suffered the decline of its steel industry.

Cleveland's downtown revival, which began slowly in the 1970s along the once-dispirited Cuyahoga River waterfront, was sparked by the refurbishing of three vaudeville theaters into Playhouse Square. Today, the area boasts hotels, shops, and cafes, not to mention the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, a science center, a base-

Cleveland and Pittsburgh, where they said the same thing," says Goldman, stretching his leg over a balcony railing. Whenever the CEO and president of NJPAC needs a place for uninterrupted talk, he escapes to this balcony in Prudential Hall. Goldman helped persuade the insurance giant to contribute \$6.5 million—the largest philanthropic commitment the company had ever made—to the center. "Prudential deserves a lot of credit," he says. "Without people like Prudential chair Arthur Ryan—and without Ray Chambers; Tom Kean; Sharpe James; and Mort Pye, the late editor of *The Star-Ledger* of Newark—the center wouldn't have been built."

"We've seen a trend where the leadership in cities all over the world has used the arts to stimulate an economic resurgence," says Ruth Ann Stewart, research professor at the Bloustein School. A specialist in public policy and the arts and a former associate director of the New York Public Library, Stewart was instrumental in the recent reclamation of New York's Bryant Park. "From Liverpool, England, to Abilene, Texas, culture has been the linchpin for urban renewal." But Stewart is also quick to note that the arts is not always a panacea: "There are other cities where projects have failed, like the \$81 million California Center for the Arts in Escondido. Building a beautiful arts campus in the midst of empty storefronts doesn't guarantee anything."

Rutgers' Hughes points out that successful downtown development can sometimes mask problems that need to be addressed in other, less-visible parts of a city. "Whenever I take the train to Washington, it's impossible not to notice the miles of garbage-strewn lots and boarded-up rowhouses as you travel through



## from Liverpool to Abilene, culture has

ball stadium, and a basketball arena. Pittsburgh's downtown had been rescued by the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, a corporate, philanthropic, and civic group that sparked a revival by purchasing an old movie palace and converting it into the \$42 million Benedum Center for the Performing Arts.

"When people tell me Newark won't succeed, I point to

PLANNERS CHOSE PRUDENTIAL HALL—A MULTIPURPOSE THEATER SIZED FOR BALLET, THEATER, OPERA, AND SYMPHONIES—OVER A LARGE CONCERT HALL. NJPAC HOPES TO CONSTRUCT A CONCERT HALL BUILDING ON ITS PROPERTY SOMETIME IN THE FUTURE.

Baltimore," he says. "They've had tremendous success with building up the Inner Harbor area. Perhaps that makes people think that everything is going well in Baltimore, but that's obviously not the case."

Well aware that NJPAC needed to extend as far from the confines of the physical building as possible, Goldman searched for key staffers with a commitment, not only to building a first-class arts center, but to improving the city. One of his first hires was architect Gail Thompson (GSM'89), who came on board as vice president of design and construction. A native of Red Bank, Thompson admits that her early experience with Newark was limited to the view from an airplane window and the vista along the New Jersey Turnpike. "My parents were opera buffs, and when we were young, they often took me and my sisters to Lincoln Center," she says. "We really had no reason to visit Newark, and, like everyone else, we had heard all the bad things."

But in the late 1980s, while working as vice president of facilities planning and development at the



GAIL THOMPSON'S VISION FOR THE CULTURALLY DIVERSE NJPAC IS PARTLY SHAPED BY HER GRANDFATHER, S. WINGTON THOMPSON, A CONDUCTOR AND MUSICIAN. "HE HAD THE TALENT—BUT NOT THE SKIN COLOR—TO PERFORM IN AMERICA'S PREMIER CONCERT HALLS," SAYS THOMPSON.

booming American Stock Exchange, Thompson enrolled in Rutgers' Graduate School of Management to gain the business acumen to one day open her own design firm—her dream at the time. Her years at Rutgers fostered an emotional bond with the city, and she is now determined to help change its fortunes. "As I progressed in my career," she says, "I realized that I wanted to do more than simply influence what a building looks like; I wanted to have an impact on a project that could affect lives."

Thompson saw that opportunity in the plans for NJPAC, which called for the



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accumulation of more acreage than was needed for the 250,000-square-foot building, a strategy that would allow for related building projects. For example, the center may eventually codevelop and generate rental income from two large commercial towers on the property. (Goldman employed a similar strategy at Carnegie Hall, where a high-rise apartment building kicks back \$2 to \$3 million a year. Goldman had even hoped that Rutgers would locate its new \$55 million law school building on NJPAC property; the law school, however, will be located closer to the Rutgers campus.)

Thompson helped develop a master plan, which included the entire downtown, and hired Los Angeles architect Barton Myers to design phase one of the arts center. One of the advantages of the site, says Thompson, is that adjacent to NJPAC's 12 acres is another 12 acres of prime riverfront real estate owned by PSE&G and the city's housing authority. "In Baltimore, Boston, and in Manhattan's World Financial District, waterfront access has been a critical factor in attract-

ing development," says Thompson. "People like to live and work near waterfronts."

Almost every week, local newspapers carry stories about development along the Newark riverfront. A proposal by Chambers in January to buy the New Jersey Nets and move the basketball team to within a few blocks of the center made headlines in *The Star-Ledger*. Two notable—and more tangible—projects are a federally built esplanade between the arts center and Penn Station and a 6,000-seat minor-league baseball stadium. Renovations to the boarded-up Hahne's department store on Broad Street—one of several key properties around the center—are already underway. The property, purchased in recent years by the Berger Organization, is being converted into a shopping mall and offices. Another new investor, the Cogswell Realty Group of Manhattan, plans extensive renovations to the Commerce Building and 744 Broad Street, two of the city's tallest buildings.

Other improvements have already taken place:





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orate. Rutgers will serve as host and organizer, but NJPAC, the museum, the library, and other venues will stage events. Says Juliano: "The conference will include brainstorming sessions on Newark and the arts and will examine

how cities in the United States and around the world have used the arts as a catalyst for change."

One issue on the agenda is using the arts to create a middle-class neighborhood, which urban planners agree is the ultimate goal of the urban-renewal process. Currently, almost no residential housing or infrastructure exists between NJPAC and University Heights, where Rutgers has its campus. Most observers point out that an arts center's patrons and personnel may support a handful of new dining establishments, but housing is crucial to retail, a vital link in the economic-development chain.

## the cultural district will change the way people

repaved streets in and around NJPAC; new signage pointing drivers to the center and other city attractions; a \$500,000 shuttle service known as "The Loop" that links Penn Station to the center and 15 other downtown destinations; landscaping improvement along the waterfront; and the renovation of the 17-story Robert Treat Hotel, Military Park Garage, and Military Park, which was formerly a swath of brown dirt.

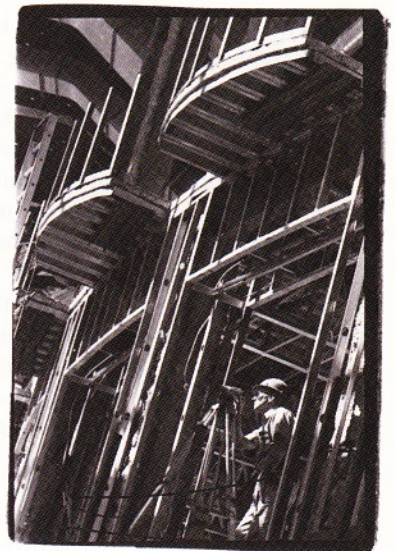
"The downtown master plan ties the center to a cultural district that, in time, will change the way people think about Newark," says Thompson with an urgent tone in her voice. "The reality is that this is a city of minorities, and that makes some people uncomfortable. The programming, the aesthetics, and all our planning is about bringing cultures together. The arts center is about cultural revitalization as much as it is about urban revitalization."

These days, Annette Juliano eats lunch at her desk in her Bradley Hall office on the Rutgers-Newark campus. Although the four-day international conference that she's coordinating, "Arts Transforming the Urban Environment," is still several months away, speakers must be lined up, exhibition space acquired, and an agenda settled. "We think this conference can really help the city in terms of generating ideas and fostering a mutually beneficial relationship between Rutgers and the arts center," says Juliano, chair of the Department of Visual and Performing Arts.

The conference, planned for next October, will be cosponsored by Rutgers, NJPAC, and the Newark Museum. More than 20 other cultural, educational, and civic institutions in and around Newark will collab-

As Miles P. Berger, chair of the Berger Organization, which bought Hahne's, told *The New York Times*, "A retailer will not be able to rely on the promise of an arts center to open a drug store or a shoe store."

When Rutgers' public policy professor Stewart traveled from her Manhattan home to NJPAC to hear the Boston Symphony, she found the necessary ingredients for a successful arts center in place: inviting architecture, programming that reflects the demographics of the city, and signs directing visitors to the facility. But when her party decided to venture into the neighborhood for lunch, they had second thoughts. "There didn't seem to be much to offer, so we ended up dining inside the center. We didn't





feel any real connection to the city; that will have to change if NJPAC is going to be truly successful.”

One key is to provide a physical link between the center, Rutgers, and three other higher-education institutions that make up the nearby University Heights district. Juliano points out that, on the periphery of the campus, there is a noticeable lack of small shops and eateries, the kind that one finds around most city-based campuses. “I foresee Rutgers students benefiting through internships, a meet-the-artist program, and performing opportunities. But that physical link between our campus and the center is important to both our futures—and to the city.”

The lack of a vital neighborhood full of shops, restaurants, and housing concerns Lynn (NCAS’74) and Robert (NCAS’74) Janiak of Middletown. Their

think about Newark.”

son, Michael, a high school senior, wants to attend a college with a strong graphic arts program, which their alma mater has. But he also wants to live on campus, which makes the Janiaks leery. “Rut-

gers—Newark is primarily a commuter school, and I’m simply not comfortable with having my son live in Newark,” says Lynn. “It’s going to take much more than a successful arts center to change the way we think about the city.”

With ticket sales and subscriptions way beyond projections and its restaurant so crowded that it must turn people away, NJPAC seems to be a success—at least as an arts center. But working against the progress of its larger goals, say people who live and work in Newark, is the tarnished reputation of city government. Two council members, a former police director, and an assemblyman who was the mayor’s chief of staff and nephew, have all been convicted of corruption. Meanwhile, a federal investigation of James has dragged on—many claim unfairly and to the detriment of the city—for years. Even Goldman, who likens James to a pillar of the arts center, is discouraged by the lack of a city urban-planning office and the image of city government.

McFarland points out that in the 1980s, as Newark struggled, nonprofit organizations that tried to improve neighborhoods were treated like the enemy by the city: “They were given no

land, no tax benefits, and no support.” A huge booster of the city, McFarland in 1987 proved her faith in Newark by moving her family from Montclair to a house near Branch Brook Park. “I was robbed five times, and the police response was so poor that I moved in 1993. I had two daughters living with me; it was too risky to stay. The attitude of city government and the police force is only now starting to change.”

But McFarland would rather talk about more hopeful signs—like the thousands of suburbanites who have defied pundits to flock to NJPAC’s performances and the sea of yellow schoolbuses that line up outside the center to discharge excited youngsters on a cultural outing. Like everyone else who cares about the future of Newark and its people, she prefers to see a glass half full. “For years and years the Victoria Foundation poured millions of dollars into Newark, only to feel like we were building castles in the sand. I don’t think we’re going to feel that way again.” □

*In the 1980s, Bill Glovin, the senior editor of Rutgers Magazine, worked for a publication that moved its offices from Newark’s Robert Treat Hotel to a suburban office park.*

## National identity at the movies

From Nazi propaganda to American gangsters, film not only has helped define and reinforce the core values and social structures of countries, but has had considerable impact on the way people perceive one another. “Film and Nationalism” (Rutgers University Press), a book edited by Alan Williams, a professor of French at FAS—New Brunswick, contains 10 essays that explore the medium’s role in gender issues, national politics and global economics.

An introduction by Williams points out that while there is little disagreement that film has changed the world, social scientists are forever debating how this has occurred. To what extent has film influenced the cultural and economic interactions between countries? How have Third World nations defined themselves in relation to hegemonic First World cultures? What is film’s influence over national character?

These questions, as well as the debate over the decline of national cinemas, are addressed by academics from several countries. One important debate is whether Hollywood cinema remains truly “American.”

“An increasing number of films made in the United States — especially big-budget action thrillers — are now made by such international conglomerates as Sony or Vivendi Universal,” says Williams. “Many are directed by people who aren’t citizens with a keen eye on foreign distribution potential. Studios are more concerned with how the film will perform than incorporating American values into them. That’s quite a departure from the days of the classic Hollywood studio.”

Williams explains that trade barriers have been removed by most developing nations in such areas as banking and agriculture, but a movement led by the French and embraced by several of its European neighbors means the number of foreign films that make it to the silver and television screens in those countries is limited. “Regulations through tariffs and quotas are a way to keep their own national cinemas healthy and limit foreign influence,” he explains.

—Bill Glovin