



Santo Domingo Performance Space

San Felipe, Panamá, Republic of Panamá 2009

UNESCO Oficina del Casco Antiguo - Ministerio Patrimonio

Santo Domingo served as the church of the Dominican Order in Panamá from the 1670's until it was destroyed by fire in 1747. Its structure contains the 350-year old Arco Chato, the flat arch used by American lobbyists and politicians as 'proof' of Panamá's seismic stability, thus justifying its superiority over volcanically-active Nicaragua as the location of the future transoceanic canal.

In 2008, OPA was commissioned by the Oficina del Casco Antiguo, the United Nation Development Program's local office for the UNESCO World Heritage site, to develop strategies that would allow the ruins of Santo Domingo to be utilized for performance of music, dance and oratory. The original roof structure and all records of the church design were destroyed in the 1747 fire. OPA engaged in significant research into the original form of the ruined structure through study of historic record, 19th century photographs and documentation of related structures in France, Italy, Bogotá and Cartagena. Based on the research, OPA developed a tensile roof structure that interprets the historic form and provides shelter from sun and rain for the performance area. The new construction describes the lofty scale of the original space, which cannot immediately be experienced from the remains of the existing ruin. It interprets the known historic forms precisely in detailed wood elements. Where the architectural form is speculative, it is represented abstractly in contemporary materials of steel and tensile fabric. New columns are wired and fitted with dual steel tubes for mounting stage lighting and speakers. Performance space can be oriented in either direction within the nave, accommodating a seated audience of 400 for performances staged in the old apse or an audience of 650 for performances or oratory from a temporary stage area located beneath the Arco Chato.

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