

# Memphis Flyer

## Shell on Earth

*Overton Park Shell renovations go "green."*



Rendering of the improved Overton Park Shell

For years, the rainbow on the Overton Park Shell served as a backdrop for the city's annual Earth Day festival. Before the city shut down the shell in 2004, the outdoor amphitheater also served as home to peace marches, pagan pride days, and other events for the environmentally conscious.

In keeping with the shell's "green" theme, the group in charge of restoring the crumbling structure hopes to make the renovation process environmentally sustainable.

"We think it's very important to show people we can do it responsibly and ecologically sound and reuse everything we possibly can," says Barry Lichterman, president of the Friends of Levitt Pavilion Memphis, Inc. (FLPM), the local group trying to bring the shell back to its former glory.

Three years ago, the shell was closed after falling into a dangerous state of disrepair. The Mortimer Levitt Foundation, a national group that has revived shell theaters across the country, then offered to pay a quarter of the cost to repair it.

"We're using sustainable techniques. We're reusing the old concrete bench stanchions and making walls out of them for privacy and sound," says Lee Askew of Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects, the firm responsible for the design. Plans were finalized this week.

Rather than demolish the metal wings on both sides of the stage, they are being donated to a private citizen for reuse.

The citizen will pay for the removal, and smaller wings will be erected in their place.

The foundations under the wings will be pulverized and used as gravel in the parking lot adjacent to the shell. The current wooden seating will also be removed but will be reused in other parts of the project.

The renovated shell, to be renamed the Levitt Pavilion for the Performing Arts at the Overton Park Shell, will also get sound-system, lighting, and restroom upgrades.

As part of the city's agreement with the Mortimer Levitt Foundation, the shell will host 50 free concerts possibly beginning as early as fall 2008. The performances will focus on regional family-friendly music, such as rhythm & blues, Latin, zydeco, American roots, and jazz.

As for events such as the Earth Day festival, Lichterman says the venue will be available for rental if organizers are interested.

The renovation will cost an estimated \$1.25 million, half of which will be funded by the city. The Mortimer Levitt Foundation will donate \$250,000, and Lichterman says the rest will come from donors and sponsors. Construction is slated to begin in September of this year and to be completed by August 2008.