

Restoration dramas

Van Phillips, Jones & Phillips Associates, USA

The revival of historical theatrical venues can turn into farce or even romantic tragedy for all concerned if the prospects of success aren't logically assessed first

Theatre consultants are constantly approached about saving older theatrical facilities. When it makes sense logically to breathe life into an existing theatrical facility, it can be a worthwhile, satisfying project.

The key words here are, "when it makes sense logically", because if it doesn't make sense, the advice is more likely to be to pull the plug on the facility and let it go. The question to ask, then, is: "Will the finished project have a sustained new life, with the market, human and financial resources necessary to maintain the facility for several years to come?"

If any one of the three elements (the reason for existing, human resources and monetary resources) is missing, the facility will be doomed to fall back to its death throes in a much shorter time period than most people realize. As people in Europe know far better than those in North and South America, older

facilities take constant care and attention and any lapse in maintenance soon requires more costly repairs.

Strangely, there is little national or international debate on when preservation, restoration or remodeling should occur. What discussion does take place is usually limited to local debate about a specific project or just generic proclamations about historic buildings from the bigger arena.

In the USA, historical societies are often jokingly referred to as "hysterical" societies, such is the level of passion that these "discussions" can cause – often with little basis in the facts of the matter.

So, what are the facts and what is the logic that dictates which choice to make? There are many factors that need to be considered in a project involving an older theatre. As exhaustive as these considerations might be, there are some issues that seem to be generally part of most, if not all, of these types of projects. Some of the following points are crucial when considering the restoration of an old theatrical or performing arts facility.

Will an audience come to this facility?

Theatres are places of public assembly. Unless you are planning to mothball the facility you will need an audience to pay the bills. That is true even if it is planned as a museum version of past theatrical glories.

Look at the audience you need to attract. Look at the neighborhood where the theatre is located. Will the audience you need feel comfortable or even safe attending events in this area? What would make them feel more comfortable? Are you being realistic?

It is true that renovations and/or new public facilities can force change and improvements

within a community. The Arts District of downtown Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, is a shining example. But it was successful not because of any single project in the district. It was forged from a bigger vision than any individual theatre project. Conversely, Underground Atlanta was a wonderful concept. But the audience it was intended to serve was not found among the people who made up the surrounding neighborhoods. It was a unique place.

Twice it was launched and re-launched with great investment and twice it sank back into the surroundings.

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Why was or is this facility not fully used or even abandoned?

If the facility simply needs a facelift, you are indeed fortunate. Most often the facility being considered is not used to its potential and many have sat unused for extended periods of time. By understanding why potential users are choosing other venues for their presentations and performances, you can go a long way to making your first list of goals and things to solve for the completed project. Approach this review from three totally different points of view. Look from the producer's viewpoint, then the audience's viewpoint, and finally from a



[Above] Templeton-Blackburn Alumni Memorial Auditorium at Ohio University reopened in 1999 following a two-year, US\$5.8m renovation, including the installation of a larger stage and orchestra pit, improved acoustics, lighting, heating and air-conditioning

[Right] First opened in 1928, Templeton-Blackburn Alumni Memorial Auditorium has undergone a major revamp that has brought the facility into complete compliance with ADA, provided new administrative support facilities and restored the elegant lobby

[Photos] Feinknopf Macioce Schappa Architects



modern legal point of view. There is very little that will appear on all the lists, and those that do will be limited to broad subjects – things like the acoustics, sightlines, the general condition of the facility and accessibility.

The condition of the stage floor, stage depth, available wing space and fly-system support, dressing and warm-up spaces, production power and audio-mix positions won't find their way on to a list of concerns for audience members. When a producer thinks of access it implies performer access (including parking), materials loading access, access for performers from the stage to dressing facilities and back again, and ease of technical access to systems, devices, and technical positions.

Most audience members don't know or care what it takes to provide a good performance. They couldn't care less about the technical difficulties or the hours spent by professional stagehands to get the show to work on stage. However, the audience can tell you a great deal about things like the feeling of safety coming to the location, the comfort of the seating (width of seats, leg room and so on), the difficulty in getting to and returning from toilet facilities during intermission, lines at the woman's restrooms and, lest we forget, the logic of getting from the box office to the seats. They can tell you if they could see, hear and felt too hot or cold.

A review of the codes shows a totally unrelated set of focus points. Items such as the Americans with Disabilities Act compliance (ADA), audience and worker safety, and

classification of the building to determine which section of the various codes apply, are the focus here. (ADA is not strictly a code, but it is included here.) Will the building's mission, and therefore code of relationship, change (church to theatre, for example)? Be aware of the difference between, for example, reconditioning the existing seating and

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replacing the seating. Often, to gain more comfortable seating, the seats are replaced or re-configured after their reconditioning. Be aware this can lead to having to comply with every aspect of the code currently in force.

There is some ability to "grandfather" back to the code(s) in place when the building was built originally. How much can be done before the new codes become the rule, however, may vary. Check with a knowledgeable person in your area as to where the project will cross the line and require modern code interpretations. The implications are enormous when you

consider new exiting requirements (some of which may be impossible to accomplish within an old building's footprint), fire sprinklers and the related supply pipes where none existed; even how sprinkler heads penetrate facades; and how older under-floor air systems and balcony structural elements can control seating layout and exiting options.

The list you produce should have a huge impact when you are trying to choose between preservation, renovation or resurrection of a theatre.

Is there an economic engine strong enough to power the long-term future of the facility?

As anyone who has ever owned an old building or house can tell you, older buildings constantly need something. And the something these facilities need most often requires parts and skills that are in short supply. There are far too many examples of theatres that are brought back to life only to slide back into disrepair in a startlingly short period of time.

Sometimes this has been caused by negligence, but most often the root cause was a lack of adequate money. In most cases, either repairs were beyond the budget, or inappropriate or inadequate repairs were made due to lack of funds. Often it can be far more painful to a community's ego to invest in the resurrection of an older theatre, only to see it quickly slide back into disrepair than if the effort was never attempted. Don't forget the economic engine may come more like a kit of parts than a single identity.

The world is paved with good intentions, but good intentions won't pay the bills. As wonderful as the local symphony is, if they are struggling to pay the musicians, how can you expect them to maintain the roof?

Can the planning team avoid the decorative potentials so they can be realistic about the difficulties?

In every project, there are at least a few people so passionate about a building that they try to discourage any serious discussion of the difficulties of renovation. These individuals are often well intentioned, but their actions can prevent the realistic discussion that could lead

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to their fond desire. Being old doesn't make a building good or even a worthy example of a type. Let the historic review process be the dispassionate arbitrator – it's not worth the heartburn to enter into an argument.

The historically passionate should not, however, be excluded from a project. The success or failure of a project will often depend on how they are included. Often, these individuals are focused on the decorative portions of the building and have little or no knowledge or concern about how a theatre must function. In many cases, and more devastating to the project, these individuals want to tell others what to do without the financial involvement needed to be considered as partners in the process.

There are three things that can be done to make the historically passionate supporters useful. First, don't allow such people to take the point position. Separate them from potential financial backers. The first time they "tell" a politician, investor or donor what they must do with their money, you may have just lost the project. Second, educate them on how theatres function, and keep educating them. And third, keep reminding them of the goal.

What are the physical and ownership limitations to improving the facility's ability to meet modern expectations? Can your plan encompass both the operational as well as the restorative needs and requirements?

Look at the whole of the facility's needs and look at the property that surrounds the site. It might be better to acquire property beyond the site before you start than to find that you need another piece at a later time.

It will do the building little good to be fully brought back to life if the access to the stage or the stage size discourages use by producers or performance groups. This can require a review of adjacent buildings, easements, off-street loading and alleyways.

Once you start working on the facility, the surrounding property owners will know that you need to protect your investment of time and money. Any surrounding property that might be required should therefore be acquired before the project begins, or make the other owner a partner in the project. Occasionally, a group has such a coherent plan that a community will condemn adjacent property owned by a neighbor hostile to co-operation – but don't count on this kind of support.

Is there public support to bring this facility into a modern community role?

Don't confuse the goals of a few with the goals of a community. If your project is in line with the community's goals, or if the community can be convinced to support this project, the chance of success is greatly increased. Get someone to whom the community listens to evaluate the goals in an honest way. The information you receive may allow this project to move past the hope and idea stage.

Are the demographics of change in the community working for or against you?

Communities, states and even nations are constantly evolving. There is a wealth of data that has been amassed over the past 100 years about change in all parts of the world. This may be boring stuff to wade through for the people on your team, but others live to find ways to use this knowledge. Enlist these people and learn from them. They may show you information to make your case to the community. But, be aware that they can also show you why another project for the same building, or another building altogether, makes more sense.

Are you competing for the same ideas, market or audience with another project? Can the community support both?

In the USA competition is prized as the American way, but competition works only if the community, as a whole or in large part, needs the product.

In most cases, USA communities are pockets of taste and opinion. What people would like to see on stage and what they are willing to support varies widely. For example, unless it is a very large community, there is most likely only room for one major symphony orchestra, and which needs only one home. Do you really want to kill another beautiful theatre to try to lure the symphony away? Look at the unmet entertainment needs and find a new audience.

Are there entertainment needs in the community that this facility is in a unique position to support?

There are lots of entertainment needs in a community and many of them have large numbers of supporters that can be transformed into an audience. What the local symphony may lack in attendees is often made up by an audience with deep pockets. Investigate the audience potential for other music, dance, drama and popular entertainment such as comedy and reviews. Think outside the obvious

and what is currently presented. Look for groups whose popularity is growing but are still working in alternative venues.

What resources are there outside of this community that would be attracted to this project?

An arena Jones & Phillips consulted on in North Carolina's research triangle was named for the Royal Bank of Canada. Canada? On the other hand, if you are a Canadian bank looking to expand, what better identity can you have than becoming the name on the local professional hockey arena?

Look beyond your community at:

- Naming rights;
- State, regional and Federal grants for historic preservation (they often will provide planning money rather than building money);
- Compliance grants (such as handicapped accessibility funding);
- Regional and national production interests. Many of these facilities in the USA (such as the Orpheum and the Fox) were built to support a touring show circuit – those interests still exist but the names have now changed to groups such as Disney;
- Special-interest societies (groups such as the Theatre Organ Society and others are interested in supporting older theatres, but be careful to look for any strings attached and make sure you can live with them).

If you fail, what will this failure cost the arts and particularly the performing-arts community in public support?

The resurrection of an old theatre is often fueled by intense passions. If done correctly, where the

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finished project will have a sustained new life and the human and financial resources necessary to maintain the facility for years to come, the rewards can be great. However, if the project fails, the damage to the performing arts community can be equally great.

Remember, to the majority of people who can provide economic assistance in a community, the arts are simply "the arts". If these donors invest in failure their frustration will be felt by everyone in the arts community. As long as the failed theatre facility exists, it can serve as a constant, visible reminder of wasted effort, time and money.

Don't let passion poison the arts donor pool. If you really value the arts and performing arts buildings, temper passion with some historic logic. ●