

Planning the Regional Theatre

Thinking about building a new theatre? Keep these points in mind.

By Keith Gerchak

For those theatre companies and communities that, lacking previous experience, decide to undertake the daunting task of a performing arts building project, the first lesson is that the process is a balancing act. True, the building program is rooted in the mission statement, as defined and interpreted by the individual preferences of the artistic and technical staff, and this will initially establish the preferred type, size, and quantity of performance and related support facilities. But, there are countless other factors that tug and pull at this defined program—what we call “creative tension”—that ultimately molds the building design, and a theatre company needs to be aware and prepared for them.

What follows are five key points to keep in mind if you are thinking about braving the process.

#1: Admit what you don't know; what you already know may not be helpful.

Howard Shalwitz, artistic director of Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company in Washington, DC, invites anyone contemplating a theatre construction project to embrace their newness to the process. “Theatre representatives need to learn their own taste, even if they think they know what they want going into it,” he says. “Many things that seem intuitive at the beginning prove to be wrong in the end.” In the case of Woolly Mammoth’s new venue, he feels that the search for an architect and theatre consultant was a tremendous learning process, as it challenged preconceptions and biases, opening everyone’s eyes to the range of possibilities. “The selection of the team was the single-most important decision to the ultimate success of the project,” he says.

Susan Knill, facility manager of Chicago Shakespeare Theater (CST), says that every owner decision, down to keying the locks, was made from the limited perspective of prior staff experience, which sometimes had little relevance to the way in which the theatre would operate in the expanded facilities of the new building. While it is a challenge to anticipate needs in uncharted waters, it is important to distinguish functions that are integral to the artistic mission from those that are learned patterns of use. After six seasons in their facility, Knill feels that the company is finally settling into their space.

#2: Identify point persons and solicit user input.

CST did not have a full-time technical director nor production department heads on staff at the time of programming and design, and today these individuals deal with the operational decisions that were made without them. Knill advises that, even if a theatre cannot hire full-time staff, it is important to involve production designers with whom the theatre has well-established relationships, who have an intimate understanding of its artistic and technical approach.

Woolly staff established well-defined roles with a clear division of responsibilities: the artistic director and technical director worked with the designers, while the managing director worked on contracts and negotiations. Bold, specific goals for the project were



The auditorium of the new Woolly Mammoth Theatre in Washington, DC.

articulated, driving both fundraising and design efforts. In addition, the theatre sought the input of their production designers who, since they were not part of the building process, could objectively evaluate and comment on the design.

#3: Be flexible in response to forces outside your control.

Planning decisions, no matter how well informed by theatre staff, will be tempered by forces that affect the available building area and budget. For example, fundraising capacity within the community will be dictated by the economic climate and competition from other capital campaigns. Operational budget and audience projections may limit the facility that can be supported. Donor and trustee interests may drive fund allocation away from theatrical equipment or storage space and towards increased patron comfort or iconic architecture. Landlord decisions may be made of which the theatre team has no control, such as shifts in lease lines, building floor elevations, or windows. Community opposition to the development may drive design changes, as may zoning and building code regulations. The site may present its own

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set of challenges, whether incorporation of an existing facility or limitations of size, ease of access, or visibility.

#4: Watch out for compromises that negatively affect operations.

Theatre planning is driven by the need to organize the main elements of the performance spaces and to address site access, namely backstage load-in and patron approach. Yet basic front-of-house and back-of-house considerations may be overlooked, not budgeted, or compromised in the shadow of other factors that garner greater attention. If exacerbated by a design team’s lack of attention to operational needs, support spaces may be eliminated or shoehorned into a pre-described geometry, eliminating programming spaces that do not fit, or otherwise rendering them useless. Site constraints may require stacking support spaces on multiple floors, but the way they are distributed will impact their usefulness as well as staffing and operational efficiency.

For example, CST occupies several levels of an existing parking garage on Navy Pier, in which planners had to contend with limited ceiling heights and sloping floors, the parking stripes of which can still be seen underneath the carpet. The inherited conditions of the site created inefficiencies. The catering kitchen was placed in a location that was accessible to the delivery dock, but two floors below the reception hall; because of the distance, the space was ultimately converted to office use. Knill recounts another example of a Chicago theatre that also has two entrances—at garage and street level—so two sets of identical tickets are pre-printed and posted, as the point of entry for an individual patron cannot be anticipated. To solve the additional pressure on material and labor resources, the theatre is now converting to printed tickets at point of sale.

Storage, backstage toilets, and the crossover corridor may all be too easily eliminated when available area is reduced due to budget constraints, without full appreciation for the effect this decision has on the operation of the theatre. According to Jeff Muskovin, former production manager and building coordinator of the Goodman Theatre, backstage storage at his theatre was cut due to several contributing factors: low early construction estimates, escalation from delays in securing financing, and fundraising limits within the community. However, he argues, “Eliminating storage area is like saying you can live without your

left ear.” The Goodman ultimately converted some of its large dressing rooms into storage. A recent fitout of basement shell space as permanent storage will enable dressing rooms to be reclaimed as needed for simultaneous large-cast productions.

Budget constraints also lead to deferred items. Muskovin suggests that the decisions about which items were deferred at the Goodman was partially a function of what user groups were less actively involved. Front-of-house staff and management were not active collaborators in the process; thus, lobby finishes and fixtures as well as the donor room were deferred.

#5: Think long and hard about what support services you need onsite.

Shalwitz advises hiring a team that understands who you are as a theatre and what equipment and support spaces you need in order to make the right compromises. For instance, consolidating theatre operations within a new facility may or may not be a good idea. For CST, set construction is offsite; not only was there insufficient area in the lease space, but the theatre company did not have the necessary staff carpenters or the operational budget to hire them. Set construction largely remains contracted with an independent scene shop and loaded in for each production, even though getting access from the pier can be a problem. At Woolly Mammoth, the costume area was sized for wardrobe that is pulled rather than built, but the need for a freight elevator was defined and defended by the theatre consultant to serve the onsite scene shop on the lower level, so located because of site restrictions. For Muskovin, however, the prospect of moving costume construction and wardrobe inventory offsite would have been a logistical nightmare for the Goodman, scheduling travel time to meet fitting appointments around rehearsals.

In the end, informed planning decisions depend upon the theatre representatives and their theatre consultant to educate the design team regarding the use of program spaces, their occupants, and their adjacency requirements. The design process, in turn, demands flexibility and some degree of compromise, as well as a more global perspective. However, due diligence must still be exercised to ensure that programming needs are not unwittingly sacrificed while addressing other factors. 

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