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New York's Theatre District is in the middle of a significant re-alignment that may affect its fortunes for years to come. In decades past, the words "Theatre District" referred mostly to the Broadway theatres located between 41st and 52nd Streets.

There were many more venues in the neighborhood, but, aside from, say, the American Place Theatre, most of them were Off Off Broadway spaces, with facilities ranging from dismal to non-existent.

Things began to change in 2001, when Theatre Row Studios, the low-end series of spaces on 42nd Street, west of Ninth Avenue, got a major upgrade, as did Playwrights Horizons, the Off-Broadway company next door to Theatre Row. On the same block, the Little Shubert, an exceptionally large and well-appointed new theatre opened, taking in

commercial bookings. This year saw the rarely used American Place renovated into the Harold and Mimi Steinberg Center for Theatre, providing the Roundabout Theatre Company with a new Off-Broadway space. Also in the works is 37 Arts, a new space in the nearby Garment District. And, if you don't mind stretching the boundaries of the area a bit, there's even 59 E. 59th Street, a new theatre complex that houses, among other things, the not-for-profit company Primary Stages.

The thinking behind all these theatres is essentially the same: conventional wisdom dictates that out-of-town theatergoers prefer to attend Broadway shows. This is partly because Broadway shows are more extensively marketed, but, apparently, also because tourists are anxious about straying into less-familiar areas

of the city. In fact, there is some evidence suggesting that they will happily attend an Off-Broadway show, if it is appealing and the theatre is attractive and located near Times Square.

Of all the new theatres going up in and around Times Square, the most ambitious is Dodger Stages, the new underground venue on 50th Street, just west of Eighth Avenue. The statistics are impressive: It spans 61,300 sq. ft. It contains five theatres of varying sizes. The renovation cost \$20 million, all of it raised by Dodger Theatrical Holding, the commercial producing organization responsible for *Urinetown*, *Fame on 42nd Street*, recent revivals of *Into the Woods* and *The Music Man*, and the currently running *Dracula, the Musical*. Most impressive of all is how a team of architects, consult-

UNDERGROUND THEATRE

An abandoned cinema becomes a vibrant
Off-Broadway multiplex

By David Barbour

ants, and designers have transformed a strange, unappealing multiplex-in-a-basement, into a sleekly designed space, conceived to make theatregoing a social event. However, this transformation took considerable structural and decorative innovation.

The death of the \$2 cinema

The block bordered by 49th and 50th Streets on the north and south, and Eighth and Ninth Avenues on the east and west, is an historic one in the world of New York entertainment. From 1925-68 it was the home of Madison Square Garden. Later, when the Garden moved downtown to its present location, the block contained one of the few open parking lots in Midtown Manhattan. In the 80s, the mixed-use development Worldwide Plaza was erected there. On the Eighth Avenue side is a 50-story

office tower designed by Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill. On the Ninth Avenue side is a 38-floor apartment building designed by Frank Williams and Associates. Linking the two is a series of low-rise residences and an open-air plaza.

Installed in an underground concourse was a Cineplex Odeon multiplex with six screens. Perhaps because of its unusual location, the venue didn't catch on until it became a second-run house, charging an admission price of \$2. As "the \$2 cinema," it attracted a young, urban crowd in search of a bargain, remaining popular even after inflation turned it into the \$3 cinema. Eventually, probably because of the increasingly rapid transfer of first-run films to the DVD and Par-Per-View formats, the \$3 cinema closed. The space remained empty for several years,

until the Dodgers took it over.

At the time, it seemed like an eccentric decision to put a theatre, or theatres, in the former multiplex. For one thing, it was in no way an appealing environment. During its cinema days, you entered on 50th Street and rode an escalator down to the box office. Then you went down two more levels—passing a mezzanine that wasn't open to the public—to reach the screening rooms. The décor was bland, the atmosphere was dark, and lighting in the public areas consisted of a purple haze which did nothing to relieve the general sense of gloom. "It was a terrible experience," says Erik Chu of Beyer Blinder

This drawing shows the basic concept of Dodger Stages, in which a series of underground cinemas have been transformed into live theatres.





The mezzanine level, seen in a photo taken before the theatre's opening, provides access to the upper part of each theatre, overlooks the main public space. The exposed ductwork and fluorescent lighting are part of the space's sleek industrial look.

Belle, the architects of Dodger Stages. "It was like a cattle corral." Still, he says, when consulted about the renovation, "We could definitely see the potential" in the space.

To achieve that potential, the interior was thoroughly reconceived. Virtually the only features retained from the original cinema were the entrance escalator and the walls between the screening rooms. The renovation took place on three fronts—the theatres themselves, the reconfiguration of the public space, and a new visual scheme designed to help turn a visit to Dodger Stages into a fun, social experience.

Of the six screening rooms, five became theatres; the sixth was converted into dressing rooms. Roger Morgan, theatre consultant and founder of Sachs Morgan Studios

(who admits to being an occasional patron of the \$2 cinema), recalls walking through the "smelly, sticky" pre-renovation venue with an eye to transforming it. His assignment was a bit of a puzzle, as he worked out how to transform the existing spaces into viable theatres for live performance, while also accommodating the necessary support spaces, such as dressing rooms, showers, etc.

Morgan says he quickly realized that the movie theatres, which sat up to 600, would have to accommodate smaller audiences, in order to make room for the necessary amenities that live theatre requires. "None of the theatres had balconies," he says, adding, however, that there was room above in each space for the projection booth and HVAC equipment.

After various drafts, Morgan came up with a plan that featured five theatres and in three formats. "Stages One and Three," he says, "have balconies, to pick up seats that were lost when we added stages. These spaces have a 499-seat capacity. [That's 390 seats on the orchestra level and 109 in the mezzanine.] Then there are two smaller stages, Two and Four, which have stadium seating for which we built new rakes. They can seat 360 each." The final venue, Stage Five, is a 199-seat studio theatre, with 147 seats on the orchestra level and 52 seats on the mezzanine.

The theatres themselves are fairly bare-bones, intended for four-wall rentals. Each of them contains a stage, lighting positions, a stage, light booths, and audience seating. There are no prosceniums and no gear. The seating, with its special lumbar-support feature, was supplied by Seating Concepts. Noise between theatre is not an issue, according to Morgan: "The original builders did a good job of isolating the theatres with thick concrete walls." The Sachs Morgan layout includes dressing rooms and shower rooms, which are reachable via crossover passages located behind the theatre spaces. There are two dressing rooms per theatre; the larger ones can accommodate up to 20 people.

L. Gerald Marshall, acoustician, of the firm KMK Marshall, notes that a major part of his job involved facilitating the venue's relatively quiet air-conditioning system. "One way an acoustic consultant can be of most help is to ensure quiet" systems, he says. "There are several parts to air-conditioning noise. There's the noise through the duct from the machinery, the air turbulence noise produced in the duct, the noise produced at the

grills. You can take care of duct-borne machinery noise with an acoustic duct liner and silencers placed near the equipment. In addition, you need to build an isolated sound room for the machinery.” Tom Knauss, a systems consultant for Marshall KMK, specified the Clear-Com production intercom system, a

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crucial feature in linking the complex network of theatres and support spaces. In addition, he says, is “there’s a tie-line system between all the stages for audio and video connections. These basic tie-line and intercom features are a little more complicated than usual, as the dressing rooms are shared in some cases; you don’t know which dressing room will be assigned to which theatre. Therefore, there’s some slightly unusual routing, matrixing, and switching capabilities between the theatres and dressing rooms.”

One major issue involved creating a way for shows load in and out of the underground space. “In most Off Broadway theatres, scenery goes in through the front door,” says Morgan, adding that this was not a workable plan here. He points out the Eighth

Avenue side of the theatre adjoins the truck bay of the Worldwide Plaza office tower. Therefore, trucks can drive into the bay, where lifts transfer the scenery and equipment down to the theatres. There is a double-wall arrangement here: The loading-dock opens to a small passage separating the theatre from the loading area.

Overall, the layout is an elegant solution to innumerable spatial problems. However, the creation of five theatres of varying sizes in such close proximity and in an interior setting posed new challenges, which required considerable ingenuity to solve.

The social experience

As Morgan notes, “There’s no theatre like this. If all five of them are filled, there’s only one house on Broadway welcoming more people—The

Gershwin Theatre.” However, he also notes, “Movie theatres have staggered starting times. Legitimate theatres don’t.” The prospect of approximately 1,900 theatregoers finding their way down the escalator and into their seats in the half-hour before curtain time posed daunting crowd-control challenges.

For that matter, says Erik Chu, the challenge was, “how to get five different productions to live together under one roof. How do you make it an asset? For one thing, you have a captive audience of theatregoers passing by your show. The public area of the theatre is, potentially, an asset to the other productions.”

Chu adds that the crowd-control issue was addressed by making use of the mezzanine level; part of the crowd entering the theatre peels off at this point, either to take seats in

Two of the theatre feature stadium-style seating (below). The seats in every theatre, provided by Seating Concepts, have a special lumbar-support feature.



MARC BRYAN-BROWN

Zieglerova: “For me, the big challenge was how to make the space more pleasant, more intimate.”

the balconies of Stages One, Three, and Five or in the back rows of the back rows of Stages Two and Four. The architect says there was “significant structural work done on the mezzanine, principally to make it more spacious. We added a couple of structural bridges and created more viewing areas, breaking up what was a long narrow slot into three discrete areas, and changing the proportions aesthetically.” As a result, the mezzanine level also pro-



This early photo shows Zieglerova’s lobby design; not yet visible are the projections that are to be seen on the Speaker Mesh scrim.

vides a viewpoint of the main floor below.

The main public space is found on the orchestra, level and virtually all the players had a part in its transformation. Chu was responsible for structural changes, such as those listed above. The Sachs Morgan team consulted on the lighting of the space. As principal designer of public spaces, theatre scenery designer Klara Zieglerova designed the interior architecture, including the box office, downstairs bars, coat-check area, and lighting fixtures, as well as the decor in the public spaces, which give the theatre its veneer of wit and chic. Graphic designers 2x4 Inc. created the distinctive graphic look that begins with the name on the building’s exterior and continues through the venue.

As you enter Dodger Stages, you stand in a foyer containing the box office. Looking the other way to the escalator leading downstairs, a grand, old-fashioned chandelier, a hand-made item created by Litemakers, hangs in a corner; in front of it is an angular metal structure, with a metal scrim, created by Rose Brand’s Speaker Mesh, which serves as a projection surface. The combination of the partially visible chandelier with the sleek, modern metal, and changing projections, sets the tone for a series of charming visual surprises.

Downstairs is a bar (one of three), with custom lighting units hanging over it, a long table made of stainless steel and a column with a lighting unit inside, built by Hudson Scenic Studio. Next to the coat-check area is a tailor’s dummy in sea green, which is one of two major colors deployed through the space. Other features include a green quilted wall piece, a giant mirror with an old-fashioned gilt frame, period furniture in various arrangements, and motorcycles that appear to be emerging from the theatre’s walls.

“It’s almost like a theatre set,” says Zieglerova, who just opened a new musical, *Jersey Boys*, at La Jolla Playhouse. The idea, she says, is to create a social space, in which audiences from different shows will mingle and discuss what they’re seeing that evening. Morgan echoes the point, saying, “In this arrangement, a producer gets to expose his or her show to more theatergoers.”

A prominent feature of the public space is a large wall in the center backing Stage Five where, behind a metal grill, fluorescent units spell out the number of each of the stages; these can be used indicate that the intermission at a particular stage is over. A portable stage can be put in front of this wall for various platform performances—readings, concerts, etc. Each of these things, says Zieglerova

had the same end: “For me, the big challenge was how to make the space pleasant, to make it more intimate.”

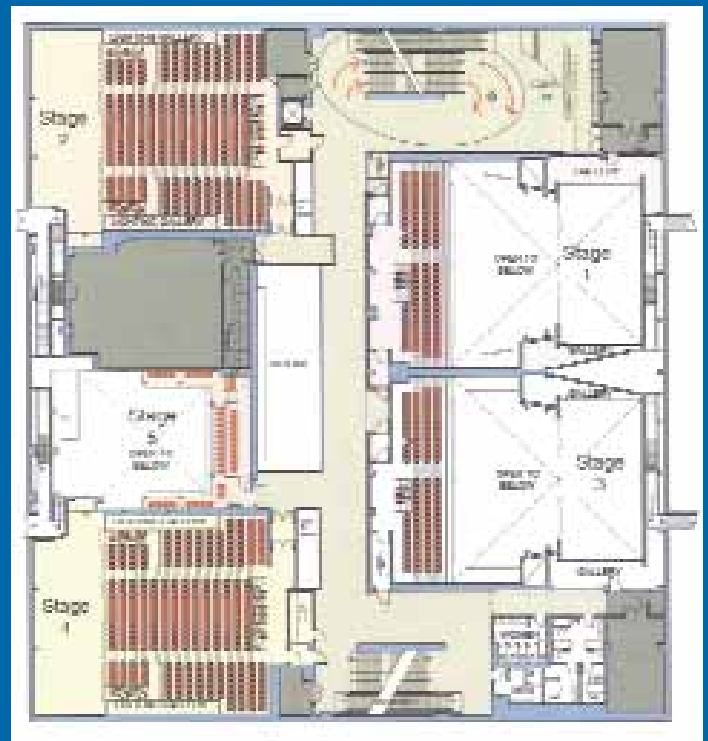
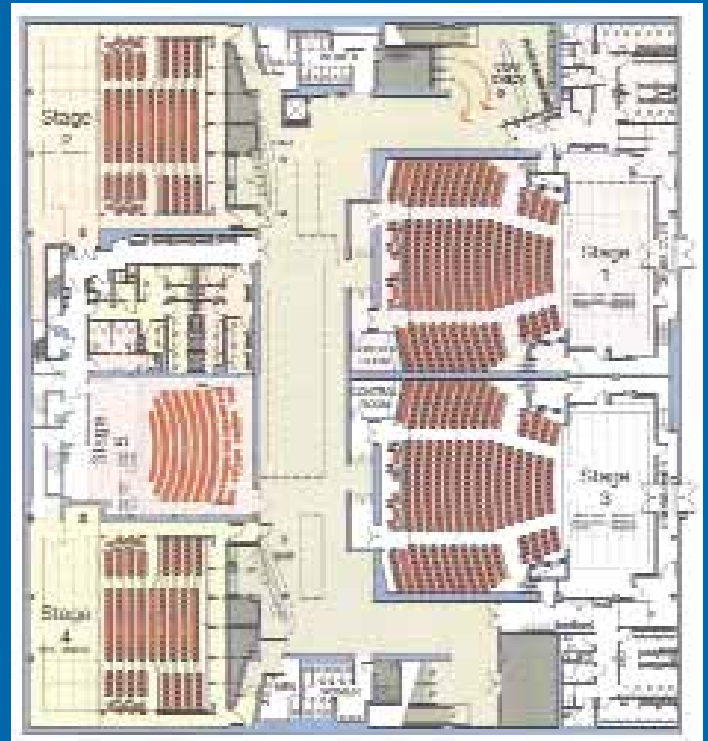
Whereas the same space in the Cineplex Odeon was dark and claustrophobic, the renovated is bright and open, emphasizing its height. Chu says that this was achieved partly by removing a slab and exposing the building’s pipes and ductwork. “We wanted to contrast gritty, tough materials with slick, modern, contemporary touches,” he adds. “We felt that this is in the Off Broadway tradition. This is not a Broadway theatre; it’s scrappier in its nature. At the same time, we wanted to provide amenities—generous dressing room areas, showers, everything that you would expect in a legitimate theatre.”

The lighting of the public space has been done with particular care. According to Morgan, “Klara liked the look of the exposed ductwork, so we took fluorescent units with blue GAMTube sleeves which put a blue over the ceiling, putting the ducts in silhouette. In addition, there are Selecon PC luminaires gelled in green.” The walls on the north side are frosted plastic, backlit by blue fluorescent units. The Selecon PCs are used to project images on the center wall featuring the numbers of each stage.

Also visible beneath the ductwork is a pair of tracks of white fluorescent units, which add a feeling of movement and a sense of the space’s horizontal nature. This is only one of many visual cues added to drive audiences in the direction of the theatres. Signs painted on the floor direct traffic to the right theatre, adding to the crowd control. These were the work of 2x4. According to Chu, “They were the first to suggest that the ceiling could generate a language for the entire project.”

The result of the collaboration is an elegant, unique theatre space, which stands to provide Off Broadway productions with a deluxe new showcase. The first production, a revival of Basil Twist’s avant-garde puppet experiment *Symphonie Fantastique*, opened in September, followed by a Mandy Patinkin concert show, and *The Immigrant*, a musical about Jews coming to America in early part of the 20th century. With such diverse programming and its commitment to theatregoing as a social experience, Dodger Stages is poised to attract a broad new audience to Off-Broadway theatre. ■

The drawings at right show how theatre consultants Sachs Morgan carved five theatre spaces out of the original six cinemas. The sixth screening room is now used for dressing rooms and showers.



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