

Theater Facility Impact Study

Volume 1:

# THEATER FACILITIES: GUIDELINES AND STRATEGIES

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THEATER FACILITY IMPACT STUDY, Volume 1  
THEATER FACILITIES: GUIDELINES AND STRATEGIES

Robert M. Beckley and Sherrill M. Myers

Abstract

The research summarized in this report formulates guidelines and strategies for the creation of regional theater facilities. This study creates a typology for a new building type based on the programmatic desires of regional theater as it has evolved through several generations. The research was funded by NEA and has received a research citation from Progressive Architecture and a research excellence award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

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# PREFACE

This study would not have been instigated if building a theatre was free of problems and pitfalls. It is because the building process has resulted in both laughter and tears that we were asked to delve into the experience of companies who have recently built or adapted buildings for theatre so that the lessons which have been learned could be more widely shared.

Julius Novicks book, Beyond Broadway: The Quest for Permanent Theaters, documents the early years of regional theatre formation in this country and highlights some of the pitfalls of building theatres.

To illustrate the kind of events and incidents theatre companies have experienced and to establish a sense of why this study was initiated we begin with two scenarios. These scenarios, to the best of our knowledge, have not really happened. They are, like good drama, based upon real experiences, however. Any similarity to situations you have heard about is quite intentional.

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**SCENARIO ONE: COMING IN THE BACK DOOR**

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During the campaign for re-election, the Mayor of the City had promised to set up a Special Commission on the Arts to investigate the needs of the arts community in the City. True to his word, the Commission was established several months after his election. The Commission made its report a year and a half later after considerable delay centering on an argument over what Arts group should be included in a survey. The Special Commission recommended to the Mayor that the city build an Arts Center on land in the downtown area which had been cleared for urban renewal, but for which there were no developers. The Commission further proposed that the Arts Center should include a new home for the Symphony Orchestra, the Opera, the Chamber Orchestra, the Ballet, and a downtown center for the Art Museum.

The recommendation of the Special Commission were referred by the Mayor to the Finance Committee of the City Council, which in turn referred the recommendations to the Capital Improvements Subcommittee. The Capital Improvements Subcommittee held public hearings as it is required to do by law. There was a public outcry, supported by the local press, that such a facility would increase public taxes, and that the city could not afford such a facility. Since no one knew how much such a facility might actually cost, the matter was referred to the Department of Public Works. The Department of Public Works prepared preliminary plans which indicated that the cost of the facility would be in the neighborhood of 30 million dollars.

A City Councilman who was a member of the Capital Improvements Subcommittee and who had also served on the Special Commission, asked that the Special Commission be reconvened to discuss the Department of Public Works report. After several meetings with representatives of the Symphony, Opera, Chamber Orchestra, Ballet and Art Museum, it was recommended that the Symphony Orchestra and the Opera share a large hall and that the Chamber Orchestra and Ballet share a smaller hall and rehearsal space. The Department of Public Works then revised its cost estimate to 20 million dollars. After additional public hearings, the Mayor took a decisive step to include 20 million dollars for an Art Center as part of a 50 million dollar Public Improvement Bond, which included money for new highways and sewers. Upon recommendation of the City Treasurer the bond was reduced to 40 million dollars as "something the public could support". The bond referendum passed by a narrow 51% and some Councilmen threatened to have the issue placed on the ballot again.

Nonetheless, architects were hired to prepare plans for the Art Center using a revised estimate for the project of 17 million dollars because of the smaller bond amount which had been approved. The architect's preliminary drawings suggested that a facility could be built for 17 million dollars. The Art Museum, which had a new Director, however, insisted that a branch of the Art Museum located downtown would over-extend his staff, and add too much to the operating budget. He refused to participate in the project.

Since the inception of the Art Center, the Regional Theater Company had been enjoying great success in attracting an audience to the old vaudeville movie house they had hastily remodeled into a performing space. Seeing an opportunity to incorporate all the Performing Arts under one roof, the Mayor himself asked the Managing Director of the Theater if they might not like to become a part of the Arts Center which was to be renamed the Performing Arts Center. The Managing Director, after meeting with the Board, saw a grand opportunity to expand the size of the theater and to build decent shop and rehearsal space.

With the inclusion of the Regional Theater, the Mayor appointed a Performing Arts Center Board to carry on the planning for the facility. It was decided by the Board that the facility should be a "monument to the progressive thinking of the citizens of the City." After months of meetings with members of the performing groups, the architects developed a complete set of drawings. However, their estimates indicated that the project was 25% over the budget of 17 million dollars. The only way the project could be brought within the estimate was to reduce all the performing space accordingly. The Regional Theater's Board met to consider this prospect. They would still have 10% more seats than they presently had in a much nicer facility. There was little question that they stick with the project.

The revised project went out to bid with the architect confident that he had "cut the fat out of the project". Of course, everyone was disappointed when the project was still over budget. The Performing Arts Center Board met with the contractor and the architect. Everyone wanted to guarantee that the facility be "a monument...to the City" but it seemed to be a shrinking monument. It was proposed that the best way to achieve a handsome facility and at the same time achieve the necessary budget cuts was to cut the amount of support space - the shops, rehearsal space,

storage etc. to a bare minimum. The Regional Theater was forced to choose between keeping its shop space or its rehearsal space in the theater. It chose to keep the rehearsal space. The Regional Theater Board wished to reconsider the whole move, but it had already given up its lease on the space it was presently occupying. The project was finally brought into line with the budget, and construction proceeded. During construction, an Executive Director of the Performing Arts Center was hired. He found the amount of space given to his office inadequate since he expected to utilize large numbers of community volunteers for various activities. The Ballet, Chamber Orchestra, and Regional Theater were asked to share rehearsal space so that one of the rehearsal halls could be converted into additional office space.

The building opened to great public acclaim, though the critics said there were still problems with the acoustics in all the performance spaces, the mechanical systems were too noisy and the carpeting was not yet installed. The Artistic Director of the Regional Theater resigned shortly after the building opened in a dispute with the Director of the Performing Arts Center over scheduling the use of the rehearsal space. The Managing Director moved to another city to form a new company. The new Managing Director is currently trying to find adequate support space for the company to rent close to the theater.



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**SCENARIO TWO: TRAGEDY AS RESPONSE TO A TRAGEDY**

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It was 5 a.m. when the fire was noticed by a passing motorist. By this time flames were already licking through the roof of the Regional Theater. The fire chief said the job was apparently that of an arsonist. It was quite obvious the fire had more than one origin. Nothing was saved.

Even though the company had often complained about the scene and paint shops being a mile away from the theater they now felt blessed that these facilities were saved from the fire because of their distance. This would allow the company to finish its season using a hastily rented downtown theater in which to finish their productions. Space was made for the costume and prop shop in the scene and paint shop.

Community support was overwhelmingly in favor of rebuilding the theater and it did not take long for the board to decide to begin a major fund raising activity. Contributions were already being volunteered. The board created a building committee headed by a local contractor who estimated it would cost five million dollars to replace the facility. That was the goal established for the fund raising effort.

The company began working around the clock to make the transition to the rented theater. New rehearsal space was acquired and the season proceeded. At the same time the company had to make plans for the next year. It felt fortunate to acquire the same theater for its next season. The season was nearly over, however, before the theater management had time to begin thinking about new facilities. The fund raising committee had raised nearly four million dollars of the five which they thought were needed, and an architect had been engaged by the building committee to begin preliminary drawings.

At the first presentation by the architect, the managing and artistic director were shocked to find that the architect had prepared schematic designs for a proscenium stage. The architect defended himself by saying the building committee had thought it would be all right when he presented them with the problem of fitting a new theater on their rather narrow site. Both the directors were members of the building committee, but neither had attended the last several meetings because of the time they had to give to relocating their performances and planning for the next season. The building committee

could see little difference between the old proscenium which had been modified to a thrust and the proscenium which the architect had proposed. The architect stressed that it was important for him to get on with his work so that the bids could be taken or the theater company might have to rent space for two years. The artistic director said he could not possibly work with the stage that the architect had designed. The building committee, feeling that they were too far along with the architect's preliminary designs to turn to alternatives, accepted the architect's proposal. The artistic director resigned. The assistant director was asked to take the director's place. He began working closely with the board and the architect, and he was able to show how the stage could be modified to serve better as a thrust. He also showed how creating a balcony and lifting the theater slightly in the air could create enough room under and behind the house to provide space for all the shops on the same site. The board was delighted. The assistant director became the acting artistic director, and the architect was asked to proceed with his drawings.

The board waited anxiously for the opening of the construction bids. Four bids were received. The first bid of over eight million dollars nearly sent two board members into cardiac arrest. Two more bids were just below eight million, and the fourth bid was just under seven million. An emergency meeting of the board was held. The architect explained that the project had grown in size and complexity with the addition of the balcony and shop space. The original estimate by the head of the building committee had been a "ball park" figure and hadn't considered the additional cost of removing the old building foundations. The fund raising committee reported it had raised four and a half million dollars and predicted difficulty in raising more than five million. All the big givers had been contacted. That left nearly two million dollars difference between the money in hand and the lowest bid. The low bidder was asked to make recommendations on ways to cut their bid, and the building committee was asked to recommend a strategy for raising the rest of the money. The contractor recommended changes in the mechanical system and interior finishes. He suggested that a bay be cut off support space simplifying the foundations. His bid was reduced a half million dollars. The fund raising committee discovered an anonymous donor willing to give a quarter million dollars and were confident they could still raise another quarter million in the next several months. The bank which was providing the construction loan was willing to extend one

million dollars of the loan. The managing director anticipated that increased box office sales and extending the season by one play could pay this loan off in ten years. Construction was ordered to proceed.

The contractor went bankrupt half way through the project. His bond covered the cost of hiring another contractor but the project was delayed several months forcing cancellation of the first two productions. Subscription sales dropped dramatically. The first production opened to mixed reviews. The lobby wasn't carpeted yet, neither was the house. The air conditioning system produced a very high whining sound. One reviewer noted: "The production, what we could hear of it, was passable but uninspired. Perhaps that was due to last minute changes in cast because of the delayed season. The building was a real flop. Better luck next time."

# BACKGROUND AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Regional theaters have evolved over the last few decades. They have reached a level of maturity and sophistication which has made clear what these theaters have in common with each other. From remodeled warehouses and store fronts to commercial theaters adapted for resident company use, theater after theater has experimented with creating a facility unique to regional theaters needs. The premise of this research is that theater companies could learn a great deal from each other's building experiences. From these experiences a set of guidelines and strategies could be created which would help other regional theater companies considering new facilities avoid the problems encountered in building a new theater. To quote from the companion report of this research:

"The proposal (for this research) was written with the knowledge that many theater companies have faced traumatic experiences when acquiring new facilities. Programs have been compromised, budgets exceeded and staffs have been drained of energy in their efforts to achieve a better physical environment in which to practice their art."

In addition, it was expected that this research would formulate a program for regional theaters which could be used by the Milwaukee Repertory Theater, participants in this research, and other regional theaters.

This study has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, Design Arts Program under their design exploration/research program. The research has been a collaborative effort of the architects Beckley/Myers and the Milwaukee Repertory Theater Company.

Two reports have been produced from this research. This report is addressed to theater companies, their architects and consultants as they contemplate the development of a regional theater. It contains guidelines and strategies for creating a facility based upon an analysis of the experience of nine theater companies, a survey questionnaire to ascertain the characteristics of regional theaters, and collaborative efforts with the Milwaukee Repertory Theater company to formulate a model which we have called a third generation regional theater.

A companion report is addressed to the Milwaukee Repertory Theater Company and its board. It contains the specific application of these guidelines in assessing MRT's facilities and exploring alternative ways they might achieve the objectives of a third generation theater.

We are particularly indebted to Sara O'Connor, Managing Director of MRT, for her conception of the study and her continuous support of its objectives. We are equally indebted to other members of the Milwaukee Repertory Theater company and its board of directors, who gave their time to explain theater operations, who shared their experiences, and who helped to formulate the ideas presented here. Deserving special recognition are John Dillon, Artistic Director; Greg Murphy, Production Manager; Sue Medak, Director of Audience Development and Services; Colleen Muscha, Costume Designer; Sandy Struth and Ian O'Connor, Properties Director and Artisan; Dan Mooney and Rose Pickering, Actors; and Peggy Rose, Business Manager.

We also wish to give special recognition to Benjamin Mordecai, who served as consultant to the study, helped to formulate the research proposal, and who served as a model of inspired leadership in his creative efforts at the Indiana Repertory Theater.

Special tribute also needs to be given to the many cooperative people we interviewed at the nine theater companies we visited. Their candor, and willingness to share their experiences, opinions and expertise has lent much to the substance of this report. We wish to especially thank the following individuals.

Arena Stage; Washington, D.C.  
Tom Fichandler, Executive Director

Berkeley Repertory Theater; Berkeley, California  
Michael W. Leibert, Producing Director  
Mitzi K. Sales, General Manager

Center Stage; Baltimore, Maryland  
Peter Culman, Managing Director

Cincinnati Playhouse; Cincinnati, Ohio  
Robert Tolan, Managing Director

Hartford Stage Company; Hartford, Connecticut  
William Stewart, Managing Director

Indiana Repertory Theater; Indianapolis, Indiana  
Benjamin Mordecai, Producing Director

Old Globe Theater; San Diego, California  
Robert McGlade, General Manager  
Thomas Hall, Managing Director

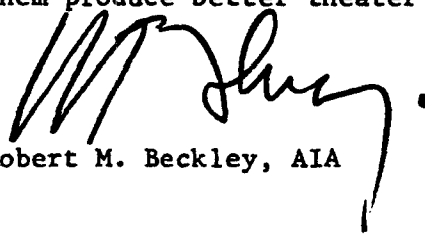
Seattle Repertory Theater; Seattle, Washington  
Peter Donnelly, Producing Director  
Robert Scales, Technical Production Director

Trinity Square Repertory Theater; Providence, Rhode  
Island  
Timothy Langan, Managing Director  
Marion Simon, Director of Development and Public  
Relations

Finally, we wish to thank the forty-seven theater  
companies who were kind enough to respond to our written  
questionnaire.

It would be impossible to include all we have learned in  
this report. A narrative of the experiences of each of  
the theater companies we visited could fill several  
volumes. What is included here is a summary of those  
experiences and insights which appear to be most useful to  
other companies. Those insights have been winnowed in our  
work with the Milwaukee Repertory Theater to create a  
program for them. What is included here is not a  
handbook. It is a guide, intended to help steer a theater  
company through the treacherous path of building. Each  
theater company will have to add its own specific  
objectives, space needs, etc., to create a complete  
program. We are firmly committed to the notion that such  
participation in programming is essential to the creation  
of good theater. We found many theaters who developed  
stronger artistic beliefs because they were forced to  
choose among several alternative possibilities. In  
addition, such participation made the theater company  
understand and develop the ideas that served as the  
foundation for the building they had built.

Our strongest hope is that this document will find its way  
into the hands of theater companies who wish to advance  
the art of the regional theater, and that it will help  
them produce better theater facilities.

  
Robert M. Beckley, AIA

  
Sherrill M. Myers, RIBA

August 1, 1982

# INTRODUCTION

The objective of the research summarized in this report is to formulate guidelines and strategies for the creation of regional theater facilities. The research has been necessitated by the fact that traditional theater facilities do not accommodate the artistic objectives of regional theater companies which have grown in sophistication over the last several decades.

This study has sought to create a new building type based on the programmatic desires of regional theater as it has evolved through several generations. At a time when architects are looking at traditional building typologies to find solutions to problems, this research holds forth the axiom that architectural solutions must be responsive to changes in the nature of institutions and their programs.

Regional theater is a changing institution. After nearly thirty years of sustained growth, regional theater has created a set of artistic objectives and possibilities, which distinguishes it from other types of theater. The primary difference of this theater type is that it houses a community of people who share in the creation of theater. The shared experience of creating theater is viewed as an integral part of the theatrical performance. Few traditional theaters accommodate or enhance the sense of community which regional theaters try to achieve.

A new theater type has emerged by synthesizing the "collective wisdom" of theater people who have, by necessity or choice, struggled with the idea of appropriate facilities for regional theater. Three different approaches have been used to gather this information.

First, several months were spent with the staff of the Milwaukee Repertory Theater, a major regional theater company, developing an analysis of their goals, objectives and needs. A program was created to address the necessary changes to fulfill aspects of the company's programmatic desires. This process included extensive participation in group and individual sessions by members of the company and their board of directors. Secondly, nine regional theater companies in various stages of facility construction were visited. Individuals were interviewed regarding the why, what, and how of their facility development. Each of these companies, in their own way, had struggled with the concept of creating a facility for regional theater. Finally, a questionnaire was mailed to members of the Theater Communication Group (TCG). Over 50 responses to this extensive questionnaire were studied and compared.

The conclusion of this study was that each regional theater is similar in regards to artistic goals, objectives, purpose and motivation. On the other hand, it is equally clear that each company is different because of its context, the nature of its support, resources, and specific artistic personalities.

For that reason the typology we have created is intended to be general and schematic. It is intended to provide a framework which can be used by regional companies to guide the creation of their own facilities. Emphasis has been given to those aspects of theater design which are particularly important to regional theater. Conclusions are drawn to be useful to people of differing artistic viewpoints. Where there is a clear choice as to a best alternative we have pointed that out. Where there are clearly choices to be made based on artistic viewpoints, we have tried to point that out as well.

We feel confident that the model presented here can help regional theaters achieve the sense of community which has so enlivened theater across the country.