

Historic Theatres as Tools of Economic Revitalization

By Ilene R. Tyler, FAIA, FAPT, QUINN EVANS | ARCHITECTS and Norman Tyler, Ph.D., AICP, Eastern Michigan University

Restoring a performance space can positively influence a community's quality of life and spur further economic redevelopment in the downtown district.

Reincarnation of a vacant, derelict theatre located in the heart of a struggling downtown district means more than fixing up a building and hanging out a banner saying we're "OPEN" again. It also means being a viable member of the business community and partnering with its stores, restaurants and other businesses to create the vitality that was once part of downtown. Besides providing performance space, a theatre contributes in ways that go beyond the traditional approach to economic revitalization.

"Main Street is Dead"

In 1984, Russell Baker, a well-known columnist for the *New York Times*, wrote an article titled, "Main Street is Dead." To quote from this article, "Main Street is dead. Dead as the Bijou Theatre with double-feature programs that changed three times a week...Main Street has

been dead for years, and it's never coming back."¹

As dramatic as these phrases are, Baker presents the thinking of many individuals in the 1980s. Indeed, dramatic examples of this recent era still surround us. For example, the historic Michigan Building in downtown Detroit had a beautiful theatre as part of its larger office building. In the 1980s, all of the seats were removed and the interior lobby and auditorium refitted as a two-story parking garage. The conversion was so rapid and insensitive that tatters of the theatre's curtain still hang from the stage's proscenium arch.

Does this mean the activities and uses we expect to find downtown, including the local theatre, can no longer survive in the 21st century? Recent successes have begun to turn around this defeatist attitude, and theatres are again taking their place as significant and integral members of the downtown business community. With an understanding of

the planning issues relevant to needs of both large and smaller city downtowns, redevelopment of a theatre can be a successful component of its revitalization.

Downtowns make significant and unique contributions to a community's economic health, compared to new development on the fringe of cities. Older districts have a viable and valuable infrastructure. Streets and buildings, sewer and water lines, are already in place; they don't have to be built from scratch on raw land. Downtowns also offer greater diversity than most newly developing areas. Planners today are rediscovering the advantages of mixed use development, but older downtowns already have that, combining retail businesses with offices, city hall, cultural amenities and even mixed densities of residential use.

Downtowns and center cities remain important centers of employment and goods, and can be considered the economic engines of most communities. With

more attention, the importance of this role will increase. Perhaps most importantly, downtowns remain the focus of community life and represent to most residents the image of the community in which they live.

Downtowns have benefited from increased attention since the 1980s. A number of relevant and successful programs are now available to support downtown revitalization, including the following:

- The Main Street Program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and its Main Street Center;
- State enabling programs focusing on downtowns, such as Downtown Development Authorities and Principle Shopping Districts;
- Focused revenue programs, such as the successful Tax Increment Financing programs; and
- Tax credits for rehabilitation of designated historic structures.

What are the best strategies for downtown revitalization? Norman Tyler's study of downtowns² in Michigan looked at 16 downtown characteristics and found that the ones most correlated with downtown health were not parking, or historic character, or streetscape improvements. The most important characteristics were related to the mix of businesses and the functional diversity of the uses in the downtown. It is function, not form,



Figure No. 1: Michigan Building theatre interior at second level. Removal of the theatre seats and original partitions and decoration left the stark shell of the interior architecture. Currently used as a parking deck by office building tenants, it is unlikely that ongoing revitalization in downtown Detroit will return this theatre to its original use.

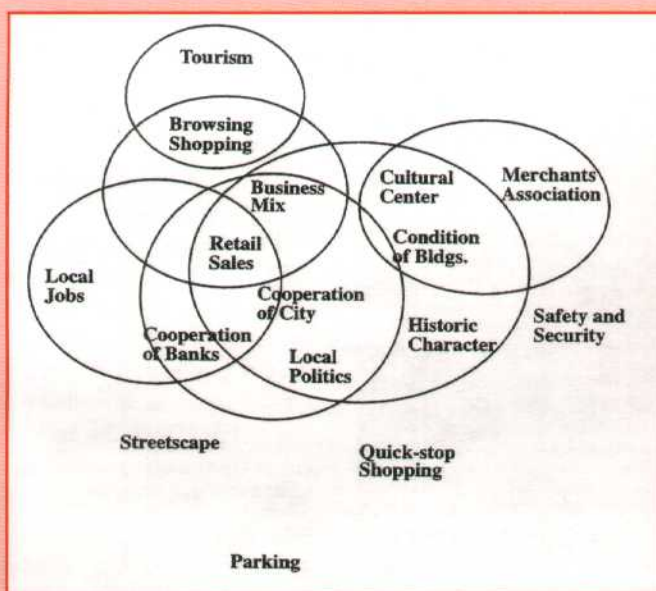


Figure No. 2: Tyler Study diagram illustrating Business Mix as the downtown characteristic most correlated to downtown health.

that makes a downtown healthy.

Contemporary downtowns can be not only “healthy,” but they are fast becoming “cool” as the places to see things and to be seen. As recognized in the popular book, “The Rise of the Creative Class...,”³ successful cities in the future will need amenities to attract young professionals. This is a realizable goal for continuous activity and vitality when the diversity of downtown buildings includes theatres and other forms of entertainment, along with a healthy residential component.

Three case studies in Michigan illustrate how a community’s historic theatre is one of the most important components of a successful business mix and the centerpiece of a downtown revitalization strategy.

City Opera House, Traverse City, Michigan

The City Opera House was built in the 19th century, when a theatre building had to fulfill many functional requirements. Although

called an opera house, the space was more typically used for traveling vaudeville shows, local school performances, weddings and community events. The space was as much a meeting hall as a theatre. Also typical was its location on the second and third floors of the building, leaving important retail uses on the first floor.

City officials in Traverse City made a commitment to the vision that a restored City Opera House would both enhance and benefit from Traverse City’s growing repu-

tation as a “destination” resort and regional commercial center. A planning study by Quinn Evans | Architects in 1995 generated plans for reuse of the building and provided strong graphic documents to illustrate and sell the idea to the community.

The rehabilitation project was designed to retain the opera house’s historic integrity while catering to modern needs. The need for a larger backstage area led to the construction of a second floor “crossover addition” connecting performers’ spaces to a building on the other side of the alley. This created new space for dressing rooms, set construction, an elevator and a green room.

Similarly, space at the front-of-house filled with offices, antiquated restrooms, and an entry stair from the street left no space for patrons during intermission, restricting its use. This problem was alleviated by utilizing an adjacent building for a new and wider stair, commodious restrooms, offices, and rehearsal rooms, giving more space at the front-of-house for the gathering functions and a much larger lobby.

These changes updated the historic theatre with the elements necessary for a modern facility. The rear entrance accommodates its service functions, while the enhanced entrance on Main Street keeps the theatre’s patrons on the sidewalk, where they pass stores and restaurants on their way to the theatre. The City Opera House is not only a beautifully restored structure, but it also restores its partnership in the economic revitalization of downtown Traverse City.

The City Opera House rehabilitation project was designed to have significant financial impact on downtown Traverse City. After the restoration is complete, it is projected to add \$5,000 per seat per year, or an annual yield of \$3,600,000 into the downtown community.

Wealthy Theatre, Grand Rapids, Michigan

“I see people walking down the sidewalk unafraid. It’s beautiful!”

Thelma Johnson Rhodes

Wealthy Theatre is in an area of Grand Rapids, MI, that is anything but wealthy. After decades of neglect, this small commercial area showed all the traditional signs of urban decay and partial abandonment. Its reincarnation began more than a decade ago when a group of visionaries from the Wealthy neighborhood formed the SouthEast Economic Development Corporation (or “SEED”) and used the vacant and derelict Wealthy Theatre as the catalyst for community renewal.

Using sweat equity from community labor to supplement a bare bones construction contract, the theatre has

continued on page 10



Figure No. 3: Front façade of the City Opera House building, including westernmost bay. In 1995, QUINN EVANS | ARCHITECTS prepared this rendering to illustrate their master plan recommendations. It has been used successfully in multiple forms of promotions, including postcards, placemats, bookmarks, letter-head for marketing materials, and on the cover of a brief history of the project.

Tools of Economic Revitalization, cont'd.

been converted to a lively performance facility with a busy schedule of diverse activities. Other businesses have upgraded their facilities and new businesses have invested in the neighborhood. Many existing buildings throughout the Wealthy Street neighborhood have been rehabilitated. In this case study, the theatre led the way for neighborhood revitalization and supported establishment of the new Wealthy Theatre Historic District.

Michigan Theatre and Theatre District, Ann Arbor, Michigan

When Tom Haywood, Director of the State Street Area Association in Ann Arbor, says that "Downtown is a living organism," it is his affirmation of the successful mix of business, retail, restaurants and entertainment in the State Street area. When one component is thriving, then the others also benefit, imparting life and vitality to the downtown neighborhood.

In the mid-1970s Ann Arbor's **Michigan Theatre** was about to suffer the fate of many older theatres: it was considered obsolete by its owners and was headed toward demolition. In a major community effort, the city purchased the property and initiated an effort to support its conversion into an important center for both the performing arts and cinema. With continuing public support over the years, Michigan Theatre has become a successful destination in the downtown/campus district and contributes significantly to the



Figure No. 4: Wealthy Theatre, with its 400-seat performance space, caters to the immediate neighborhood as well as drawing from the surrounding community. Diversity of programming and constant use is critical to the vitality it offers to the community. The adjacent buildings are part of an expanded facility that houses performance arts education and community events.

life of the community, especially during evening hours when many of the other downtown activities are essentially shut down for the day.

Since its restoration in 1986, the contribution of the theatre to life on the sidewalk is undeniable. That contribution is multiplied by the fact that other performance venues and movie houses in the district together create a

sum that is greater than its parts. It has been estimated that the Michigan Theatre has over 200,000 patrons per year for its shows and performances, a significant contribution to the business district. Two smaller unrestored screening rooms down the street at the State Theatre add another 100,000 patrons per year. Two short blocks away, the University of Michigan's



Figure No. 5: With Michigan Theatre in the foreground and the State Theatre in the background, their prominent marquees are dynamic features of the streetscape. During the annual Art Fairs, the streets are flooded with pedestrians. The theatres participate in the success of this community event with creative programming and unique offerings of refreshments and respite from the crowds and the heat.

Hill Auditorium seats up to 3,600 people for each of its performances, and the nearby Power Center for the Performing Arts, Rackham Auditorium, Mendelssohn Theatre and Trueblood Auditorium add another 7,500 seats on a regular basis. Each contributes to what has become a theatre district—an area of the city that brings incalculable vitality to the downtown and campus. Each theatre enhances the others, and collectively they bring additional patrons and potentially longer business hours to the commercial district.

Conclusion

Theatres can be lead actors in community renewal and revitalization efforts. They bring in patrons in concentrated doses and feed them out to ancillary businesses during hours that would otherwise be unproductive economically. Many communities have overlooked the importance of the local theatre to downtown vitality. Considering the theatre as an economic as well as a cultural asset opens doors to new opportunities and new life in downtowns.

¹Russell Baker. "There's no Main Street in America anymore, only shopping centers." *The New York Times*. 16 September 1984.

²Norman Tyler. *A Comparison of Revitalization Efforts in Sixteen Michigan Cities*. University of Michigan. 1991.

³Richard Florida. *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. Basic Books: 2002