

State Theatre videos, photos: On a hunt for history

Written by BryAnn Becker Knecht For the Argus Leader
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LIFE-State Theatre

A broad view from the balcony shows the State Theatre in January 2012. Finishing work on the restoration will begin in a few weeks. / Jay Pickthorn / Argus Leader

Playing detective with restoration work

In a few weeks, finishing work will begin in what could be called the most breathtaking space in the historic State Theatre — the auditorium.

Restoration artists will begin discovery work on the decorative stencils on the walls and work to uncover the original artistry on the ceiling's arches, which are now covered with white paint. Stacy Newcomb-Weiland, president of the theater's board of directors, anticipates that finishing work will continue in the auditorium for at least nine months.

The intricate restoration process involves a lot of attention to detail and takes time. But project planners are committed to following through with restoring the theater and keeping the historic intentions of the building, all while knowing that the public is eager to get inside. "We can't move fast enough on this," says Stephen Williamson, executive director of the State Theatre.

State Theatre officials hope to hold the first film screening some time next year. "We are all convinced that we will be showing film in 2014," Newcomb-Weiland says.

It's been a journey for project planners to reach this point. "The difficulty of this whole project has been unfolding for 20 years," says Newcomb-Weiland, referring to the theater's closure in 1991.

For Newcomb-Weiland, who has led the project since 2007, the start of the finishing work in the auditorium seems to signal the goal: a packed auditorium in a space that will not only honor a piece of history but also drive further economic growth to downtown Sioux Falls.

"A valuable preservation project became a very valuable economic project," she says. "Downtown is just exploding now, really hanging on for this moment when we're going to get the theater done and it's going to open. The timing is really good."

Updating building infrastructure

The State Theatre Co. has put more than \$2 million into the building since 2007, and an additional \$1 million will go into the building in the next 12 to 16 months to show film in the theater for about 450 seats on the main floor, Newcomb-Weiland says.

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While Newcomb-Weiland says the project has passed a “tipping point,” there is still more work to be done. The scope of the project also includes restoring the balcony and stage area and adding a second concession stand on the second floor. “We do need quite a bit more money to get the balcony and the rest of the building opened,” she said. The company has raised about \$2.5 million in pledges since 2007, and about \$1 million of those pledges are still out in the community.

When patrons eventually do step inside the theater, they will be transported back to 1926 but enjoy the technology of today, including a proposed 33-foot-by-23-foot screen in the auditorium. Project planners also anticipate holding live entertainment shows there. “The object of reopening the State Theatre is ... to have a full entertainment experience,” says Bruce Eide, a member of the State’s board of directors.

But making that experience come to life has resulted in artistic, structural and monetary challenges. One major concern, project planners say, is maintaining the historical integrity of the building while meeting current building codes and standards.

“The challenges are that historic renovation takes longer than you think,” Williamson says. Fundraising also tends to dictate the pace of the project. “With fundraising, you can have a pledge, but until someone fulfills that pledge, (the money isn’t there). As money comes in, we work. Our pledge commitment success rate is over 90 percent right now, so that hasn’t been a problem.”

Restoration work is not an exact science, Newcomb-Weiland notes. To restore the lobby, which Williamson says was a \$500,000 project, planners worked from black and white photos of the original lobby, and then used similar color schemes that were discovered in the auditorium and elsewhere throughout the building.

“You have to be a bit of a detective because it’s restoration,” Newcomb-Weiland says. “You have to look for clues to see it’s connected to that, or it’s the same as that.”

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Lobby example

The renovated lobby presents a taste of what the auditorium will feel like when it's completed: white marble, chandeliers, terrazzo tile and intricate stencils on the ceiling invoke a feeling of grandeur.

Restoration artists from Conrad Schmitt Studios, a Wisconsin-based company that specializes in conservation and restoration services and worked on St. Joseph Cathedral, have focused on the decorative nature of the theater, in both the lobby and auditorium. In the lobby, for example, artists created exposure windows to expose and document the original scheme. "We peeled back layers of paint to find the original color scheme and original decorative work. We used that as a basis to re-create what you see right now," says Rick Statz, national project director with Conrad Schmitt.

Project planners follow the Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, a standard that requires additional consultation on planning and design work with the State Historic Preservation Office, based in Pierre.

The restored State Theatre includes amenities that the original 1926 theater did not have, including a concession stand on the first floor. To make room for the concession stand and first-floor restrooms, planners redesigned what originally was the back of the theater.

'Split personality'

Maintaining the historic integrity of the building is a focus in a historic project, explains Sarah Aldinger, principal architect for Architecture Inc. That firm has been the principal architect for the project since 2007.

"You start identifying the characteristics or features of the building that you want to maintain," Aldinger says. The challenge, she says, is incorporating upgrades to the building — such as adding energy-saving measures, redoing the mechanical system and meeting the current building code for accessibility — while maintaining everything that was original.

Ken Stein, executive director of the League of Historic American Theatres, says groups restoring historic theaters often must negotiate a balancing act between keeping the historic authenticity of a theater intact and designing the space to fulfill its intended purpose.

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“The biggest challenge that you face when you’re restoring a theater is that you take on a split personality,” Stein says. “As a space, it needs to serve the art that will take place in that space — the shows, the performances, the mission of the organization. But because you’re in a historic theater, suddenly that space and the role that that has played, that plays equal status with the arts.”

Although the challenges of restoring historic theaters are vast, Stein says the investment will pay off. “If you stay true to the original integrity of the building, even though it’s more expensive in the beginning, the payout is significant.”

While the main source of revenue for the project comes from fundraising, planners also have sought out other money. One recent revenue source capitalizes on the fact that project planners meticulously work to meet historic preservation standards. The State Theatre recently finished applying for the Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit Program, a preservation-focused tax incentive program that would allow the theater to recapture 20 percent of the expenditures on the project and then use the money again. The application is stuck in limbo in Washington, D.C., during the government shutdown.

Since the State Theatre does not have all of the money today to finish the project and open the theater in one phase, the company is waiting for approval to break up the project into phases. Phasing the project would allow the company to open portions of the theater to the public before the entire project is complete and also provide money to use toward the next stages of the project. “We are literally waiting for approval on phasing, and then we should be able to open the front lobby before the rest of the building,” Newcomb-Weiland said.

For Newcomb-Weiland, historic restoration is worth the challenge. “We could not have bothered to put the marble in, or the stencil work back in (to the lobby), but you wouldn’t have the history. You wouldn’t have the era from when the theater was built. ... We always need to honor and preserve pieces of our history.

“Theater is really an interesting piece of history because it says a lot about where we’ve been. It’s also about showing people what life was like in 1926 versus today — how was it alike, how was it similar,” she says.

“That’s the charm and allure of historic theaters: They connect us,” Stein says. “Older people have fond memories of what that space meant to them growing up. All of those stories have an impact; this space can connect generations.”

Sioux Falls resident Kira Christensen, 31, is excited to see the theater open its doors. She sees the State Theatre as contributing to the growth of downtown.

“There’s an energy down there that didn’t exist five years ago, that is unique to our city. When the State opens, I think more people will see downtown as a place they want to go. And they should. ... Also, I’m just anxious to see this historic piece of our city’s history come back to life. ”