

How Green Is My Theatre?

Portland's eco-friendly, ship-in-a-bottle complex sets a new national standard

BY KEITH GERCHAK



KURT GOETZINGER COURTESY OF PORTLAND FAMILY OF FUNDS © 2006

Portland Center Stage's construction inside the Armory.

Locals call it “salmon-friendly” living. Portland, Ore., has been at the forefront of the environmental movement for so long that the city’s visitors association officially adopted “It’s Not Easy Being Green” as its slogan. So it comes as no surprise that the major regional theatre in town, Portland Center Stage, has opened the “greenest” performing arts facility in the country.

But the significance of this project goes far beyond environmentally friendly design. Sustainability—the idea of meeting today’s needs without compromising the resources of future generations—has brought new relevance to the place of the performing arts in this community’s history and contemporary life. It is the interplay of these facets—history, theatre, community and sustainability—that PCS calls the “four pillars” of its new Gerding Theatre at the Armory, which opened its doors with a gala street party on Oct. 1, prior to the debut two days later of the first production on its main stage, *West Side Story*.

Inserted within the shell of a national landmark Armory saved from the wrecking ball, PCS’s “ship-in-a-bottle” facility serves as a distinctive vessel for the arts that is quintessentially Portland.

Since its founding in 1988, PCS had been a tenant of the Portland Center for the Performing Arts with a variety of other resident companies—including Oregon Ballet Theatre, Portland Opera and Oregon Symphony. Finding the center chronically overbooked, with seat counts too large for their needs, these four arts organizations formed an alliance in 2002 that commissioned a feasibility study for a replacement complex of smaller, dedicated spaces. The study concluded that Portland was in no position to build a new complex, but recommended freeing up existing facilities by rehabilitating

a building for the smallest of the groups, PCS.

This was surprising yet encouraging news to PCS and its artistic director Chris Coleman. Ever since his arrival in 2000, Coleman says, “I fantasized about building a theatre inside the Armory.” The abandoned 19th-century fortress in the heart of Portland’s trendy Pearl District was owned by a group of investors led by Bob Gerding of Gerding/Edlen Development, a pioneer in green building construction who happened to be vice chairman of PCS’s board of directors. Built in 1891 as a National Guard drill hall, the Armory was for many years the largest single room in the city and served as its ad hoc community center, hosting a range of functions, from John Phillip Sousa concerts to wrestling matches, until its eventual use as a storage facility for a succession of breweries.

After brewery operations discontinued in 1999, the building’s free-span, virtually windowless space had attracted few potential users. However, Coleman saw the advantages of these characteristics for a theatre and the potential creative and financial freedom that the space could offer—an intimate connection between artists and audiences, support of small-scale works, the extension of hit productions, and expanding education and community programs.

BUT THE ARMORY’S FUTURE WAS IN QUESTION.

Construction was underway on an adjacent 15-story residential tower, requiring the roof of the Armory to be fireproofed before an occupancy permit could be issued for the pre-sold condominium units. With no obvious tenant waiting in the wings, a demolition permit application had been filed. The timely release of the feasibility study findings, however, prompted 11th-hour discussions between Gerding and Coleman, culminating in an announcement by the mayor in

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support of saving the Armory for the future home of PCS.

According to Coleman and managing director Edith Love, such a young theatre was in no position to raise \$36 million to convert the Armory without the help of community partners. As Love jokes, “We were hoping they would find the bones of Lewis and Clark during excavation so we could get federal money.”

In reality, an outgrowth of the Portland Development Commission—the Portland Family of Funds (PFF)—worked to identify and pursue loans and tax credits to bridge the financial gap. While PCS successfully raised \$2 million in 60 days that was used for immediate roof replacement and seismic stabilization, PFF secured federal new market and state historic tax credits, as well as loans from both US Bank and the city’s development commission, with the requirement that the project had to demonstrate positive financial, community and environmental impacts. The combination of public and private investment allowed design of the overall project to commence immediately before PCS’s capital campaign.



Portland’s new Gerding Theatre at the Armory.

Selling the building to the Portland Historic Rehabilitation Fund (an entity within the PFF) and serving as developer pro bono, Gerding hired local firm and green building specialists GBD Architects to do a feasibility study, fitting the 56,000-square-foot theatre

program into the 20,000-square-foot building footprint. With no prior theatre design experience, GBD insisted on the involvement of a theatre consultant. Coleman contacted Landry & Bogan, responsible for Oregon Shakespeare Festival’s Angus Bowmer The-

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Portland's Armory, the new home of PCS.

atre, which he saw as a model for PCS.

GBD architect Stephen Domreis says there was a healthy tug and pull between GBD and Landry & Bogan regarding the exact placement of the main performance space within the Armory shell, as well as the allocation of the remaining volume of space. The new facility includes a 599-seat main-stage theatre, a 200-seat black-box theatre, rehearsal space, backstage support, costume shop and administrative offices. In addition, a new outdoor park along adjacent Northwest Davis Street and indoor public space with a wireless Internet café encourage community use day and night, even when the theatre is dark.

GBD'S SOLUTION WAS TO BUILD A "ship-in-a-bottle," with five stories of program tucked inside the existing building envelope, protected by its listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Domreis credits Landry & Bogan with recommending excavation for a second performance space and tucking administrative offices under the barrel-vaulted roof—design decisions that left unobstructed views of the original Douglas fir bow trusses, tension cables and tension rings that hang suspended in midair like giant sculptural ornaments above the lobby. Exposed roof structures and raw brick walls are visible from virtually any point in the building, serving as a constant reminder of the presence of the original Armory shell.

Even with green building design required by the funding manager, and a developer and architect at the forefront of

the movement, PCS was initially resistant to the idea of sustainability, questioning how it aligned with its mission. Then Coleman says he had an epiphany. If, in order to survive and prosper, "a regional theatre had to reinvent its relationship with its community, then sustainability and green building were to be embraced as part of the cultural mindset of Portland," he says. Because of its community-based use, Coleman realized, PCS could reach out to a broader potential audience base at the Armory by engaging Portlanders who were not typical theatregoers, but who were proponents of green building.

To guide the sustainable design process, Green Building Services (an independent consultant in the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program of the U.S. Green Building Council) was brought on board as consultant. Widely known as LEED, the council program is recognized in the construction industry as the standard for measuring environmentally responsible building design, establishing a rating system by which credits are given in five construction categories—site design, water efficiency, energy, materials and indoor environmental

quality, as well as innovation in design for operational practices.

Gerding and Norris Lozano, CEO and president of the Portland Family of Funds, set LEED's highest possible rating of platinum as the benchmark for the project. The Armory is both the first performing arts center and the first building listed on the National Register of Historic Places to attain this status. As of this writing, only two dozen projects in the world have received a platinum rating.

A team accomplished in green building design thoroughly investigated sustainable options, the most noteworthy of which is a water catchment system. Rainwater from the Armory roof is collected and stored in a 10,000-gallon subterranean cistern, where solids settle to the bottom and clean water is recirculated for toilet flushing to reduce potable water consumption. In the adjacent Sliver Park designed by landscape architects Murase Associates, pervious pavers and a rock-storage layer combine with a "bioswale" to filter solids from storm water runoff and reduce the amount entering into the sewer system.

Alternatives to traditional heating, venti-

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lation and air-conditioning provide improved indoor air quality and reduce energy bills by an estimated 30 percent. For the office level, individually controlled active chilled beams, which are suspended convection units with integrated light fixtures, supply overhead heating and cooling; a raised access floor supplies under-floor ventilation by locating air outlets where needed. Displacement ventilation is used to supply fresh air under the fixed auditorium seating, displacing warmer room air with fresh cool air. CO2 monitors activate increased fresh-air supply as needed, while computer monitoring measures and verifies performance efficiency.

Recycled, local and rapidly renewable materials are used throughout the building, from fly ash in the concrete to wood harvested from renewable forests to fabric made from recycled bottle caps. Responsible construction waste management diverted 95 percent

of materials from landfills. Even the building represents recycling on a large scale: 80 percent of the original building is reused.

Reuse of the building, however, proved a challenge to meet LEED's minimum 2 percent daylighting factor. Since listing on the National Register of Historic Places precluded additional wall penetrations, skylights were the only viable option, another argument for locating administrative offices at the roof level. Daylighting studies determined the number and locations of skylights, with manual sun-shading devices for individual control.

GREEN BUILDING DESIGN HAS NOT come without costs. According to Domreis, studies by the Green Building Council cite a 4–5 percent premium in construction cost by pursuing the LEED platinum rating. There are other costs as well: the orchestra

pit lift, for instance, was sacrificed. However, Domreis notes the increasing availability and decreasing cost of environmentally friendly building supplies. And Green Building Services consultant Elaine Aye adds that up-front costs are offset by lower long-term operating expenses, as well as proven physical and psychological benefits of natural daylight, views and ventilation, with anticipated improvements in communication and productivity.

In addition to design and construction strategies, ongoing operational practices such as waste-recycling programs, green-certified energy credits, recycled paper product sources, and non-polluting cleaning products are being implemented to meet LEED credits. The café will serve local foods and use sustainable products like soy- and corn-based biodegradable cups. An adjacent streetcar stop, bicycle racks and investment in Portland's hybrid flex car system all offer alternative commuting methods.

As the final piece in LEED certification, Portland-based Second Story Interactive Studios has developed interactive media installations to educate the public about each of the "four pillars" on which the project has been built. Glass windows into mechanical rooms allow guides to literally show and tell how the sustainable building systems earned platinum LEED status. "By seeing how the theatre does some of the strategies, people can learn something new about sustainability and apply it to their lives," says Aye. "This theatre will help to educate them. Reaching out to school children, the information spreads."

In the end, the Gerding Theatre is a shining example of an American regional theatre finding relevance in the life of its particular community. Managing director Love credits Ed Schlossberg, renowned interactive exhibit designer, with shifting PCS's thinking from theatre as a destination to theatre as an intersection of social interaction. "This was when the project crystallized," says Love, "with the suggestion to focus it all through the eyes of the theatre. He said, 'Educate through your expertise, your discipline, using that lens to advance your mission.' That advice helped to focus all the partners." ☑

Keith Gerchak is an actor as well as a registered architect and senior design consultant with Theatre Projects. He just completed a run in Walnut Street Theatre of Philadelphia's production of *Windy City*, a musical version of *The Front Page*.

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