

Thinking Outside The Box

Some surprising advice on holding down renovation costs



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The lobby of the Templeton-Blackburn Alumni Memorial Auditorium at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio; the renovation of the space and its stage house entailed adding support facilities and making it ADA compliant.

With renovations, it's what theater companies don't do that causes them grief in the long run. That's what leading players in four major theater planning and consulting firms told us. They suggest that you begin by considering these four important questions.

1. What would happen if you relocated to a new facility, instead of renovating your current structure? "If you're the Harlem Theatre, you don't want to move to Queens," says Van Phillips, ASTC, president of Indiana-based Jones & Phillips Associates. "But, if you could move from downtown to an upscale suburb where there's more pass-by street traffic, it could be better than your current location." In other words, make sure there is a compelling reason to stay where you are.
2. What will you do for two or more years, while your current performance space is being renovated? If you move to a temporary location, you could lose your audience or your identity. If you stay, your options may narrow considerably. "You have to change your scale of thinking for a project of this size," says Ann Sachs, president and CEO of Sachs Morgan Studios in New York City. "It always takes longer than you thought it would at the beginning."
3. Are you renovating because your facility needs upgrading, or because you have outgrown the space? That's an important distinction, Phillips explains. "If you want to expand an 800-seat theater to 1,200 seats, your current structure may not handle that without a huge expense. You may need to find an alternative site, or buy the building next door."
4. The most important question of all: Do you know what you want from the new facility? "You should try to determine in advance what your priorities are going to be," says Ned Lustig, president of Lustig & Associates in St. Louis. "Is it just making it look pretty, or are you actually going to improve the

The Palace Theatre in
Waterbury, Connecticut
before renovation



The Palace
Theatre after
renovation



BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY OF SACHS MORGAN STUDIOS

Inside the Omaha Civic
Auditorium; this was a
renovation of an existing
civic center



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lighting, rigging, seating, sound, acoustics, air conditioning and so forth?"

"Determine whether [your space is] meeting current needs and what needs to be addressed to meet new demands," Sachs advises. "If you can take a year and use it for dreaming, brainstorming and planning, you'll save a lot of time—and hundreds of thousands of dollars—at the other end of the project."

Scott Pfeiffer of Kirkegaard Associates in Chicago agrees, and adds that it's vital to be clear about what you want to accomplish in the space. "The clarity in the description of your problems is paramount to finding a good solution," he says. "Make sure that whatever the needs are, they stay within the program requirements, rather than trying to anticipate what the architectural solution is."

So, what's it going to cost?

"That's always one of the first questions we're asked," Sachs says. "But it's one of the last that can be answered," because cost is dependent upon the final plans. That said, if you can get a handle on the scope of the project, it is possible to get a grasp on its costs.

If you exclude the value of your current building, Phillips says, new construction is always cheaper than renovation. So, begin by establishing the value of your current structure in its current location. Then, determine the ballpark cost of the

changes necessary to make it into what you want it to be. Add the cost of renovation to the value of the current building, and then compare the total with the estimated cost of an entirely new structure.

"For example, we're doing a conversion of a 1960s cinema facility into a theater complex," Phillips notes. "The structure is solid, but we have to add a stage and a back-stage. The value of the existing facility is \$2.7 million, and it will cost \$8.5 million to renovate, which adds up to \$11.2 million. It would cost \$11.5 to replace the entire structure—so in this case it's slightly less expensive to renovate." However, on another project, the cost of building on new ground was one-third less than to alter and integrate two other facilities on either side of the original theater structure. So it pays to do the math.

Structural changes are not the only factor in estimating costs. As a rule of thumb, you can figure that installing new

Definition Time

- Renovation refers to changes that keep most functions of the original structure, but alter it to fit new demands.
- Restoration means returning a historical or architecturally significant structure to its original look and design, as much as is possible. (A good example is Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC)
- Adaptive reuse is the term used for altering a structure or using parts of it, but not for the building's original use and intent, such as turning an old warehouse into a theater.

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equipment in an old building will cost twice what it would in a brand-new building, Phillips says. That's because new equipment may require new wiring, or the strengthening of walls or ceilings in order to handle the added demands.

Murphy's Law comes into play, even when changes aren't drastic. Something always needs to be changed, and change orders are—again—usually twice the cost of something planned that way originally.

Phillips recalls an example in the remodel of the Pittsburgh Memorial Auditorium. "When it came time to install new dimmers, we thought we could use the space behind the cheek walls [the diagonal walls on other side of the proscenium]. There's usually a void behind those walls, and the original building plans indicated that was the case. Then came a frantic call from the contractor: He'd knocked a hole through the wall, and sand poured out. It probably was added after the theater was built, most likely for sound-dampening purposes."

Needless to say, a new and more expensive solution was needed for the dimmer problem. The point: expect surprises and build in a realistic cushion to pay for them.

If your renovation plans call for adding non-performance space like offices, rehearsal space or storage, you may be better off locating these functions elsewhere.

"Lots of folks want everything in one place," Phillips explains, "but often it's more cost-effective to locate space for storage, set construction or offices somewhere else."

He notes that the Rapid City Civic Center in South Dakota decided to go with off-site prefab buildings for its shops, classrooms, and offices. "What they have may not be fancy, but it's all theirs—about four times the space for what it would cost to build adjacent to the theater's public space."

Pfeiffer suggests that three additional costs should be considered up front: Lack of performing area or support space, noisy or poorly maintained mechanical systems that need to be

replaced, and issues of theater accessibility. "Those pieces tend to be overlooked in the early planning stages," he says, "and those three items can eat up substantial amounts of the project."

While it's possible for a theater company to handle its own planning for facility renovation, greater expertise is always a plus. "Whenever anyone goes into renovating a performing space—50 seats or 4,000 seats—they really should hire a qualified theater consultant," says Lustig, adding that many can be found online at www.theatreconsultants.org.

Sachs agrees, and explains they can help you "focus your ideas, make them very concrete and incorporate into the facility the unique vision of your company. At the outset, we always tell our client, 'Don't start by giving us solutions; explain the problem and let us come up with solutions.'"

That's precisely the role of the consultant, Phillips says: "to give you six options for everything you want. You have the final say, but it's up to us to give you the choices."

Sounds like a plan. **SD**

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