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VALLEYTIMES

An environmental arsenal *A new theater, armory stages sustainability show*

BY ERIC BARTELS
LocalNewsDaily.com Sep 18, 2006

Chris Coleman is the artistic director of Portland Center Stage, the top professional theater company in Portland. As such, he doesn't generally spend a lot of time on things like rainwater collection and LEED certification.

But he's learned much about sustainable building in the two and a half years it's taken to ready the historic Portland Armory to be the new home of Coleman's company.

"Now, I feel like I do a pretty good job of explaining how it's accomplished," he says. "It's so interesting. I joked with (developer) Mark Edlen: If I ever get out of theater I'm going into real estate development."

Next month, Center Stage will inaugurate its new Gerding Theater at the Armory with a season-opening performance of the stage classic "West Side Story." But its new home, a sparkling



JONATHAN HOUSE / LOCALNEWSDAILY.COM
The 1891 Portland Armory housed soldiers during the Spanish-American War and now is home to theater troupes, and a showcase of both Romanesque Revival style and modern technologies.

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showplace of leading-edge technology and responsible building practices, will bid to steal the show.



“I think everybody is very, very pleased with the way it turned out,” says Renee Worme, sustainability director for Gerding/Edlen Development Co., which acquired the armory in 2000 as part of its Brewery Blocks project.



The structure, a Romanesque Revival fortress built in 1891, has housed everything from troops mustering for the Spanish-American War to professional wrestling. It made its way onto the National Register of Historic Places, but it also had stood empty for some time when Gerding/Edlen went looking for a tenant.



“It was a shell,” says senior project manager Patrick Wilde. “You had the brick wall, and you had the roof trusses and the old roof.”



Gerding/Edlen, an acknowledged pioneer in sustainable building, considered retail property for the space — a health club was one possibility — but was delighted to find a more meaningful collaboration, Wilde says.



“We needed to find a really creative use for it,” he says. “It’s a special building. When it became apparent that Center Stage was a possibility, it just seemed like that had to be the right fit.”



So Center Stage went looking for \$36 million to fund the creation of a 599-seat main stage, a 200-seat studio theater and administrative offices, and Gerding/Edlen set about making design history in one of the nation’s most eco-friendly cities: a historical property redeveloped to the highest sustainability standards put forth by the U.S. Green Building Council.



The project is on target to achieve a LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, Platinum rating from the council, according to Gerding/Edlen.



“The LEED Platinum goal was something that was established early on,” Worme says. “We did have to re-evaluate some of our features. You have to balance the design and functionality of the building you’re trying to create with capturing LEED credits.”



“It’s a unique project in so many senses,” Wilde says. “We’re not the first building to capture rainwater and use it to flush toilets. We’re the first of this kind on two levels: the historic renovation and also this type of use.”

Lighting heats things up

The features used in the renovation incorporate a virtual glossary of sustainable technologies:

- A 30,000-gallon cistern atop the building will send rainwater to flush toilets and irrigate a 200-foot-long sliver park along Northwest Davis Street.
- Negotiations with historical preservation officials produced an agreement to allow the installation of dozens of skylights, which will illuminate Center Stage’s top-floor offices.
- Ventilation is improved by an underfloor air distribution system.
- Tubes in the floor of the armory’s immense lobby serve to both heat and cool the area, depending on the need. Wilde says displacement diffusers



provide additional air conditioning by moving a large volume of air through the lobby at low velocity.

- The space is cooled by chilled beams, perforated metal boxes that capture rising air and cool it by exposing it to cold water sent from a chilled water plant off-site.

“It’s not a brand-new technology,” Wilde says, “it’s just one that hasn’t been used all that widely here.”

Wilde says that while the chilled water plant does generate heat elsewhere, economies of scale create a broader energy savings. “You have one plant doing all that,” Wilde says. “It’s a lot of natural resources you’re not using to buy equipment.

“The building is very energy efficient. Being 29 percent better than the industry standard is kind of a feat all its own,” he says.

To be sure, Wilde says, the project presented some obstacles. The building’s old bones — huge slabs of basalt, exposed tie rods and enormous wooden flying trusses — had to be showcased.

“Being able to see all those things and really get a feel of the historic nature of the building is something we were challenged with,” he says.

What’s more, it all had to happen indoors.

“One of the bigger challenges was taking an existing space with a roof on it,” he says. “You have a finite physical space to work in.”

Wilde says workers had an especially tricky time with several gargantuan steel beams that were designed to support the top floor.

“We couldn’t bring them in off of 10th or 11th Avenue,” he says. “There’s a door on Davis that’s about the size of a door on your house. Those massive beams came in the building that way.”

At one stage, crews had to pull a crane inside the building up a steep dirt ramp with two tow trucks.

“You couldn’t get equipment down there to push it up,” he says. “The only other way to get it out of the building would’ve been to take it apart.”

Lobby will be open to visitors

The Portland Development Commission has estimated that the armory project will generate \$80 million in economic activity over a 10-year period.

Gerding/Edlen’s Worme says the new armory space is an essential component of the company’s vision for the Brewery Blocks, a five-block “18-hour live/work/play” zone on and around the site of the old Blitz-Weinhard brewery.

“Sustainability and livability are very closely related,” she says. “The whole idea of the theater was viewed as such a key complement to the project. It really rounds out the Brewery Blocks vision.”

The armory is intended to have a role as a community center, throwing open its lobby for extended hours and offering touch-screen information kiosks, exhibition space, free Wi-Fi, live music and a cafe.

Wilde says the men and women who've restored the Pearl District treasure may well join that community.

"With the finished product being the preservation of a historic building, and providing such a wonderful amenity, I think there definitely is a sense of pride in what they're doing," he says. "I think they'll want to come to the theater."

As contractors scramble to apply the finishing touches to the project, Center Stage's Coleman says any anxiety he may be feeling is far outweighed by eager anticipation for the company's move into the new space.

"Call me crazy, I don't feel so fearful," he says. "We have such fantastic partners. They have hit their deadlines before they said they would. It feels like we got very close to what we set out for, and that's pretty darn exciting."

Coleman says theater types are enthusiastically a part of the green community. "They are thrilled and delighted," he says. "We care about that here. The ingenuity that goes into devising the sustainability aspects, people are like 'How cool is that?'"

Gerding Theater Opening Community celebration

When: Noon to 5 p.m. Oct. 1

Where: Outside Gerding Theater at the Armory, Northwest Davis Street (between Ninth and 11th avenues), 503-546-6387

Cost: Free

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