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Retooled armory to be arts hub

New venue seen as gathering place for theater and much more

By ERIC BARTELS Issue date: Fri, Apr 29, 2005

The Tribune

Edith Love knows about the excitement that a building can generate, but she hasn't seen anything quite like what's happening in the old Portland Armory.

Then again, neither has anyone else.

Before Love took over as general manager of Portland Center Stage theater company, which will move into the transformed armory in less than 18 months, she worked for the Dallas Theatre Center — in a building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

Now the Texas company, backed by a cash-rich community of arts patrons, awaits a new home designed by the visionary Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas as part of a \$275 million arts center.

But Dallas, says Love, who arrived here in 2003, has nothing on Portland and its plan to turn a stout 19th century fortress into a glittering theater showplace where the play is not the only thing.

Center Stage will move into its new Pearl District home as a kind of anchor tenant in an arts center whose multiple uses will make it unlike any other, Love says.

What's more, planners hope to achieve platinum status in the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program, meeting the highest federal standards for energy efficiency and environmentally responsible use of materials.

It will be the first historically designated building and the first theater venue in the nation to do so, Love says, making it a beacon for visitors on that basis alone.

"Thousands and thousands of people come here just to see what Portland's done with sustainability," she says. "We're going to be able to help showcase what this community has done."

The armory has multitasked over its 112 years. Troops drilled there in preparation for foreign wars. Woodrow Wilson came through, campaigning for the presidency. And fans of a different kind of theater thrilled to the mayhem of Portland Wrestling, broadcast from the building for decades.

"The armory is part of the fabric of the community," says Love, 54. "To find a new use for it makes so much sense. From my standpoint, looking at Portland as a newcomer, it looks to me like it's right for the city."

Love is confident that the castlelike armory is a place where dreams can come true: "The building has a fantasy feel to it," she says. "It looks like a place where imaginative things can happen."

Stage brings audience closer

Portland Center Stage will benefit from a smaller, more intimate main stage, down to 600 seats from 880 in its current home at the Newmark Theatre in the Portland Center for the Performing Arts. At 200 seats, its second stage will be slightly smaller than the PCPA's Winningstad Theatre.

But that's just the beginning.

"It started out being a theater," Love says. "It's been developing. One of the things that became clear is that it is extremely important that it become a gathering place. We've sort of run with it from there."

Love says Portland Center Stage, which received \$1.5 million for the project from

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the Meyer Memorial Trust in March, is halfway to its fund-raising goals. Its plans for the armory include information kiosks, arts education, acting classes, playwriting workshops, play readings, lectures and music.

“We have lots of dreams,” Love says. “It’s not going to be like a regular theater that’s locked when there’s no performance. It’s going to be a community space. It becomes a living, breathing entity. I think it will become the icon of the Pearl District.”

‘A new model’

Love imagines a point of entry for those who see theater existing in a rarefied air. “People think, ‘It’s too effete. It’s not for me. I don’t know enough,’ ” she says. “Sometimes when you go into these huge edifices, it’s intimidating. We hope we’re creating a new model.

“I think we will bring more people into the neighborhood. The people in the neighborhood seem to be excited. I think people are excited they’re going to be able to walk to the theater.”

Local planning consultant Peter Finley Fry likes the project.

“I think it’s fascinating,” he says. “If they hit it right, if they hit that happening thing, that would be great for the Pearl and for Portland.”

Jill Baum, managing director of Artists Repertory Theatre in Northwest Portland, says Center Stage will have a chance to boost local theater by sharing space in the new venue.

“There’s a fairly acute shortage of venues in the community,” she says. “There are a lot of people who want to do shows and not many spaces to do it in.

“We are a huge fan of things that build a stronger theater ecology in our community. Things that create more work, more employment, more audiences: That’s just really good for Portland.”



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