

CENTER STAGE

ERS
SOON

THE BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF
HISTORIC THEATER PRESERVATION
IN WASHINGTON STATE

OCTOBER 26, 2022

SOCIETY OF
ARCHITECTURAL
HISTORIANS

MARION DEAN ROSS
PACIFIC NORTH-WEST CHAPTER


REPORT PRODUCED BY



RESILIENT
HERITAGE



PANTAGES

 The
**MUSE
HOUR**
TACOMA
ARTS LIVE

A VIRTUAL CONVERSATION
WITH MIKE BIRBIGLIA
Saturday, April 24 at 7:30 p.m.
Buy today! TacomaArtsLive.org



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Resilient Heritage would like to thank the Marion Dean Ross Chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians in the Pacific Northwest for generously funding this study. Additionally, the report's author would like to thank the following participants who graciously gave their time:

Government

Dr. Allyson Brooks, State Historic Preservation Officer,
Director, Department of Archeology & Historic Preservation (Olympia)
Regulatory and Incentives

Nicholas Vann, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer,
Historical Architect, Department of Archeology & Historic Preservation (Olympia)
Regulatory and Incentives

Non-Profits

Chris Moore, Executive Director, Washington Trust for Historic Preservation (Seattle)
Advocacy

Eugenia Woo, Director of Preservation Services, Historic Seattle (Seattle)
Advocacy

Consultants

Michael Sullivan, Principal, Artifacts Consulting, Inc. (Tacoma)
Architecture / Historic Preservation

Betsy Godlewski, Fox Theater (Spokane)
Fundraising

Theaters

Scott Stolarz, Executive Director, Fox Theatre (Centralia)
Patty Dicker & Jerry Dicker, Owners, Bing Crosby Theater (Spokane)
David Allen, Chief Operating Officer, Seattle Theatre Group (Seattle)

CONZENS

01	SUMMARY	P6
02	METHODOLOGY	P8
03	HISTORY & CONTEXT	P10
04	BARRIERS & OPPORTUNITIES	P14
	04.1 COMMUNITY CAPACITY	P15
	04.2 SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC TRENDS	P18
	04.3 FUNDRAISING EXPERTISE AND FINANCIAL INCENTIVES	P19
05	THE IMPACT OF HISTORIC THEATERS	P24
06	THE ROAD AHEAD	P26

SUMMARY | 01

WASHINGTON, USA



GRAPHIC: FIELD RESEARCH SITES

In Spring 2021, the Marion Dean Ross Chapter of the Society of Architectural Historians in the Pacific Northwest supported Daniel Ronan of Resilient Heritage to research the barriers to adaptive reuse of historic theater resources in Washington state. The report, funded by the Elisabeth Walton Potter Award for public architectural research, sought to build on the work of Artifacts Consulting Inc.'s 2008 report, *Historic Theaters: Statewide Survey and Physical Needs Assessment*¹, to reflect on the persistent barriers and potential opportunities to historic theater reuse in Washington state. In the summers of 2021 and 2022, Ronan conducted field research across Washington, including Centralia, Olympia, Seattle, and Spokane, interviewing ten individuals who touch historic theaters from government, nonprofit, consulting, and theater management backgrounds.

With a background in historic tax credit consulting, serving as a “finder” for historic tax credit investors looking to support historic theater rehabilitation, Daniel Ronan currently serves as a consultant in fundraising, strategic planning, and public engagement for nonprofits as the Principal of his firm, Resilient Heritage. The research conducted within the course of this study sought to outline the current thinking behind historic theater renovation and the potential for rehabilitation projects to serve as a tool to document the barriers and opportunities for historic theater development in Washington.

Notably, the report’s author looked for current and historical inferences that could be made to hypothesize why certain theaters – whether by location (urban or rural), historical design and use (vaudeville, silent film, nickelodeon, etc.) market demand (current and historic), theater size (storefront to movie palace), historic theater chain (Fox, Liberty, Paramount, etc.), and

relative community support for historic preservation – could adequately illustrate a trend explaining why certain theaters are currently more primed for investment than others.

The report’s author assumed that in optimal market conditions, historic theater redevelopment would happen without government or non-profit advocacy support or intervention. In this scenario, the private market would have the resources it would need to operate profitable historic theaters across the state. Unsurprisingly, what the author observed, as for many historic theaters around the country, is that market conditions in Washington state are not optimal and require additional resources and support.

The Washington State Department of Archeology and Historic Preservation’s (DAHP) Historic Theater Grant Program managed by the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation, as well as continued historic preservation advocacy from historic preservation nonprofits, and broad based community support, are all crucial efforts in helping create more nimble financial incentives to make historic theater renovations more possible. Further, increased sophistication in fundraising, community partnerships, and continued preservation advocacy is needed to help assist in more historic theater renovations.

¹ Washington State Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation. (2008). (rep.). *Historic Theaters: Statewide Survey and Physical Needs Assessment*. Retrieved October 22, 2022, from <https://dahp.wa.gov/sites/default/files/theater%20survey.pdf>.

02 | TECHNOLOGY



PHOTO: PARAMOUNT THEATRE, SEATTLE, WA. PHOTO COURTESY OF RESILIENT HERITAGE

The report’s organization and content stems from word-of-mouth engagement with the state’s top leaders in historic preservation, including many individuals who have touched historic theaters in various domains: architecture, regulation and incentives, fundraising and management, advocacy, and promotion. Together, these individuals have centuries of collective expertise that this report seeks to piece together as part of a broader effort to outline the key gap between a healthy historic theater and an endangered historic resource. The author’s intent is to engage the thought leaders behind the initial 2008 report, funded by the Washington State Department of Archeology & Historic Preservation, and also to draw together the threads of conversation, advocacy, and love for historic theaters across the state.

While the initial vision of the research was to pinpoint two to three theaters in Washington state that were “on the cusp” of rehabilitation, Resilient Heritage noted that interviewees referenced broader trends in historic theater rehabilitation that worked to both help and hinder historic theater rebirth at large, necessitating a wider lens through which to examine historic theaters, their development barriers, and potential opportunities. Accordingly, through ensuing interviews, Resilient Heritage elicited more open-ended answers to potential barriers to historic theater reuse as opposed to asking a prescribed list of questions. The resulting responses allowed for more potential barriers to be revealed, and aspirationally, more potential opportunities for historic theater rehabilitations for discussion detailed in this report.

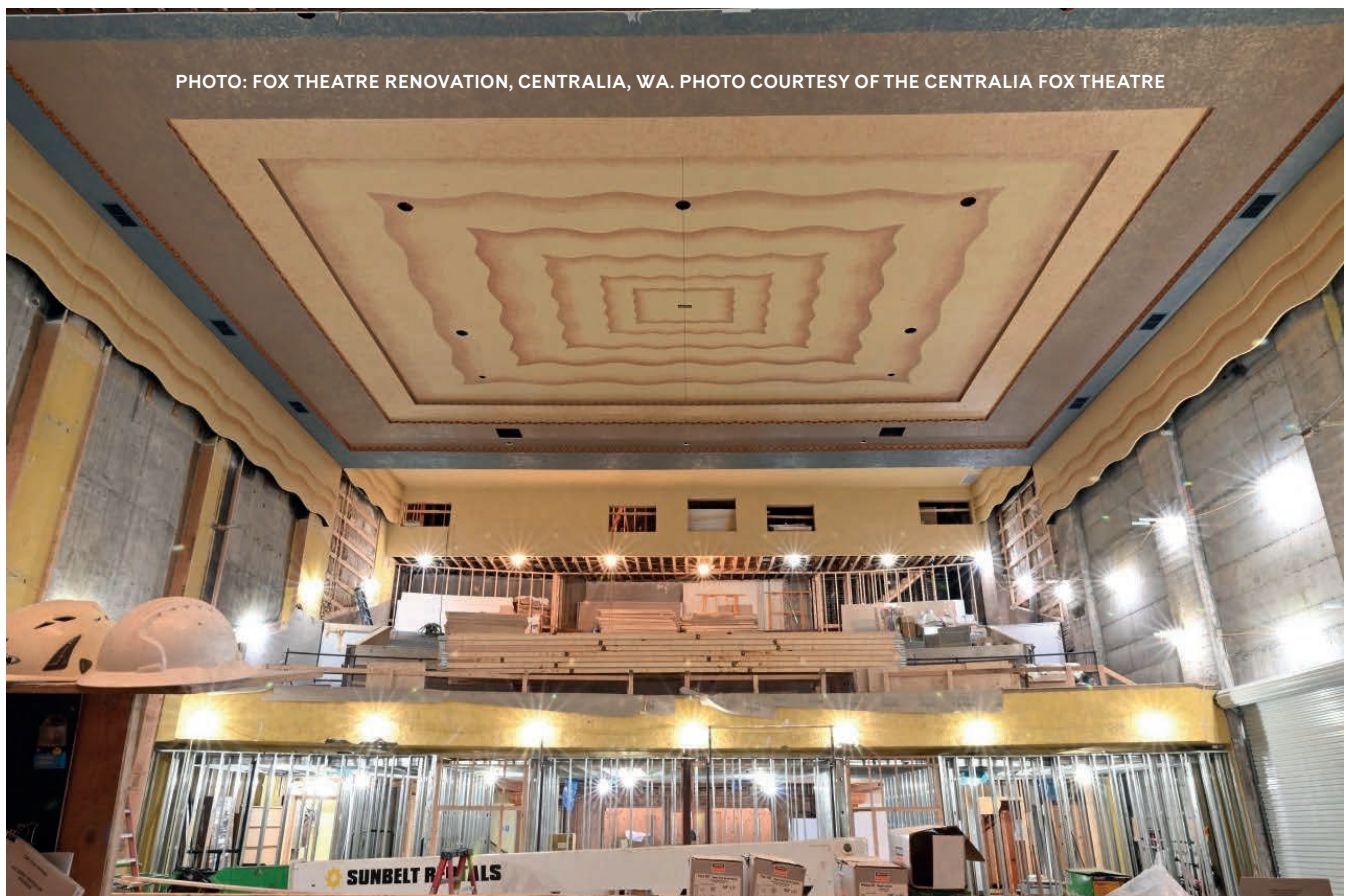


PHOTO: FOX THEATRE RENOVATION, CENTRALIA, WA. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CENTRALIA FOX THEATRE

² Historic Theater Grant Program. Washington State Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation (DAHP). (2022, March 31). Retrieved October 22, 2022, from <https://dahp.wa.gov/grants-and-funding/grants-contracts/historic-theater-grant-program>

03

HISTORY & CONJECT

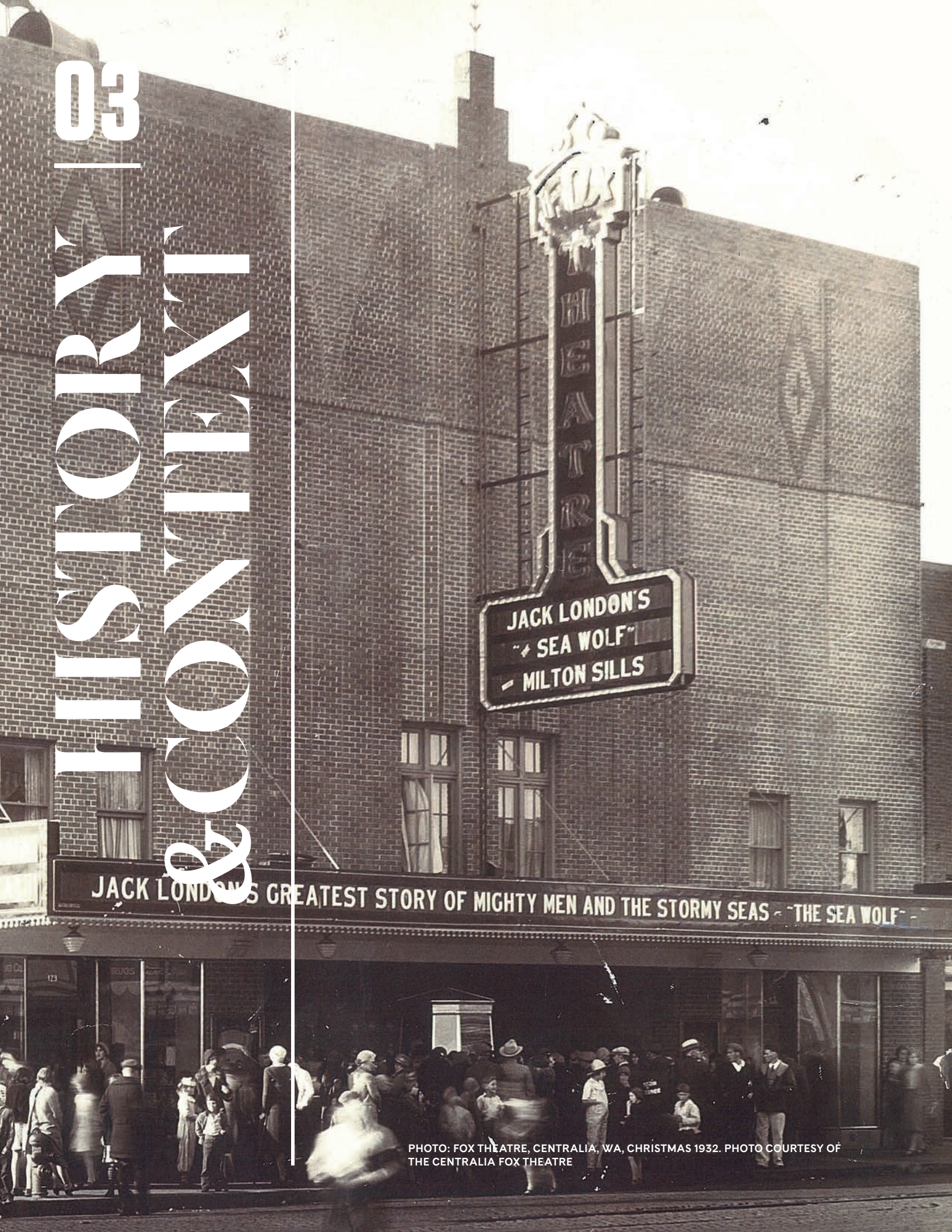


PHOTO: FOX THEATRE, CENTRALIA, WA, CHRISTMAS 1932. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CENTRALIA FOX THEATRE

The 2008 report surveyed the 80 extant historic theaters in Washington state, detailing the capital needs of as many of these theaters as possible. This report, funded by DAHP, helped outline the needs for this particular historic resource, underscoring the precarious nature of historic theaters statewide and providing the impetus for the creation of the Historic Theater Grant Program funded by the Washington state Legislature in 2020. The grant program was bid out for management by the DAHP and later awarded to the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation to manage in 2021. With the first round of applications concluding in late 2021, the Trust awarded eight theaters across Washington for the first round of the program in the 2021-2023 biennium.

The history of neglect in historic theaters in the 20th century can be attributed to many economic and societal trends. From the 1948 Supreme Court ruling *United States v. Paramount*, which effectively dismantled the Hollywood studio system with an aim to break up the near-monopoly of the movie business they controlled, physical theaters were sold almost overnight. With the advent of television, and an inability to manage the pressures of a collapsing business model, communities across the country were left with vacant theaters in declining downtowns, made all the more worse by increased suburbanization and white flight.

Later in the 20th century and into the 21st, theaters continued to be at the heart of misguided urban development programs which ended in outright demolition of historic theaters, or insensitive remodels which contributed to the decline of the historic resource, such as splitting up one theater into three separate theaters by partitioning upstairs balconies. The transition from film to digital projection starting in the 1990s increased many capital and operating expenses for theaters which had already been struggling to retain declining audiences. Further, with the advent of Netflix and online streaming,

the pressures to keep theaters operating have continued to mount.

Fifteen years since the 2008 theater survey, the status of historic theaters has grown all the more precarious. As Chris Moore, the Executive Director of the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation states, the Historic Theater Grant Program seeks to “look at resource types where we have recurring challenges or recurring barriers to rehabilitation,” in reference to historic theaters. Dr. Allyson Brooks, the State Historic Preservation Officer at the Department of Archeology & Historic Preservation, stressed “the whole concept behind this grant program is theaters had nowhere to go and they’ve been frustrated.” Ultimately, Washington and its historic theaters merit a more holistic approach to help preserve these buildings that, despite the odds, persevere in downtowns and small towns across the state. The following section details the specific barriers and opportunities echoed by these and other experts looking to save one of Washington’s most beloved historic resources.



“The whole concept behind this grant program is theaters had nowhere to go and they’ve been frustrated.”

*- Dr. Allyson Brooks, Historic Preservation Officer,
Washington State Department of Archeology &
Historic Preservation*



19

**MCFILERS
COMING SOON**

21+
NON JO
Bon Jovi
MIRAGE
DOORS @ 8:00

EVOLVE
ALL YOUR BUSINESS MARKETING
IN ONE PLACE



04

BARBERS & |
OLD TOWNIES



PHOTO: BAKER THEATRE, BELLINGHAM, WA. PHOTO COURTESY OF RESILIENT HERITAGE

The barriers and potential opportunities to historic theater rehabilitation in Washington are often not viewed as two sides of the same coin. By examining the nature of the current perceived barriers to historic theater rehabilitation, the report's author seeks to showcase potential opportunities for advocates and would-be advocates of historic theaters, tapping into the nostalgia communities hold for these structures across the state. Community capacity, broader economic and social trends, and fundraising expertise and financial incentives are all variables in determining whether a historic marquee lights up again and whether a community regains a bit of its luster from its historic past. The following sections outline the salient topics in historic theater rehabilitation with examples of historic theater projects across the state.

COMMUNITY CAPACITY

The location of a historic theater does not immediately reflect the capacity of a community to embark on a rehabilitation. However, access to capital is the number one barrier to making rehabilitation projects possible. Emblematic of Washington's, and indeed the country's, urban and rural divide, unsurprisingly, is the fact that theaters located in more rural areas and smaller towns tend to suffer from poorer market conditions and a lesser number of wealthy donors that can help fund large capital improvement campaigns. In turn, the lack of fundraising capacity leaves the potential for taking advantage of tax credit programs, such as the federal historic tax credit on the table. While the recent Historic Theater Grant Program seeks to provide additional incentives for historic theater rehabilitation, rural and small-town theaters are not explicitly targeted by the program, leading to increased competition for limited resources statewide.

As noted by Michael Sullivan, Principal of Artifacts Consulting Inc., and an original author of the 2008 study, a larger concern for theaters is their earned revenue and profitability in addition to their ongoing capital needs and continued sense of belonging to local communities. He cites the recent move away from nonprofit management of publicly-owned theaters in downtown Tacoma – the Pantages, the Rialto, and Theater on the Square – to that of a private management model, a seismic shift in theater management. “[It’s] an earth-shaking change in one of the most healthy facilities in the state.” This shift, which lessens the cost burden for the City of Tacoma to run the theaters, while arguably more fiscally responsible, comes at the cost of community engagement in local historic theaters, their missions, and ongoing preservation. How a private operator manages theaters, which will operate off the proceeds of acts and performances the management books, may be at odds with the goals of the local nonprofit arts community in presenting less lucrative but community-centered programming.



“[It’s] an earth-shaking change in one of the most healthy facilities in the state.”

- Michael Sullivan, Principal, Artifacts Consulting Inc.

An alternative to public ownership which can keep a historic theater community-centered might look like a co-op membership-based investment model as demonstrated by the Blue Moose Theater in Tacoma. Sullivan, one of the owners, speaks to this possibility: “It’s a very successful and beloved little neighborhood amenity [... and] was interesting because I got to participate from an ownership level in a community-owned theater where we all put in

money and sweat equity to restore the theater. Now we're all owners." He maintains that the co-op model could even work in a smaller community, where an investor, more than just a donor for a brick for instance, could receive discounts on movie tickets or shows, concessions, and serve as a real shareholder for the broader project.

Eugenia Woo, Director of Preservation Services at Historic Seattle, suggests that in addition to preservation concerns for historic theaters, there is also a question of adaptive reuse considering changes in the economy, consumer tastes, and real estate pressures. "If a historic theater doesn't stay a theater, then what are good uses for it? That's always a question. So are we content with something just staying like the building and the spaces, and it can be used for anything else? Or do we really want to [keep] the original use?" Additional considerations for performance venues and spaces that may not have been purpose-built as historic theaters but hold special value for communities, are also a consideration. The controversial 2018 proposal to demolish the Showbox Theater in Seattle, a historic 1917 building converted to a performance space in 1939, becoming a center of several noteworthy music scenes and artists from jazz to grunge, prompted yet another preservation quandary.

"If a historic theater doesn't stay a theater, then what are good uses for it? That's always a question."

- Eugenia Woo, Director of Preservation Services, Historic Seattle



As Chris Moore from the Washington Trust recalls, a city survey of historic resources concluded the Showbox lacked architectural

integrity for purposes of state environmental review, "[the fans of the Showbox] – They'll stop you right there. 'It's not about what it looks like on the outside, it's about the experience, it's about the place. it's about the stories that happen there.'" This interest from fans of the Showbox are just an example of one theater's supporters. The leap, however, from fans and supporters to advocates for preservation, is critical. Larger theaters in cities such as Seattle and Spokane may have more fans, but the level of historic preservation advocacy in the case of the Showbox pushed past potential regulatory barriers potentially demoting the historic theater as non-historic, a key advocacy spark that may not be as present in rural and small-town communities.



"It's not about what it looks like on the outside, it's about the experience, it's about the place. it's about the stories that happen there."

- Chris Moore, Washington Trust for Historic Preservation

Whatever the barriers for a historic theater's rehabilitation, a community spark and a common sense of ownership must be present. These facets of human capital together impact the business model, fundraising, and management questions which in turn ensure that an historic theater is preserved as both a community and an historic resource. Continued advocacy to push past potential challenges is in and of itself a solution and potential opportunity for historic theater rehabilitation across the state. As noted at the Showbox, and in additional theater projects detailed further in this report, a community's ability to show up for its beloved theater is a crucial first step for its long-term preservation.

SAVE

The Showbox

PROTECT

SEATTLE'S HISTORIC
CULTURAL SPACES!

#SAVETHESHOWBOX

 HISTORIC
SEATTLE
Educate Advocate Preserve

historicseattle.org



PHOTO: SHOWBOX RALLY, SEATTLE, WA. PHOTO AND IMAGE COURTESY OF HISTORIC SEATTLE

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC TRENDS

The current neglect and disrepair of historic theaters are but a microcosm of historic resources across America's downtowns. With the diminution of civic participation in the public sphere notably described in Robert D. Putnam's *Bowling Alone*³, the social and economic spaces in American communities, from historic department stores and government buildings, to fraternal clubs and public schools, have all suffered various levels of disinvestment and disinterest. Historic theaters represent both the result of these broader trends and the potential for rebirth inherent in community-shared spaces that embody shared history and collective memory.

The Fox Theatre in Centralia is home is one of these sites of togetherness, and has been in the journey of rehabilitation for nearly fifteen years. The theater's former Executive Director, Scott Stolarz, noted the importance of local businesses in helping generate support for the theater project: "Having good local business owner support is critical, they see the value in theaters, and the theaters produce additional activity around the theater which helps grow existing businesses' revenues." This positive economic effect is one that can be seen in the physical design of many historic theaters which often feature businesses prominently in theater storefronts like the Centralia Fox's. The mutual support of a historic theater and its surrounding local business community, both in geographic proximity and general support, can help theaters transition away from dormancy and disuse in an upward cycle of community economic activity, despite ongoing pressures of corporate cineplexes and big box retail competitors.

Social and economic trends have a large impact on the physical considerations of theater rehabilitations and subsequent operations. In the case of the Centralia Fox Theatre, the nonprofit theater group is undertaking significant work to adapt existing bathrooms and floor rakes (seating floor slope) to be compatible with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Common for today's theater renovations, the group has also enlarged the size of its seats which in turn has reduced capacity for the theater, enhancing comfort for theatergoers while also creating a more right-sized venue for its middle-market location, centrally located directly between Seattle and Portland, Oregon. Its location offers a convenient stop-off point for traveling performances and shows between larger markets. The need to turn a profit also led to the Fox's enhancement of its concession space, a key strategy in increasing earned revenue for the theater, from popcorn to alcoholic beverages.

"Having good local business owner support is critical, they see the value in theaters, and the theaters produce additional activity around the theater which helps grow existing businesses' revenues."

- Scott Stolarz, former Executive Director, The Centralia Fox Theatre

Whether activating a downtown core, reimagining a beloved community asset, or creating a sense of belonging in an underinvested community, historic theater projects such as the Centralia Fox Theatre reflect a community solution in response to broader cultural homogenization and decline. As Patty Dicker, a co-owner of the Bing Crosby Theater in Spokane noted, "What became immediately clear is in a smaller community,

³ Putnam, R. (2001). *Bowling alone*. Simon & Schuster.

you're able to make a big impact with not a whole lot of resources being extended." While the relative effort and resources differ between nonprofit and privately-owned theaters and their subsequent community impacts, a historic theater's location in a relatively smaller city or market does potentially create a higher return on investment and a more palpable set of results, especially when enhanced by a shared community vision.

"What became immediately clear is in a smaller community, you're able to make a big impact with not a whole lot of resources being extended."

- Patty Dicker, Co-owner, Bing Crosby Theater

FUNDRAISING EXPERTISE AND FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

In reference to financial incentives for historic theater rehabilitation, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer Nicholas Vann of the Washington State Department of Archeology and Historic Preservation, summed it up, "Historic theaters are just integral pieces of fabric of every community they're in and people gravitate towards them because they have a special connection to them. And sometimes that turns into money." Perhaps the best example of a completed historic theater rehabilitation project in Washington state is the Spokane Fox Theater. Completed in 1931 as the largest theater in Spokane with 2,300 seats, the theater fell into decline starting in the 1970s with its clientele opting for suburban movie theaters and a division of the balcony into two separate theaters. In 2000, the theater faced demolition.

After steady community advocacy and an unprecedented \$31 million capital campaign, the Fox reopened to the public as the home to the Spokane Symphony in 2007.



"Historic theaters are just integral pieces of fabric of every community they're in and people gravitate towards them because they have a special connection to them. And sometimes that turns into money."

- Nicholas Vann, Officer, Washington State Department of Archeology & Historic Preservation

The theater, originally designed with architectural features of both the vaudeville and silent film eras, featured special acoustics for live performances, perfect for the Spokane Symphony. As Betsy Godlewski, the past development director of the Spokane Fox's nonprofit group organized for the theater's renovation stated, "It has really changed how the symphony makes music, I think. Their quality is just outstanding and a lot of it is because it's a smaller home, the acoustics are better, [and] it's their home. So it really took them to the next level." This community project could not have been possible without the dedication and expertise of Godlewski and her team. Knowing what fundraising expertise is necessary and which financial incentives can help broader fundraising goals are skill sets which can be limited for theaters located in small towns and rural areas, an observation noted by Resilient Heritage in the course of this study.

The often multi-million-dollar price tag of a historic theater rehabilitation can often hamper the most exciting community vision. Framing a project through the lens of possibility is not



PHOTO: FOX THEATER (INTERIOR), SPOKANE, WA. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE MARTIN WOLDSON THEATER AT THE FOX

common in communities where basic theater maintenance costs and a lack of consistent revenue are already outstanding issues. Where fundraising does begin to work, however, is where the combination of individual champions, illustrated by Betsy Godlewski, and community support coalesce around a shared community vision. With this previously-mentioned community “spark” informing the initiative’s fundraising efforts, only then can formal financial incentives, in addition to fundraising, be targeted to completing a historic theater rehabilitation.

The federal historic tax credit of 20 percent on all qualified rehabilitation expenditures, or QRE, is the largest financial incentive for historic preservation both in Washington state and nationally. In order to take advantage of this incentive, a large amount of fundraising is needed upfront to cover the cost of an historic theater rehabilitation project and to receive the equity from the credit towards the close of the project. In order to qualify, a historic theater must be listed in the national historic register or as a contributing building in a national historic district in addition to complying with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Historic Rehabilitation. Taking advantage of this incentive, however, is contingent on a deliberate fundraising team with a broader vision to perform a “substantial rehabilitation” as required by the federal program to maximize the benefit of the tax credit.

More extensive reports exist regarding the federal historic tax credit program, its requirements, and needed reforms. However, it should be noted that Washington state does not have an accompanying state historic tax credit program, unlike 39 other states⁴. A state historic tax credit program would double the potential

equity for historic theater projects, helping bridge the funding gaps all too familiar with community-based historic preservation projects. Despite the lack of a state historic tax credit, Washington state does have the Main Street Tax Credit Program⁵ funded through Business and Occupation (B&O) or Public Utility Tax (PUT) tax credits, which can help serve as an example for the popularity and efficacy of historic preservation-focused investments. In 2020, the program doubled in size from a \$2.5 million to a \$5 million program cap, increasing the impact of the credit. Meanwhile, looking at states like Washington state that lack an income tax, such as Texas, can help outline how a state tax credit program might work.

Specific to the Seattle area, which features a strong real estate market, high growth pressure, and increased calls to conserve farm and forest land, an additional incentive includes Transfer of Development Rights (TDR)⁶. Created in the 1990s, the voluntary cash for development rights program seeks to use a market-based approach for monetizing development rights. The Paramount Theater in Seattle is one theater that has waived its development rights for cash, helping generate additional resources for its continual preservation. While other jurisdictions in Washington may not have reached this level of development sophistication, the TDR program serves as a potential example for other communities in the state to use this idea as an additional preservation incentive.

Property tax relief, in the form of special tax valuation in the city or county in which the historic resource is located, can also be used to help historic theater rehabilitation. This incentive would not serve nonprofit theater operators as they do not pay property taxes, but could serve private theater operators and

⁴ State HTC program descriptions. Novogradac. (2022, July 6). Retrieved October 22, 2022, from <https://www.novoco.com/resource-centers/historic-tax-credits/state-htcs/state-htc-program-descriptions>

⁵ Main Street Tax Credit Program. Washington State Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation (DAHHP). (2021, August 25). Retrieved October 22, 2022, from <https://dahp.wa.gov/local-preservation/main-street-program/main-street-tax-credit-program>

⁶ *Transfer of development rights*. Transfer of Development Rights - King County. (n.d.). Retrieved October 22, 2022, from <https://kingcounty.gov/services/environment/stewardship/sustainable-building/transfer-development-rights.aspx>

owners who could reduce their tax burden when embarking on capital improvements that meet the threshold of their local special valuation program by avoiding increased property tax assessments associated with property improvements.

In taking the long view of these incentives for historic theater rehabilitations, Allyson Brooks of DAHP reflects, “The lesson is, sometimes you have to know when to ask. You have to be smart about when to ask, and you have to be smart about your argument. People seem to understand the need in the end.” Whether through state incentive programs such as the newly-released Historic Theater Grant Program, historic tax credits, or tax abatements, knowing and taking advantage of these incentives is the key driver of historic theater reuse.



“The lesson is, sometimes you have to know when to ask. You have to be smart about when to ask, and you have to be smart about your argument. People seem to understand the need in the end.”

*- Dr. Allyson Brooks, Historic Preservation Officer,
Washington State Department of Archeology &
Historic Preservation*



PHOTO: LIBERTY THEATER, WALLA WALLA, WA. PHOTO COURTESY OF RESILIENT HERITAGE



NORTH BEND THEATER

ORDER-TO-GO CONCESSIONS
5 - 8

A CHRISTMAS CAROL LIVESTREAM
VALLEYCENTERSTAGE.ORG SAT 7PM

125



PHOTO: NORTH BEND THEATER, NORTH BEND, WA. PHOTO COURTESY OF NORTH BEND THEATER

05

THE IMPACT OF HISTORIC THEATERS



PHOTO: RIALTO THEATER, TACOMA, WA. PHOTO COURTESY OF JOE MABEL

As David Allen, the Chief Operating Officer of the Seattle Theater Group confided, “Somehow, you know, that became a part of my job [keeping] it together, no matter what it took, if it’s sticking plaster with chewing gum, whatever to keep it going.” Even for one of the largest theater organizations in the state, the task of maintaining historic theaters is an uphill climb. Many interview subjects stressed the need to document the effects of theaters in economic terms to help make their tasks one that not only is worthy of broader-based support from the public sector, but also one that merits increased investment.

Echoing the economic impact of theaters and the cultural and community power, Chris Moore continues: “Theaters themselves, they’re important historically, they’re important culturally, but they’re part of the parts of Main Streets, and so really, a program that’s going to help boost theaters is also a program that is going to be a general economic development program as well.” By supporting historic theaters, much like the Centralia Fox Theatre example, business owners and the jurisdictions support broader economic activity in communities across the state.

This economic activity, Moore continues, is critical to not only celebrate, but to also document. “Getting the story is easy – getting the data would be great, and an important piece.” From stating the value of historic theaters, to lining up the incentives for historic theater renovation, to documenting the effects of investments and incentives for these special community spaces, the exercise of historic theater advocacy is a positive, upward spiral. Whether through community spark, continued advocacy, and expanded government incentives, historic theaters exist as a rallying cry for the importance of community cohesion and collective investment at a time of increased social isolation and discord. The impact of a theater can be an antidote for our broader

shared community assets and a case for increased investment in the public sphere, a broader aim financial incentives, and tax policies can stand to affect in the long-term.



PHOTO: COLUMBIA THEATER, LONGVIEW, WA.
PHOTO COURTESY OF COLUMBIA THEATRE ASSOCIATION

06

THE ROAD AHEAD



PHOTO: THE SHOW BOX, SEATTLE, WA. PHOTO COURTESY OF HISTORIC SEATTLE

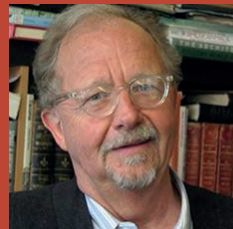
Historic Theaters in Washington state are as different as they are similar in their geography, architecture, and community importance, when compared to similar fundraising, design, and advocacy challenges. As detailed in this report, the opportunities and barriers historic theaters face are, on the whole, largely similar when it comes to community capacity to address existing challenges and to seek the critical resources leading to theater rehabilitation. The effect of the pandemic is an ever-clear reminder about the threats facing historic theaters. As Michael Sullivan states, “I just don't think you can overstate the uncertainty that comes with us now, as we come out of COVID. And what that's going to mean for theaters in general, what it's going to mean to audiences.” Indeed, the novel coronavirus has sped up many of the social and economic trends already injuring the recovery of historic theaters. With concerted efforts from community leaders, governments, and theatergoers, there is hope to change the tide.

theaters are the centerpiece to a community. As a result, historic theaters can showcase a community's best solutions and inherent need for community connection and belonging, but only if our individual decisions reflect our broader policy priorities.

One theater owner not included in this report offered this anonymous perspective: “What's irritating is that the community is always saying, ‘Oh! We love this stuff, love this stuff.’ But there's no follow through. ‘We love it.’ Like in theory.” Reversing decades of economic and cultural decline cannot happen in a world of “Netflix and chill.” Date night must start at the local restaurant and end at the historic theater if we are going to maintain the vibrancy of our downtowns, and ultimately, the community cohesion necessary for a functioning democracy.

The importance of historic theater preservation in Washington state is the collective ability to solve a community problem at many scales. From the local “spark,” to municipal support, state grant funds and additional state tax programs to the federal historic tax credit, there is no shortage of needed incentives and creativity to continue to light the silver screens. With continued advocacy, focused engagement, and hard work, historic theaters can serve as linchpins to encourage communities to understand what it means to be stewards of our built environment, and fundamentally, how to shape the built environment to reflect our community values.

“I just don't think you can overstate the uncertainty that comes with us now, as we come out of COVID. And what that's going to mean for theaters in general, what it's going to mean to audiences.”



- Michael Sullivan, Principal, Artifacts Consulting, Inc.

In one of the takeaways from the 2008 report, the report's authors concluded, “Theaters are often considered the heart and soul of the downtown community. The challenges facing the continued survival of many theaters are complex and will require diverse support mechanisms and a broad range of local and statewide stakeholders.” This is certainly true, and much like the original 2008 study stated,

“What's irritating is that the community is always saying, ‘Oh! We love this stuff, love this stuff.’ But there's no follow through. ‘We love it.’ Like in theory.”

- Anonymous Theater Owner

GARLAND

Tops
in
SHOW
W
E
T
H
E
A
T
R
E

BONBON HAPPY HOUR 4 TO 7
SALAM NEIGHBOR 5:00
FINDING DORY 12:15 7:05
GHOST BUSTERS 2:30 9:15
YEAR PASSES FOR SALE

GARLAND
W-900







PHOTO: LINCOLN THEATER, MOUNT VERNON, WA. PHOTO COURTESY OF LINCOLN THEATER