



Memorial Hall preparing for a rebirth



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A \$2 million state capital grant and \$2 million in historic tax credits secured



(Photo: Enquirer file)

Memorial Hall in Over-the-Rhine will be closing in May for its first renovation since 1992.

Earlier this week, William Baumann, who heads the board of the nonprofit Cincinnati Memorial Hall Society, outlined the steps that are being taken to preserve what supporters feel is an under-

appreciated gem.

The hall will remain closed for the entire construction period, estimated at 12 to 18 months. The plans include:

- New seats: Slightly wider seats will be installed, resulting in a loss of about 50 seats from the auditorium's current count of 610. The original wrought-iron décor will remain, but cushions will be added for the first time.
- A new elevator will be added, big enough to transport a grand piano to the stage.
- Acoustical treatments will address the bright sound in the hall and separate the theater from exterior sound.
- More restrooms will be added.

- Memorial Hall's auditorium will be air conditioned for the first time.
- A small addition will add about seven feet to the rear of the hall. That will provide dressing rooms, a catering kitchen and a service elevator and will allow performers the ability to cross behind the stage.
- The building will get a new roof, as well as electrical and heating upgrades.
- Modern amenities will be added, such as better lighting, an improved sound system and meeting spaces with built-in projectors.

The project, estimated to come in under \$10 million, will be financed with a combination of public and private funding, said Anastasia Mileham, spokeswoman for Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation (3CDC), a partner in the project. The group has already secured \$2 million from a state capital grant, and another \$2 million in federal and state historic tax credits, she said.

The goal, said Baumann, "is to preserve the historical and architectural integrity of the building, enhance audience amenities and improve the production capabilities in the theater."

Memorial Hall – which sits next door to Music Hall in Over-the-Rhine – was designed by Music Hall architect Samuel Hannaford. It was built in 1908 as a "speaker's hall" dedicated to sailors, soldiers, Marines and pioneers. Over the years, it has been home to performing groups such as the CSO Chamber Players, the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra and the MusicNOW Festival, and is used for lectures and weddings.

In recent years, Hamilton County, which owns the hall, has pitched in to fix holes in the ceiling, and provided new chairs and catering equipment. However, there was no money for additional restrooms, a kitchen or other improvements, Baumann said.

In the last 18 months, 50,000 people have crossed under the Tiffany lamp at the front doorway to attend 225 performances and events, Baumann told a group of Friends of Memorial Hall on Wednesday.

"There is a need for this building," Baumann said. "In spite of it being a relative secret, there has always been a core group that has preserved and supported the hall."

Baumann began two years ago with a board of six, now expanded to 25 trustees. The 150-member Friends of Memorial Hall was launched to help with fundraising. Baumann hopes to double its membership by next year.

On Wednesday, he unveiled a new painting of Memorial Hall by Cincinnati wildlife artist John A. Ruthven in memory of Ruthven's late wife, Judy, who worked to preserve the historic building. Ruthven will provide signed, limited-edition lithographs of his painting to the first 100 new members of the friends society.

The use of the building has grown under the new executive director, Teresa Summe-Haas. Coming up, Memorial Hall will host MidPoint Music Festival, FotoFocus, performances by the Exhale Dance Tribe, Vocal Arts Ensemble, MUSE Women's Choir and the Queen City Band's Veteran's Day Salute.

In November, the hall will launch the second season of its Signature Series, a lineup of local food and beverage tastings, paired with music from Broadway to blues.

Other updating efforts over the years

There have been several efforts to complete a full renovation. In the '70s, the county pondered a rehab and planned to rename it Schippers Hall, after the sudden death of then-Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra music director Thomas Schippers, an early champion. In 1992, private donors, foundations and the Cincinnati Preservation Association raised \$1 million to fund a revitalization. The county kicked in another \$1 million. They undertook repairs to the concert hall and added a passenger elevator.

In 1996, the Cincinnati Memorial Hall Society was established to help support, revitalize and maintain the architectural gem. Two years ago, county commissioners approved a five-year lease agreement to allow the nonprofit developer 3CDC to spearhead renovations and help pull together financing.

Cincinnati firm John Senhauser Architects and Westlake Reed Leskosky of Cleveland have been selected to provide architectural and engineering services for the revitalization.

"Memorial Hall was important when it was built," said Paul Muller, executive director of the Cincinnati Preservation Association. "With this new plan, there is an opportunity to reinvent its role, make it relevant to the community and honor the initial goals it was built for."