

Making Spaces for Art

A Case Study: Grand Theatre



Some things are timeless, ageless, and truly grand. And while theatre as an art form is a perfect example of this, theatres themselves, tend to have an expiration date--especially ones that were built well over a century ago. Such was the case of The Grand Theatre in Kingston. Built in 1879, the time had come for a major overhaul that would preserve and maintain the grandeur of this historic building while simultaneously expanding the space for an ever-growing audience.

From 2004-2008, everything from the HVAC system to the carpet were a part of the transformation, requiring the theatre to be closed for three years. In total, the renovations cost 17.1 million dollars. Funds were raised from a number of sources including the City of Kingston, public funders, corporate donors and personal contributors. Notable amongst the contributions was a one million dollar grant from the provincial Rural Economic Development Program and 2.75 million dollars from the federal Cultural Spaces program. The most remarkable contribution however, came from the "Let's Make Her Grand Again" capital campaign through the Grand Theatre Restoration Foundation, which brought in 3.35 million dollars. This campaign enlisted the time and hard work of more than forty volunteers.

Toronto-based Diamond Schmitt Architects, in partnership with Shoalts and Zaback Architects of Kingston, ensured that this renovation paid homage to the rich history of the building, earning them a certificate of commendation from the Frontenac Heritage Foundation. Diamond Schmitt are no strangers to theatres, having taken part in more than a dozen performing arts centre builds all over the world.

To the building, changes were numerous and included a new HVAC system, structural reinforcing of the auditorium roof and walls, repairs to the foundation, electrical upgrades including back up power inverter, sprinkler systems, carpet throughout and a pretty new façade on Princess Street.

In the main auditorium, the Regina Rosen Theatre, renovations included improved sightlines from the balcony, the addition of a full orchestra pit with mechanical lift and removable seating, an upgraded rigging system, upgraded dimmer panels, and a new multipurpose room under the stage complete with washroom facilities. Other additions included an orchestra shell, and stage scrim drapery.



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No space inside was left untouched. The Baby Grand, the Grand's black box theatre also underwent renovations, making it a 110 seat venue, up from 66 seats previously. Interestingly a neat part of the Baby Grand's past is that it used to be an apartment. Three new chandeliers, a reconfigured bar area, and enhanced audio and sound systems were added to the lobby. The Springer Lounge was also given a facelift with new interior decorating.

A brand new lounge called the Davies Lounge was added that can accommodate up to 90 patrons. In the refurbished administration area, sections of the former walls were exposed to reveal parts of murals from the past. In other parts of the theatre, angels that were prominent sculptures in the 1920's are now modern features.

The Grand Theatre is still committed to this day to meeting the needs of the audience. Three years ago, wishing to increase their accessibility, more changes were made. Much of the work that was done previously to make the theatre accessible did not accommodate the large scooters that many people use today. A larger lift was installed to remedy this and the washrooms were expanded to a size that can accommodate a 360-degree turn with a hospital stretcher. The hospital is directly behind the theatre and occasionally has long term patients come in for a show. As well, there is also a washroom with a full size adult change table.

With an eye to the future and deep respect for its past, the theatre continues to expand and build upon the rich legacy that this truly grand theatre embodies.