

Deliver Value To Cultural Facilities

For cultural organizations with tight budgets, such as community theaters, strategic and cost-effective renovations boost capacity and open doors to long-term success.

August 10, 2018 by Jeffrey Murphy, FAIA, Partner, MBB



Billie Holiday Theater upgrades included new seating, enhanced lighting, symmetrically reshaping interior walls, expanding the stage with sprung-maple flooring, and adding acoustical panels to the ceiling.

In cities across the United States, cultural organizations serve vital civic roles promoting the arts, addressing social needs, supporting education, and creating community touchstones. Nonprofit groups, such as community theaters, offer access to the arts and platforms that nurture local talent. Plus, many of these organizations provide space for neighborhood-based events and programming, all reinforcing a sense of local pride and community.

Yet most cultural organizations lack the benefits of purpose-built venues. Their tight budgets and dwindling arts grants rarely cover the costs of constructing their dream facilities—or even adapting responsively as their communities grow and needs change. As a result, strategic, targeted renovations become a necessity. By helping make these smart design choices, architects and project teams can make it possible for today's cultural groups do more with less and, in many cases, enhance engagement with their respective communities.

Throughout the planning and design process, unlocking value takes a creative mix of thoughtful, targeted upgrades that improve crucial infrastructure and building systems and prioritize programmatic goals. Here are three key strategies for focusing efforts to achieve outsized results.



Billie Holiday Theater infrastructure improvements included adding new boilers and air-conditioning units that work with the building's existing geothermal system.
Photo: Francis Dzikowski/OTTO

Fine-tune project scope

With limited budgets and often-aggressive schedules, renovations for community facilities demand cost-effective and creative approaches. It's crucial for design teams to understand the client-organization's goals and set the project scope accordingly.

As an example, MBB's recent renovation of the historic Billie Holiday Theatre, in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, focused on two main goals of its parent group, RestorationART: Provide state-of-the-art performance infrastructure and strengthen the theater's bond with the community. With a relatively modest outlay of about \$4 million for a total gut renovation and expansion of the 3,200-sq.-ft. performance space, MBB evaluated every planning and design decision in light of those factors, always trying to get both at the same time.

Performance upgrades included expanding the auditorium with new seating, upgrading lighting and life-safety systems, adding stage rigging and audiovisual equipment, enhancing ADA accessibility, symmetrically reshaping the interior walls, and extending the stage. These upgrades make the space perform better as a theater, allow better and more varied programming, and create an enhanced viewer experience. In short, the project broadens the theater's capacity as a community asset and dynamic local center.

Upgrade infrastructure

Many community facilities undergo incremental upgrades because comprehensive renovations are often out of reach or impractical without shutting down operations. As a result, major infrastructure issues often go unaddressed.

Smart, tactical renovations focus on vital infrastructure first, addressing legacy concerns relating to issues such as accessibility and life safety. They also focus on the users, creating a better experience for all. For example, installing new sprinkler deluge systems and fire alarms that communicate with base building alarms can dramatically improve life safety. Upgrading to efficient LEDs can bring lighting up to code, save energy, and make circulation and egress safer.

For a theater or music space, acoustically sealing all doors helps reduce outdoor-sound intrusion and eliminate excessive noise transmission. Adding acoustical

panels to a ceiling can boost sound projection to the audience. These are often tough improvements to sell to clients, because they are not necessarily visible or apparent to users, even though they support the programming.

Finding ways to lower ongoing operating costs is a boon to nonprofits. At the Billie Holiday Theatre—a converted milk-bottling plant that hadn't been renovated in its 42-yr. lifespan—MBB added new boilers and air-conditioning units that work with the building's existing geothermal system. These improvements to the theater cut energy use by 25%.

Add flexibility

Programmatic flexibility is the secret to success for today's cultural organizations. Many serve diverse constituencies with varied needs, so facility renovations should accommodate the widest range of uses and civic amenities possible.

At the Billie Holiday Theatre, upgrading theatrical equipment such as catwalks and rigging and adding better audiovisual technology freed up critical room for screenings and other programs. Similarly, expanding the stage area with sprung-maple flooring opened the door for dance performances, which are high in demand in the community.

Newly converted ground-floor rehearsal studios added opportunities for diverse creative expression, adding new artists, partner institutions, artists-in-residence, and school-outreach programs. Today, the theater engages its community in more innovative and meaningful ways than ever before.

With smart choices and a strategic approach, architects and designers can help cultural organizations turn facilities' challenges into opportunities to improve functionality and increase community connections. For mission-based cultural groups, these architectural ideas are always center stage.

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