

# Architecting a Brand: Theaters, Communities, Roots, Reach

by Lance Olson, Associate Director, Arts Emerson/Office of the Arts, Boston, Massachusetts

How do you express the values of a 130-year-old institution with outposts on three continents that stands for the cutting edge in expression, sees its community embracing the world, yet celebrates its deep roots in the fabric of Boston?

For Emerson College the answer involves preservation, people, and performances.

In September 2010, the Paramount Center will open. It includes three theaters, seven rehearsal studios, a scene shop, a movie studio, a restaurant, and a residence hall for 262 students in Boston's historic Theatre District. With six other campus venues, Emerson College will be the largest theater owner in Boston, and it will house on campus nearly 75% of its full-time students. Its historic theaters will include:

- Paramount Theater, 1932, a faithful adaptive reuse, 590 seats
- Cutler Majestic Theatre, 1903, restored in 2003, 1,186 seats
- Colonial Theatre, 1901, last restored in 1995, 1,658 seats

## Community – Boston and Beyond

Greater Boston has always been an international city. Its safe harbors welcomed immigrants from around the world. It has the earliest Chinatown in the US. Even today, suburban Lowell boasts the largest population of Cambodians outside of Asia. Showman

B.F. Keith celebrated cultural newness in his vaudeville cards, while creating temples for educating and assimilating immigrants into American culture.

So it is not surprising that Emerson College, with campuses in Boston, Holland, and Los Angeles, chooses to embrace an international community of artists to support and engage greater Boston and express Emerson College's values.

The College has created an Office of the Arts to program its portfolio of theaters. It recruited executive director for the arts Robert Orchard from American Repertory Theater, which he co-founded in 1980. According to Orchard, "The Office of the Arts will offer three different 'streams' of public performances. Smaller ensemble companies that feature younger emerging generations of artists will be brought in to showcase works that explore the definitions of 'performance' as well as the relationships between audience and society. Established companies that represent the highest standards of work from a variety of cultures will perform on the College's larger stages like the Paramount Theater and the Cutler Majestic Theatre. The Office of the Arts will also include performances tailored for young people and families to highlight Emerson's legacy and excellence in theater and education."

In addition, Emerson College



The Paramount Center in Boston. © Bruce T. Martin, Cambridge, MA

will continue its partnerships with exceptional New England arts institutions such as Opera Boston.

FMI:

<http://www.emerson.edu/parents/e2u/index.cfm?action=3&articleID=4676&editio nID=391>

<http://www.emerson.edu/news/archives/index.cfm?action=detailNews&postingID=12639>

## What's so Special about the Paramount Center?

The Paramount Center is a mixed use, state-of-the-art performance and production

complex enlivening one of the oldest American theatrical sites at the heart of downtown Boston. The project team was almost the same as for the 2003 restoration of the Cutler Majestic Theatre. Project manager for Emerson College was Robert A. Silverman and Associates, with John Walden as senior construction manager assisted by Michael Faia and Ted Sowa. LHAT members involved included theatrical consultants Auerbach Pollock Friedlander, decorative and restoration artists Evergreene Architectural Arts, Irwin

## The City Planning Context

In 1995 the National Trust for Historic Preservation declared the Historic Boston Theaters, specifically the Keith Block on Washington Street, one of America's "11 Most Endangered Historic Places."

Boston had already been focused on restoring its historic theaters for nearly 20 years, with considerable success. The Midtown Cultural District zoning plan of the 1980s had driven the restoration of the 1926 Metropolitan Theatre/Wang Theatre, the preservation of the Shubert, the Wilbur, the Colonial and the Charles theaters, and the initial restoration of Emerson College's Cutler Majestic Theatre. These six theaters surrounding two blocks of Tremont Street comprise the Boston Historic Theatre District as listed on the National Register. Open and active, they were already contributing to the vitality of downtown Boston.

But the NTHP designation appropriately pointed out that the Keith Block, an outlying group of historic theaters one block over on Washington Street, provides a vital transition between the Tremont Street theaters and the Downtown Crossing retail district.

In response to the designation, Boston Preservation Alliance, the City of Boston, the National Trust for

Historic Preservation and the League of Historic American Theatres convened in 1996 the Boston Historic Theater Charrette. Over 100 professionals from the fields of real estate development, arts management, construction, architecture, education, preservation and urban planning convened with community leaders and public officials to focus on solutions to reenergize the theaters and the neighborhood.

LHAT members who participated in the Charrette included Killis Almond, David Anderson, Janis Barlow, Ann Beha, Howard Elkus, Tom Field, Dulcie Gilmore, John Hemsath, Peggy Ings, Sid McQueen, Lance Olson, Lynn Singleton, Steve Sigel, and Rosa Stolz.

Working in eight teams, participants produced recommendations with a range of specific approaches but remarkable consistency in principles, specifically:

1. A sense of place creates community
2. The "right mix" of uses restores prosperity
3. Development can have many forms and several phases
4. A dedicated leadership entity will bring focus to the task
5. Special funding incentives drive a community-wide effort.

Shortly after the findings were released, Mayor Thomas M. Menino and Theater Management Group president David Anderson announced a plan to acquire and reopen the B. F. Keith

Memorial Theatre/Opera House. That eight year journey succeeded in 2004 when TMG successors brought *The Lion King* to the restored Opera House. Emerson College will exceed all expectations when it reopens the three-theater Paramount Center in September, 2010, and in 2011 Suffolk University will open a new residence hall that incorporates the Modern Theatre façade and includes a small auditorium.

These efforts are consistent with the first four Charrette principles. They reenergize the neighborhood with mixed use development that creates a unique sense of place on what is arguably the earliest theater property in the United States. And they provide dedicated professional leadership for neighborhood improvement in the various theater and education owners. The project as a whole illustrates the importance of a strong leader, Mayor Menino, who provided consistent leadership through the 15-year process. And the development was accomplished without dedicated public funding, employing non-specific Historic and New Market tax credits and tax exempt bonding as well as capital gifts generated by the owners to finance the "many forms and many phases" of development.

[http://www.emerson.edu/admission/graduate/why\\_emerson/quick\\_facts.cfm](http://www.emerson.edu/admission/graduate/why_emerson/quick_facts.cfm)

Seating Company and Boston Light and Sound. The building was designed by Elkus Manfredi Architects

*Boston Globe* architecture correspondent Robert Campbell calls it, "...one of the triumphs of recent Boston architecture and urbanism, the perfect marriage of the right client and the right place. This is what makes good cities: the juxtaposition of new and old in one place, so you feel connected to history while you look forward to the future. Paramount Center embodies the wonderful urban paradox in which memory meets invention, the old and new converse with each other. The Paramount interior looks all the more 1930s because of its contrast with the neighboring architecture of 2010." (*Boston Globe*, March 7, 2010, [http://www.boston.com/ae/theater\\_arts/articles/2010/03/07/architecture\\_critic\\_robert\\_campbell\\_looks\\_at\\_the\\_paramount\\_center\\_at\\_emerson\\_college/?page=full.](http://www.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2010/03/07/architecture_critic_robert_campbell_looks_at_the_paramount_center_at_emerson_college/?page=full.))

The "place" is unique. It is adjacent to the original Haymarket, at the northern end of the isthmus connecting Boston to the mainland. The Center embraces two buildings connected by their entertainment use as far back as 1738. The northern building's Romanesque revival granite façade was added to the 1836 Lion Tavern/Lion Theatre in 1860, uniting it with the 1846 Adams House Hotel to the south. For the next 90 years the Lions site held as many as three simultaneously operating theaters and

served as the home base of the 400-theater Keith-Albee vaudeville empire. On the Adams site the Paramount Theater replaced the hotel in 1932. Adjoining to the north is the Opera House, built in 1928 as the B. F. Keith Memorial Theatre to replace the 1854 Boston Theatre. The Paramount was abandoned in 1976, the Lion-site theaters were demolished in 1960 leaving “the Arcade” front building, and the Opera House was closed from 1991 until 2004. But at its heyday the block contained six of the neighborhood’s 28 venues. Theater is at the heart of the neighborhood’s revival.

#### Featuring History

Historicity is a “built in” feature, not a programming emphasis or an add-on. Emerson College put interpretation of the unique place with integration to the future among its top priorities in the Paramount Center. The granite façade was preserved and augmented with a glass extension that subtly displays the many names of the site over the centuries. Its arched windows incorporate an LED wall capable of 10-million-color visual art events that enliven the street for blocks around. The original Paramount marquee and neon blade sign were restored and reenergize the streetscape, but the 7,000 hand-dipped lamps are now look-alike LEDs, the chasers electronic, and the reader boards are digital. Visitors find historic fabric incorporated in all areas.

Interpretive displays abound, including the door of Keith’s safe that

admonishes, “in case of fire close this door – ANYONE.” Of the memory murals, Robert Campbell noted, “My favorite is a vast wall of names, looking a little like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, of thousands of performers who worked here once, mostly in vaudeville. Some weren’t yet famous. Next to the name of Broadway composer Jerome Kern, for example, is the note ‘accompanist,’ which is all he was when he performed here.”

The Paramount auditorium was reconfigured from a 1,500-seat movie palace into a 590-seat proscenium theater. Instead of 15 feet, the stage and orchestra pit now occupy 46 feet of the same footprint. The décor was demolished in the 1970s, and reconfiguration required gutting the interior and replacing structure and finishes. The Art Deco

murals and detail, carpet, seating colors, proscenium ornamentation and sunburst were replicated from various sources and adapted to the reconfigured space. Cutting edge tools were used in the decoration. Cutting edge speaker systems were embedded in the walls, and cutting edge technical systems such as motorized fly gear and fiber-optic video recording and distribution channels were incorporated throughout.

But guests perceive the auditorium to be a faithful restoration of the 1932 auditorium. Even workers from the original theater have expressed surprise that it is new construction with a different overall shape.

Preservation has been featured to create a sense of unique place in the heart of a great middle-sized American city, making the Boston Historic Theatre District a destination for

visitors and residents alike.

For Emerson College the Paramount Center houses its students, provides classroom and faculty office space, and enhances its vital connections to its community. For the world of artists, it provides a production and performance center that unites the future and the history of the field. For the greater Boston community it connects and educates theater lovers about the world of art today, tomorrow and throughout Boston history while revitalizing a long neglected critical connector in the fabric of downtown life.

As Robert Campbell says, “Some stories have a happy ending.”

Visit <http://ArtsEmerson.org> for current programming and information about the Emerson College venue portfolio.

This article has been posted with permission from its original source, *inLeague*, (Summer 2010, Vol. 33, No. 2), a publication of the **League of Historic American Theatres**.

LHAT, a nonprofit membership association, is a professional network dedicated to sustaining America's historic theatres for the benefit of their communities and future generations. [WWW.LHAT.ORG](http://WWW.LHAT.ORG)