



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Lyric Center for the Arts, Virginia, Minnesota A Case Study in Reuse

Location	506-514 Chestnut Street Virginia, MN
Date of Study	July, 2000
Date of Construction	1911
Owner	Laurentian Arts and Culture Alliance
Cost of Study	\$10,000
Sponsors	Laurentian Arts and Cultural Alliance State Historic Preservation Office
Projected Rehab Costs	\$700,000
Actual Rehab Costs	In progress, \$57,000 for roof
Past Use	Theater for both films and live performances
Current Use	Project underway Theater, community gatherings, events, retail in front portion



Photos: Tom Zahn

Background:

The building housing the Lyric Theater was constructed in 1912 as a mixed-use commercial space. Retail space occupied the front of the building's first floor, with a brick bearing wall separating it from the two-story theater in the rear. The second floor housed offices and an assembly hall. In the 1920s, the building was remodeled and renamed the State Theater, showing primarily movies. The theater marquee and entrance underwent changes at that time the interior was not significantly altered.

The theater's closing in the 1950s brought more substantive changes to the building's interior. The dividing wall between the building's commercial space and the theater lobby was partially removed, as were the theater seats, so that the theater space could be used for storage.

In 1997 the State Theater building became a contributing property to the Virginia Commercial Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Later that year, the proprietor of a nearby hotel proposed to demolish the building to make way for additional parking. In the summer of 1998, a newly formed nonprofit group called the Laurentian Arts and Culture Alliance (LACA) stepped in to purchase the building and renamed it the Lyric Center for the Arts. Two years later the group commissioned a reuse study.

The Reuse Study: Process and Conclusions

At a cost of \$10,000, the relatively small reuse team – consisting of a preservation architect, a planner/historian and an urban planner – began a three-day consultation at the site. Team members conducted a building inspection and held a series of half-hour interviews with Virginia citizens representing a broad spectrum of economic and community planning interests. Afterwards, a town meeting was held to field questions and comments from the public. In addition to these standard components of the reuse study process, the team participated in a local radio program entitled “Open Mike.”

The team’s published report focused on revitalization of the building’s exterior and commercial aspects, then recommended a phased restoration of the theater, setting a timeline and goals for each stage of the project. Such a measured approach would allow community support for the project to build and leave ample time to raise funds for the theater’s rehabilitation. The report also recommended ways that the fledgling Laurentian Arts & Culture Alliance could establish credibility and raise visibility for its project. Among the first steps to be taken taken, according to the report: stabilize the building, renovate the street façade and replace of theater marquee. Cost estimates for the proposed renovation totaled \$700,000.

Current Use

The reuse study process helped identify major community needs, with LACA playing a central role in decision making. The assembly hall/ballroom area on the second floor would be used for weddings, reunions, and other community functions. And LACA secured a grant from the Blandin Foundation to develop an adult community theater that would use the facility. In addition, LACA made plans to acquire a building next door that housed a teen center, giving the



teens access to the theater and providing the theater with more office and dressing room space.

Funds for the rehabilitation of the Lyric Center for the Arts have come from a variety of sources. A Virginia Community Redevelopment Block Grant made possible replacement of the roof at a cost of \$57,000. Additional funding sources are membership fees, a capital campaign, contributions, and grants.

Fundraising has proved challenging, however, partly because the reuse study process was not entirely successful in engaging the community. One local resident attributed this to the community's general lack of receptivity to the arts. Another cited the extra challenges inherent in generating support for a nonprofit enterprise rather than a city-owned facility. Nevertheless, rehabilitation of the building has continued, rescuing it from demolition – a fate shared by too many historic buildings.

