

Lessons from the field

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It might be an uncomfortable message for some, but the notion that arts is a business is an important one and must be kept top of the mind.

In speaking to a group of arts advocates and dignitaries gathered for a discussion on building successful arts centres last week, theatre consultant Janis Barlow said that while calling arts a business once rankled people, most have come to realize it's true and that it must be treated as such.

No where is this notion more important than in building arts centres, such as the Brock-city project going forward downtown. At every stage of the process, Barlow said, why it is being built, who it is being built for and the targeted audience must inform every decision.

"We're building a delivery mechanism for a business," she said, adding the business must drive the project and not the other way around.

Those building a theatre, whether it's a city or another order of government, a university, a non-profit or profit-driven arts enterprise must focus what they are doing and realize they can't do everything. Barlow said setting priorities early is the best way to avoid conflicts in the future.

"Attempting to be all things to all people, as we all know, will get you into a lot of trouble," she said.

Barlow, who has been involved in dozens of theatre build and renovation projects across North America, including the \$30-million Elgin and Winter Garden Theatres in Toronto, said successful centres maintain a balance between three areas, first and foremost being their mission and vision. Other areas to balance include keeping in mind their capacity (the artists who will fill the centre with programming) and their capital (financial resources).

Artists realize the importance of running a cost effective operation, she said, mainly because funding is always hard to come by.

"Every dollar in one of these facilities is hard won," she said.

Barlow said one of the worst mistakes a city building a theatre can make is not involving the end user, artists, in the design stage. She said she's been flabbergasted in the past with some projects where the municipality seemed to want to build a turn-key facility, that is build the centre without consultation and then hand it over for arts groups to run programming. What this results in, she said, is artists going through 'midnight improvements' — making what's handed to them work the best they can.

Similarly, the executive director for a centre should be hired well before it opens, as he or she should have the expertise to know what should go where and can get to work early starting to program the upcoming seasons.

Barlow said not hiring an executive director early is like a business building a headquarters or a factory without having a CEO.

"It's invaluable to have that kind of expertise driving it right at the beginning," she said.

That expertise will also be able to guide the inevitable budget cuts to ensure cuts to the initial building costs don't translate later to increased operating costs, she said.



Janis Barlow brought her decades of theatre experience to an audience at the courthouse theatre Aug. 27 for a discussion on building successful arts centres.