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# **MEMOIRS OF AN HISTORIC THEATRE CONSULTANT**



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## **Memoirs of an Historic Theatre Consultant**

**By Janis Barlow**

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Whenever I can, I try to live by the KISS principal – "Keep it Simple, Stupid." Even in the complicated world of theatre restoration and theatre management, there are some uncomplicated factors which can determine the success of a project. Sometimes, it takes two hands to count the factors you need to remember, sometimes we can name those factors on one hand. The following represents one of my favourite 'top ten' lists.

### **Top Five Factors in a Successful Project**

In March of 1996, the League of Historic American Theatres was invited to participate in an 'Historic Theatre Charrette' hosted by the Boston Preservation Alliance, the City of Boston and the National Trust for Historic Preservation to discuss options for the redevelopment of three historic theatres on Washington Street: the *Modern*, the *Paramount* and the *Opera House*. The charrette included developers, owners, preservation professionals, design professionals, cultural facility operators, representatives from the City of Boston as well as planning and preservation agencies and financial experts. There were about 200 participants from across the United States and representatives from the League were to set the tone with a keynote discussion.

Dr. Rosa Stoltz, then President of the League decided to invite some of her colleagues who were especially familiar with theatre district development to bring their expertise to the charrette. The League contingent comprised: Dulcie Gilmore for the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago; John Hemsath from the Playhouse Square in Cleveland; Killis Almond from the Columbus Association of the Performing Arts (CAPA), and me, the token Canadian who knows something about theatres in Toronto and is a big fan of everyone's project. Steve Sigal from the Garde Arts Centre in New London, Connecticut, served as our local liaison.

The CAPA and Playhouse Square projects are generally considered flagship efforts in the historic restoration movement which took off in the United States in the early 1970s. After twenty-five years of revitalizing urban America through historic theatre rehabilitation, it seemed like a good opportunity for some key members of the League to reflect on what was required for a successful theatre restoration project and to offer some straightforward advice to the people of Boston. We provided case studies from Columbus, Cleveland and Toronto for comparison purposes and then summarized what we considered to be the five keys to future success.

We came up with the following list, and because I am a planner oriented to formulas, and because I like to think that almost everything can be boiled down to who, what, where, how and why, I have added those questions to the subtext.

## 1. Leadership

*Who are you?* Project leadership must be strong, dynamic, committee, widely respected and knowledgeable. Leadership may be the combined resources of a Campaign Chair Person, a Project Director, a Board of Directors and a Design Team.

## 2. Vision

*Why are you doing this, what do you want to achieve?* The project's long-term purpose, scale and scope should be understood and defined at the outset, especially in relation to the initial assembly of land.

## 3. Municipal Support

*Where do you stand in your community?* The support and leadership of Mayors and Councillors will be indispensable to the project, and they will look at the project leadership, the media and the local cultural climate to judge your project.

## 4. Professional Management

*How are you going to do business?* An experienced facility management team should be assembled early in order to help guide project development. Volunteerism is critically important and a not-for-profit Board of Trustees may govern your project, but professional standards are essential in a place of public assembly.

## 5. Programming and Operations Plan

*What are you going to do, specifically?* Good restoration and renovation design is the response to existing conditions and a well-detailed business plan. Form follows function. Start with a project plan which answers all the questions above, *then hire a restoration architect to realize your requirements.*

It is interesting that the list does not include the inevitable cost factor – *How much (or how little) will it cost?* All too often, *How much?* Is one of the first questions I hear from people contemplating an historic theatre restoration. Cost is a function of all the answers to all the other questions. With good answers, a good consultant can give you an accurate budget. Chances are, if you try to define a project by a budget before you have a plan, your project will fail. The money tail will wag the dog. Theatres are expensive buildings to build and operate by comparison with your average residence, but they usually accommodate a lot more people. Historic theatre projects are expensive too, but for some types of theatre activity they can offer better value than a new theatre.

The question, *how much will the restoration cost?* also implies that there will be a completion date, that the project somehow will be finite. In either an historic theatre or a new theatre, there is no such thing as a completion date. Public buildings, and especially theatres, are always evolving through maintenance and change cycles, so my first impulse is to answer, 'no matter what stage of completion you reach in an historic theatre project, the cost of the remainder of the project always remains the same.'

Horrified bean counters usually back away from the project at this point, or fire me. Real leaders are never discouraged. They understand what a restored theatre will mean for their community and they embrace their role in its revitalization. In rural Tiffin, Ohio (population 20,000), there was a sharp intake of breath when the Board was told in 1995 that their dreams to restore and expand their historic *Ritz Theatre* would cost \$4.3 million. The most money the community had raised in the past was \$1.1 million for a hospital campaign. A local newspaper pitted hospital against theatre with the comment: 'Need or Entertainment?' The theatre's executive director wrote a moving editorial response, but the comment that diffused the situation came from the fund raising counsel who said 'I think that's unfair, the hospital is much more than mere entertainment.'

The *Ritz Theatre* has exceeded its \$4.3 million fund raising goal. In an inspired and visionary act of leadership, they found a way to make it happen. As they restore the *Ritz* it will transform them. They will never live to regret it.