



THE KIMMEL CENTER
ACADEMY OF MUSIC
MERRIAM THEATER

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KIMMEL CENTER LAUNCHES PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PROCESS TO SOLICIT IDEAS FOR RENOVATION OF ICONIC MERRIAM THEATER

Philadelphia, August 12, 2017 – The Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts today announced a comprehensive community engagement process intended to solicit innovative ideas for the renovation of the historic Merriam Theater, located in the heart of the Kimmel Center campus on the Avenue of the Arts in Center City.

While strongly committed to the preservation of the performance venue, the Center revealed that it will launch a Request for Expressions of Interest (RFEI) from developers and other parties as part of its plan to redevelop the property, including the prospect of building above the theater. At the same time, the Center has retained acclaimed architect and civic planner Harris Steinberg to lead a public charrette as part of a process to solicit ideas from throughout the region about how best to incorporate the Merriam into the thriving Kimmel Center campus, which includes Kimmel Center and the Academy of Music on South Broad Street.

“The Merriam Theater is an important part of Philadelphia’s past and a vital part of our future,” said Kimmel Center President and CEO Anne Ewers. “We want to engage the Philadelphia community in helping us plan the next steps for our campus and our city.”

The Kimmel Center, which has operated the 1,761-seat Merriam Theater for eight years and formally purchased the site in December 2016, envisions the redevelopment as a centerpiece for its performing arts campus, which cumulatively represents the second-largest performing arts center in the nation, behind only New York’s Lincoln Center, and hosts 1,400 performances for more than one million people per year. The Center’s goal is for new uses on parts of the site – including both the office building fronting Broad Street and the air rights above it – to generate additional revenues that will fund the preservation of the historic 99-year-old theater as well as continuing to support the operation of the Center and its education and artistic initiatives.

“Our goal is to use the community engagement process, including the public charrette, as a way to inform the preservation and development process moving forward,” Ewers said. “Our vision for the Merriam is to provide a rejuvenated theater space that also helps support the mission of providing world-class performing arts that serve all of the diverse interests in the Greater Philadelphia region.”

The Center will issue the RFEI to gauge interest in the Merriam project among the development community. At the same time, it has engaged Steinberg, head of the Lindy Institute for Urban Innovation at Drexel University whose work includes similar initiatives for the Central Delaware River, the Benjamin Franklin Parkway and the Kimmel Center itself, to lead a civic engagement process intended to reveal the challenges and opportunities of the Merriam site as it solicits compelling ideas for its redevelopment.

Among the challenges is the commitment to preserve the theater at the core of the 19,500-square foot site, which includes a six-story office building that fronts on South Broad Street. While the Theater core is historically significant, the adjoining office building, a utilitarian structure which has received several new facades in its lifetime, does not enjoy the same status.

Earlier this year, the Kimmel Center engaged architects from KieranTimberlake to conduct a feasibility study of the site with a specific focus on the issue. KieranTimberlake has extensive experience working in historic buildings by noted architects, and has completed award-winning renovation projects nationally for Harvard, Yale, and Princeton Universities. Locally, the firm has developed a master plan for the Kimmel Center, and designed the Suzanne Roberts Theatre and Arden Theatre. Earlier this year, the firm’s renovation of the former Ortlieb’s Bottling House in Northern Liberties received National Historic Landmark designation and was honored by the Preservation Alliance.

The feasibility study indicated that redevelopment options could include: renovating the existing buildings, or renovating the historic theater core while replacing the office building with new construction to expand theater lobby and amenity spaces currently limited by the existing structures. The Kimmel Center has made clear that it is committed to retaining the theater core as it solicits input from the design community, the arts community and the general public about the best way to maximize the potential of the site.

“We believe that the redevelopment of the Merriam presents a unique opportunity to preserve the history of the theater while also generating compelling new ideas for compatible uses,” said Steinberg. “Our goal is to lead a process that solicits ideas and input from all segments of the Greater Philadelphia community that will inform the design process at every step along the way.”

The Center also announced that Erica Atwood, CEO of First Degree Consulting, will co-lead the engagement process to encourage public participation in the redevelopment of the Merriam, which enjoys a rich and incredibly diverse performance history by some of the biggest names in show business, including: Helen Hayes, Katherine Hepburn, Sir Laurence Olivier, Sammy Davis Jr., Angela Lansbury, and more recently, Patti LaBelle, Aretha Franklin, the O’Jays, Billy Joel, and scores of other artists. Atwood, a former Director in the Mayor Nutter administration and a 2014 Drexel University Leading for Change Fellow, specializes in “authentic” community outreach and “strategic planning with a racial equity lens.”

Steinberg and Atwood will be joined by Harris Sokoloff, whose work in designing and implementing public engagement projects includes initiatives for the Benjamin Franklin Parkway and the Kimmel Center among many others. Sokoloff is the Director of the Penn Project for Public Engagement.

Together, they will encourage participation from a broad cross-section of planners, design professionals, members of the arts community, the city administration, our neighbors and the general public that will culminate in the public Charrette to be held in late September. The RFEI and community engagement activities are designed to inform a more traditional RFP process scheduled to begin later this Fall.

“The opportunity exists to reimagine the Merriam Theater site in a way that pays homage to its history while also securing its place at the heart of an exciting performing arts campus that serves people from all walks of life in the Greater Philadelphia region,” Ewers said. “We are eager to hear from our stakeholders about planning the next phase of the Merriam Theater’s future, and we can’t wait to get started.”

The Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts

Located in the heart of Center City, Philadelphia, the Kimmel Center’s mission is to operate a world-class performing arts center that engages and serves a broad audience through diverse programming, arts education, and community outreach. The Kimmel Center Campus is comprised of the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts (Verizon Hall, Perelman Theater, SEI Innovation Studio, and the Merck Arts Education Center), the Academy of Music (owned by the Philadelphia Orchestra Association), and the Merriam Theater. The Kimmel Center is also home to eight Resident Companies: The Philadelphia Orchestra, Opera Philadelphia, The Pennsylvania Ballet, The Philly POPS, PHILADANCO, The Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, The Philadelphia Chamber Music Society and Curtis Institute of Music. With nearly 9,000 seats per night, The Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts is the region’s most impactful performing arts center, and the second largest in the country. TD Bank, America’s Most Convenient Bank, is the season sponsor of the Kimmel Center’s 2017-2018 Season. American Airlines is the official airline of Broadway Philadelphia. For additional information, visit kimmelcenter.org.

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