The Historic Babcock Theater
A restoration/redesign proposal
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by Eric S. Hoffman
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[Signature]
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The challenge of this project calls for the redesign of the historic Babcock Theater in Billings, Montana into a premier movie theater and performing arts center that will work in conjunction with the Alberta Bair Theater. Currently in Billings there lacks an appropriate place for small stage and auditorium performances. The Alberta Bair Theater is a large theater and therefore is expensive for local community stage groups, choirs, orchestras, bands, and other local engagements to rent. The Babcock Theater is a small theater (approximately 800 seats), and therefore would better accommodate smaller groups or conferences than the Alberta Bair Theater. Also, since there is this need for a smaller performance theater, if it were located in the downtown area of Billings, then there is the distinct possibility that it would add and help the downtown community economically. Because of these reasons, it seems to be reasonable that Billings would successfully use a newly restored Babcock Theater.

The theater will have to be designed with the following needs in mind: A cafe/bar for before performance dinners (with a limited but exquisite menu) and after performance cocktails, coffee, and desserts. This cafe/bar should work in association with the Alberta Bair Theater and all downtown theater performances and other street events so that it will become the place to be seen before and especially after performances. The center will also have to have an auditorium that will function successfully as a movie theater with up to date projection and sound technology, and as an acoustically sound performing arts stage and auditorium with the benefits of state of the art electronics to enhance any performance. The theater must also have a lobby that will easily tell a patron were they need to go to get to whatever area of the theater they may wish to visit, and in case the auditorium is not being used, the main lobby will need to be able to be partially shut off but still be inviting to the guests of the cafe/bar area of the building. The lobby should also include a dedicated area to box offices, and have the ability to keep the crowds around the box office from interfering with the patrons of the restaurants, or people in the general lobby area.

The design of these three important areas should reflect the ideas and spirit of the history of the downtown area and the design of the buildings in that era. The facade and interior should be representative of the exuberance that was once felt when being inside and experiencing the great movie palaces of the 1920's. The Babcock was originally designed in the late 1920's, but after a disastrous fire in the mid 1930's it was rebuilt in the style of that period-Art Deco. It is this design that the majority of the people in Billings remember and associate with the Babcock, and it is this style that the new design should be considerate of and accommodating to. By doing so, it will historically link the old with the new and be sympathetic to the past. People once went to the great stage theaters and movie houses of the past to escape from the stresses and doldrums of everyday life and enter a world of fantasy and frivolity for a few hours and thus get a respite from the problems of ordinary life.
It is this feeling of escape that most movie theaters and performing arts centers have lost and is something that should be regained and captured in the sympathetic redesign of the Babcock Theater.

**BACKGROUND**

**Downtown Billings**

When Billings first started as a camp town and stopping/loading port for the Yellowstone River by Frederick Billings, downtown Billings was just an assemblage of wood shacks that supported the workers at the port. Over time it flourished as an important port for all the farmers of the surrounding communities and the buildings of the downtown area became larger and sturdier to support a growing community. It was at this time that the architectural style was set. Now, if one visits the downtown Billings area you can see the same buildings that were built in the earlier haydays of Billings. Unfortunately, as Billings grew the people spread out and eventually the shopping mall appeared on the edge of the city to service those who lived near the city or in the suburbs, this signaled the beginning of the death of downtown Billings. This lead to the loss of businesses in the downtown area and now one can see many empty buildings or shops that have been turned into office complexes, which seem to be the only thing that can survive in the downtown area. What is needed and wanted by those who are still operating businesses downtown is a rejuvenation that will draw people to the area. In doing so, I believe it will prove to be a benefit to local businesses and possibly create a need for new business to open in the buildings once abandoned. This in turn will improve the downtown economy and therefore the Billings economy. There is even the opportunity, with the two downtown hotels, that special promotions could be held for weekend escapes including: going to the civic centers, shopping in the local downtown market, and a romantic place to stay the night, all in downtown Billings. The advantages are evident.

**Babcock History**

The Babcock Theater, originally the opera house, was built at a cost of $150,000 dollars and rated as one of the finest theaters in the northwest. When it opened its doors in 1907 it was strictly a vaudeville theater and it was known at the time as the rich man's theater. People went to a show as much to see a performance as to be seen by the affluent members of the city's upper class. This "high society" theater remained the place to be seen until February 1935, when a fire, started by a dropped cigarette during a boxing match, quickly spread and engulfed the theater in flames and was deemed a total loss. It was at this time that the theater was rebuilt by Mr. Lipsker, the then owner of the building, in the modern style of that day—Art Deco. In August of that year the Babcock had its new grand opening to a packed house. Between August of 1935 and today the theater has generally remained in this Art Deco Style. It has had many different owners and over...
time the theater has lost its golden image and become a place of no more importance than your average multiplex movie house. After a period of being closed, a very small production company with a limited budget has been showing performances and concerts in the Babcock to help raise money to get Starfire Productions on to their feet and to help renovate the old theater.

The Babcock as it stands today is in a state of disrepair with many minor problems that need to be taken care of and quite a few major problems that need to be dealt with as quickly as possible. I believe that the Babcock Theater is worth saving and restoring while updating many old ideas, it is worth the time and effort of the people of the city of Billings to give their time and money to save this historic landmark.

**Building Image**

The image the new Babcock Theater should, as previously stated, project is not just the history of downtown Billings, but the history and architecture of the 1935 Babcock Movie Theater, and in doing so have the unifying historic elements that will link the new theater successfully to its past. In doing so, one should not just clean and repaint but bring his/her own ideas into the space and enhance the space. It is necessary though, that one does not change the theater's identity so much so that it is no longer recognizable as the Babcock Theater from times past, this redesign/restoration might be thought of as a modern interpretation of old ideas. When this is done correctly the elements used in the design will be lasting. These ideas should also be an unifying element to help connect the surrounding facade designs into a unified "look" that will show that the different facades are all part of the one building. Also, the interior of the theater should be inviting, but also be intriguing enough to hold a patron's interest, and the interior should transport the patrons into a different world where the pressing problems of one's daily life can be forgotten. This calls for a specific and lasting image that will capture people's attention and keep it.

**General Design Considerations**

**Region**

Geographically, Billings is located in south central Montana in a prairie like landscape with rolling hills and mountains within an hours drive. The city itself is found in a valley which was cut into the sandstone substrata by the Yellowstone River which borders the south edge of the city. The city tries to present itself as a "big" city with "small" town closeness. Billings feels it has the advantages and social events of a big city, but with a "Big Sky" openness towards people living in or visiting it.

**Cost**

The expected budget for this new facility is limited to a renovation cost of 65 dollars per square foot, based on an estimated cost of 58 dollars per square foot for construction of a new theater. Since the Babcock has approximately 11,000 square
feet of space that one will be able to reno-
ivate, the total budget should not exceed 
approximately 2.2 million dollars, allow-
ing for unforeseeable circumstances. The 
design must demonstrate prudence and 
attention to cost as an important factor in 
the architectural problem.

Climate

The climatic conditions of Billings 
vary greatly; from sub zero temperatures in 
the cold winter months of December - Feb-
uary, to 100+ temperatures in the downtown area in the hot summer months of 
June - August. Due to the cold winter 
months, Billings has approximately 8000 
Degree Days if using a balance point tem-
perature of 65 degrees Fareinheit. As a 
comparison Los Angeles has 1819 Degree 
Days with an average low of 55 degrees and 
an average high of 69 degrees with an aver-
age temperature of 60 degrees, whereas 
Billings has an average low of 18 degrees 
and an average high of 68 degrees with the 
yearly average being only 43 degrees. With 
these conditions in mind the designer has 
to consider the design of the north facing 
facade, roof structure/design, and HVAC 
loads when in the design process of this 
space. Entry and approach must also be 
considered due to heavy snowfall, and 
snow removal must be considered in the 
facade design due to passenger loading 
and unloading.
**PROGARN**

**Entry**

This space should symbolize the grandeur of entering a grand theater and should give patrons a feeling of anticipation on entering a very important and glamorous space. The entry should also serve as a transition space from exterior to the interior.

**Lobby**

The lobby should be an important area with a feeling of a gathering space. It should be easily noticeable when a patron is in the lobby which way they should travel to get to the destination they chose. The area should set the stage for entry to the auditorium by making the patron feel that there is a very important space behind the auditorium doors. The lobby should be the “heart of the theater”.

**Auditorium**

The auditorium should make one feel as though they have “arrived”. It should be the ending point - the place of destination by the patron. The auditorium should also be a place of grand importance where everything is at a voluminous scale. It should evoke a feeling of awe.
Restaurant

This area should be an adjunct part of the theater, but due to food odors wafting into the theater the restaurant should have an adequate separation from the main theater area. The restaurant will want to invite patrons in to enjoy themselves. A waiting area should be the annex from the theater to the restaurant, and should help reduce the scale of a large theater to the closeness of an intimate restaurant.

Backstage

The backstage area should be a clean and concise space, large enough to handle volumes of people exiting and entering the stage area from the green room and the actor preparation area in the basement. The backstage should also have space dedicated to a freight elevator and an area around the elevator for unloading and loading of props. There should also be a backstage lighting system that is able to operate during performances without hindering stage lighting effects.

Green Room

This room is where actors or performers will wait for their cue to go on stage. This area should be a comfortable environment that will evoke the performers to relax and not tense up before the trip to the stage. This room should also be set up to handle after performance receptions that a crew and cast may throw for themselves after a performance.
Dressing Rooms

There should be adequate dressing rooms on the theater for a support cast, up to two star performers, and at least one more for cast members who receive second billing. These rooms must have precise lighting for makeup applications. As with the Green Room these rooms should be comfortable so as to relax the performers before the evenings performance.

Office

The offices should be provided for the restaurant manager, theater manager, and current owner. These spaces should all be secure and secluded due to privacy and monetary storage.


Bathrooms should be adequate for building occupancies (approximately 900 people). Hall should be ample for use as social places before, after, and during intermission of a performance. The projection room should have ample electrical circuits, breakers, and appropriate outlets to run stage lighting, spotlighting, and house lighting. The option of using the room for movie projection must also be kept in mind with appropriate ventilation for heat or any mishaps that may happen in this space.

Apartments

The existing apartments in the Babcock Building will be renovated and expanded to twice the existing size. The number of available apartments may decrease but the quality will increase.
SITE

The site map shown includes the two downtown theaters, the two downtown hotels, and the boundaries of the “downtown” areas.

- Alberta Bair Theater
- Sheraton Hotel
- Babcock Theater
- Northern Hotel

Downtown area boundaries
Case Study 1

The first case study is the Alberta Bair Theater in Billings, Montana. Originally the Fox Theater, the theater became the Alberta Bair in the late eighties. In its origin the Fox followed the Babcock by a number of years and was built as the common mans theater, but after the demise of the Babcock due to a lagging downtown economy, the Fox became the place to hold performances due to its larger auditorium. In the early eighties a group of people started a cause to create a modern performing arts theater to entice larger acts to come to perform for the Billings community and therefore increase the cultural experiences in Billings. It was at this time that the save the Fox Theater campaign was started with the community deciding that the best way to raise community support and dollars was to restore and renovate the old theater. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending how you look at it, the original game plan was altered, and the theater was entirely changed from the space it once was. Now in Billings, resides a new ultra modern theater with the latest in sound and lighting design, designed in post modernistic style. I use this theater as a case study in two ways. One, it is a good example of how modern advances can be used in a theater and quite successfully, and second, how not to destroy a rich history of a once important landmark.
Case Study 2

The second case study used is the Fox Theater in Detroit. The 4804 seat theater was originally built in the late 1920's and has been operating since. In 1987 Michael Ilitch, founder of Little Caeser's, bought the theater and a ten story office block next to the theater to use as the corporation's head quarters. The corporation restored the old theater to its original grandeur and in the process managed to save 80% of the original work. In 1989 the Fox was the top grossing theater in the country, but unfortunately the reconstruction cost is not available. This space is used as a case study due to the fact that it shows that it is possible to accurately restore an aged theater exactly to its original grandeur and be able to make money off of it, no matter the size and complexity of the space as is seen in the Fox, for it is both large and complex.
The third case study is the Bay Cafe in Seattle. This small cafe was built with the Fishermen's Terminal on Salmon Bay. The fishermens diner was designed in classic style of diners in the 1950's. The cafe is designed in a functional, industrial simplicity that is in keeping with the rest of the businesses in the Fishermen's Terminal. The design encourages the customers to interact with one another by using a curved bar and large seating areas. This design is used in this project to show that a diner can be oriented towards one group of user and be successful. Also, this design shows that a retro design can be successful and when applied in the right way can provide interaction.
Existing Plans

The following plans, elevations, and section are of the Babcock Theater as it exists now. Though the drawings are incomplete, they show the layout of building well enough to give one the idea of the feel of the building as well as the spatial design of the building. These are to be used in comparison with the finished drawing at the end of this document. All as is drawings of the Babcock Theater are the property of A&E Architects of Billings. The "retail upper level and the "apartment level" were not drawn at uniform horizontal cuts through the building, therefore I have combined the the "retail upper level" and the "apartment level" by omitting the shown upper retail space an inserting the lower balcony into the "retail upper level" plan as shown in the section. The finished presentation drawings should make this more clear.
Theatre Upper Balcony
Design Development

This portion of the document will show through annotated plans the problems I believe the Babcock Theater has, and my solutions to these problems. Each page will be dedicated to a floor of the building and there will be two reduced plans - one with problems and one with solutions. These solutions are only annotated sketches, and will be followed later by the final presentation drawings to clearly show the design solutions. Each set of plans will be accompanied by an explanation of what is happening.
Basement

Problems

The basement as it is now has a wide variety of problems. As can be seen by the existing photos of the space it is in a means of disrepair, from walls in wrong places, poor facilities for dressing rooms, and a concrete floor that is on a variety of levels. Once the floor is repaired the area needs to be opened up, there needs to be proper storage for props and other accessories, bathroom facilities for the performers, and a waiting area for those who may have to wait to go on stage.

Solutions

If one takes the walls out and reconfigures the arrangement of spaces so that near the stage access doors there is a large waiting area then the rest of the space can be used for the other spaces needed according the the programing. As for storage I propose taking the space used by Trott Printing and the space dedicated the apartment boiler room and linking them with a wide hallway so that both spaces are connected to each other and to the elevator, and the exit to the outside. The remaining space will be dedicated to common staff with bathroom facilities on one side of the hallway, and guest and star performers dressing rooms on the other side of the hallway.
Ground Level

Problems

The ground level needs more room in the lobby for the gathering of people before, during, and after performances, as it is now there is too little room for a social atmosphere. There also needs to be an area for an office and box windows to sell tickets for upcoming events, as is evident the old ticket booth is not large enough to handle a large volume of people. Also there needs to be reacquisition of the stage space now used by Lou Talbert's Ranchwear as floor area.

Solutions

The hardest part of this solution will be the reacquiring the old stage space. This would probably take a large amount of money and negotiation, but is a necessity. As for more lobby, I suggest pushing the rear auditorium wall back towards the stage, although this eliminates some seating its benefits will make it worth it. To also increase lobby space, the entrance to the Babcock Apartment will have to be moved to the space now occupied by Trott Printing, again this will need negotiation, but needed space will be necessary for handicapped accessible bathrooms, so that theater as a whole will be accessible. If the entrance to the apartments is moved to east side of the theater it will also allow access to the the upper lobby and restaurant to those who are handicapped, and will allow more leniant restaurant hours.
Retail Upper Level

Problems

The upper level and retail level will be combined as explained on the previous pages. The problems are that the upper lobby needs to be expanded for the same reasons the lower lobby needed to be expanded. Also, the upper bathrooms need to be larger to accommodate the numbers of people, as it is, the bathrooms do not accommodate even a partial crowd. There also needs to be access for the handicapped to the upper lobby area.
**Apartment Level**

**Solutions**

The upper lobby will be enlarged by removing the apartments in the theater area and using the space for a bar and reception area. This space will be enlivened by an opening to the lobby below to link the two spaces with an exciting design element, and the two bearing columns on the first floor will pierce through the opening to the ceiling above for a vertical link between the spaces. The bathrooms will be enlarged and they will be separated from the bar area by the void to the lower lobby, therefore keeping the space open but separating the two distinct areas. The entry to the apartment, as mentioned before, will serve as a second means and handicapped entrance to the bar/reception area. The entry to the apartments will also be on this level, and to prevent unauthorized entry into this area, a pass key will be needed to access the apartments.
Theater Upper Balcony

Problems

The only problems with the upper balcony is that there needs to be some added roof structure to the north side of the theater where the proposed restaurant would be placed. The only other problem is to remove the lower projection booth and refurbish the upper projection booth.

Solutions

The proposed restaurant would be the only real new construction to the theater. This would call for proper ventilation and a means of food placement and waste removal. The design calls for the removal of the lower projection booth so that the area could be used for a grill and food storage in a bar/cafe style of seating, also the apartment entrance stairwell would also be used as an entrance for the restaurant during times when the theater is not in use. This would also provide handicapped accessibility to the restaurant.
Theater Section

Problem

The problems seen in the section are the same ones shown on the plans. The needed acquisition of stage space, the transformation of the basement, the changes to the upper and lower lobbies, and the restaurant addition.

Solutions

The solutions are also the same. As can be seen the upper lobby extends far into where the apartments used to be and will provide much more space for conversation and reception, also the lower lobby extends quite a ways into where the auditorium seating used to be. Also one can see the ceiling treatment in the auditorium has been altered to give a greater effect of immensity.
Elevations

Problems

The facade, as it is now, lacks conformity with the surrounding facade designs, especially in the upper facade of the Babcock Building. The lower facade of the Babcock Theater also does not match the surrounding facades, but even more so it does not match the ideas or the image the building is trying portray.

Solutions

The upper facade will be changed into a pattern that will better match the surrounding facades by using a repeating arch pattern that will be linked in pairs a third and larger arch. The lower facades will remain the same, except for the theater which will have a facade that is similar to the upper facade, but will have art deco ideas incorporated into it to help show the patron that the exterior of the theater is linked to the interior.
Design Solution
Design Solution

The design solution which I have achieved is one which I believe solves the problems put forth in the first part of this document. During the last four months I have struggled with the design rules that I put forth, that I cannot totally redesign the space, but that I must remodel/redesign the space while leaving enough behind to associate the theater with its historic past.

I started the process of design by trying to reconfigure the facade, unfortunately this was not successful due to the fact that the project revolved around the interior and that the best solution to the exterior would come once I successfully redesigned the interior.

After the initial interior sketches were started, I found that I could use the most important, historic, eye catching portions of the interior and either change or reinforce those ideas so that a modern interpretation of them can be used. Along with ideas generated from the older and more successful portions of the building, I generated new ideas with modern methods of design to compliment the ideas of old.

At this point I went back to the facade and found that the exterior worked much more smoothly and that it was easy to match the exterior to the interior once some ideas had been generated. Now, I believe that the exterior facade works very well with the surrounding facades and that it also works very well as a joining element between the downtown Billings area and the interior of the Babcock Theater.

When it came time to finalize the design of the interior, it came fairly easily, once I had the basic ideas generated and all they needed was finalization.

The lower lobby now holds many more people than before and is much more conducive to interaction between people, and with the opening to the lobby above, it helps enlarge the space so that it seem to be the heart that connects the different portions of the building together with the columns being the verticle link. Also, now that the lower lobby has handicapped accessable bathrooms and an elevator, it makes the entire theater accessable to everyone. The box offices will hopefully accomidate more people in a much more efficient manner during time periods before performances when people are trying to either buy or collect their tickets.

The auditorium has been changed very little since the original idea has been well preserved over time. The changes to the back wall come as a nessesity to lobby expansion and I believe that it is not that much of a defecite to the auditorium seating or accoustics, in fact it allows fewer people to set in the "dead zone" below the balcony. With the hopeful expansion of the stage due to space aquisition the theater will be able to accomidate larger performances that call for more stage depth due taller and more complex backdrops.

The upper lobby has been transformed from a boring cramped space into an event. The idea is that before performances and during intermission the patrons would come to the bar and reception area to have a drink, be seen, and socialize with those around them. The design idea being that this space would attract people with its grandness. The space, as men-
mentioned before, will be connected with the lower lobby through the opening and with the columns. The bonus to being in the upper lobby, is that it is easier to see how the columns meld with the ceiling with a radiant blue to purple glow. Also on this level are the bathrooms which have been updated and expanded to hold more people at one time, and have a sitting area if one finds it necessary.

The only truly modern addition to the theater is the Fiddler’s Rooftop Cafe. This restaurant will be located on the existing roof and will have a 180 degree view of downtown area and of the Rimrocks to the sky above. This restaurant will specialize in a limited menu that will be able to be prepared for you in front of your eyes if you decide to sit at the grill / bar. This restaurant will be accessible to everyone due to the stairwell and elevator that runs from the ground floor up. Because of this, the restaurant will be open most late afternoons, evening, and nights whether or not the theater is operating.

Finally, there is the basement. After much remodeling the space should be quite comfortable to the actors and actresses who will use the space more than anyone else. Included in the space is an area for the cast to change, store clothing, shower, and clean up after a performance. On the other side of the hallway will be the area for the star or guest performers, who will each have their own room and bathroom. There will be a waiting area near the end of the space where the stairs to the stage will be. This is where the actors will wait for their on stage cues. On either end of the space is where prop storage will be, each connected with a wide hallway, with the space under the stage having a freight elevator to carry props and supplies to stage.

I feel the design solution that I have achieved is the one that works best with the program put before me. I feel that it integrates with the existing designs very well and does not compete with the past, but harmonizes with it. This project was harder than first expected and I believe that the solution shows four months of dedicated thought.

The following pages are the finished drawing of the design proposal for the Babcock Theater.
Ground Floor
Perspective
Light Detail
## The Babcock Theater

### Legend

1. Lobby
2. Upper Lobby
3. Auditorium
4. Stage
5. Restaurant
6. Protection Booth
7. Restroom
8. Actor Waiting
9. Dressing Rooms
10. Storage
11. Showers
12. Changing
13. Make-up
14. Orch. Pit
15. Box Office
16. Balcony

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Display Wall
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