

## **Commentary - CITY VIEWS / HENNEPIN AVENUE THEATER DISTRICT - Downtown Hennepin Avenue gets gussied up**

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On certain magical evenings in downtown Minneapolis, theater marquees flash, traffic jams up, people crowd the sidewalks and restaurants are packed. Hennepin Avenue, once again, recalls its past as the Great White Way, where 20 theaters lined its blocks.

Not so long ago the city's main entertainment street was dark, drab and downright scary. It's still no nirvana. But with a streetscape redo adding polish between 5th and 10th Streets, the Hennepin theater district is glowing.

Property owners will be assessed for the \$3 million effort, which spiffs up the five blocks that form the core of the city's entertainment district. It was inspired by the street's glory days in the early 1900s, when more than 40 theaters lined Hennepin and nearby streets.

New white streetlights lend the biggest punch. Gone are the tall, ugly wands with yellow light that replaced old-fashioned globes in the 1950s.

The design team from HGA and the committee of Hennepin Avenue business owners that oversaw the project chose to bring back traditional ``double acorn" globes. The 20-foot-tall fixtures spread enough white light to illuminate both the street and the sidewalk.

Also gone is the dreadful concrete sidewalk marred with grease and gum.

The new one has smaller, patterned squares that add life.

While the lights hark back to Hennepin's history as Theater Row, the simple lines of the street furniture establish a crisp, contemporary look appropriate for the 21st century. The black steel benches, planters, trash receptacles, bike racks and cages for newspaper boxes are grouped at the curb to help buffer pedestrians from traffic. Come spring, well-shaped black ash and honey locust trees will soften the place.

The total effect: The street looks cared for. And when something looks cared for, it feels safer.

A district grows

Of course, it isn't the streetscape that has drawn crowds to Hennepin Avenue. It's the theaters.

Even five years ago, the notion of downtown's seediest street as a theater district seemed almost laughable. After decades of decay, the State and Orpheum marquees were glowing again. But two theaters do not a district make.

The State, you may recall, barely survived a proposed demolition. In 1988, Brett Smith, known as a crazy preservationist, sued the city to save it. It is hard to imagine Hennepin without it.

The State's success in drawing people downtown encouraged the city to renovate the down-at-the-heels Orpheum two years later. Financed by a surcharge on tickets sold for the theaters, the

city's multimillion-dollar investment in theater renovation has paid off by drawing more than 600,000 folks a year to a once-shunned street.

Another crucial step was Sandy and Ben Hey's wild idea of installing a long-running play, "Tony and Tina's Wedding," in the vacant Hirshfield's building. When the playgoing "wedding guests" snaked out onto the sidewalk for the conga dance in November 1995, a new era of fun on Hennepin was born.

Then, in 1999, came the next crazy idea - moving the 2,900-ton Shubert Theater to 5th and Hennepin from Block E, where the developers claimed it was standing in the way of progress. Cleaned and lit, the beautiful neoclassical facade is still only a pretty face, but if the intimate auditorium is renovated and reused, it will be a sterling anchor to the theater district's north end.

The drab Mann Theater at 710 Hennepin seemed the least likely of the downtown venues to be revived. Lacking a theatrical facade and stripped of its interior ornament, the 1,000-seat auditorium was an architectural nonentity. But Fred Krohn and Tom Hoch of the Historic Theatre Group, which manages the State and the Orpheum, reenvisioned the Mann as the Pantages, its original identity, and persuaded the city to renovate the theater and the derelict two-story Stimson Building, which wraps around it.

Planned as a "plain vanilla job," the renovation grew in scope and cost as original ornament was discovered and re-created. The elegantly painted neoclassical interior is the most beautiful of the city's three historic auditoriums and has helped create a theatrical critical mass. Its marquee and blade sign draw the eye - and activity - farther north.

The Stimson building has sat unsold for two years, but project manager George Kissinger said the city now has three offers. He'll recommend one to the City Council within 90 days.

And of course, Block E's opening in 2002 filled a hole that had sapped Hennepin's energy for 15 years. It's great to see people on the long-underused block, and the brightly lit skyway across Hennepin adds color. But its plastic-covered marquee is an embarrassment. Crown Theatres refused to post the movies it's showing. The City Council required the developer to build the marquee and use it anyway. The plastic banner ain't much.

Block E's designers followed the new Hennepin Avenue guidelines when they installed black steel tree grates and benches before the rest of the street was under construction. Strangely enough, the benches on the Hennepin sidewalk disappeared this past fall. Block E general manager Sue Bonin said they were removed to facilitate fall clean-up and snow removal but would not confirm that they will be put back in the spring.

The next block that awaits the spark of life contains the Skyway Theater, where the gray concrete facade remains a reminder of Hennepin's worst days. Hotel developer Jim Graves said he wants to expand his partial ownership of the Skyway to include other property on the block. His ideal plan: a 40- to 50-story glass-walled condo tower.

Clearly, Hennepin Avenue's future looks brighter than its immediate past. The avenue won't ever boast the 20-some theaters that once made it pulsate, but life is starting to course through its veins. The lights and, sometimes the beat, are back.

Hennepin Theater District

City money as well as private investment has spurred the revival of Hennepin Avenues Theater District. From the 1989 purchase of the State Theatre to the 2002 restoration of the Pantages, Minneapolis has spent close to \$30 million on improving three of the streets historic theaters and another \$4.25 million to move the Shubert Theater from Block E. City money also subsidized the development of LaSalle Plaza, between 8th and 9th Streets, and Block E.

#### State Theatre

Built: 1921

Renovated: 1991, for \$8.8 million

#### Orpheum Theatre

Built: 1921

Renovated: 1993, for \$9.5 million

#### Hey City Theater

Former Hirshfields Building purchased by city for \$500,000 and leased to Hey City Theater.

Renovated: 1995, for about \$1 million.

#### Pantages Theatre

Built: 1916

Renovated: 2002, for \$10.8 million

#### Shubert Theater

Built: 1910

Moved: 1999.

Renovation: Not yet underway. Cost estimated at \$34 million. \$12 million raised. Will seek \$10 million from 2004 State Legislature.