

Adapt & Thrive:

Arts Facilities after COVID-19



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COVID-19 is a life altering event on a worldwide scale. It may continue for quite a while and radically change the world. The tremendous loss of life, impact on our health, the disruption of our daily existence, the economy, and our social lives is overwhelming for us all. The stay-at-home orders and social distancing guidelines are clearly necessary right now, although the impact is self-evident. It is important to bear in mind though that as disrupted as our lives are right now, it is temporary. While today looks bleak, like 9/11; like the World Wars; like pandemics of past eras - this too shall pass.

Much has already been written about how design will change in the wake of COVID, and particularly about gathering spaces like theatres and live music venues. After 9/11 people predicted the death of the skyscraper and the end of air travel. Now we are reading about the end of elevators and crowded bars and restaurants, as well as the end of live performance and close social gathering. Let us be optimists. Rather than resign ourselves to a life where our entertainment is solely enjoyed through a screen, we need the faith that this is only one moment in time. Like so many historic moments before it, the COVID-19 pandemic will end, and life will resume.

A significant change to the design of public buildings after 9/11 was to accommodate the additional security at airports and other large-scale gathering places. No buildings had to be torn down and rebuilt to accommodate this though. Our buildings, like the people that run them, adapted to the new normal. Skyscraper construction has had a boom like no other time in history, including in New York City. Air travel overall returned to its previous levels within 3 years of 9/11 and has continued to grow.

The period after the Spanish flu of 1918 saw one of the largest theatre-building booms in history, and they didn't go out of their way to prevent human to human contact. Between 1918 and 1928, the number of Broadway



Allentown Civic Theatre, built in 1928. Photo credit: Aislinn Weidele for Mills + Schnoering Architects

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theatres increased from 48 theatres to 76. In fact, these buildings boast some of the tightest lobbies and auditoria per person of any through history.

Do we need to completely rethink the layouts of auditoria based on permanent social distancing? The saying "You don't design the church for Easter Sunday" applies here. Our actions should reflect what occurs in normal circumstances, not the most unusual events. While we will need to make short-term accommodations for social distancing, we should not design auditoria and other gathering places for a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. Performing arts buildings are designed to last between 50 and 100 years, so to change the way we design them over any individual event is shortsighted.

Nonetheless, as events dictate, we need to adapt our facilities to accommodate a variety of challenges. Similarly, there are less dramatic, yet effective ways to improve arts and entertainment venues while maintaining the intimacy and closeness that makes them special. It is important to provide a more sanitary experience for the patrons, staff, and performers alike. Some examples include touchless bathroom fixtures and doors, hand sanitizer stations at entries, and the use of more anti-microbial coatings and surfaces in heavily touched areas. These coatings may be employed on seat arms for example. While seats have been getting wider over the last few years, by and large we still use shared arms in rows of seats. In the future, perhaps each chair should have

two arms of its own. While this would limit touch-contact between strangers, it would also improve the comfort of our venues, regardless of health and safety issues.

Many changes will be operational, and dependent on the current state of health locally. As Patrick Corcoran, the Vice President of the National Association of Theatre Owners suggested in Fortune on April 13, 2020, "when we first come back, we may need infrared fever monitors, and if you register high you may be sent home." Pro-active practices like these, albeit a minor inconvenience to the theatre-goer will improve safety, similar to security-wandering and bag checks.

The most important thing going forward for arts centers is to have a comprehensive contingency plan. There has been a lot of discussion in the industry about the liability exposure of an outbreak of COVID-19 that is traced back to a venue. I think the best parallel is to a mass shooting. These have become disturbingly commonplace in America, but we haven't stopped gathering. Nor did we start designing arts centers as armed bunkers. Instead it became another factor in the design conversation, and we employ common-sense adjustments on a case-by-case basis. We limit entries and exits, provide space for security stations, and often consult with local law enforcement during the design process. Most arts centers have a security plan that includes what to do in the event of an active shooter. If the worst takes place, they can implement that plan and, in the

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An exhibition at the Museum of History and Industry recalls when theaters in the city were ordered closed during the 1918 flu epidemic. Credit: Museum of History and Industry, Seattle

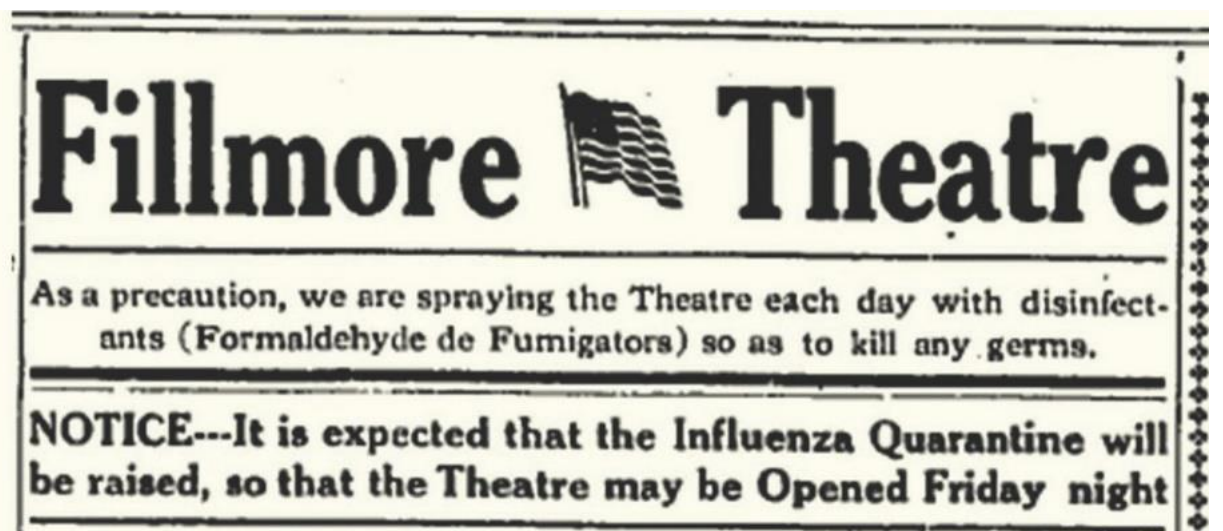
aftermath, demonstrate to the courts and the public how they had prepared and how they reacted. The same sort of preparation is needed for contagion prevention. When there is an uptick in local cases, venues should implement their Illness Response Plan and follow it. The plan might include additional hand washing and masking for staff, temporary reduction in the number of seats sold, deployment of hand sanitizer stations for the public, removal of self-serve food options, etc. If an outbreak is identified as originating in a venue, the venue would be expected to demonstrate the efforts taken to minimize future risk.

We are social creatures. We long for shared connection. The experience of gathering for a performance is a key to our humanity, and society thrives on shared experiences. It is unreasonable to expect that we are going to forego it. Theatre and music events are only two examples of gathering – festivals, sporting events, bars, even house parties are experiences that are necessary to the human condition. Beyond the impact it would have on the social experience, it would be impractical to mandate social

distancing in the long term. Schools are not going to be able to maintain spacing in their already overcrowded buildings. Public transit isn’t going to be able to either; airlines are not going to give you a 6-foot radius around your seat, and even if they did, how likely is it that distancing could be enforced as people deplane?

It is likely that we will have additional outbreaks of COVID or even new illnesses in the coming years. It would be crippling to

the arts and events industry for it to shut down during every one of these periods. Therefore, our buildings must adapt so that when an outbreak occurs, social distancing can be observed, temperatures can be checked at the doors, and disinfecting and cleaning can be quickly completed. The physical precautions will be easily administered, but we cannot abandon our basic need to gather in groups for collective experiences over a rare and brief moment in history. The show must go on!



The Fillmore Theatre, which was located east of the present Aurora Theatre, promised to regularly disinfect the building after the Spanish flu quarantine that closed down the theater and other businesses for nearly a month. This advertisement appeared in the Advertiser in November 1918. Credit: The archives of the Aurora Town Historian’s Office.



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