



# A THEATER BY ANY OTHER NAME

BUILT IN 1919, THE OLD REGENT THEATER ROSE AND FELL WITH THE FORTUNES OF THE PITTSBURGH NEIGHBORHOOD AROUND IT. NOW, ITS LATEST REVIVAL AS THE NAMESAKE OF TWO WORLD-FAMOUS CITY SONS IS USING THE SAME POWER OF ART TO REVIVE A COMMUNITY.





The Ebenezer Mime Group performs at the Kelly-Strayhorn. The theater in Pittsburgh's East Liberty section is staging a revival that parallels several struggling neighborhoods.





*Regent Theater opens as a silent movie house in 1915. In 1917, it is remodeled to accommodate live shows, joining six other theaters in the bustling neighborhood.*

*East Liberty has become one of the hottest, high-end real estate markets in Pittsburgh. Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, George Westinghouse and Henry Heinz all live on its fringes. To accommodate mogul wannabes, there are 23 real estate offices in the neighborhood.*

*By Christine H. O'Toole  
Photography by Joshua Franzos*

**B**y day, East Liberty resident Lynette Drawn-Williamson sees the dark side of childhood as deputy director of Shuman Juvenile Detention Center. But on many weeknights, she celebrates the best parts of it, playfully mimicking her son and daughter in a family acting class at the Kelly-Strayhorn Community Performing Arts Center.

Being onstage, she says, “makes you understand the bigger picture. We want our kids to be comfortable in any environment they’re in. The more comfortable we are, the more we break down barriers and help resolve conflicts.” At the Kelly-Strayhorn, she’s found a generous spirit.

The theater’s name conjures the neighborhood’s gifts to the arts: dancer Gene Kelly and composer Billy Strayhorn. The 14-year struggle to revive it reflects the belief that the arts can return the neighborhood’s gifts — that the difficult rebirth of an old silent movie house can be a catalyst in a neighborhood stigmatized by violence, poverty and failed renewal schemes.

There were very few national models for the theater’s mission. Nor was there always local consensus on its role. What did exist was determination: to confront disparate viewpoints on community development and cultural expression, and to sustain a theater that synthesized them.

“The Kelly-Strayhorn [formerly the Regent] symbolized why I was doing work in that area,” says community activist Karen LaFrance, the former executive director of East Liberty Development, Inc., who enlisted the support of The Heinz Endowments for initial funding in the early 1990s. “Where the races came together were shopping districts and the arts, and we had both: a multiracial, multicultural place.”

The community development corporation’s vision for the former silent movie house took years to achieve. Dark since the mid-1970s, the Regent had opened briefly as a live venue in 1995. But financial and management problems, coinciding with community violence, beset the theater almost immediately.

At the project’s nadir in 1996, the theater’s padlocked doors reinforced a perception of East Liberty as a community with a broken heart. Too many civic projects had failed to deliver. Too many of its youngsters had fallen, victims of gang violence — one in a drive-by shooting steps away from the theater. The neighborhood’s 30-year spiral of decline seemed irreversible.

But on the evening of its rededication this spring, the theater’s neon marquee glowed with excitement. The patrons who streamed into a bright, refurbished Kelly-Strayhorn were celebrating a resurrection.

“There are lots of life and death metaphors here, and, considering that, it’s pretty amazing that the funders came back,” says Stephanie Flom, a local resident who has worked on the theater’s redevelopment since the late 1980s.

“It was a really difficult decision, because we knew that the project was not just about a theater,” says Mary Navarro, Arts & Culture Program officer for the Endowments, which has helped lead the theater past its near-death experiences. “It was about community revitalization, it was about safety, it was about race, it was about deteriorating neighborhoods. We felt it was important to go forward. The positives are the amount of community support — and the size of the theater is perfect.”

The debut of the 350-seat theater showcased a renovation that included professional light and sound equipment and a revamped, dance-friendly stage. Those improvements make the Kelly-Strayhorn a dream venue for the city’s smaller arts groups, which were early allies of the community activists who sought to reopen the theater.

“A building does capture people’s imaginations,” Flom says. There was always strong local interest in seeing the old movie theater come back to life, she notes. “That’s what happens to people when they experience art — in this case, a movie. Art becomes part of community memories. Everyone can tell you what movies they saw there.”

*Playing at the Regent on May 17, 1935: Rumba, featuring Carole Lombard and George Raft, along with Case of the Curious Bride.*

*May 12, 1935 — New East Liberty Presbyterian Church dedicated on the South Highland Avenue site of 1819 church destroyed by fire.*



“Theaters are difficult, because they cost a lot of money and they don’t make any money,” says Navarro. “We had looked at enough models in other cities to understand why this was different. The only real analogy is Pittsburgh’s Cultural District,” a two-decade effort supported by the Endowments to develop a downtown neighborhood for professional arts programming. “To use the arts as one mechanism for community revitalization is something we learned in the Cultural District. The other thing we learned is that you need to stick with these things over a long period of time.”

### Development and Redevelopment

In the 1950s, East Liberty was the third-largest business district in Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh’s prosperous second downtown, with jewelers, clothiers and seven thriving theaters surrounding the Gothic spires of East Liberty Presbyterian Church. Now both poorer and older than surrounding city enclaves, the neighborhood has been the focus of ambitious development plans.

A massive concrete-and-parking-lot redevelopment effort,

designed to lure 1960s suburbanites back to shop in the district, acted as a slow poison. By replacing a bustling, walker-friendly street grid with multilane ring roads and pedestrian malls, this well-meaning urban renewal erected a barrier between East Liberty and the rest of the city, discouraging commercial growth. New public housing high-rises looming over the mall supplanted neighborhood home ownership. Even street names disappeared. It was as if a concrete moat had been dug to keep the riffraff away from the manicured manor homes in the nearby upscale neighborhoods of Shadyside and Squirrel Hill.

By the late 1970s, streets were deserted; shops were shuttered. It was clear that the redevelopment had been a disaster.

“The Penn-Highland building was our ‘Main and Main’ corner, in real estate terms,” Flom recalls. “And when they put cinder block over the windows, when it was leased to the welfare agency, it looked like an armed fortress. It said, ‘We don’t care about the community. It can look like a slum.’”

“We knew, before the concrete on some of those projects was dry, that there was a negative image,” recalls Karen



*1955 Regent Theatre closes — reopens in 1959 under the banner of Associated Theaters.*



*East Liberty becomes the state's third-largest business district — after the downtowns of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia — with seven theaters, a roller-skating arena and a shopping district that includes boutiques and a department store.*



Scenes from a theater's grand re-opening, from left: the results of a buy-a-brick campaign, grass-roots fundraising key to foundation support; East Liberty resident Vanessa Minecone models a balloon sculpture; the venerable East Liberty Presbyterian Church, crucial to the Kelly-Strayhorn's long-term success, rises protectively across the street from the theater entryway. Says one neighborhood resident of now-retired Pastor Bob Chestnut: "He helped us see the changing community around us not as a detriment, but as an opportunity."

LaFrance, who worked at East Liberty Development from 1987 to 1995. In 1987, its subsidiary bought the city block surrounding the theater and set about undoing the redevelopment.

The organization's revitalization strategy was built on an image survey conducted in 1984, which identified crime, lack of access to the business district and safety fears as key problem issues. But the survey also found that the positive historical image of East Liberty as an entertainment center persisted — and gave community organizers hope for the resurrection of the theater.

With a 1989 fundraiser called "The Regent Returns," local performers launched a campaign to raise funds for a theater in serious disrepair. A grass-roots "Buy a Brick" effort netted an astonishing \$100,000 in individual contributions over the next few years.

But as the fundraising effort continued, the community's attention was diverted by a surge in gang activity, semiautomatic weapons and drug dealing on its streets that crested in the early nineties.

"In 1993–94, most of the city's shootings were in the East

End," recalls Bill Joyce, who headed police narcotics investigations at that time. "There were 83 homicides in 1993, and probably half were attributed to gang activity." (It was a high-water mark for city violence; the city's annual rate is closer to 38, much lower than cities of comparable size.) "They were basically turf battles, with kids in their early teens to early twenties. There were neighbors, or cousins, who were members of different gangs. It tore families apart."

While citywide numbers show that gang violence took more of a toll elsewhere, increased drug dealing and other crimes in East Liberty's business district reinforced the public sense of the neighborhood as a danger zone. Crime reports on the evening news — many broadcast from the nearby police Investigations Unit with the close, "reporting live from East Liberty" — didn't help.

Despite its travails, the neighborhood continued to respond to the fundraiser.

"These little envelopes just kept coming back," says Flom. "They ranged from \$2.50 offered by a student who sent a refund from some coupon, to a donation sent in by a

1960s



*Regent Theater reopens in 1965 after a three-month shutdown for renovations. This was the first major rehabilitation project in East Liberty's redevelopment program. In Harm's Way was the first feature at the new Regent, starring Kirk Douglas and John Wayne.*

*East Liberty becomes the victim of federal urban renewal with the construction of 1,400 public housing units. The project includes a massive high-rise apartment tower straddling the eastern gateway to the neighborhood.*

1970s

*Oct. 31, 1979 — Regent Theater closes after struggling for more than a decade with diminishing profits.*

*Pittsburgh Police reports describe gangs of teenagers who have been mugging patrons in local theaters, including the Regent. In another police report, city police close down the Regent after groups they described as "wolf pack gangs" begin fighting in the theater.*



gentleman in his nineties who remembered his days at Peabody High," Flom remembers. "We went back to the funders and showed them a list of hundreds of people who'd sent money."

This time, previously deferred grants to complete the Regent renovations finally went through. But following expensive repairs, first-year bookings in 1995 were sporadic. "We started hearing rumors that people called to use the theater and were turned down," recalls Flom. The neighborhood's take on the Regent was that it was indeed a beautiful stage, but not for regular folk who wanted to see East Liberty productions or even an occasional movie. Increasingly, says Flom, the theater was viewed as a playground for interlopers from wealthier sections of the city.

Some activists, alienated from the theater programming and the community development corporation's agenda, began to campaign for changes. LaFrance resigned as director of East Liberty Development, and Regent board members began arguing among themselves over how to chart the theater's future. But by early 1996, the turf battling was moot. The dismal financial records showed that the Regent couldn't fend

for itself. When the theater's then-executive director approached Flom in 1996, the conversation was blunt. "The start-up money is all gone," the director told her. "I think I may have to lay myself off."

The theater's poor performance and the departure of the executive director led to a crisis of faith among community supporters. "The seminal question of how to do community revitalization," says Karen LaFrance, "is belief. The belief has to exist both within the community and outside the community."

But by 1996, the theater had few believers.

### Starting Again

"When it closed, I got the keys," recalls Maelene Meyers, who joined East Liberty Development as director that July. "I remember sitting there, trying to figure it out. What do we do next? The only thing I could do was go back to the funders and say, 'Okay, guys. What are we going to do? It's an asset. We have \$1 million invested.'"

The Endowments and other funders, McCune, Richard King Mellon, Pittsburgh and Hillman Foundations chief



1980s

*Community activists take on the Regent as a neighborhood revitalization project. East Liberty Development, Inc. eventually buys the Regent (1987) in an attempt to keep it alive and stem business district erosion.*

*Pittsburgh City Council holds hearings in 1986 on the continued deterioration of East Liberty's Penn Center Mall. The sessions are packed with business owners and residents angered over the economic disaster resulting from 1960s and 1970s redevelopment schemes that cut off traffic and pedestrian flow into the district.*

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East Liberty neighborhoods are learning to share the Kelly-Strayhorn stage with outside touring groups and a church music program that pay the bills. From left, the Sounds of Heritage gospel choir performs at the theater's opening night celebration; dancer Kristi Ward of the Rising Sphinx Artistic Collective makes the most of her group's time in the limelight; and Kelly-Strayhorn Board Member Greg Mims tries to coax a group of students into an impromptu performance while leading a tour on the opening weekend's community day.

among them, helped retire debts from cost overruns on the theater renovations. Pittsburgh Partnership for Neighborhood Development, also funded in part by the Endowments, agreed to sponsor an expert, third-party analysis of the theater's situation.

The 1998 report by SR Associates recommended improvements to increase the theater's appeal to arts renters: reducing seating, improving the stage floor, and adding dressing rooms and first-class technical equipment. It also reprised a dilemma faced by community theaters nationwide. While many smaller groups were eager to rent the venue occasionally, no one entity could guarantee enough usage to pay the bills. The theater needed an anchor tenant with strong community ties. Through a heavenly bit of coincidence, that perfect tenant faced the theater across Penn Avenue.

During the 1990s, East Liberty Presbyterian Church had begun to embody more than the neighborhood's most magnificent structure. Under the charismatic leadership of its pastor, Bob Chestnut, it also brought needed activism and ecumenism. "He helped us see the changing community around us not as a detriment, but as an opportunity," said one

appreciative church member. With a massive endowment and a growing congregation, the church has run effective social service and outreach programs for decades. Its Hope Academy of Music and the Arts, an outgrowth of an ambitious music ministry, provides low- or no-cost tutoring and performance opportunities for 100 children in music and dance.

"Lots of people were interested and could use it two weeks a year. But the foundations were looking for [a regular user]. That's how our idea of the academy as the anchor tenant originated," says church music director Richard Szeremany. Because the program uses the building mainly on weekdays, the arrangement left prime weekend evenings free for other renters.

When the consultant's report identified the Academy as the most suitable anchor tenant, the church's bona fides with East Liberty Development and the community recommended it as a worthy partner. The agreement provided a small but critical base for the theater's fiscal health and neighborhood profile. Funding of \$1.3 million, led by the Endowments, allowed theater improvements to proceed in 2000.





1990s

*Despite renovation grants from funders, the Regent is imperiled for lack of an anchor tenant. East Liberty Presbyterian Church comes to the rescue.*

*East Liberty becomes the staging area for gang-related violence. By 1993, most of the city's shootings are in the area. In the late 1990s, public housing high-rises come down and mixed-income town house communities spring up. Construction crews begin dismantling the "Concrete Moat," the business district's one-way traffic circle.*

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While East Liberty residents have reconnected with their neighborhood theater, the outside world is reconnecting with the community. Struggling for years, East Liberty now has been tagged as one of the hot development areas of the city. Two heavyweight retailers, Home Depot and Whole Foods, have placed their stores there and managers remark about the community's enthusiasm. That's also true for performances at the Kelly-Strayhorn. From left, student Wesley Gadsen performs a piano solo for a supportive audience; Soulful Spirits works up the crowd; and storyteller Leonora Kivuva, a local favorite, captures the imaginations of adults and children.



"By this second round, we had learned some things," says the Endowments' Navarro. Negotiations overseen by the funders spelled out the contractual responsibilities of the theater board and anchor tenant, and established the ratio of rentals by arts and community groups. Those engraved donor paving bricks — a dramatic symbol of the theater's solid community support from the first fundraising effort — were finally laid on the front walk. The Kelly and Strayhorn families enthusiastically endorsed the renaming of the theater for the two artists, and the local Chamber of Commerce mounted a lobby "Wall of Fame" to honor a century of East Liberty-connected artists and celebrities.

The theater's baptism as the Kelly-Strayhorn came in April 2002 as the curtain was raised on an ambitious but carefully planned season. Groups ranging from Dance Alloy to Shona Sharif African Dance and Drum Ensemble to the Bach Choir had booked the theater every weekend through mid-July, and bookings through the end of the year are strong. Hope Academy performances lure families to applaud young performers. Says co-director Linda Addlesburger, "Every time

we have a performance, we expect 50 people—and 150 people attend." The schedule acknowledges community ownership but it also shrewdly makes room for professional productions.

Drawn-Williamson, the Shuman Detention Center official, was among the vanguard of East Liberty residents who had their faith renewed in the theater and were cheering performers from the front rows. Her belief in the power of art to change lives deepened, she said, when she got her chance to perform in the Academy's family acting class. As a result of her experience with the arts program, she has asked Academy teachers to offer summer courses in African drumming, storytelling and dance to her charges at the county detention center. "Families come in different forms. Any positive role model in a child's life can do something for them," she says.

Audiences entering the theater are finding a more welcoming neighborhood, as well.

By the late 1990s, East Liberty Development had achieved hard-fought gains toward its goals. Separated from the community theater board, it refocused its priorities on housing

By 2000

*East Liberty Presbyterian Church supporters and East Liberty activists band together to raise \$1.3 million to cover renovations and start-up costs for the Regent. Contributors include foundations, the city, corporations and individuals.*



*East Liberty becomes a hotbed of arts-related growth through the development of an arts district on Penn Avenue that includes subsidized lofi housing for artists, art galleries, dance studios and a glass center. In February, The Home Depot opens on the site of the long-abandoned Sears store, a coup for the neighborhood.*

2002

*Marquee lights go on for the opening celebration of the Kelly-Strayhorn Community Performing Arts Center.*



*Private developers begin construction of a high-end grocery and prepared foods store. Also, two historic office buildings are saved from demolition and undergo renovation.*



and commercial development. Bustling two-way traffic and on-street parking are now replacing the pedestrian moat; public housing high-rises have been replaced with several blocks of attractive new town houses. Local gang leaders have been prosecuted, and an assurance of safety has returned to the neighborhood.

Meanwhile, East Liberty has been tagged as one of the hot development areas of the city. Two major new retailers, The Home Depot and Whole Foods, have been lured to within several blocks of the theater. A commercial bakery, employing hundreds, has been saved and expanded. An artists' cooperative, a dance troupe and a cooperative glass studio are renovating vacant industrial buildings.

But the challenge of making the Kelly-Strayhorn as self-sustaining as possible remains. The expectations of its current board are tempered by rough experience. The young theater must grow into a new role as a cultural anchor of the community. Part of the solution for accomplishing that, says Navarro, may be to find more balance between neighborhood uses and professional productions, which generate income and audiences.

The board's focus is now to boost use and attendance. "We're doing a good job of controlling costs," says board chair Fritz Okie, a retired banker, "but the building itself is an uncertainty. We'll need about \$80,000 in basic repairs and services in the next couple years," out of a current operating budget of just under \$200,000.

When lights flood the stage and the applause begins, says Navarro, the Kelly-Strayhorn dream inspires its audience. "It really does become a centerpiece of the community — a place where people can be a part of something happening that's larger than their own circle of family and friends, a place to go and feel safe and see a relaxing, beautiful performance. We need a lot more of those kinds of nights." *b*

TIMELINE PHOTO CREDITS

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