



As president and CEO of the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust since February 2023, Kendra Whitlock Ingram is applying her energy and enthusiasm to enhancing arts venues such as the Benedum Center for the Performing Arts, shown here, and reinvigorating the city's Cultural District.

THE LULLABY FACTOR

For decades, the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust has played a major role in stimulating and maintaining vitality in the city's Downtown. Today, in this post-pandemic era, the Trust and its new leadership are trying to do their part to revitalize Downtown while upgrading Trust-owned venues.
By Elwin Green

Kendra Whitlock Ingram's face lights up when she talks about the Lullaby Project, an arts project that helps families celebrate their newborns.

"We hire local musicians who can become flexible in various genres of music," she said. "Then we identify families through some of our community partners. Sometimes it's mom and dad, sometimes it's auntie, sometimes it's grandmama, sometimes it's a combination of folks."

“They work with families to learn about the family—what’s unique about their family, what they want to have their baby remember—then work with them to develop the lyrics and the music.

“Then, once the song is created, the musicians have the songs professionally recorded so that the family will have them as a keepsake.

“How we connect it back to the District is that we invite all those families, and the musicians, the community partners and the general public, to a concert where we perform all the lullabies—where the musicians that have written the lullabies perform them in a special concert.”

The “District” in this narrative is the Cultural District, 14 connected blocks in Downtown Pittsburgh that encompass a cluster of performing arts and gallery spaces, including the Benedum Center for the Performing Arts, the Byham Theater and the O’Reilly Theater.

The “we” is the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, the \$70 million nonprofit that owns the above-named theaters, along with more than a dozen other properties in the District. That makes the Trust the landlord, in a sense, for the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, the Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera, the Pittsburgh Public Theater and other arts organizations. The Trust also is an important player—under Ms. Ingram’s direction—in efforts to pump new life into the city’s Downtown since the COVID pandemic while upgrading its venues to burnish its own future.

“District activation is a big part of our history, and I would even say of our present and our future,” said Ms. Ingram.

She should know—in February 2023, she became the Trust’s third president and CEO, following inaugural officeholder Carol Brown, who led the organization from 1986 to 2001, and Kevin McMahon, whose tenure began in 2001.

She brings a wealth of experience, having last served as president and CEO of the Marcus Performing Arts Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and with earlier executive stints at the Newman Center for the Performing Arts at the University of Denver and Omaha Performing Arts, a nonprofit that manages three live-performance venues in Nebraska’s largest city.

Ms. Ingram’s current post in Pittsburgh is not her first. The Scranton native earned her bachelor’s degree in arts education from Duquesne University, graduating in 1997. There, her eagerness to volunteer in off-campus activities (“I was a hand raiser”) led to an internship at the Pittsburgh Opera. That exposure to the behind-the-scenes world of theater instilled an interest in arts management and a fondness for the Cultural District.

But she “never in a million years” thought she would return to work in the District, much less to head up the Trust.

The size of the Trust’s portfolio, the depth of its partnership roster and its 40-year history of success in helping to transform Downtown Pittsburgh mean that “this is a destination job in my industry” of arts management, she said.

Ms. Ingram’s arrival came on the heels of a high mark in her predecessor’s tenure: a three-year capital campaign, ending in December 2022, that raised \$25 million more than its \$150 million goal.

Raising a large amount of money for an ambitious program of capital improvements is one thing; deploying those funds well is quite another, requiring a separate set of skills.

According to Christopher Hahn, general director of the Pittsburgh Opera, Ms. Ingram has turned out to be the right person at the right time.

“Kendra, when she came in, was able to start afresh with a war chest already dedicated to improvement,” he said.

“I think what she has been excellent at is ensuring that those funds are spent with great care and thought, to make sure that the expenditures, when they start happening, are where they need to be, with prioritization.”

In her first year, Ms. Ingram oversaw the completion or near-completion of work on three Cultural Trust properties: 937 Liberty Avenue, the Greer Cabaret Theater and the Benedum Center for the Performing Arts.

The renovation of 937 Liberty Avenue is transforming it into a multispace, with a 100-seat theater on the first floor, a second-floor gallery and a 50-seat flex space on the third floor.

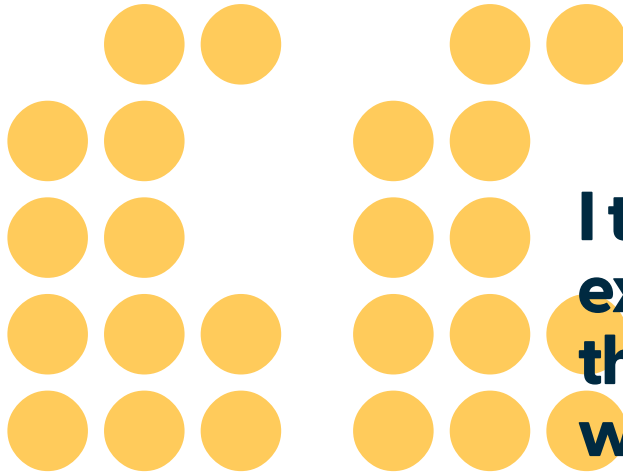
Around the corner and down the street, the Greer Cabaret Theater, a 198-seat dinner theater venue that is part of the Theater Square complex on Penn Avenue, underwent an extensive redesign that included expanding the Backstage Bar and combining the lobbies for the box office and the restaurant into a single open space.



The District

Theater Square, a complex in Pittsburgh's Cultural District that houses the O'Reilly and Greer Cabaret theaters, Katz Plaza and a parking garage, is bustling on evenings when productions take place at multiple Downtown venues.

The Trust's real estate portfolio contains a total of 17 properties that encompass more than a million square feet, including outdoor spaces.



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The Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera, which mounts its mainstage productions at the 1,311-seat Byham Theater, has used the Greer since 2004 for its CLO Cabaret series of more intimately staged shows.

“We’ve definitely benefited from the improvements,” said CLO executive producer Mark Fleischer, noting that the new layout provides patrons with a more seamless experience.

“You can park in the parking garage, take the elevator down, then after the show go back into the bar and get drinks or desserts.

“You never have to leave the building. It’s truly a one-stop shopping and entertainment experience.”

At the Benedum Center, which seats 2,870, the biggest and most obvious change has been the upgrading of both the front and the side marquees with digital lighting.

The marquees were last improved as part of a renovation of the Benedum in the 1980s. That was also when much of the interior lighting equipment for the theater was installed, Mr. Hahn said.

“Lighting equipment, like much of tech, advances year to year with astonishing speed,” he said — which means that when Ms. Ingram arrived, the Benedum’s lighting equipment was, in a word, ancient.

Now, lighting upgrades are in progress on a multi-year schedule.

Looking forward, one of the primary beneficiaries of the campaign will be the 650-seat O’Reilly Theater, home to the Pittsburgh Public Theater.

Managing Director Shaunda McDill said that over the next three years, the O’Reilly will receive \$4 million in upgrades to its sound and lighting systems.

After focusing on capital improvements in her first year, Ms. Ingram wants to shift the Trust’s gaze.

“The next thing that we’re looking at is how we can help with the revitalization of Downtown — almost like we’ve come back to our original mission,” she said.

“How do we play a role in revitalization when the center of Downtown is maybe not the center of business, but the center of leisure or recreation?”

Part of the answer is “better placemaking in some of our outdoor spaces.” That means making improvements to the Agnes R. Katz Plaza at Penn Avenue and Seventh Street (home of the granite “eyeball benches” by sculptor Louise Bourgeois),



Joshua Franzos

and the upper level of Allegheny Riverfront Park, a narrow strip of parkland that lies between Fort Duquesne Boulevard and the Allegheny River.

The restoration of the park is one of the targets of The Heinz Endowments’ \$20 million gift to the capital campaign. That work is being done in partnership with Riverlife, a nonprofit steward of and advocate for riverfront property in Pittsburgh.

The hope behind those improvements is “to encourage people to spend more time [Downtown] that’s unstructured,” rather than being tied to attending a particular event, Ms. Ingram said.

Another part of the answer is perhaps counterintuitive, namely, “going out of the District to meet people where they are.”





Pittsburgh's Cultural District in the city's Downtown incorporates lively performance venues, such as the Greer Cabaret Theater, left, where trumpeter and composer Sean Jones and bassist Dwayne Dolphin performed during the theater's Jazz Club in April. The District also includes landscaped areas, such as Allegheny Riverfront Park, where Ryan Kiger and Christina Johnson, both of Oakmont, Pennsylvania, enjoy an evening stroll and take a selfie with Ms. Johnson's children Nathan, 10, and Cara, 15. The strip of green space overlooks the Allegheny River.



SPACES AND PLACES



"A Sudden Gust of Wind" is a public art installation created by Lenka Clayton and Phillip Andrew Lewis that consists of 200 multicolored kite sculptures installed within the branches of more than 80 trees throughout the Cultural District.

Ms. Ingram foresees the Trust bringing nationally and internationally touring artists, not just into Downtown but into other Pittsburgh neighborhoods, to do masterclasses, workshops and community talks “to build more of a relationship that’s beyond the walls of the theaters.”

The Trust also has moved beyond property management into arts management. It developed a program of shared services whereby it offers support to non-tenant arts organizations.

The August Wilson African American Cultural Center is one of those organizations. The Center taps into the Trust’s account with Tessitura Network, an arts and cultural tech support service, to handle its ticketing needs and to help with fundraising. The August Wilson Center also receives marketing services from the Trust, such as the printing of program books, on a shared-cost basis.

But the organization’s collaboration with the Trust goes further.

“We’re always looking for ways to work together,” said Janis Burley, the Center’s president and CEO.

One of those ways is by allowing Trust organizations such as the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre or the Pittsburgh Opera to use the Center for some of their programming, something that Ms. Burley said happens two or three times a year.

The flip side of that is the Center moving some of its programming into one of the Trust theaters, such as jazz pianist Herbie Hancock’s appearance at the Byham.

Other arts organizations that make use of the Trust’s shared services include Pittsburgh CLO, Pittsburgh Public Theater and Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra.

In addition to her work at the Cultural Trust, Ms. Ingram has what she calls “a side hustle” that could become significant for Pittsburgh’s arts and culture community—a fellowship program, Executive Leadership in the Performing Arts. She and Josephine Ramirez, executive vice president at The Music Center in Los Angeles, worked collaboratively with National Arts Strategies and AMS Planning & Research, two organizations that support arts and culture in communities, to develop and launch the program, designed to bring more people of color into top leadership positions in arts organizations (Ms. Ingram identifies as “biracial Black”).

“We often see Black and brown folks in education, community engagement and HR roles at the executive level” in the arts, she said. “But we don’t often see Black and brown people in CEO, CFO, COO positions.”

She said that when she speaks with potential candidates, they often express preferences that correspond to lower-level positions: “I want to be close to the art” or “I want to be more grassroots.”

“But where do you think the actual power is?” she said. “Who do you think is actually controlling your budget?”

“This is the job where you can actually make change.”

The Cultural Trust will be hosting a fellow in the program’s next cohort.

Meanwhile, Ms. Ingram and her crew continue the work of managing the Cultural District, where the fall calendar will include the Pittsburgh Public Theater’s staging of “Dial ‘M’ for Murder,” an extended run of “Hamilton” at the Benedum Center, and a one-night live edition at the Byham Theater of the popular comedy podcast Girls Gotta Eat as part of their No Crumbs Tour. And that’s just in September.

For Ms. Ingram, everything is about maintaining, and even growing, that level of activity, which may have been difficult to even imagine when the capital campaign was launched in the midst of the COVID pandemic.

“Our priority needs to be on what makes up the bulk of our business—and that is actually driving our business—and that’s what’s in the theaters.” **h**



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Kendra Whitlock Ingram
president and CEO, Pittsburgh Cultural Trust

Joshua Franzos



CREATING A CULTURAL DISTRICT

Pittsburgh Cultural Trust



The transformative impact of Pittsburgh's Cultural District can be seen in differences between a stretch of Liberty Avenue, Downtown, when it was part of the city's red-light district before the mid-1980s, and the area's current reincarnation as an arts and cultural destination for events such as gallery crawls.

The Heinz Endowments' connection to the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust precedes its existence: H. J. "Jack" Heinz II, then-CEO of Heinz Inc., was one of the Trust's founders in 1984.

His vision, shared with founding Cultural Trust president and CEO Carol Brown, was to use the arts as a catalyst for revitalizing a Downtown that had fallen far from its days when the dense concentration of corporate headquarters earned it the nickname "The Golden Triangle."

Bringing the vision to pass began with real estate.

"It was an intentional transformation that involved buying up properties that were considered nuisance properties," said Mac Howison, senior program officer for Creativity at the Endowments.

Perhaps the single property in the Trust's portfolio that best encapsulates the transformation that the organization spearheaded is the Harris Theater.

According to the Trust's website, the theater, originally the Art Cinema, was the first in Pittsburgh to show art films but surrendered to competition in the 1960s, when it began showing adult films. By the 1970s, the Art Cinema was one of a group of adult theaters and bookstores that made Liberty Avenue a swamp of pornography and illicit activities.

The Trust purchased the building housing the theater and renovated it, reopening it as the Harris Theater in November 1995. Now it operates as a repertory theater, with single-day or short-term showings of art, foreign and classic films, and offers memberships that allow patrons to receive discounted ticket prices.

The trajectory of the Harris reflects that of the Cultural District overall. Once the Trust acquired properties, "it became the operating principle to steward those resources and widely market them as regional assets, and also to handle the complexity of booking arts presentations," Mr. Howison said.

That stewardship role grew as the Trust acquired properties that were not nuisance properties but that fit into the overall vision of a thriving arts district, such as the Benedum and the Byham. **h**

—Elwin Green