

Sherman Theater

Architectural Imaging and Artist Outreach Services for the Redevelopment of Sherman Theater and Business Center



A Sherman Park & Milwaukee Landmark

History

The Sherman Theatre, located in the 4600 block of West Burleigh, was designed by noted architect Herbert W. Tullgren. He designed a large number of buildings in Milwaukee and other cities in southwestern Wisconsin, and many of these are now listed on the National Register of Historic Places for their architectural and historical significance.

Built in 1935, the Sherman Theatre is an excellent example of 1930s movie theatre construction. The building is of the “Art Moderne” style, a late version of Art Deco, which became the standard design style during the Great Depression. The Sherman is one of only a small handful of Milwaukee theaters from this time period that is still relatively intact.

The theater closed in 1977 after an arson fire damaged the curtain, screen, and several front row seats. Although initially scheduled to be closed only temporarily, the theater never reopened. The 1970s and 80s was a period of great economic and social change in Milwaukee, and the theater never showed another film. Instead, it was sold to Liberty Temple Church, which occupied the building for more than a decade.

In the mid-1980s, community leaders and area residents launched a promising campaign to revive the theater as either a movie house or performing arts venue. In 1989, Milwaukee Neighborhood Ventures, a neighborhood-based non profits entity, purchased the property and later invested more than half a million dollars into fixing up the retail storefronts. Unfortunately, unfavorable economic conditions kept the theater portion of the building closed and untouched.

In 2001, the whole complex was sold to a third party, and the theater has remained empty.

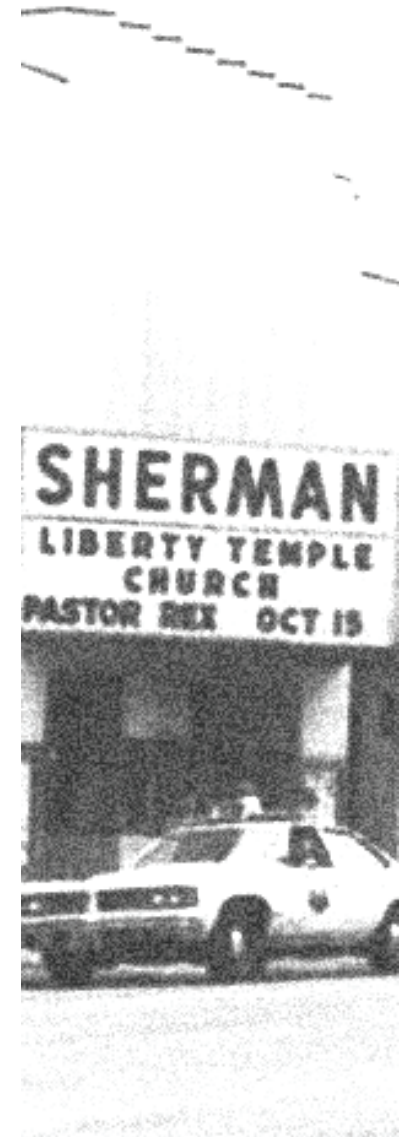
THE HISTORY

The Project

In 2009, the City of Milwaukee recognized the importance of the theater as a vital point of the business corridor and called for its redevelopment in its west-side comprehensive plan. In keeping with that plan, the BSCDC (Burleigh Street Community Development Corporation) renewed its efforts in 2012 to bring the theater back online as a center for the arts (visual, musical, and performing), with space for studios, galleries, and offices.

Many neighborhood stakeholders and segments of the greater Milwaukee Community are involved in this collective effort. The BSCDC has assembled a diverse 20-member stakeholder workgroup consisting of community leaders, funders, fund-development professionals, artists, consultants, architects, and non-profit leaders. Together, they are developing creative solutions to the project’s different challenges. The BSCDC plans to create a new entity, the Sherman Park Arts Council, to act as a “booking agent” for the theater venue.

Because of its size and location, the Sherman Theatre building has the potential to do great things for the Sherman Park Neighborhood and surrounding area. In its prime, the theater was a commercial anchor for the area, and it may serve that purpose once again. Indeed, the building’s revitalization could act as a major catalyst for future investment and development in the area. It could also make real the dreams of neighborhood residents, who have hoped the building might house a thriving theater once again. And it could become the home to both artists and artisans. It can do all of these things.



THE WALK THROUGH



Milwaukee Gets a New Theater

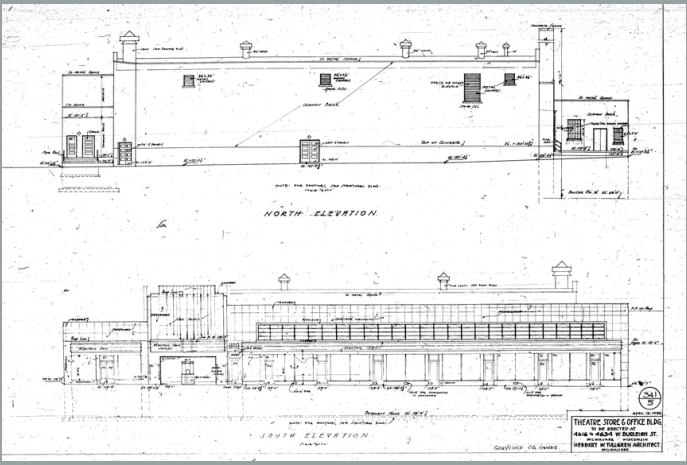
The Sherman Theatre was designed by noted Milwaukee architect Herbert W. Tullgren (1889-1944). Tullgren came to Milwaukee with his family as a young man when they moved to the city from Chicago in 1905. Soon thereafter, he was sent to Staunton Military Academy in Virginia where he graduated in 1908. He returned to Milwaukee and in 1910 entered into business with his father, a Swedish-born architect, under the company name Martin Tullgren & Sons.¹

Herbert Tullgren had a short but prolific career. He designed a large number of apartment buildings, businesses, schools, and stores in Milwaukee and in cities across southwestern Wisconsin. He was an architect for the Schroeder Hotel Company and designed the Shorecrest Hotel in Milwaukee as well as hotels in Fond du Lac, Green Bay, Madison, and Manitowoc. Many of Tullgren's buildings are now listed on the National Historic Register for their architectural and historical significance. ²


Construction on the Sherman Theatre complex began in mid-1935 on a large empty lot between neighborhoods that had been, as one early neighborhood resident recalled, “the scene of furious inter-neighborhood football games.” The building cost \$100,000, or about \$1.7 million in 2014 dollars, and was said to be one of the largest building projects in the city that year.³

The theater opened on Christmas Day 1935 under the management of Fox Wisconsin Corporation with the films She Married Her Boss, Diamond Jim, and the Popeye cartoon You Gotta Be a Football Hero. Admission for the whole day was a 25 cents, or about \$4.38 in 2014 dollars.⁴

1 John G. Gregory, History of Milwaukee Wisconsin, vol. 3, (Chicago: The S.J. Clark Publishing Company, 1931), 520-523.
2 “H.W. Tullgren, Architect, Dies,” The Milwaukee Journal, Feb. 23, 1944; Wisconsin Historical Society, Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory.
3 Jay Joslyn, “Once Townsend Marked Towns End of Milwaukee”, The Milwaukee Sentinel, Dec. 5, 1985; “Theater to cost \$100,00 to be Built on Northwest Side,” The Milwaukee Journal, April 21, 1935.
4 Advertisement, The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Dec. 25, 1935; Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator, Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor.

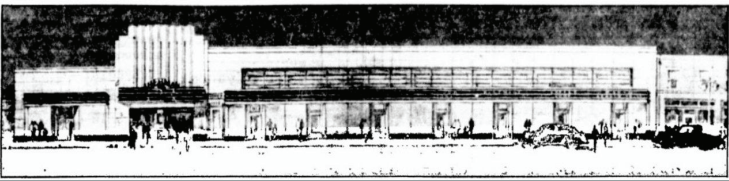


Original blueprints indicate the theater maintains most of its original character.



Herbert W. Tullgren, c.1931.

Theater to Cost \$100,000 to Be Built on Northwest Side



A sketch of the Sherman Theatre building as it appeared in The Milwaukee Journal, April 21, 1935.

Architecturally, the Sherman Theatre is an excellent example of 1930s movie theater construction. Built in the middle of the Great Depression, the building’s muted decor and clean lines stand in sharp contrast to other Milwaukee movie houses built only a few years prior. The 1920s had produced, as one observer wrote, the “cinema palace of crystal and gold”, however the bleak economic conditions of the 1930s favored the simpler, less ornate Streamline Moderne style, a late version of Art Deco, which became the standard for theater design during this time. The construction of the Sherman Theatre was also congruent with a broader trend that emergence of neighborhood movie houses.⁵

Though not as regal as other movie houses in the city, the theater still sought to dazzle moviegoers through a careful application of lighting. Neon tubing adorned portions of the exterior and interior of the theater, and Box office Magazine praised Tullgren’s “unusually ingenious application of indirect lighting” in the lobby and auditorium that came from more than 1,800 lighting receptacles tucked away in recessed coves in the multi-arched ceiling.⁶

The theater was unique in one other respect. Unlike earlier theaters, the Sherman Theatre was built exclusively for “canned” entertainment. With synchronized sound movies now standard, the theater contained no pipe organ or orchestra pit. Nor was there a stage, dressing rooms, or any other accoutrements typically required for live performances. The theater was strictly a movie house in every respect.

Wisconsin Historical Society property records indicate that the Sherman Theatre is one of only a few such buildings Herbert Tullgren ever worked on or designed. Martin Tullgren & Sons designed Milwaukee’s Savoy Theater, which opened in 1914, and Herbert himself designed Kenosha’s Orpheum Theater, which opened in 1922. Neither building presently house theaters. The Savoy, located at 2626 W. Center St., has lost many of its character-defining features and

5 . Maggie Valentine, The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee (Yale University Press, 1994), 90-95.
6. University Press, 1994), 90-95.
“Milwaukee’s Sherman Theatre Sets a New Standard in Lighting for Small Houses,” Box office Magazine, May 30, 1936.

its façade no longer resembles a movie theater.

Closure and Second Life

After serving as a neighborhood institution for more than four decades, the Sherman Theatre closed its doors in March of 1977 following a fire that damaged the theater’s curtain, screen, and several front-row seats. The theater’s marquee initially read “Closed Temporarily”, however six months later, owner Robert Read told The Milwaukee Journal that no repair work had been done, and that he was still waiting for an insurance payout.⁷

It is unclear exactly happened next but the Sherman Theatre never showed another film. By the early 1980s, changing social and economic conditions in the city had led to the closure of many Milwaukee movie houses. Some were demolished to make way for parking lots. Others lived second lives as businesses or churches. The Sherman Theatre was sold soon thereafter to Liberty Temple Church, headed by pastor Rex Gwaltney.⁸

By the mid-80s, some Sherman Park neighborhood residents and area leaders had begun efforts to buy the Sherman Theatre building and rehab the property to help jump-start the faltering Burleigh Street business corridor. This early effort was lead by Mike Brodd, Thomas Donegan, and Paul Mathews. Brodd was the manager of the Planning and Analysis Division of Economic Development for the City of Milwaukee and the chairman of the business and economic development committee for the Sherman Park Community Association. Donegan was the alderperson for Milwaukee’s 7th District, and Paul Mathews was serving as a county board supervisor.⁹

Many had high hopes for the theater and the neighborhood. “Ideally, I’d like that whole strip to be the West Side’s Downer Avenue,” Donegan told The Milwaukee Journal, referencing the business corridor’s trendy east-side cousin.¹⁰

7 “Reopening of Theater in Doubt,” The Milwaukee Journal, August 4, 1977.
8 . Jay Joslyn, “Historians to Find Theatres with Strange Second Lives,” July 8, 1981.
9. “Pillar of the Community,” The Milwaukee Journal, Jan. 25, 1987; Grant Application, The Sherman Park Community Association, 1988, Box 6, Folder 8, MSS 72, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department; Mary Carole McCauley, “Sherman Park Residents Vow to Solve Area Woes,” The Milwaukee Journal, Feb. 1, 1988.
10 . Katherine Skiba, “West Side Blues: Merchants Seek a Cure,” The Milwaukee Journal, Jan. 26, 1987.

ARCHITECTURAL DETAILS

A NEW BEGINNING

In 1986, the Sherman Park Community Association (SPCA) received two grants from the City of Milwaukee that funded a market study and feasibility study prepared by a local consulting firm. The market study made a bold but somewhat unusual recommendation: That the theater be converted to a large 120-child daycare/after school facility. It further recommended that the entire front of the building, including the old theater lobby, be used exclusively as retail space. However, the report also noted that several performing arts groups expressed interest in the theater, including Ko-Thi Dance Company, an African-American dance company.¹¹

By 1989, the push to reopen theater was in full swing. In March, Milwaukee Neighborhood Ventures Inc., a nonprofit entity created by SPCA and headed by Brodd, had purchased the property. At this point, the goal was still to restore the theater to show foreign-language films and classic movies and as a space for performing arts. Brodd said he hoped to have the theater opened by the end of year, although he acknowledged it could take longer.¹²

In a press conference at the theater, Allan H. “Bud” Selig, then the president of the Milwaukee Brewer’s and the chairman for the theater project’s capital campaign, expressed fond memories of the theater. He said he and Herb Kohl had “fought and won the Second World War” sitting in the theater, later adding: “Hopefully young kids of today and tomorrow will have the same opportunity we did in participating in the Sherman Theatre.”¹³

Milwaukee Neighborhood Ventures Inc.’s push to reopen the theater seemed so promising that former mayor John Norquist even signed the city’s 1990 city budget there in a bid to, as one news-paper report put it, “emphasize the city’s commitment to neighborhoods”. The city’s budget set aside more than half a million dollars for use on neighborhood projects like the Sherman

11 . Grant Application, The Sherman Park Community Association, 1988, Box 6, Folder 8, MSS 72, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department; Harvey Rabinowitz, Heoh Schroeder Piwoni, Inc., “Market / Feasibility Study: The Sherman Theatre,” January 1986, Box 6, Folder 9, Milwaukee MSS 72, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department.
12 . Anne Waukau, “Theater Called Link to Past,” The Milwaukee Sentinel, June 24, 1989.
13 . Anne Waukau, “Theater Called Link to Past,” The Milwaukee Sentinel, June 24, 1989.



The Sherman Theatre in use as the Liberty Temple, 1988. Photo courtesy The Milwaukee Journal.



An artist’s vision of the rehabilitated theater, 1989. Image courtesy The Milwaukee Sentinel.

Theatre. In an interview Donegan described the theater as “a neighborhood landmark, a center for the community coming together.”¹⁴

Three years later, rehab efforts were still underway. About \$500,000 had already been raised and invested in restoring the building’s façade, replacing all storefront windows, removing asbestos materials, and installing new heating and air conditioning systems. However, another \$350,000 would be needed to renovate the interior of the theater. Brodd told The Milwaukee Sentinel that the intent was use the theater to show movies and host live performances, but he indicated he was “still getting input from the arts community and theater operators.”¹⁵

By 1996, however, attempts to reopen the theater portion of the building had fizzled out. Some \$600,000 in public and private funds had been spent on fixing up the retail shops, but the theater itself remained shut. Brodd cited unfavorable economic conditions in the theater industry as the chief reason that part of the building remained empty. However, he said there was a possibility Milwaukee Public Schools might use the space for youth programs or that it could indeed be converted to an indoor childcare play space. These alternative uses were never realized, however, and the theater remained unused.¹⁶

A New Beginning

In the mid-2000s, the Burleigh Street Community Development Corporation (BSCDC), the primary nonprofit economic development agency in Sherman Park, renewed the theater revitalization effort.¹⁷ In 2006, the BSCDC hosted an open house tour of the theater complex. At least 100 residents attended the event, filled out surveys, and shared their visions and opinions for how the space should be utilized. The BSCDC contemplated reopening

14 . James Nelson, “Norquist to Sign City Budget at Theater,” Milwaukee Sentinel, November 9, 1989; David Umhoefer, “Rejection of Sales Tax Has Norquist Relieved,” The Milwaukee Journal, November 9, 1989.
15 . Tom Daykin, “Work to Restore Theater Goes On,” The Milwaukee Sentinel, June 15, 1992; Mike Brodd to Alex Snyder, e-mail, April 27, 2014.
16 .Tom Daykin, “Small Theaters Face Fate,” The Milwaukee Sentinel, January 19, 1996.
17 . The BSCDC’s mission is to advance the business environment in the Burleigh Street Commercial Corridor by conceiving and implementing economic development and community revitalization projects through the leverage of public-private partnerships with the city, county, state and federal governments, private investors, local corporations and foundations. Visit its website www.burleighstreet.org

the theater as a performing arts venue, possibly for the aforementioned Ko-Thi dance group. However, by this time the building had been sold to 31st Street Holdings LLC and attempts to re-open the theater were put on hold.

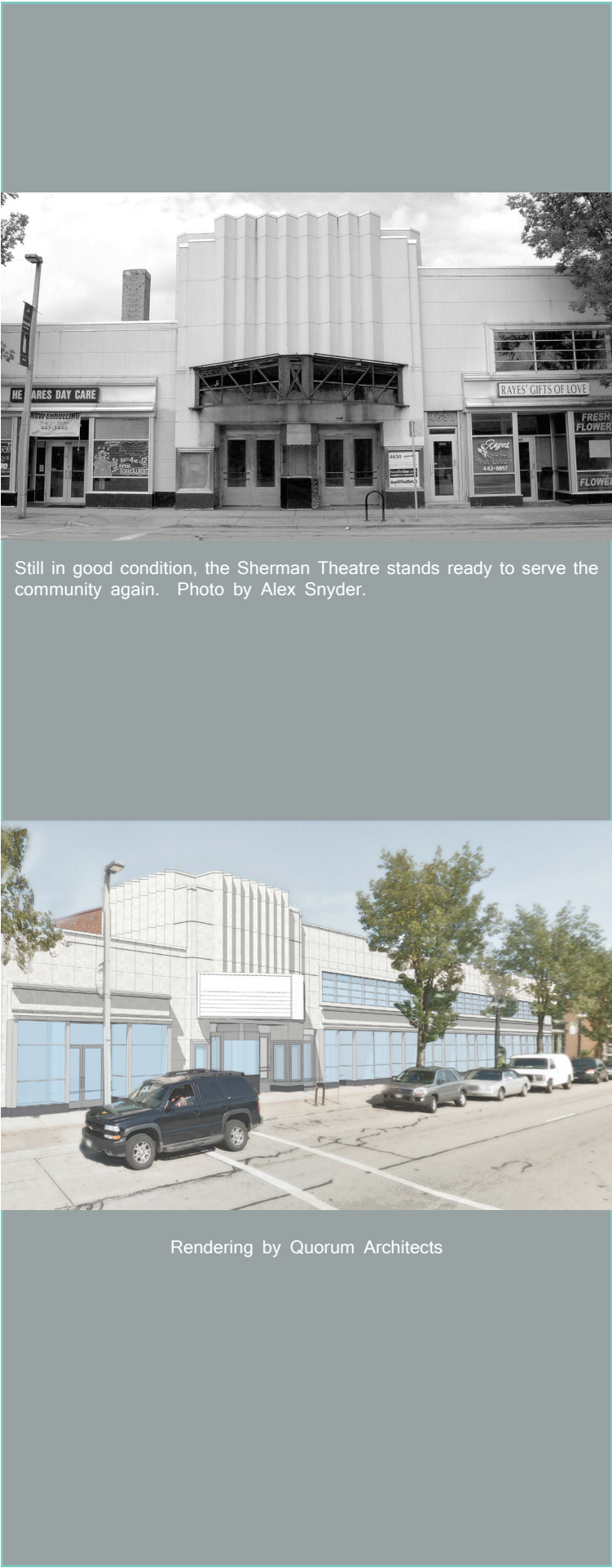
But this was not the end for revitalization efforts. Recognizing the importance of the theater as cornerstone of the business corridor, the City of Milwaukee called for its redevelopment in its 2009 west-side comprehensive plan. In keeping with that plan, the BSCDC renewed its efforts in 2012 to bring the theater back online as a center for the arts (visual, musical, and performing), with space for studios, galleries, and offices.¹⁸

Many neighborhood stakeholders and segments of the greater Milwaukee Community are involved in this collective effort. The BSCDC has assembled a diverse 20-member stakeholder workgroup consisting of community leaders, funders, fund-development professionals, artists, consultants, architects, and nonprofit leaders. Together, they are developing creative solutions to the project’s different challenges, including site acquisition, parking, historic development issues, and achieving a proper tenant mix. The BSCDC plans to create a new entity, the Sherman Park Arts Council, which will act as a “booking agent” for the Theatre venue once the building has been acquired.

One of the cornerstones of the project will be having the artist and tenants give back to the community. The BSCDC envisions the revitalized Sherman Theatre being an important community hub, with the artists and performers of the Sherman Theatre complex periodically opening their doors and sharing their craft with the adults and children of the community, free of charge.

Because of its size and location, the Sherman Theatre building has the potential to do great things for the Sherman Park neighborhood and surrounding area. In its prime, the theater was a commercial anchor for the area, and it may serve that purpose once again. Indeed, the building’s revitalization could act as a major catalyst for future investment and development in the area. It could also make real the dreams

18. Department of City Development, Milwaukee Comprehensive Plan: West Side, December 2009: 92.



Still in good condition, the Sherman Theatre stands ready to serve the community again. Photo by Alex Snyder.

Rendering by Quorum Architects

of neighborhood residents who have hoped the building might house a thriving theater once again. And it could become the home to artists of many mediums. It can do all these things.

Stay tuned for the theater’s next act, when the curtain opens once again!

About Sherman Park Neighborhood & the Burleigh Street Community Development Corporation

Located in Milwaukee’s Sherman Park neighborhood and running along Burleigh Street from Sherman Boulevard on the east to 60th Street on the west, the Burleigh Street Commercial Corridor is also known as “the Mosaic on Burleigh” for the variety of local businesses reflecting a community that welcomes many ethnicities and faiths.

Sherman Park has welcomed residents of remarkable diversity: European, African American, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, Asian and American Indian; Jewish, Christian and Muslim; long-time citizens and recent immigrants; blue-collar workers and professionals. Residents continue to enrich this stable, harmonious neighborhood.

In addition to its great diversity and the commitment of its residents, Sherman Park’s assets include high-quality housing stock, historically significant buildings, responsible landlords, high-ranking public and private schools, religious institutions, government and social service agencies, and community-based organizations providing health care initiatives and support programs.

For decades, Sherman Park’s residents achieved prosperity for themselves and their families - working hard, running small businesses, owning homes in one of the keystone neighborhoods of Milwaukee. But economic recession hit the community fiercely, and too many neighbors lost their jobs, their businesses and their homes.

Ever resilient, the community is again moving forward. Capitalizing on the wonderful neighborhood assets, residents are building a prosperous future for Sherman Park and the Burleigh Street Commercial Corridor.

Leading revitalization efforts since 1999 is the Burleigh Street Community Development Corporation (Burleigh Street CDC), a coalition of people who live, worship, work and do business in the neighborhood. By convening our partners, which include the Sherman Park Community Association, West Burleigh Business Improvement District (BID #27), the City of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County, state and federal government, and private investors, local corporations, foundations, and block associations throughout Sherman Park, the Burleigh Street CDC is raising the quality of life in the neighborhood and revitalizing the Burleigh Street Commercial Corridor.

Produced by the Burleigh Street Community Development Corporation & Quorum Architects, Inc.

Written by
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UW-Milwaukee Urban Studies Graduate Student

With contributions by
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Burleigh Street Community Development Corporation

Renderings by Quorum Architects, Inc.

The Process

The overall plan layout of the Sherman is very suitable for reuse as creative arts space. Proposed modifications are mainly to improve accessibility and allow the theater to be used by a greater variety of performing arts genres.

As stated, the commercial storefronts and windows were upgrade in 1989. Much of that work is still usable today. Several granite base panels are missing, and a few thermal glass panels are in need of replacement. With minimal upgrades, the commercial areas of the building can be leased to creative arts professionals.

The plans convey our intent to combine two commercial storefronts into a rehearsal hall for organizations and performing artists leasing the theater space. Another proposed improvement would be to create shared resource space (kitchenette, meeting areas, and perhaps a shared retail establishment) for the creative tenants. Plans also include upgrading the toilet rooms.

The original theater, as stated, was designed as a movie house. There is no backstage, nor back of house existent. The major plan modification would be to create a stage

and backstage so that the theater could be used by musical performing artists, theatrical groups, dancers, as well as organizations and educational groups. Plans include back of house accommodations for dressing rooms with showers and restrooms, a small shop space, green room or area, and a stage manager. Renovation to the project room includes programming for the light and sound booth, and space for an assistant stage manager.

Many of the proposed renovations are suggested to improve access for persons with ability challenges, again to allow for the use of the Sherman by the largest possible "audience". Accessibility modifications include new theater restrooms, concessions, and an elevator to access the booth. All areas of the new backstage/back of house are designed to be accessible.

With these modifications we feel the Sherman will be attractive to the following commercial and artistic groups:

Theater Space/Rehearsal Hall:

- Performing Artists
- National traveling acts
- Local bands
- Regional groups

- Theater groups looking to do community based programming or needed a larger venue:

UPAF member groups
School theater groups
Community theater groups without permanent space

- Movie Theater
Milwaukee Film Festival venue
Local Film artists/UWM Peck School community venue
Second run movies
Community presentations

- Dance Groups
Ethnic dance groups
Site specific dance groups
Community dance groups without permanent space

- Commercial Businesses
Local groups doing continuing education/presentations
Corporate Events

- Milwaukee Schools
Alternate auditorium space
Graduations and presentations

Creative Arts Spaces

- Geared to commercial artists that produce, e.g.:
Clothing designers and manufacturers
Furniture designers and manufacturers
Commercial photographers/
videographers
Graphic artists
T-shirt design and production

Restaurant Space

- Support to commercial artists and theater uses, e.g.:
Café
Ethnic restaurant

Store:

- Commercial venue for both performing arts groups (t-shirt, album and retail sales) and showcase venue for creative artists. E.g. the Wisconsin store at the Marcus Center, tailored to the creative artists in the Sherman Theatre.

Youth Programming

- Bicycle & Skateboard workshops
Retail shops





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Exterior View

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SHERMAN THEATER

4632 W. BURLEIGH STREET
MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN 53210

Revisions:

Sheet Name:
FIRST FLOOR
SPACE PLAN

Date: 08/18/2014
Drawn By: ADB
Project No.: 14003.00
Sheet No.

SP1.1



- COLOR KEY:**
- Building Manager Space
 - Creative Studio & Gallery Space
 - Theater Support Space
 - Theater Auditorium
 - Theater Entry & Foyer
 - Theater Operations & Service Space
 - Retail & Restaurant Space
 - Support Space

- LEGEND**
- EXISTING WALLS
 - EXISTING DOORS
 - EXISTING COLUMN
 - EXISTING FURNITURE

1 FIRST FLOOR SPACE PLAN
SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"



PRELIMINARY
NOT FOR
CONSTRUCTION
QUORUM ARCHITECTS, INC.

SHERMAN THEATER

4632 W. BURLEIGH STREET
MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN 53210

Revisions:

Sheet Name:
SECOND FLOOR
SPACE PLAN

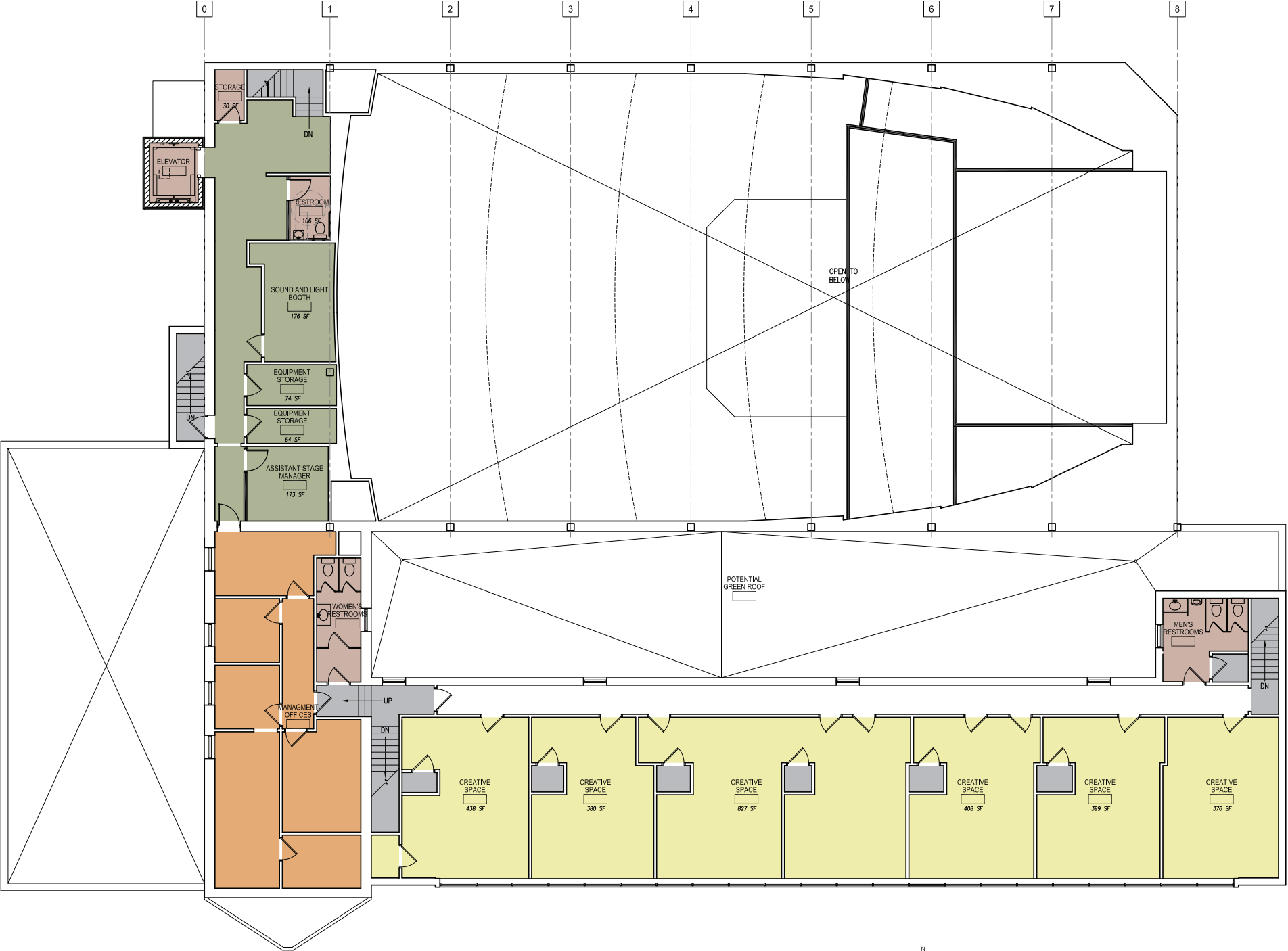
Date: 08/18/2014

Drawn By: ADB

Project No.: 14003.00

Sheet No.

SP2.1



1 SECOND FLOOR SPACE PLAN
SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"





Lobby Perspective



Theater View