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Encore for a classic

Tattered Cover transforms historic Lowenstein Theater

By Mary Voelz Chandler, Rocky Mountain News
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Correction

This story about the Lowenstein Theater should have said that its owner, the Bonfils Foundation, turned down an opportunity in the 1990s to have the building listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

How do you turn a theater into a bookstore? In the words of the old joke: "Very carefully."

But this is serious business: In one of the most adventurous examples of adaptive reuse in the region, the *art moderne* Lowenstein Theater - long vacant on East Colfax Avenue - will come alive again June 26. That's when the newest outpost of the Tattered Cover opens in a former hub of dramatic activity that was home to the Denver Civic Theatre for more than 30 years.

Carefully? Begin with the floors.

"Bookcases do not love a sloping floor," said Tattered Cover owner Joyce Meskis, who will move stock June 25 from the store in Cherry Creek North to the new Lowenstein branch. "You're entering the theater of ideas."

The project at East Colfax and Elizabeth Street involves remaking portions of the Lowenstein, which opened in 1953 as the Bonfils Memorial Theater. Theater lover and philanthropist Helen Bonfils built the theater, which was designed by Denver architect John K. Monroe. After her death in 1972, it was owned by the foundation that bears her name. The theater was renamed in 1985 to honor Denver Civic producer and arts activist Henry Lowenstein but was closed a year later - an odd, sad end for a respected venue in Denver's arts community.

The redevelopment also includes a new 300-space parking structure, with space for several other retail outlets. It's all connected by what used to be an alley, now dubbed the "Junior Esplanade," in honor of the Esplanade across Colfax adjacent to East High School.

The former Lowenstein will house the bookstore as well as an Udi's Restaurant and the Denver Folklore Center (music studios will share space in the lower level with the bookstore's storage and offices). The new structure will include Twist & Shout, Neighborhood Flix Cinema and Café, and Chipotle.

Birth of the Bonfils

The developer, the St. Charles Town Co., and the architect, Josh Comfort, have good raw material with which to work.



Historic Photos From Denver Public Library ©

Inside The Bonfils Theatre

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The program for the fall 1953 dedication of the Bonfils, also the premiere of the Denver Civic Theatre's 25th season, proclaimed: "No community theater in America - and few, if any, professional theatres - has a more beautiful home than this nor one as carefully planned and equipped for its purpose.

"Through an outer lobby of rich travertine, the playgoer will step into a spacious foyer, walking on a deep Prussian blue rug. . . . The walls are wood panelled and the plaster above is painted in a warm pumpkin color."

The pumpkin remains in the Tattered Cover, joined by gold and the bookstore's signature dark green carpeting. The Prussian blue rug? Gone.

But the blond brick and creamy terra cotta exterior - set off by a wing-swept marquee - will basically be left intact, except for the new bookstore entry and overhang on what had been the alley wall.

Architect Monroe was born in Denver in 1893 and educated at Washington University in St. Louis. Monroe, who returned here to work for noted architect J.J.B. Benedict, was known as a designer of churches when Bonfils retained him for the theater. (He was principal architect for the Catholic Archdiocese of Denver.)

In a 1991 application to put the Lowenstein on the National Register of Historic Places, researchers Diane Wray, Michael Paglia and Rodd Wheaton, of the Modern Architecture Preservation League, compiled the history of the building and its backer and designer. (Wray is working on the current project as a preservation consultant.)

They quoted Monroe as saying at the time of the groundbreaking in 1950, "The modern design of the theater is aimed at combining dignity and simplicity of appearance with all utilitarian considerations of a multipurpose theater which can be used for legitimate plays, opera, moving pictures, concerts, lectures and television."

Monroe was prescient: After the Lowenstein closed in 1986, the TV production company Viacom used the facility for shows partially made in Denver. The theater has been vacant since 1989.

Paying close attention

Since the developer is seeking historic tax credits as part of the complex funding package, which also includes tax-increment financing and city-approved loans, that has added a new layer of scrutiny.

"We had a series of people looking over our shoulders," said architect Comfort, who also is working on other retail going into the Lowenstein. Semple Brown Design designed the adjacent parking structure and is working on the retail component in that part of the project.

"It's helpful to remind us," Comfort said of the attention. "We have to work a little harder to do this."

That means, for example, components of the existing ticketing area inside the original Elizabeth Street entrance must remain intact, although the space soon will become a restaurant. The travertine walls and the metal-framed windows, where a generation of theatergoers bought tickets, cannot be removed; the solution is still being worked out, but Comfort said the wall probably will be moved flush with the original inner vestibule wall.

"The Park Service wants to keep the lobby here," he said.

The 1991 National Register nomination didn't get the National Park Service's approval, but the Lowenstein will go on the register at completion if all requirements are met and tax credits are granted. When the theater went on the market a few years ago, fears of demolition prompted Historic Denver Inc. to prepare a nomination to designate the structure a Denver landmark, but it never took action.

In the former inner lobby, too, much will stay the same: The store plans to repaint the lower part of the walls in a dark faux-wood-grain brown, with the upper portion that sort of ocher-pumpkin color. The sleek metal railings - elegant and in the *moderne* style - remain.

A large wall, where a portrait of theater founder Helen Bonfils had hung, has been cut open, allowing a view into the theater auditorium. The portrait, said Henry Lowenstein, long ago moved to the Denver Center for the Performing Arts. The inner lobby will house the store's newsstand, and to one side of the auditorium, the former green room will become the store's coffee shop.

Several of the original pink-tinted windows - with their etched circular design and, in some instances, the Civic Theatre's sailing-ship logo - were replaced years ago by clear windows with the same design.

Those pink windows were "outlandishly expensive," Lowenstein said, even though it was 30 years ago and the theater was operating with Bonfils' resources. For replacements, the theater used clear glass with a blue cast, he said.

The lobby chandeliers - a bevy of dangling lighted balls - was installed in the 1970s, Lowenstein said.

"The other lights were very dark. We needed to increase them, and it worked," Lowenstein said. The fate of the original fixtures is not known.

The book's the thing

Inside the old auditorium, meanwhile, the space is part theater and part bookstore.

The vaulted ceiling and side walls are a light taupe and look as if they're awaiting an audience.

But there are no seats on the floor; most were given to a church that recently moved from an inner-city location to a new home. Two small "balconies" at the rear remain and will include some of the original red mohair-covered seats. Comfort says they've dubbed one the Helen balcony and the other the Henry in honor of the two people who made the theater tick for so many years.

He says the two also will be honored in a piece of public art at the end of the "junior esplanade," a water feature by artist Barry Rose that includes likenesses of Bonfils and Lowenstein.

The stage remains, and the backstage is in full view, so visitors can see the rear windows and the mammoth fire doors. The side curtains will not be rehung on the proscenium, but a red velvet valance will be reinstalled so that those standing on the stage will have the sense of being in a performance space.

The floor, however, is a mix of personalities. Most of it has been leveled. During a recent tour, dozens of the store's traditional rustic bookshelves were scattered around the sales space, some at odd angles, others stacked one upon another.

Toward the center, a ramp leads to a vestige of the old orchestra pit, an element that Park Service officials said had to remain as a reminder of the building's historic use. The ramp, to allow disabled access to the pit floor, will be fronted with bookshelves. On sale in the pit: books on the performing arts.

Offices, the author's signing area and storage will fill the lower level, which used to house coat-check space and the old Bo-Ban cabaret.

And the mix of theater and bookstore?

"Henry gave us his blessing," says Meskis, who decades ago worked at the then-Bonfils, selling theater-related books during intermission.

"No bones about it, I clearly would have preferred it to continue as a theater," Lowenstein said. "But it was not in the cards anymore. The next-best thing is for the Tattered Cover to move in. They have been respectful of the theater's heritage. Their job is to sell books, but the architecture is remarkably careful about keeping the feeling of a theater.

"I'm happy to see it used."

By the numbers

Tattered Cover opened in 1971 on Second Avenue in Cherry Creek North with 950 square feet of space ; Joyce Meskis bought it in 1974. After expanding several times, in 1983 a new location was added in what is now Kazoo & Co. In 1986 all operations moved to 2955 E. First Ave., which includes 40,000 square feet. A breakdown after the move from Cherry Creek:

- Lower downtown: Moved some aspects of the operation there in 1990, then opened a 7,500-square-foot bookstore in 1994 at 1590 Wynkoop St. Expanded in 1996 to 25,000 square feet.
- Highlands Ranch: Opened in 2004 at 1045 Mayberry Drive, Littleton; 23,000 square feet.
- Lowenstein Theater: East Colfax Avenue at Elizabeth Street, opening June 26: 24,000 square feet.

Chandlern@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-892-2677

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