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Cityscape

Bringing Out The House

For Studio Theatre's Expansion, A Promising Premiere

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The latest Studio Theatre expansion on 14th Street NW amounts to more of the same. And that's good.

Two additional old automobile shops converted to cultural use. Another theater of the same cozy 200-seat capacity as the two that already exist. Just about double the space for the theater's notable acting conservatory. More gathering space for playgoers, bigger rooms for scenery and costume shops, additional toilets, a larger intermission bar.

What we have here, in other words, is a case where more is better -- for the theater, for its audiences and for fast-changing 14th Street. Celebrations Saturday in honor of the opening of the Russell Metheny Theatre welcomed it all.

Architecturally, the challenge for the expansion was the familiar one of how to respect older buildings while enlarging them and dramatically changing their purpose. Thanks to the combined talents of theater designer Metheny and Washington architect William Bonstra -- not to forget the driving vision of Artistic Director Joy Zinoman -- the response here was in many ways exemplary.

The Studio Theatre, founded by Zinoman in 1978, first moved into the old automobile showroom on the northeast corner of 14th and P streets NW in 1987, a time when the whole stretch of 14th between Thomas Circle and U Street had that dangerous, abandoned feel. In 1993 the theater bought the building, and in 1997 it completed a thorough renovation, including a second 200-seat auditorium above the initial theater on the ground floor.

With more expansion in mind, four years later Studio purchased the two buildings immediately to the north. Like the corner building, both of these structures were built around 1920 for automotive purposes.

More impressive of the pair was the northernmost building. Four stories high, it was designed to house new-car showrooms, and thus was equipped with an extra-large elevator to lift cars from one level to another. With a limestone pediment and factory-like windows, it was a curious amalgam of the industrial with the classical -- a look that became characteristic of 14th Street.

But it was the modest two-story building in the middle that provided Bonstra with an architectural opportunity. From the get-go Zinoman's idea was to put theaters inside the



Studio Theatre's lobby creates an airy contrast to the two buildings it connects. Above left, the 14th Street entrance.
(Dudley M. Brooks -- The Washington Post)

bigger building, and utilize the middle structure to connect the north and south "wings." Bonstra ran with the idea, designing a glass-and-steel rooftop room that is sure to become a big part of the Studio's visual identity.

The architect refers to the new room alternatively as an "ice cube" and a "beacon," and both words work. With its high, all-glass ceiling and two all-glass walls, the spacious room creates an icy, airy contrast to the heavy masonry surfaces all around. Powerful steel posts and beams give the glass structure the visual weight it needs to stand up to its brick and stone neighbors.

Lit from within at night, the new atrium becomes a lantern signaling the vitality of what goes on inside the buildings. In this way, the glass box reinforces the lively street presence of the new backlit sign and the crisp glass-and-steel entrance canopy. (Patrons of all of the Studio theaters now will enter through this new door.) Zigzagging strands of neon and supergraphic actors' portraits will add further to this most appropriate effect.

Contrasting elements also play a big part on the inside. Metheny -- who in addition to many award-winning stage sets has designed at least six auditoriums for Zinoman, including the very first theater on Church Street back in 1978 -- is a master manipulator of edgy meetings between old and new.

As in the renovations he designed for the corner building seven years ago, Metheny took advantage of the musty ambiance and tactile appeal of old surfaces. It is hard to turn around anywhere in any of these three buildings without encountering an exposed masonry wall with scratchings and sloppy mortar jobs left intact. Plumbing and structural elements, old and new, also often are left exposed.

Sleek new elements -- but not too sleek -- have been added as needed. Metheny's favorite device throughout the three buildings is a thin wooden arcade with rectangular openings, either free-standing or placed directly against the wall. Sheathed with unpainted plywood or, in the glass box, painted bright yellow or blue, these work both as decorative patterns or as architectural space-shapers.

The play's the thing, of course, and the weekend celebrations justly focused on the new theaters. Although it holds the same number of seats and the same size of thrust stage, the new ground-floor auditorium is about twice as high as the two older theaters and thus has a very different, more liberated spatial feel.

In the long term, the raw space on the top floor of the northern building may turn out to be even more important. In it, for the first time, the Studio Theatre Secondstage has its own commodious and technically well-equipped space in which to try out new plays.

Both Metheny and Bonstra demonstrate that they respect the semi-industrial history of these buildings. But this respect is active rather than passive. Metheny's approach is perhaps tinged with creative mischief. He likes the surprises old-new contrasts can provide. Bonstra's attack seems more straightforward. He wants his new piece to be the equal of the old. The combination here produces genuinely revitalized spaces.

One more thing: The same architectural freshness characterizes quite a few of the new projects on the stretch of 14th Street between Thomas Circle and V Street NW. Once again, Zinoman and her theater appear to be harbingers of better things to come.

