

How saving the Detroit Opera House helped set the stage for one neighborhood's comeback

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The crumbling old theater couldn't have looked less promising: Abandoned and neglected, its faulty roof had let the elements seep in for years. Upholstered seats were caked with mold. Ornate plasterwork, saturated and destroyed. The orchestra pit practically had become a moat, so full of rain that a piano was floating in it.

But standing in this waterlogged mess of a building, David DiChiera saw the sparkling future: A grand and permanent home for opera in Detroit.

The Detroit Opera House's rise from near ruins more than 20 years ago might not seem all that extraordinary these days, at a time when saving historic buildings from the wrecking ball has become a thread in the recent narrative of Detroit's rebirth. But that wasn't the case in the late 1980's, when DiChiera -- the Michigan Opera Theatre's founder and artistic director, who is retiring this month - first walked into a vacant theater along the then-desolate Grand Circus Park and saw its potential.

Which is what makes the story of the Opera House, and of the gamble DiChiera made on it, nothing short of remarkable.

"It was a ghost town," said Michigan Opera Theater archivist Tim Lentz when describing how that part of the city felt back then, when Grand Circus Park neighborhood was home to vacant hotels, overgrown grass and hardly any foot traffic. "[But] then the theater came up for sale, and when David walked in, he knew right away."

The soaked, sagging building had originally opened as the glittering Capitol Theatre: Detroit's first film palace, an elegant entertainment venue with a shallow stage for vaudeville acts, too. Built in 1922 under the direction of C. Howard Crane, the city's brilliant early-20th-century theater architect (responsible for the magnificent Fox Theatre, The Fillmore, and Orchestra Hall, among others), the Capitol was designed to produce impeccable acoustics -- a necessity in the era before widespread use of speaker systems.

More than six decades later, even with plasterwork melting on the walls around him, it was precisely that status as a superior sound chamber that hooked DiChiera. But he knew it wouldn't be easy selling patrons on the idea -- and enormous costs -- of rehabbing a disintegrating Detroit theater at a time when some folks perceived the city as being left for dead.

So DiChiera sold it on the most recognizable name in opera: Luciano Pavarotti.

"I said, 'Luciano, I want you to see the place I'm wanting to transform into an opera house,'" DiChiera said. "We walked in and the place looked just terrible, but I said, 'Just look at this. Look at the house. Look at the stage. Just sing part of an aria; let's just hear it in this space.'"

In response, Pavarotti stood to the side of the stage -- the stage itself being in such disrepair that it was too dangerous to walk on -- and let loose part of an aria from Puccini's *Tosca*, flooding the run-down theater with his unmistakable tenor. He turned to DiChiera.

"He said, 'Alright, David. You do it, and I will open it for you,'" DiChiera said.

Pavarotti's promise helped create the buzz that DiChiera needed to drum up financial support from individual patrons as well as corporate donors for the massive undertaking. Tour after tour was given to show people the space's potential and convince them that the MOT belonged in the city, not the suburbs. More than \$40 million was raised for the endeavor.

Five years after his initial visit, Pavarotti made good on his promise. At the Detroit Opera House's official opening night gala in April 1996, he took the stage for an electrifying, star-studded performance in front of a wildly enthusiastic crowd.



By then the rickety former vaudeville stage had not only been shored up, it had tripled in size. Full-scale opera productions require enormous amounts of space, and so as part of the renovation and rehabilitation, the Michigan Opera Theater purchased and demolished two adjacent buildings to create a 75,000-square-foot modern stage house big enough to accommodate sprawling sets, large casts, and the kind of touring shows that roll into town with dozens of semi-trucks -- such as Disney's live version of *The Lion King*.

It is, in fact, the largest such stage anywhere in Michigan.

But DiChiera also felt it was important to preserve the building's historical integrity, so the rehab included painstaking restoration work. An entire year was devoted to meticulously recasting plaster; a professor from Detroit's College for Creative Studies spent months on scaffolding, painting frescoes freehand; more than 850 color tests were performed in a lab to match the theater's original paint scheme.

As a result, to walk into the Detroit Opera House today feels like stepping straight into a piece of classical European art: luminous chandeliers, rosette-laden railings, and a jaw-dropping proscenium arch are set against a softly lit palette of gold, blue, cream and dusty rose.

But it's also as close as you can get to stepping back in time: Seeing the trappings in this gem of a theater as Detroiters largely would have seen them nearly a century ago.

One delightful departure from the faithful restoration work: Look closely, and you can find DiChiera's likeness in several spots around the theater, his bespectacled face set into two of the proscenium's plaster ornaments as well as a painting in which he is crowned with a Grecian-style laurel wreath and surrounded by a quartet of musical cherubs. These details were a surprise gift for DiChiera from the artisans and craftsmen who helped restore the theater -- an understated tribute to the soft-spoken man whose

vision saved a treasure of a building, made a crucial impact on the arts in Detroit, and was a catalyst for the area's renewal.



"When [the Opera House] opened, it was kind of like a lonely queen in this area," DiChiera said. But four years later, in April 2000, Comerica Park opened its gates for the first time, just down the street. And two years after that came Ford Field. Broadway Street now purrs with restaurants, retail, hotels and residences. Grand Circus Park feels pretty grand.

The Michigan Opera Theatre hosts a "Grand Salute" Friday, May 19 for DiChiera, who also announced last month he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. The event will feature performances by world-renowned singers and dancers as a tribute to DiChiera's four decades at the helm of the MOT.

One might say that the Detroit Opera House is itself a lasting tribute to DiChiera. Certainly, after the impresario has retired, his legacy will continue to reverberate in this space. It will be the end of an important chapter not only for his opera company, but also for Detroit: It was not that long ago that people told him it would be a mistake to bring opera into the city.

But that was never how DiChiera saw this story playing out.

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