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Svigals + Partners renovates and updates Little Theatre in New Haven for ACES

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Built in 1924, New Haven's Little Theatre (formerly known as Little Theatre on Lincoln) has seen several incarnations, including a period as a beloved art-film cinematheque. After months of construction, the latest transformation was unveiled at a ribbon-cutting ceremony held on June 6. Designed by local architecture firm Svigals + Partners, the renovation for owner Area Cooperative Educational Services (ACES) preserves the structure's unique historic qualities while delivering dual functions: a cutting-edge theater venue and performing arts teaching facility.

Svigals + Partners' design for ACES Educational Center for the Arts (ACES ECA), a magnet high school operated by ACES, combines up-to-date theater craft, current K-12 design trends, careful preservation methods, inventive construction techniques and respectful community engagement.

"We are delighted that the curtain in the Little Theatre will be raised once again," said Dr. Craig W. Edmondson, executive director of ACES.

Julia McFadden, AIA, an associate principal with Svigals + Partners said, "New Haven has an exciting arts scene, exemplified by the dedication of ACES ECA students to improving their crafts. As members of a New Haven-based firm with our own commitment to art, we could not be more excited about having played a central role in the Little Theatre's next chapter."

Built during the "little theater movement," a national trend emphasizing the importance of smaller community spaces for drama as an alternative to glitzy spectacles and follies, the Little Theatre was later converted to a movie house. ACES purchased the defunct facility in 1986 – two years after it received status on the National Register of Historic Places – and conducted renovations necessary for use by ACES ECA. Little Theatre continued to serve as a theater for the community, and was incorporated into a designated arts district.

But the lack of sufficient space and antiquated technology hampered the efforts of both ACES ECA and groups using the theater as a performance space. ACES engaged Svigals + Partners in 2010 to design a major overhaul.

"The renovation needed to serve multiple goals at once, in a very small space," said McFadden.

"The theater required additional support spaces and modern infrastructure, and had to function more appropriately for the school."

"Of course, it was also crucial to preserve as much as possible of the theater's historic legacy," said McFadden. "Though the structure was not architecturally significant, its importance to New Haven and the city's arts community required that the renovation include preservation as a guideline."

Construction included tearing down an older addition in order to build a new one, adding 2,000 s/f to the theater's original 9,000 s/f of floor area. The existing foundation walls needed to be replaced, which required replacing one section at a time in order to maintain the structure's stability. The renovation plan retained the 16-inch thick steel-reinforced concrete walls and the steel truss roof

with timber decking.

Svigals + Partners also worked with Theatre Projects, a global consultancy, to design the theatrical infrastructure, advising McFadden's team on maintaining sightlines by lowering the stage floor, for example. The consultant group also designed new flylofts, rigging, lighting systems and an acoustic divider that makes it possible to have two rehearsals or performances simultaneously.

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