

THE LAUGHTER ON LIBERTY: THE REBIRTH OF THE ARCADE COMEDY THEATER



A far cry from today's flourishing cultural hotspot, Pittsburgh's Downtown strip of Liberty Avenue used to host the Steel City's seedy underground. As longtime natives will recall, this section of Downtown was once a red-light district complete with tawdry establishments spanning from peep rooms to adult bookstores—making it one of the worst sections of a city already referred to as “Hell with the lid off” for its polluted, industrial skyline.

This same 14-block area is now celebrated for its vibrant nightlife and notable landmarks—such as Heinz Hall and the Benedum Center—which draw millions to the city every year. As popular as it is today, the District's transformation only began in the 80s when the [Pittsburgh Cultural Trust](#) moved in, determined to redefine the section of town as a welcoming, intellectual space.

Under the guidance of co-founder H.J. “Jack” Heinz II, the Cultural Trust pushed for something that didn't exist at the time—a neighborhood in Downtown Pittsburgh dedicated to the visual and performing arts. Determined to transform Downtown into an enviable hotspot for other cities to emulate, the Cultural Trust took a surprising strategy that emphasized theaters and art galleries over restaurants and bars.

Little by little, the Cultural Trust acquired old properties and converted them into some of the gems we know today, like [Theater Square](#) and the [Harris Theater](#). As the founders predicted, restaurateurs soon took note of the traffic Downtown, and they quickly set up shop in between the city's hottest destinations. Between the combined efforts of the Cultural Trust, the City of Pittsburgh, and renewed economic activity, the red-light district eventually disappeared, and the vibrant Cultural District, with its rich blend of restaurants, theaters, and galleries generating more \$300 million annually, took its place.

MOVING TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD

With the Cultural District's enormous fanfare and commitment to the arts, the founding Creative Directors of the [Arcade Comedy Theater](#), Abby Fudor, Jethro Nolen, Kristy Nolen, and Mike Rubino, knew it was the right place to be. In 2013, they partnered with the Cultural Trust to offer affordable comedy shows and classes via an intimate, 75-seat, nonprofit venue. Thanks to its accessibility and consistent affordability (most tickets are under \$20), it was an immediate hit, presenting over 1,000 shows to 50,000 visitors in four short years. The Arcade Comedy Theater quickly became a venue around which many fans—especially young couples—planned their Saturday nights in the Cultural District. But its hilarious programming wasn't the only selling point that made it a hot attraction. Its many weekly classes, including improv, sketch writing, and stand-up classes, were so popular, they had to be held across the street and in another building on Penn Ave.

Due to its meteoric success, the Arcade soon outgrew its original home on the 800 block of Liberty Ave. The Theater approached the Cultural Trust in 2015 to find a larger space in the city's Cultural District—one that would give the Arcade Comedy Theater the room to expand its programming and classes.

A CLUTTERED SOLUTION

The Cultural Trust had an opening a block down the road at 943 Liberty Avenue. There was, however, a problem. The opening—a former adult theater and bookstore—was absolutely decrepit, complete with a rotting timber frame from the building's original construction. Nearly 100 years old, the unused upstairs was littered with debris, filth, and dirty viewing booths from decades ago. Similarly, the ceiling was broken and fallen

through, casting long shadows with what little light still cut through the dirty window panes on the second floor.



Photo Credit: Jason Clark



Photo Credit: Jason Clark

The first floor wasn't much better. Its last occupant—the adult bookstore—moved out in 2007. Between 2007 and 2015, the first floor sat mostly unused, save for intermittent art shows. Because of the building's condition, the city only issued permits for these shows after temporary walls and fire extinguishers were installed to properly handle an influx of patrons.

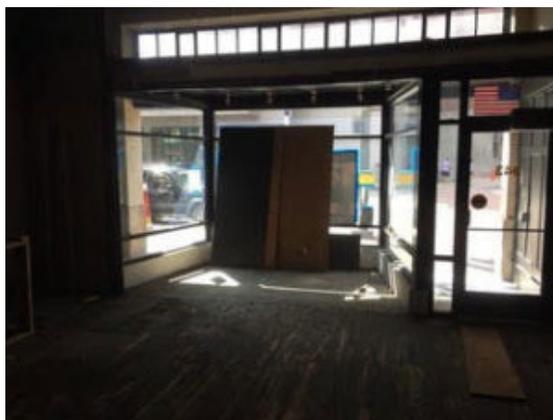


Photo Credit: Jason Clark



Photo Credit: Jason Clark

Although the Cultural Trust provided a major facelift to the building's facade, the building's decaying interior remained a problem. Redesigning a space like this would require someone with enough experience to orchestrate such a delicate process.

TRANSFORMING THE TAWDRINESS

Because of its long-standing reputation for transforming Pittsburgh landmarks into modern day icons, Desmone Architects was the first firm that came to the Cultural Trust's mind. After leadership at the Arcade Comedy Theater secured financial backing from the Cultural Trust, they got to work generating ideas—ideas Desmone quickly brought to life.

Though they had blank a canvas, the Arcade's founders didn't start completely from scratch. Having traveled the world through clubs and theaters, they pulled their inspiration from hundreds of venues to design a space with clever amenities and their own personal flair—all combined with a desire to stay true to their roots at 811 Liberty Avenue.

Between its intimate space, collection of arcade games, and enormous exposed brick wall behind the stage, the Theater's former home at had quite the unique charm. That same charm, it was determined, would be preserved in the new location. For starters, the new lobby was designed to feature the same colorful seating and gaming unit from the old location. In fact, it would come to look so similar that some people wouldn't realize they were in a new building—especially a former adult entertainment facility.

While nodding to its roots, Arcade's founders also wanted to join the Pittsburgh theater tradition. To that end, they installed a new pressed tin ceiling in the lobby, perfect for

reflecting light from Liberty Ave. down the Arcade's long lobby hallway.



Photo Credit: Gregory Neiser

Overall, however, the Arcade is unique, with bright splashes of color and an atmosphere that immediately wins over casual visitors. Gaming cabinets—like you would find in an old arcade—have been added downstairs and in the lounge on the second floor, marking perfect locations for visitors to enjoy their BYO drinks while they wait for shows to start.



Photo Credit: Gregory Neiser

The building's past isn't lost to the Arcade's founders, who have a good sense of humor about its history. Artwork throughout the building hints at the building's checkered past, like a print of one of the building's old "Open 24 Hours" signs and another marked "Absolutely! Only One Person Per Booth!" Complementing the humor is a bright, colorful space that's come a long way from its adult roots.

Though the comedians were bolstered by humor throughout the redesign, things didn't always go smoothly. The building's age presented many challenges, including the rotted, original wooden frame. Hurdles like these are where Desmone's architectural expertise really came into play.



Photo Credit: Mike Rubino

For example, finding an ideal spot for the bathrooms was a struggle, as they require valuable square footage in such a small building. Desmone recommended moving the bathrooms to the basement, where they wouldn't steal space from the theaters, lobbies, and classrooms. However, this presented yet another problem. The basement ceiling was only six feet high. With no room to expand upward, Desmone hatched a plan for going *down*, digging into the foundation to make the ceiling feel higher. It worked!

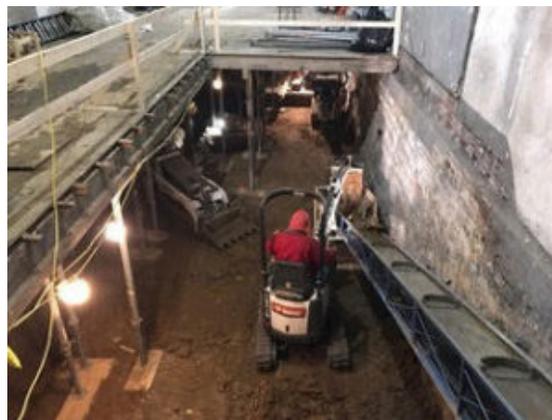


Photo Credit: Jason Clark



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If you head into the basement today, perhaps to play one of the arcade games or use the bathroom, you'll notice a portion of the original brick wall missing along the floor—that's where construction workers extended the old foundation. To help the Theater save on construction costs, Desmone planned for a slight grade in the basement, with an incline leading into a large storage closet sitting on the original, higher foundation.

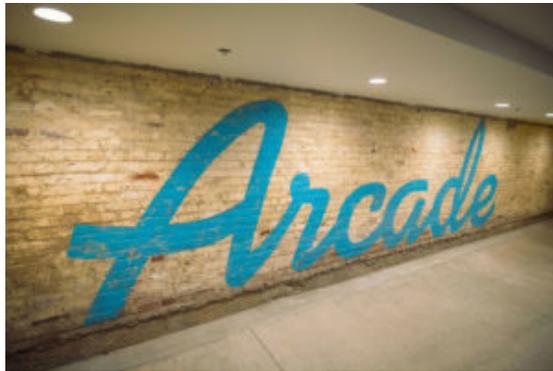


Photo Credit: Gregory Neiser

Throughout the transition, members of the Arcade Comedy Theater threw themselves into construction, dedicating entire days and nights to the project, all to get the new theater up and running. "By the end of it, we definitely needed a laugh," recalls the Theater's Operations Manager Jason Clark. Now that the Theater's in business at its new home, they're all laughing again, as are the guests streaming through the front door.

A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD

Desmone's ambitious overhaul of the Arcade Comedy Theater was enough to grab the attention of Pittsburgh fan and TV icon Seth Meyers, who stopped by during construction to view the progress and visit with former improv teammates Jethro and Kristy Nolen. As star-struck as Arcade's community was, the leadership is confident this world-class visit was only the beginning of something bigger. With a downstairs theater

capable of seating 100 guests, the Arcade will have the capacity to attract bigger names to a venue that's exploding in popularity as one of the best things to do in Pittsburgh.

What's been good for the Arcade Comedy Theater has also been good for the neighborhood—especially its nightlife. Thanks to the increased patronage at the Theater, and because laughter is a great community-builder, more people are also spending extra time in the Cultural District, banding together after shows and classes to enjoy drinks and meals at one of the District's 50 restaurants—all testaments to the Cultural Trust's efforts for developing the area.



Photo Credit: Gregory Neiser

Though more patrons can fit into the Theater thanks to the increased seating, there still weren't enough spots for one of its first nights after reopening. With fans excited to see the new building and set to enjoy one of the Arcade's popular shows, the audience packed in with a line stretching out the front door. Unable to squeeze into the theater, the fans stood silently in the lobby, straining to hear the entertainers' voices emanating from the stage. Kids sat on their parents' shoulders to get above the crowd, hoping to catch a glimpse of the show inside. It was a beautiful sight to see for the Theater founders, who have poured their hearts into the nonprofit and its new home on Liberty.

The successful relaunch is all thanks to the combined efforts of Arcade Comedy Theater's passion, the Cultural Trust's generosity, and Desmone's experienced professionals. Perhaps in a few more years, the Arcade Comedy Theater will knock on the Cultural Trust's door once again, inquiring about larger spaces available in the Cultural District.

SUPPORTING ARCADE COMEDY THEATER

Want to see the Arcade Comedy Theater for yourself? [Buy tickets](#) for the next show! You can also support the theater by [donating](#) or attending one of [its popular classes](#).

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