



REIMAGINING THE MERRIAM THEATER:

A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

A REPORT TO THE

KIMMEL CENTER FOR PERFORMING ARTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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# REPORT TO THE KIMMEL CENTER

## REIMAGINING THE MERRIAM THEATER:

### A COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On Sept. 24 and 25, the Kimmel Center hosted three community input sessions about the future of the Merriam Theater, two on that Sunday, one on Monday evening.

Held at the theater, they attracted about 133 people. The biggest segment of participants came from Center City, but Northwest, South, Northeast and West Philadelphia were well represented. The groups included a sprinkling of people from suburban locales, including the Main Line, Newtown (Bucks), Mount Holly and Cherry Hill. Interesting input came, as well, from a handful of out-of-towners who accompanied Philadelphia-area relatives to one of the forums.

The group was majority white, but with a significant number of African-Americans, plus a few Asian-Americans and Latinos. It skewed older, but almost every breakout group had one member under the age of 40. These were often artists, University of the Arts students and/or representatives of the resident companies.

In each of the three sessions, participants were divided into breakout groups of seven to 12 people; each breakout session was led through a structured dialogue by moderators trained by the Penn Project for Civic Engagement, which also designed the dialogue.

In the process, participants were asked to talk about whether they felt the Avenue of the Arts was “a place for them.” They were asked to give their sense of the current uses and users of the Merriam, its potential uses and users, what obstacles stand in the way of that potential, and what guidance they would like to give the Kimmel and its architects about how to revive the Merriam.

Each of the eleven (11) breakout sessions is summarized in a written report. These reports are provided as an appendix. Reading them is essential to get the fullest, most textured sense of the public input.

This report distills all that input into a set of seven guiding principles for the Kimmel and its architects.

We will present them here first in summary form, then circle back to each one in turn to flesh it out in terms of more specific ideas and observations from the participants.

There is some overlap among the principles, so certain ideas or recommendations will be cited under multiple principles, with an explanation of the particular way a given suggestion addresses a particular principle.

Here are the Merriam Principles:

- 1) Weave an identity
- 2) Become an artistic hub
- 3) Build a community hive
- 4) Understand it's the experience, not just the show
- 5) Uplift the legacy
- 6) See small as fruitful
- 7) Use these principles to build capital

Now let's discuss them in more detail:

## 1) WEAVE AN IDENTITY

Task one is to remedy this problem: The Merriam has no clear identity.

The public has a shaky grasp of who or what the Merriam is for. This is a clear takeaway from the forums, and the biggest challenge facing those planning its revival. Input from forum participants suggests the Merriam needs a distinct brand, one clearly different function and tone from the Kimmel Center and the Academy of Music.

Participants had a vague sense that the Merriam is a cheaper and less stuffy venue than the Kimmel or the Academy, but did not view the space as being clearly associated with any particular art form, resident company, style of entertainment, or audience segment. Some participants said they thought of its audiences as more African-American and diverse, but African-American voices tended to see that perception as a relic of a vanished past.

Yet, as much as they struggled to pinpoint the Merriam's current identity (with many not knowing of its ties to the Kimmel), they envisioned the Merriam being transformed from a dormant mystery in the middle of the Kimmel triad into a vibrant center of activity day and night that ties together the Kimmel campus and radiates out into the larger Philadelphia arts community, while also serving distinct needs of its Center City neighborhood. The rest of these principles detail their advice on how to do this.

## 2) BECOME AN ARTISTIC HUB

Forum participants consistently saw similar, exciting possibilities for the new spaces that could come alive behind a new façade for the building. They imagine that façade as being in some way transparent and welcoming, designed to project this inner energy out to the sidewalk in multiple ways, luring people in. They envision small, flexible spaces that community members could embrace as venues to showcase the diversity of Philadelphia’s cultural riches, from poetry slams to gallery shows to post-performance discussions to open-mic nights to student performances. They would like to see social media-savvy digital displays and a TKTS-like kiosk celebrate not just Kimmel programs, but a whole range of nearby cultural offerings.

In general, they advise: Don’t just think just in terms of the Kimmel and its resident companies; turn this central location of the Kimmel campus into a hub for all that’s exciting in Philly arts.

They would love to see intimate spaces where pre- or post-performance discussions could take place. They would love to see a rooftop space with a view of Broad Street, a winter garden or green roof, affordable food/drink options and a small stage for performance (maybe a telescope, too). Speaking of dining options, they would like to remind the Kimmel’s leaders that “food is an art, too.”

They would like to see the renovated building include rehearsal spaces, priced for rental so as to be accessible to University of Arts students and other rising performers. They would like to see the Merriam endowed with performance spaces flexible enough to allow the region’s richly varied arts organizations to bring a taste of their work to the Avenue of the Arts. Meanwhile, artists who use or would like to use the Merriam stress the need to improve “back of the house” elements such as wing spaces, green rooms, loading dock – and to repair the lack of studio or rehearsal space for visiting companies.

## 3) BUILD A COMMUNITY HIVE

The Merriam’s neighbors say their part of the city is lacking in green space, places of respite, and comfortable, moderately priced places to eat. We heard not just a desire for such amenities to be built into a renovated Merriam, but also a yearning from neighbors to be asked to help conceive and maintain them. It’s possible that by doing this, the Kimmel could go a long way to addressing opposition to parts of its plan for the building. For example, invite nearby condo associations to help plant/tend that winter garden/green space. Design flexible meeting spaces into the renovation that community members could use ( e.g. for meetings, book clubs, small milestone events), the Kimmel can activate the space at times when it is now dark, while building significant community trust. And remember that Philly is now a thoroughly “pop-up” city; think of ways to

bring serendipity, excitement and curious passers-by into the building through pop-up performances, food offerings and art installations.

#### 4) UNDERSTAND IT'S THE EXPERIENCE, NOT JUST THE SHOW

Merriam patrons, as well as employees of the Kimmel and resident companies, stressed that the redesign of the theater needs to put as much thought into what happens before patrons reach their seats as it devotes to the acoustics, comfort and sight lines of the theater proper.

While the architects seem rightly focused on issues of interior circulation, difficult stairs and distant restrooms, participants reminded that the Merriam user's problems begin even before people reach its front door. The chaotic scrum on the sidewalk outside just before performances, which gets many a Merriam night off to an unpleasant start, needs to be addressed. Great thought and effort should be put into how to ease the connections to nearby parking, mass transit and ride-sharing services. Even if better physical connections to the SEPTA concourse or nearby parking prove too costly (or at best a long-term dream), better digital information and way-finding could help ease customer (particularly suburbanite) unease.

They also advised that dining, in particular availability of comfortable, efficient, affordable places to eat before and after performances, is a huge piece of the patron experience. It should be addressed in any renovation plan (whether by on-site amenities or digital information assets, or both). Also, the more attention that is paid to touches such as bike racks, smartphone charging stations and backpack lockers, the more Millennials will see the Merriam as a place that "gets" them and wants them to be part of its future.

#### 5) UPLIFT THE LEGACY

Perhaps the thought was prompted by the review of the Merriam's richly diverse performance history offered at the top of the forums. Or maybe it was already top-of-mind for people as they arrived. Either way, the consensus was clear: Philadelphia's cultural legacy, as revealed through the Merriam's history, should be visibly and lovingly honored in the renovation.

The tech savvy were beguiled by the idea that this could be accomplished through digital displays or smartphone apps with multimedia or augmented reality. Other, less techy ideas in this vein included a costume museum and a theater/music arts bookstore. Bottom line: Enabling Philly's popular cultural history to come alive inside and outside

the renovated building would help achieve the goals of activating the space through the day and imbuing it with a distinct brand.

## 6) SEE SMALL AS FRUITFUL

Yes, the footprint of the new space intended to front Broad Street is small. No, not all of the ideas the forum participants' imaginations cooked up could possibly be packed into that limited turf. But, to be clear, what's being sought are mostly spaces that are cozy, comfortable, built to human scale.

Paradoxically, the lack of real estate between the Merriam's last row of seats and the South Broad sidewalk might enable architects, programmers and digital designers to pull off exactly what has proved challenging at times at the Kimmel Center: creating an interior civic space animated by the arts.

Remember: A lot of new moves have been perfected and embraced in Philadelphia since the Kimmel opened: pop-up spaces and programming, rooftop gardens and bars, a rambunctious spoken word and DIY arts scene, audio tour apps. Study them, learn from them. The feedback argues for creating flexible spaces, watching how the public uses them, then adjusting the set-up accordingly.

## 7) USE THESE PRINCIPLES TO BUILD CAPITAL

Most forum participants understood that all the needed improvements to the core experience of watching a performance at the Merriam will not come cheaply. They heard the message from the opening presentation that the renovated building will have to throw off more revenue to defray those costs. While concerns about lost views and increased congestion spawned by a new Merriam tower were concentrated among participants who live in nearby condos, most people at the forum strove to think through the revenue issue creatively, not assuming a condo tower as the only solution.

What they'd like to see is a genuine effort to maximize the revenue the building generates from its core identity as an artistic hub and a community hive. In other words, generate capital by adhering to the other principles, not ignoring them.

From that wish sprang a number of creative ideas: a boutique hotel where visiting artists could stay and Kimmel patrons could enjoy mingling with them in the halls, the restaurants and other gathering places of the facility; cafes, bookstores, rooftop bars and other gathering spaces; a set of rehearsal spaces for rent; flexible seating and a movie screen in the Merriam so that it could be used for corporate meetings, weddings and other milestone events, and live streaming of performances from elsewhere.