

THE OPINIONS OF THE OREGONIAN EDITORIAL BOARD

Armory renovation shows city at its best

No project is without risk, but a first-class city doesn't just sit back, passively, and wait for stardom

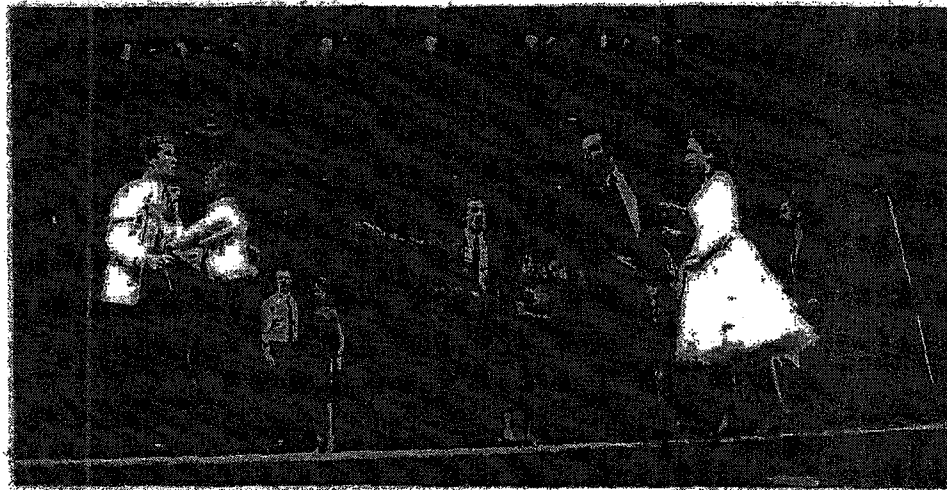
Great cities never stand still. Like any serious business enterprise, they know they must keep moving and improving or they're going to start declining and deteriorating.

That's what Portland's chorus of naysayers always seems to forget: that there's an opportunity cost involved in doing nothing. Keep that in mind as you sort through the buzz about the new Gerding Theater at the Armory. You'll hear raves, but this being Portland, where people are sometimes strangely reluctant to acknowledge a success, you may also hear negative murmurs.

Gloom-and-doomers have gleefully pounced on the \$36.1 million project, suggesting it's full of financial peril for the city. Nonsense. True, the city was instrumental in making it happen.

Former Mayor Vera Katz loves the 1891 Armory in the Pearl District and didn't want to see it razed. The Portland Development Commission cemented the complicated financing package for the deal, which involves loans and nearly \$17 million in tax credits.

But the nonprofit Portland Center Stage will own and operate the building. The capital campaign has already raised nearly \$9.3 million in private giving. It has another \$9.3 million to go. This must be in hand by 2013, but the goal is to finish the campaign by the end of next year. That's not unreasonable. Donations have only stepped up in recent weeks, now that donors can actually see what they are contributing to.



Portland Center Stage will open in the new Gerding Theater with "West Side Story."

You can see, too, if you tour the Armory on Sunday afternoon during Portland Center Stage's grand opening celebration. Or if you catch a performance of the company's first show in the new theater, "West Side Story."

In this renovation, Portland Center Stage accepted a triple challenge: First, build a theater (there actually are two in the building) and an artistic headquarters worthy of a regional theater company. Second, stay true to the unique character of the Armory building, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Third, make it as futuristic as a theater in a historic build-

ing can be by simultaneously shooting for the topmost standards of green building and energy efficiency, known as a platinum certification. In this regard, the Gerding at the Armory actually is designed as a ecotourist attraction, with docents who will be trained to explain how the energy-efficient features of the building work.

Perched on the mezzanine above the lobby, you may feel a touch of vertigo, pulled by both the forces of the past and the future. Remember, if it were up to Portland's chorus of naysayers, this project would never have happened. Portland would never have done — and would never do — much of anything.

Passivity always looks like a safer approach, but it isn't. There are costs in demolishing a building, losses and contagious effects on other businesses when buildings start to slide, and an incalculable loss to the community when history vanishes.

By standing still, you'll never break your leg. But you'll also never "break a leg" in the superstitious reverse way that the theater folks use the words. You'll never have a hit. Katz was prescient to push for this theater project, and Portland Center Stage has done a remarkable job of realizing it.

No great city achieves greatness by sitting back, and embracing the do-nothing option. Don't take our word for it, though.

See for yourself.
Go to a show.