

# Memorial Auditorium showing its age

## Arts officials suggest repairs of \$1.5 million

By Sona Iyengar  
Free Press Staff Writer

It's 5:35 p.m. and the third floor of Memorial Auditorium pulsates with the furious rhythm of African drum beats. Twenty dancers in colorful wraps bend and stretch and flail their arms to

the music.

■ Convention center study on tap, **14A**

Two stories below, the drum beats are a distant echo. Sneakers squeak on a shiny wood floor and a basketball pounds and rebounds as IBM employees in shorts and tanks face off on the court.

People from throughout the state come to the city-owned civic center for everything from dog obedience classes to wrestling shows. But that popularity has worn down the 68-year-old building.

While many improvements have been made, at least \$1.5 million is needed to keep the auditorium running in the future, City Arts Director Doreen Kraft said Monday.

"It's a long road. You can't turn it around in a few years. It probably takes a decade to turn a building like this around."

This spring and summer, City Arts, which manages the building, is planning several renovations to the auditorium.

A 12-foot triangular kiosk is expected to be installed at the corner of Main and South Union streets in May. Large posters on the kiosk will advertise upcoming events. It also will project the names of shows with a laser onto the side of the building at night.

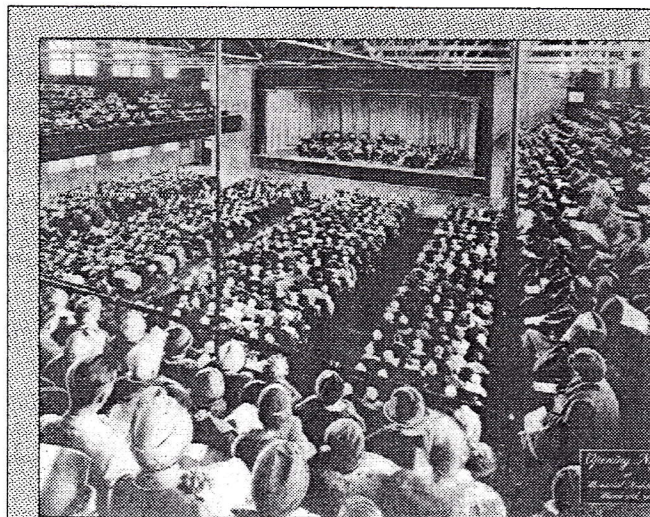
Howard Bank and the Vermont Historical Society paid for the \$20,000 kiosk, Kraft said.

In addition, City Arts plans to make bathrooms handicap-accessible, add a ramp at the entrance, repaint staircases and doors, and



GLENN RUSSELL, Free Press

Officials say Burlington's 68-year-old Memorial Auditorium is in need of \$1.5 million in renovations. City Arts planning a series of interior improvements and the construction of a kiosk downtown to advertise the venue



Memorial Auditorium on opening night in March 1928.

## Back in time

■ Memorial Auditorium was built in 1928 in honor of war veterans. The 16,650-square-foot, three-story brick building is the state's largest indoor civic center. It can hold 2,600 people.

■ On opening night in March 1928, the Burlington Symphony Orchestra played Schubert's Unfinished Symphony, Symphony in B minor and selections from Brahms, Chopin and Bizet.

■ The auditorium was a popular night spot and dance hall in the swing era. Over the years, it has hosted a wide variety of acts, including the future stars of the 1950s television sitcom *Ozzie and Harriet*, Ray Charles, Bob Dylan, Bob Marley and the Russian Philharmonic Orchestra.

refinish floors in the next few months, Kraft said. Flowers will be planted around the building on Main and South Union streets.

Since City Arts took over

management of Memorial Auditorium in 1993, about \$400,000 has been spent renovating the building. That work includes a new fire alarm and sprinkler system; refinishing the main floor;

heating improvements; new lighting; new signs and paint; new windows; and getting rid of coal-burner left over from old coal-burner furnaces.

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# MEMORIAL: Tough money choices

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Part of that money came from the auditorium's restoration fund. For every ticket that is purchased, \$1 goes into the fund. The city also contributed to the building's capital improvements, providing \$31,000 this year and \$60,000 last year, Kraft said.

Kraft and City Arts board members are trying to figure out how to raise the additional \$1.5 million needed for longer-term repairs. That work includes a new roof, plumbing and wiring, repairs to the stage, and making the building completely handicap-accessible.

Kraft said the money likely will come from several sources, possibly including a Burlington bond issue or some type of regional funding. Money from a federal housing loan program, a financing method voters approved in March, also might be available.

"Chittenden County will have to make some choices about whether or not they value this building enough to make that

## Main events

- April 22, Joan Osborne
  - April 27, Carrot Top, comedian
  - May 7, Tori Amos
- For ticket information, call 863-5966

investment.

## A community center

Lois Trombley, 21, of Burlington, values Memorial Auditorium. She takes the African dance class and has taken drum classes in the building.

"It's really a nice space to dance in," Trombley said. "It's good for a community."

Mary Manghis of Burlington, another dancer, agreed. "It's really important to have something right in town that's accessible," said Manghis, who has danced in the building for seven or eight years.

In addition to the repairs, City Arts hopes to restore some

of the historical details to the 1928 building, such as awnings over the entrances and lampposts flanking the doors.

City Arts has applied for a \$1,000 grant from the Preservation Trust of Vermont to create a preservation plan for the building, Kraft said. Improvements made to the building would have to follow the plan.

Some Burlington residents have their own history with Memorial Auditorium. City Attorney Joseph McNeil remembers sneaking into the building as a teen-ager to see Gene Krupa, a jazz drummer.

McNeil said he snuck in by sliding down a coal chute, but unfortunately landed in a big pile of coal. Krupa spotted him and brought him into his dressing room to clean up. He let McNeil sit by the side of the stage as he performed.

"I think half of it was the fun of accomplishment, half of it was that I had squandered my allowance somewhere else," McNeil said. "It has great memories for me."

# Convention center study nears finish

By Sona Iyengar  
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A group of business executives, city officials and regional planners expects to complete its study of a regional convention center by May.

The group, which has been meeting since last fall, researched potential markets for a Chittenden County convention center; economic benefits; and types of facilities. It also rated existing civic centers and concert halls.

The Memorial Auditorium block in Burlington, which includes city parking lots and the Mid-Town Motel, is a possible location for a civic center.

The group's report likely will not recommend a specific site, said Joe Sutton, general manager of the Radisson Hotel Burlington. Sutton, chairman of the

18-member study group, said the group focused more on the demand for a convention center and its economic benefits.

"Being in the hotel business, we're always looking for new ways to stimulate business in the winter months," Sutton said. "A center like this could add to the economic development of the area."

Group members agreed that a regional convention center should be used for different types of activities, from trade shows and exhibitions to sports events to concerts, said Diana Carminati, director of Burlington's Community and Economic Development Office.

Sutton said such a facility likely would cost between \$10 million and \$15 million. It isn't yet known what size the facility would be.