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Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

L.A. County spending \$350,000 to plan a higher-profile future for John Anson Ford Theatres

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Los Angeles County will spend \$350,000 to take a detailed look at possible upgrades for the [John Anson Ford Theatres](#) near the Hollywood Bowl.

The key issues to be addressed in a new master plan, officials say, are improving cramped parking and designing an entrance that would command attention for the easy-to-miss venue on Cahuenga Boulevard.



As for the 1931-vintage amphitheater itself, designed to evoke the gates of ancient Jerusalem, the plan will address possibilities for future upgrades and methods of preserving their historic features. The amphitheater seats 1,250 and an 87-seat indoor theater is housed within the building.

The [Los Angeles County Arts Commission](#), which runs the Ford, announced Thursday that it has picked the firm of architect Brenda Levin, an expert in restoring historic buildings, to develop the master plan. Her job includes considering where new buildings, such as a rehearsal hall, administration building and restaurant, could be placed on the 45-acre site.

Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, whose district includes the Ford, will fund the study out of

discretionary funds he controls.

The county has put \$6.1 million into the Ford since 1993, when the arts commission started

running the venues instead of leasing them to an outside operator. The improvements have included a new electrical system, modernized production capabilities, a picnic area for patrons and installing proper access pathways for the disabled.

But, Yaroslavsky said Thursday, the approach has been “piecemeal,” and it’s time for a comprehensive strategy.

“It’s a look-see at how this theater is going to operate at maximum benefit to Los Angeles County for the next 50 to 75 years,” the supervisor said.

“They’ve done a great job in diversifying the repertoire so there’s a lot of ethnic programming that reflects the different ethnic cultures of Southern California,” Yaroslavsky said, but this would be a good time to consider future offerings as well. “You can’t do a physical master plan for a theater without having programmatic issues in mind.”

The Ford builds its multidisciplinary seasons from a competitive application process that’s open only to artists or producers based in L.A. County. They submit proposals, and those who are chosen sign contracts allowing them to keep the lion’s share of the box office in exchange for paying production costs.

Among the coming attractions: a Salvadoran folkloric performance, world music ensemble Huayucaltia and the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony playing music by Jewish film composers.

The indoor and outdoor theaters each host about 100 performances a year, according to county budget documents. The summer season has attracted 45,000 to 57,000 people in recent years, and the indoor stage has drawn about 4,500 annually. Ticket prices have averaged \$21 to \$29, with shows playing to 51% to 59% of capacity, on average.

The county’s proposed budget for 2010-11 calls for \$703,000 to operate the Ford, with any earnings going to a special fund for developing the theater.

Adam Davis, the Ford’s managing director, says expanded parking and an eye-grabbing street presence top his priority list for future improvements. Funding all or part of what the master plan proposes would be up to county supervisors and the private, nonprofit foundation that raises money to support the Ford.

Davis said that a high-visibility entrance and signage would help fill many additional seats at the theaters, which are set far back and uphill from the street. He hopes Levin can create a design that allows for “a sense of arrival, so people know that they’re here. If I had a nickel for every time I’ve heard people don’t know the place existed, I could have funded the master plan myself.”

The limited parking for 300 cars means they must be shoehorned in, making it impossible for patrons to leave until a performance lets out. Even then, there aren’t enough spaces for everyone at well-attended shows, so the county pays to run shuttles from free overflow parking at Universal Studios, about two miles away. Parking limitations and lack of

soundproofing also mean that the indoor space, [Inside] the Ford, can't be used when shows or rehearsals are going on in the amphitheater -- an issue the plan aims to address.

Also to be addressed is the need for an office building that would allow the theater's 15 staff members to be quartered in one place, rather than scattered in cubbyholes inside the theater structure, or in a former motel on the site that's mainly occupied by office operations of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.



The master plan, to be completed by year's end, also will consider the need for production workshops and a rehearsal space that Davis said would pay off in sharpened performances. "We work with a lot of mid-level and younger organizations that don't have their own rehearsal space. To let them have one for a week or whatever will enhance the art, the experience."

It will be up to Levin's firm, which was one of 19 to apply for the job, to sort through wants and needs and suggest ways of turning them into realities. Her past projects include the \$93-million renovation of the Griffith Park Observatory and \$21 million in earthquake damage repairs and restoration at the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Hollyhock House at Barnsdall Park in Hollywood. Levin also designed a \$175-million makeover and expansion of the Autry National Center in Griffith Park, but Autry officials dropped the plan last year rather than meet a City Council requirement that they continue museum operations "in perpetuity" at their other site, the Southwest Museum in Mount Washington.

-- Mike Boehm

Photos: John Anson Ford Theatre; architect Brenda Levin outside one of her restoration projects, the Wilshire Boulevard Temple. Credit: Paul Antico (Ford); Wally Skali / Los Angeles Times (Levin)