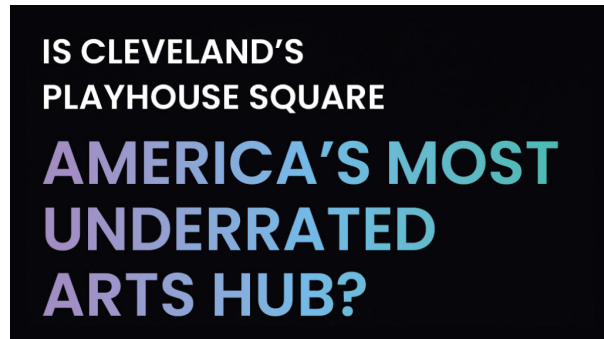


Is Cleveland's Playhouse Square America's Most Underrated Arts Hub?

4 MIN READ



The folks at Playhouse Square know how to tell the story of their past. It is featured prominently on their website and plastered on the walls outside the Helen Theater for all to see after they cross the skybridge from the Chester Avenue parking garage.

It began with the rapid construction of five theaters along Euclid Avenue from 1921 to '22, earning the area the nickname "Playhouse Square." Handsomely decorated and featuring lobbies more spacious than anything on Broadway, the venues offered a mixture of live theater and film screenings in their first several decades. But by the summer of 1969, all but one (the Hanna) had closed — victims of the automobile and the resultant age of suburbanization, which has hollowed-out the urban center of all but a handful of American cities.

By the early '70s, plans were in place to demolish the Ohio and State theaters, but an unexpected hit held off the bulldozers: Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris, the revue of songs by the Belgian cabaret star, was presented as dinner theater in the lobby of the State. Originally scheduled to run for three weeks, it played for two years, proving that Clevelanders were still willing to get in their cars and drive downtown to see a great show.

Civic and business leaders raised \$40 million to restore the theaters and consolidate management under the not-for-profit Playhouse Square Foundation. The Ohio Theatre reopened in 1982, followed by the State (1984) and Palace (1988). In the late '90s, Playhouse Square purchased and restored the Allen and the Hanna. Since then, five more stages have been added, as well as an outdoor plaza. In 2011, Cleveland Play House took up residence at the Allen and collaborated in the construction of the Outcalt and Helen theaters. The Playhouse Square empire also encompasses a handsome portfolio of commercial and residential real estate, buttressing this arts not-for-profit which boasts \$341 million in total assets.

All that makes Playhouse Square America's largest performing arts complex outside of New York City and a major point of pride for Clevelanders, who came together to rescue their historic theaters from the wrecking ball. Again, the people at Playhouse Square are very good at talking about that history, but they're a little coy when it comes to discussing the future.

One hint comes in the recent acquisition of property north of Chester Avenue, including the old Greyhound Bus Station, which the organization purchased for \$3.25 million in April.

“Buying the bus station means we increase our footprint,” said Craig Hassall, who joined Playhouse Square as CEO in 2023 following previous leadership stints at Royal Albert Hall and Opera Australia. “And we’ve just actually bought the building next door to the bus station, which was the Cleveland Institute of Electronics.” He plans to turn the latter into a rehearsal center while transforming the bus station into a versatile performance and art space.

“It might be for one-nighters of cabaret, music, and burlesque,” he speculated, “You come have a meal, have a martini, watch a show. So the idea is more bars and restaurants and more activation for the neighborhood.”

Hassall’s vision revolves around what he calls “grazing,” the notion that you don’t just come down to Playhouse Square for one ticketed event, but to enjoy a variety of activities — not all of them planned. “You might see a show. You might go for a coffee. You might hear some music. You might go to a food market in the square; and you experience the neighborhood rather than just a theater.” And that brings us back to that parking garage skybridge.

Presently, it is possible for a Cleveland Play House subscriber to drive in from Shaker Heights, park in the garage, walk across that skybridge, enjoy a performance of *What the Constitution Means to Me*, get back in the car, and drive home without ever setting foot on Euclid Avenue. This epitomizes the urban vision of Robert Moses, created in response to the age of the automobile — an epoch that is nowhere near its conclusion. Not in Cleveland.

“I find I find slightly odd, because I’m from London and in London no one drives. You just take the tube,” Hassall admitted, “but here everyone drives. It’s like most cities in America. The culture of the car is everything, so if you’re going to pay for petrol and parking, you have an expectation of something in return. So that’s where the grazing expression comes from.”

Hassall is essentially trying to foster an urban pedestrian culture — the kind New Yorkers and Londoners take for granted — within a larger society that is hugely reliant on cars. Yes, you’re still likely to drive to Playhouse Square, but once you’re parked, you can graze like you’re in Times Square.

He’s also hoping that tourists begin to recognize Cleveland as a destination on par with many of America’s more notable centers of hedonism. “It’s a bit like you might go to Nashville now for a weekend. Not because so and so is playing, but because you know that Nashville will deliver a great experience,” he said, mentioning New Orleans as another city worth emulating.

It’s going to be a long struggle to get Americans to think of Cleveland the same way they think of Las Vegas. It’s not a transformation a single not-for-profit arts organization can accomplish alone. In the short term, Hassall is asking Clevelanders to reconsider how they interact with Playhouse Square — to linger and get to know it as a neighborhood. In the long term, he might just be positioning Playhouse Square to be the centerpiece of a future Cleveland, in which cars are not viewed as essential, and neither are suburban homes — because people would rather live downtown.

In small ways, Playhouse Square is contributing to this change. In 2020, it completed construction on the Lumen, a 318-unit luxury apartment building across the street from the main stretch of theaters (Mayor Justin Bibb is the building’s most prominent resident). And the organization is currently developing 84 apartments in the Bulkley Building across Euclid Avenue, most of which will be rented — but not all. This is still a performing arts organization.

“We’re hanging on to about 12 or 13 of them, which will be expressly for visiting cast and crew,” Hassall said. “There’s going to be a gym, a yoga studio, and a communal hangout space all right above the theater. It’s going to be a real game changer for touring companies.” It could also be a refuge for the companies of Broadway-bound new musicals.

“Last year we managed to successfully negotiate a \$5 million tax carve-out for theater,” Hassall revealed. “That means we can now entice producers to commission and create shows in Cleveland that will have a Broadway life.” Broadway producers might want to seize the opportunity.

Playhouse Square claims the largest subscriber base in the country, with 38,000 active subscribers.

It seems obvious to me that the theater audience in this blue city situated in a red state is far more representative of average American theatergoers than the one drawn to a new musical in Chicago — the favored city for pre-Broadway in recent years. When so many shows now rely on tours and tourists to recoup, producers would be wise to test their shows in the heart of it all.

The changes at Playhouse Square reveal an organization placing big bets on the future. It’s not the fearful crouching that we’re seeing from so many not-for-profit theaters as they struggle to adapt to a rapidly changing landscape. And as with any organism, the ability to successfully adapt will mean the difference between survival and death. From all appearances, Playhouse Square is not only surviving, but thriving.