

Hennepin Theatre Trust to open City Center site

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[Hennepin Theatre Trust](#), which runs the historic State, Orpheum and Pantages theaters, is developing a 300-seat performance space on the first floor of the City Center retail complex in downtown Minneapolis.

The so-called New Century Theatre will hold a variety of events, from small plays to concerts to educational and corporate events.

It is an unusual move for a shopping center to convert space into a live theater venue, but an experiment worth trying considering the vacancies that have plagued City Center over the past decade, especially on the first floor.

The Theatre Trust is leasing about 12,000 square feet for the performance space, a ticket office and its headquarters.

Brookfield Office Properties, which owns the City Center, will move its property-management office from that space and into the adjacent office tower, 33 South Sixth.

New Century Theatre will have typical theatrical lighting, sound equipment and stage. It also will have upholstered chairs that can easily be rearranged.

“It’s going to be a black-box theater, with some flexibility in it,” said **Tom Hoch**, president and CEO of Hennepin Theatre Trust, which will relocate its headquarters of about 5,000 square feet of office space it leases at LaSalle Plaza in Minneapolis.

Live theater at the mall?

Hennepin Theatre Trust’s space should bring some energy to the largely bare first floor of City Center.

The organization has had great success with the theaters it operates, bringing life and vitality to Hennepin Avenue, said **David Sternberg**, senior vice president at Brookfield's Minneapolis office. He expects some of that success will help City Center.

"They're a great partner and the building is just thrilled to have them here," Sternberg said.

The theater will bring some interest and activity to the building in the evenings and add to traffic at the restaurants, he said.

With this lease, City Center's retail space is more than 80 percent occupied, up from 50 percent in 2006, the year Brookfield spent \$18 million fixing up the 370,000-square-foot enclosed mall.

Only three retailers remain from before renovation: Office Depot, Marshalls and Starbucks. The rest, including Au Bon Pain, Leann Chin, Fogo de Chao, Brooks Bros. and a Len Druskin Outlet, are all new.

Brookfield has done a great job repositioning City Center, Hoch said. "People who have not walked through City Center really need to."

Hoch would know. He's been a lifelong Minneapolis resident. He serves on the Minneapolis Downtown Council and is chairman of the Minneapolis Downtown Improvement District. Before he joined the Theatre Trust in the 1980s, he worked for the city of Minneapolis' planning and economic development department.

[Hennepin Theatre Trust](#) wouldn't move into City Center if he didn't think it was a good fit.

"I don't really feel like I'm taking somebody's hand-me-downs," he said. "I think it is the perfect place for what we want to do."

Construction on the theater will start in June and the first show will premiere after Labor Day. Minneapolis-based [Greiner Construction Inc.](#) is the general contractor. The lead architect is Minneapolis-based [Shea Inc.](#)

Hoch declined to share construction costs or financial terms of the 10-year lease deal.

Brookfield put City Center up for sale last month along with 33 South Sixth. The Chicago office of Eastdil Secured, a New York-based subsidiary of [Wells Fargo & Co.](#), is listing the property for sale. Hoch doesn't expect a sale to affect Hennepin Theatre Trusts' new space.

Moving shows from Hennepin Stages

The organization plans to shift some of the programs it previously produced at the Hennepin Stages theater to City Center.

The city sold Hennepin Stages, at 824 Hennepin Ave., to the [Brave New Workshop](#) in April for \$725,000. The sale prompted [Hennepin Theatre Trust](#) to look for a new home for Hennepin Stages' programming, such as "Girls Only" and "A Don't Hug Me Christmas Carol."

Hennepin Theatre Trust also plans use the New Century Theatre for its education and community programs, cabarets, workshops and its SpotLight Musical Theatre Program, which hands out awards to high school musical theater students from around Minnesota.

The New Century Theatre will have a sign on City Center's Hennepin Avenue entrance. It will have a Hennepin address, too, which was an important detail for Hoch because it helps tie the location to the theaters along the avenue.

The new venue's name is in honor of the Century Theatre, a former movie house that once stood where [Minneapolis Marriott City Center](#) sits today. Century Theatre opened in 1929, survived the Great Depression and several sweeping changes in movie technology, but was destroyed by a fire in 1965.

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