

The evolution of Revolution

Defunct for decades, Washington High School reopens this month as a performing arts venue – a ‘mini-Schnitz’

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Walking the halls of Washington High School in Southeast Portland, I am nostalgic about my old high school days. Portland youth attended school here from 1906, when the school was built, until the school closed its doors to students in 1981 for lack of enrollment.

One of the most notable WHS graduates, Linus Pauling, is the only person to be awarded two unshared Nobel Prizes. In 1954, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry. In 1962, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his peace activism.

Although the property has stayed in the hands of Portland Public Schools since 1981, it wasn't until recently that Washington High School's destiny began to change. You might say, it revolted.

The shift began in 2013 when Venerable Properties purchased the school from Portland Public Schools. The developer was key in the renovation of the White Stag Block in Old Town, and the Portland Business Journal named the company a recipient of its 2014 Innovation in Sustainability Award in the Green Building category.

The idea with the Washington High School project was that the venue in the middle, the old high school auditorium, would remain a performance venue and the rest of the spaces in the building would be for businesses.

I'm talking with Ned Failing, marketing and public relations director for Revolution Hall and a co-owner of the Pickathon music festival in Happy Valley. He is explaining to me the original vision of the project as we sit on the stage of Revolution Hall, surrounded by miscellaneous lighting and other production gear. I ask him about the bittersweet circumstances involved with the early days of the deal to purchase the historic Portland property.

"His story is so attached to this building and how it has come back to life," Failing tells me in reference to Art DeMuro, the Venerable Properties founder who facilitated the sale and redevelopment of the school and was instrumental in the property being sold by the school district. DeMuro died in 2012 before his dream was realized.

"His spirit is inevitably present and recognized when talking about the new life in this building," Failing said.

There are already many businesses operating inside. In fact, Failing says, all of the business spaces are rented. New Seasons' administrative offices claim the



PHOTO BY SUE ZALOKAR

From the outside, Revolution Hall looks like Washington High, the Southeast Portland school that hasn't held classes since 1981. But inside the old auditorium is a revamped concert hall with seating for about 830 people and a state-of-the-art sound system.

entire fourth floor.

When I was there last week, there was still some substantial renovation happening, but many of the former classrooms, most of them dormant for nearly 25 years, are once again home to innovation, thought and, now, a music hall and performance center.

"The room, while a perfect spot to host and receive great live music," Failing says, "... is also a great place to host a variety of performances."

Performances like a recording of Portland's own Live Wire! Radio or Dan Savage recording a "Savage Love" podcast or Mount Hood Ted Talks or a Neko Case concert. Perusing the dates already set, I'm looking forward to a lecture late this month by the original Riot Grrrl, Kathleen Hanna.

Revolution Hall is a unique space. It's a seated space like the Aladdin, but it is a lot bigger. (The Aladdin's capacity is about 600, and Revolution Hall is about 830).

"There has been an amazing attention to detail for the sound in here," Failing tells me. "It will quickly be regarded as one of the best-sounding rooms in Portland. RH has the

opportunity to feature other forms of art than music alone."

Kind of like a "mini-Schnitz," I tease. He chuckles, "A mini-Schnitz. Exactly."

Construction timing is the largest obstacle. Top on the list now is the completion of two bars, Martha's and Tthe Assembly Lounge, in time for the official grand opening with two sold-out Neko Case shows April 17 and 18.

Failing has been pleased with the progress.

"The track record has been really great so far," he says. "We are super happy."

Of course, anytime you move into a new neighborhood, you try to reach out and connect with your neighbors. The case of Revolution Hall was no different. In fact, at first, some neighbors weren't so keen on a music hall next door.

"Anyone who had this coming into their neighborhood, there might be some trepidation or skepticism about what it will be," Failing says. "We've had a great dialogue with the neighbors. We have an amazing team. And we are so dedicated to being a

part of this community."

I ask him about the success of the project to date. I'm told there are so many victories in this whole building – everything from logistics and staffing and booking the room to creating the room.

"Each one of those are monumental wins," he says. "I'm excited about the evolution of Revolution, you know?"

The vision for the near (and long) term is to book 200 or more dates and events.

Next, we go to the much-referenced rooftop event space. It is cloudy, but in many ways, it is the perfect Portland day. And the city is spread out across the landscape. I'll have to return on a day that isn't so cloudy, Failing tells me and points to where Mount St. Helens and Mount Hood would be visible on a clearer day.

I stand there flanked on one side by the city I love and on the other by the suggestion of the mountains to the north and west and wonder at the beauty that is Portland.

¡Vive la Revolution!