



Bound for Broadway

Downtown buildings to become 'cultural core'

Get ready, Eugene: A new landlord's taking over downtown, a landlord who's creative, colorful and focused on taking care of business, with an artful twist.

That new landlord, taking over block-long buildings on Broadway owned by Connor & Woolley, is the Lord Leebrick Theatre. The Leebrick plans to sell a third of its huge new digs to the Downtown Initiative for the Visual Arts (DIVA) and consolidate its own operations in the central downtown location. Anonymous "angel" investors, Leebrick Artistic Director Craig Willis said, will provide funding for the purchase price of just over \$1 million.

The recently beleaguered Tango Center occupies a large space in the old Farmers' Market building. Shaw Medical and the New Zone Gallery are also tenants in the building, and Willis said that the Leebrick expects most of the tenants to continue in the short-term. The Leebrick will use some of the space for rehearsal and a scene shop, making it possible to expand its current theater space from 94 to 110 seats, Willis added.

Leebrick board president Don Van Houten said that the theater had been looking for another building for several years. "We've outgrown our current facility, and we need to be able to expand and bring our functions together," he said. The theater company now rents its building, at 540 Charnelton, from Diamond Parking and has about two and a half years left on its lease. The administrative offices are in a separate building, and there are no dressing rooms in the Charnelton building.

Willis said that the Leebrick would use the purchase to kick off a capital campaign to raise the money needed to remodel part of the new space. Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy said, "The Lord Leebrick coming into that part of downtown is a very exciting concept." She said that she and the City Council were pleased at the idea that the area might become an arts district.

Leebrick Artistic Director Willis estimated that DIVA would buy the building it now rents "within 90 to 180 days," but DIVA's executive director, Mary Unruh, said that the purchase would happen much sooner. According to Unruh, DIVA's board has lined up private donors to fund the purchase of the 12,500 sq. ft.

building that runs from Olive to the alley partway down Broadway.

Willis said that he wants to work with other arts groups such as Sparkplug Dance (whose founder is longtime *EW* dance writer Rachael Carnes), and he also talked about partnering with the Network Charter School, the UO and LCC. His dream for the building, he said, hasn't quite settled but does involve more space for Leebrick productions, including a 125-seat theater. "Within 10 to 15 years, we could occupy the entire Farmers' Market building," Willis said. He anticipates expanding the Lord Leebrick season into the summer and having something like a coffee shop or café in the theater's lobby, as Portland Center Stage does in its remodeled Armory building.

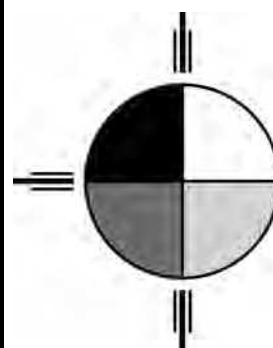
DIVA's Unruh said that she has also spoken with other individuals and arts organizations. "The cultural core is what I like to call it," Unruh said. She envisions the area replete with galleries and restaurants, and she expects the Leebrick to draw in more people. She added, "We're in the Bermuda Triangle, but this would give it a different flavor, one that's connected to the community as a whole."

The city of Eugene's option to buy the two buildings was priced at \$3.2 million a couple of years ago, considerably more than the theater will pay. "Economic conditions have changed, and that's just a reality," Piercy said. "I'm appreciative that Connor & Woolley are working with the Lord Leebrick to make this happen."

The Tango Center held a fundraiser March 14 to meet back rent after it was threatened with eviction. DJ and former executive director Greg Bryant said that he had high hopes for the new arrangement's benefits to the center. "We're interested in having a landlord who has an arts mission," he said.

Willis said the Leebrick would seek urban renewal monies for remodeling the building, whose 1920s Moorish rococo façade has been buried under plaster. Bryant said, "The main building is a gem under that bad box."

The Leebrick, DIVA and the city of Eugene held a press conference at 1:30 pm Wednesday, after the *Eugene Weekly* went to press. Look for more coverage on blogs.eugeneweekly.com and on our Twitter feed, twitter.com/eugeneweekly *EW*



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