

# Parallel for Providence

27 Jan. 1978

## to consider

### Chester Smolski

WILMINGTON, Del. — They have done it here. The Grand Opera House has nearly been restored and is now the Delaware State Performing Arts Center. A lively activity center located on the recently opened, pedestrianized Market Street Mall, the Grand is serving as a major focal point in bringing life back to downtown Wilmington.

As Providence considers the cultural and economic feasibility of buying and renovating the Ocean State Theater, it might well consider Wilmington's experience, for there are many parallels between the two cities. Unquestionably, Wilmington has demonstrated that a beautiful old building can provide the setting for a renewed vitality in the city center.

Wilmington is the largest city in the second smallest state. Its 80,000 population compares with that of Warwick. But quite different from its Rhode Island counterpart, Wilmington has a sizable downtown, dominated by high rise bank buildings and a hotel which adjoin the Rodney Square central green space. Governmental buildings also front on the Square but many of their functions are being shifted to the new governmental complex of city, county, state and federal buildings being finished. This \$50 million public investment complex is located just one block to the east of the Market Street Mall.

The exciting part of the Wilmington downtown is the Grand Opera House, with its beautifully ornate cast iron facade. This four-tier, columned structure is of the mid-Victorian Second Empire style and is regarded as one of the finest examples of the period in our country today.

Built in 1871 by the Masonic Lodges of Delaware, the Grand's stage was the second largest in the country. It quickly became a major showcase, and over time artists such as Edwin Booth, Ethel Barrymore and Providence's George M. Cohan appeared here. In 1906 came the movies, which soon replaced live entertainment. Warner Brothers took over the Grand in 1930, and the last films were shown in 1969. Neglected, deserted and vandalized, the building became a shambles and much of the cast iron facade was torn away to accommodate street level store fronts. It seemed like the end of the Grand, but the community rallied to its support.

On the occasion of its birthday, a group of interested citizens sponsored a Centennial Gala in the building, after much cleaning, to draw attention to this sadly neglected piece of architectural history. The response by the community was overwhelming. An historical study of the building was done and an economic study determined that the performing arts would be a viable use of the building. Although still owned by the Delaware Masons, the building was turned over to a non-profit community organization to operate the building for that purpose.

The original cost estimates for the entire

gutting of the building with authentic restoration was pegged at \$3.8 million. Interestingly, the city of Wilmington provided only \$100,000 of this amount, with the state coming in with \$1 million, and foundations, friends, business, federal and county providing the rest. Inflation, always it appears, pushed these costs to \$5.2 million, and some cosmetic construction is incomplete.

Although providing some performances since 1973, the Grand Opera House opened for its first full season in 1976 and has been rated as a tremendous success as a performing arts center, as a generator of considerable activity on the two year old, six block long Market Street Mall, and as a draw for suburbanites to return to the downtown once again.

Interestingly, in this city of DuPont wealth, that interest provided help only in the second year of operation. In other words, it was more than just the help of some major chemical firms which made this an economic possibility; it was the full support of the entire community, including the state, which brought this building back to life.

The performing arts are not a profit-making activity, and finances are a continuing challenge. According to Michael Gallagher, administrative assistant of the Grand, only 60 percent of the annual operating budget of \$700,000 comes from ticket sales. If Providence decides to follow the Wilmington example, it should be noted that the Ocean State's seating capacity is three times greater than the intimate 1,100-seat Opera House, and thus could secure a greater income from ticket sales.

The other 40 percent needed to meet expenses comes from a variety of sources, both public and private. While raising this money hasn't been easy, the effort has brought in the Minnesota Symphony, Bill Cosby, Marcel Marceau, Donna Fargo and the Irish Cabaret of Dublin, among others, to this community. The Children's Series, theater, dance and other activities provide the variety of entertainment also requiring community support.

Another source of income is created by renting space in the building for a bookshop and a gallery, both of which emphasize the performing arts, and a delightful gourmet restaurant, Le Grand Tier, heavily used by the Opera House patrons.

Restored to the multi-purpose use for which it was intended over 100 years ago, the Wilmington Grand Opera House, today a Registered National Historic Place, vividly demonstrates that a community-based center for the performing arts, situated in a building that recaptures the elegance of a bygone era, is a viable cultural and economic opportunity. It has helped revive a former dying downtown and the lesson for Providence should be quite clear.

Chester E. Smolski, director of Urban Studies, Rhode Island College, is touring several cities in the "Sunbelt."