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Worcester 'Aud' reopening, but just for tours



The lobby of the closed Worcester Auditorium. T&G File Photo/Rick Cinclair



This aerial photo shows the Worcester Memorial Auditorium in 2013. T&G File Photo/Rick Cinclair

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"A lot of people have nostalgia for the Aud, but a lot of people, particularly young people and new people to Worcester, don't know about the Auditorium and its history," said City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. "The thought was, let's share ... Let's pry the door open a little bit, and share this little bit of our history and prime the pump, get people thinking about the Aud again, talking about the Aud again, and sometimes it gets something going that you had hadn't anticipated."

Memorial Auditorium, also called "the Aud," was dedicated in 1933 as a monument to the veterans of World War I, and the building has hosted wrestling and boxing matches, musical acts, Christmas parties and religious services, among other events.

But the city-owned Classic Revival building with art-deco embellishment has been essentially shuttered for about a decade as renovations at other local venues have provided other stages for concerts and events. The city is still maintaining the building, however; even in its mothballed state, the building costs the city more than \$100,000 to heat and maintain each year.

The city has long tried to find another use for the building, which Preservation Worcester documents as having a 25,500-square-foot main auditorium with a capacity of 3,508 people, a 10,500-square-foot Little Theater, with seating for 627, and the 14,400-square-foot Memorial Hall that boasts a 30-foot-tall by 60-foot-wide mural by American painter Leon Kroll. The building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The City Council rezoned the property earlier this year to entice redevelopment and issued a "Request for Interest" in early June to see if any developer might be interested in renovating the property. The request requires that Memorial Hall be preserved.

City spokesman John Hill said the city received two letters of interest, which are being reviewed.

Meanwhile, the city and Preservation Worcester are teaming up to show off a building where even a coating of dust and peeling paint cannot diminish its art-deco grandeur.

"Like the exterior, which is very grand and expertly finished, the interior is the same quality," said Susan McDaniel Ceccacci, the education director at Preservation Worcester. "Ideally, whatever the new use is, the hope is that it would be something that would enable it to display the fine materials and fine features of the building and that it would continue to operate as Memorial Hall."

The free tours will be held for the next three Sundays, from 12:30 to 2:30 p.m. Food trucks will be outside. The tours will be led by Preservation Worcester volunteers, and there will be exhibits showing historical photos and other memorabilia from the auditorium's heyday.

"People like to get into places they usually can't get into, so it should be attractive," said Preservation Worcester Executive Director Deborah Packard.

Most notably, an organist will be present to discuss and play the 1933 Kimball organ.

Mr. Augustus and Ms. Packard both said it was unlikely that a single developer would take on the redevelopment of so large and ornate a building, particularly in one project. Both also agreed that Worcester has several venues that would compete with the auditorium as a venue. But Mr. Augustus said that however long it takes, the city is committed to seeing the building revived.

"That is a true stunning building on Lincoln Square," said Mr. Augustus. "It won't be easy, it won't be quick, but we're committed to (revitalizing) it because the building is too important to the city to not do that."