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In Cleveland, a global environmental first

Gordon Square Arts District to be home to world’s first theater
featuring super-insulated ‘passive’ design

CLEVELAND (May 6, 2013) – The new home of Near West Theatre, soon to be under construction in the Gordon Square Arts District, will be the first performance hall in the world to use a super-insulated “passive building” design. Commonly found in Europe but rare in North America, the method will reduce the theater’s energy consumption by at least 35 percent, its energy bills by more than $1 million over 50 years, and still keep a full, brightly lit auditorium just as comfortable as in a conventional building.

It will also be the third of three theater projects in the Gordon Square neighborhood, where, already, the restored Capitol Theatre has been showing movies since 2009 and Cleveland Public Theatre is updating the oldest standing theater in Cleveland. Near West’s brand-new 275-seat performance space at West 67th Street and Detroit Avenue, which will get added energy bang from rooftop solar panels, will scream not only earth-consciousness but also the kind of sustainability that means this West Side nonprofit – itself a hybrid of professional direction and community-volunteer energy – plans to continue changing the lives of young and old participants for generations to come. The first performance in the new theater is planned for the fall of 2014.

Passive building elements will appear early in the construction process, currently scheduled to begin July 1, 2013. An 8-inch-thick insulating barrier will be laid under the basement slab. A trench of geothermal tubing will surround the foundation. Walls and roof will be a foot thick and virtually airtight, with a conventional steel frame surrounded by additional wood framing, gypsum sheathing and mineral wool insulation. The walls will be twice as thick – and the insulation value (R40) twice as high – as those of a conventional building.

Once the structure is finished, audiences will be kept comfortable by a “heat recovery ventilation” system, pumping fresh air in, stale air out, and, in the process, transferring heat between the two.

Based on predicted rate increases and an engineering firm’s conservative estimate of 35.2 percent energy savings, the theater expects to avoid electricity costs of at least $1.2
million over 50 years by using passive design. An even more-generous estimate by passive technology experts pegs energy savings at 44 percent, which would avoid at least $1.5 million in expenses over the same period. And it could get even better over time as standard, hot theatrical lamps are gradually replaced with cool, energy-efficient LED lighting.

Developed in Germany (and known there as Passivhaus), the passive building method is used widely in Europe for homes and in public buildings, such as supermarkets, schools, clinics and recreation centers. In the United States it is used rarely, and mostly in homes. In 2011, thousands of visitors to the Cleveland Museum of Natural History saw the method on display in the PNC Smart Home, which has since been moved and is a private residence.

A theater presents special challenges, with its heat-generating lights, a stage filled with dancers and singers, and seats densely filled with warm bodies. Comfort is a particular concern for Near West, which has been producing “extraordinary theater with ordinary people” since 1978 in a third-floor ballroom next to St. Patrick’s Church in the Ohio City neighborhood—including sweaty summer shows without air conditioning. The designer of the new 24,465-square-foot theater, Richard Fleischman + Partners Architects of Cleveland, assures Near West Theatre-goers they will be comfortable year-round, thanks to the super-insulation, paired with a heat-recovery system in the theater’s basement that will regulate temperature and humidity, zone by zone, throughout the building. Fleischman developed the design in consultation with passive building specialist Adam Cohen of Roanoke, Va., Karpinski Engineering of Cleveland, and Panzica Construction of Cleveland, the construction manager. Near West hopes to seek prototype certification for the building from Passivhaus Institute U.S.

Beyond the savings realized through the passive building elements, more will come from a 75,000-watt generating system powered by solar panels to be installed by an investor on the theater’s south-sloping roof. This will provide a portion of the building’s electricity at 1 cent less per kilowatt-hour than the electricity drawn from the regular utility grid.

Near West has been aided by a special gift earmarked for the passive method from philanthropists Chuck and Char Fowler, among the $2 million they have provided for the building through the Gordon Square Arts District capital campaign. “Chuck and Char really care about sustainability of our theater’s work and of the earth,” said Stephanie Morrison-Hrbek, Near West’s founder and executive director. “We are extremely grateful for their leadership, and for the amazing outpouring of support we’ve received for this project from so many sources. We’re working to be careful stewards of these gifts and more that are still coming in, and we’ll continue to look for creative ways to minimize the future costs of operating this facility.” She also expressed appreciation for the leadership of GSAD Campaign Co-Chairs Tom Sullivan, Albert Ratner and Richard Pogue; for lead gifts to the Near West Theatre portion of the campaign by Tom and Sandy Sullivan, Jim and Anne Schoff, Eric Kennedy and the Gund Foundation; and for the partnership of GSAD Board Co-Chairs Pogue and David Doll, Cleveland Public Theater’s Raymond Bobgan, Jeff Ramsey of the Detroit Shoreway Community
Development, City Council Member Matt Zone, and GSAD President Judi Feniger in the ongoing, district-wide capital campaign.

“This passive building is great news for our neighborhood,” said Zone, who represents Ward 15. "Near West Theatre’s programs, housed in this beacon of environmental sustainability, will add to the quality of life on the West Side and beyond and to Gordon Square’s profile as a national leader in economic development and the arts.”

The theater has reached 87 percent of its portion of the goal within the larger $30 million Gordon Square Arts District capital campaign, which concludes Dec. 31, 2013. Near West then plans additional fundraising to finish teaching and café-performance spaces on the new building’s lower level and purchase lights, rigging and curtains for the main stage.

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Since 1978, Near West Theatre has engaged youth and people of all ages from Cleveland’s Near West Side and beyond in positive activity that taps into their energy, allowing them to discover their creativity and present themselves as contributing members of the community. Professionally led but with diverse volunteer actors from all walks of life, the theater uses large-scale musicals to build relationships through an intense, challenging and transforming process. They share their unique life stories and experiences to find their own voices and make personal connections with the production and each other. With productions for participants of all ages as well as specifically for children and youth, the theater offers low ticket prices ($8 for adults, $6 for children, with a special voluntary $20 “Star Seat”) to keep great live theater affordable to the community. Near West Theatre receives ongoing support from the Ohio Arts Council, Cuyahoga Arts and Culture, and Greater Cleveland Community Shares.  www.nearwesttheatre.org

Near West Theatre, Cleveland Public Theatre and the Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization are partners in the collaborative Gordon Square Arts District, a powerful combination of housing, new businesses, the arts and neighborhood beautification that is sparking the development of new jobs for residents. To date, the project has helped infuse more than $500 million in economic development in the surrounding community.  www.gordonsquare.org

[EDITORS AND REPORTERS: Interviews are available with Near West Theatre and Gordon Square Arts District leaders as well as passive building experts. Call Hans Holznagel, Near West Theatre, 216-961-9750, or Judi Feniger, Gordon Square Arts District, 216-961-4242, ext. 239.]