

Historic Seattle Steps in to Save Washington Hall

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A leaky drain spout waters a shock of ferns clinging to the southern wall of Washington Hall, a century-old building on 14th Avenue and Fir Street. The roof leaks. The plumbing is failing. The boiler hasn't worked for years in **one of the last remaining mid-sized performance venues in Seattle.**



"The thought of it going through another winter with the roof leaking and deteriorating is kind of sad," says Mark Blatter, Director of Real Estate Development for the preservation nonprofit Historic Seattle.

But after widespread speculation that Washington Hall would be demolished to make way condos, **Historic Seattle is negotiating with the owners, Sons of Haiti, to buy the building.**

"We have yet to agree on a price," says Blatter, who notes there are some logistical challenges to negotiating with the Sons of Haiti, a member-based group that must vote to ratify decisions. (The group did not return calls to comment.) But, he says, "I can't imagine that they won't cooperate in resolving those issues."

Washington Hall looked doomed in spring of 2007—while Seattle's real estate market was still strong—when a developer offered \$2 million for the site,

planning to demolish the building and build condos. But the recession has brought good fortune. The developer withdrew his bid. And neighbors nominated the building as a historic landmark, noting its heritage of hosting African-America performers, such as Billie Holiday and Jimi Hendrix.

From the 1970 to the '90s, Washington Hall was home to On The Boards, and over recent years it has been a weekend venue for dance performances and raves. The a lodge room on the first floor holds 110 people and a second floor ballroom holds 350 people.

“Those are **exactly the kinds of spaces we have lost over the last few years** in the real estate market,” says Jim Kelly, executive director of 4Culture, a nonprofit that supports arts groups in King County. For example, when a developer purchased Oddfellows Hall, a rent hike pushed out Velocity Dance Center and Freehold Theater.

If all goes well, Historic Seattle plans to rent the building to a couple arts and humanities production companies, including the

Central District Forum for Arts & Ideas, which,

ironically, is usually forced to hold its performances on Capitol Hill. “When we need a space, we spend a tremendous amount of time negotiating locations and rents,” says, Stephanie Ellis-Smith, director of the CD Forum, which would



move into Washington Hall. “We are reclaiming the African American heritage for the Central District, regardless of who moves in and out of the neighborhood.”

Before the building is ready for tenants, Historic Seattle estimates the building requires an additional \$8 million in donations and federal tax credits to pay for seismic retrofits and restorations.

The city’s Landmark Preservation Board gave an initial nod to preserving the building in November, and it has set a **public hearing** for 3:30 p.m. on January 7 in room 4060 of the Seattle Municipal Tower.