THE HILBERRY GATEWAY PROJECT:
A Bold Vision for the Future

A new and revitalized complex to reflect the caliber of student talent and expertise
The Hilberry Gateway Project
An Initiative of Wayne State University

Since 1963, the Hilberry Theatre has been a vital part of the Wayne State University landscape. Located on Cass Avenue in the former home of the First Church of Christ Scientist, the theatre provides a training ground for actors, designers, stage managers and theatre managers—a place where they can hone their craft and grow from talented artists to skilled professionals.

Throughout its 50-year history, the Hilberry Theatre has cultivated a symbiotic relationship with the Detroit community. Featuring a full company of graduate students, the Hilberry welcomes local patrons to be among the first recipients and arbiters of performers’ success. In turn, the Hilberry contributes to the growing vibrancy of Midtown Detroit. An anchor at the south end of campus, the Hilberry serves as a gateway to the arts and all that Wayne State has to offer as an institution of higher learning and culture.

With the support of alumni, friends, corporations and foundations, Wayne State University is undertaking the Hilberry Gateway Project, a $48.6 million initiative to strengthen the theatre’s important role in Midtown and upgrade and expand the current facility to establish a new performance venue for theatre, dance and arts-related events. Built for the 21st century, the complex will open as a destination for visitors and members of the Wayne State community, reflecting the quality of art that defines Wayne State, the College of Fine, Performing and Communication Arts, and the Maggie Allesee Department of Theatre and Dance.
Wayne State University is deeply grateful to the Kresge Foundation for its support of the Hilberry Theatre feasibility and planning study.

The Hilberry Gateway Project, an initiative that will help strengthen and secure the theatre’s important role within the Detroit arts community, emerged as a direct result of the foundation’s support.
“With the exception of our directors and guidance from instructors, the Hilberry Theatre is entirely run by graduate students. Everything from the sets and costumes to the box office and promotions—and of course the acting—is entirely student produced. I can tell you that these ‘hands on’ opportunities are not only unique, but essential to our artistic and professional growth as theatre practitioners.”

— Andrew Papa, acting
The nation’s first graduate repertory company, the Hilberry Theatre was the brainchild of Professor Leonard Leone, director of theatre at Wayne State University from 1945 to 1985. Professor Leone conceived the Hilberry and its company of graduate students as a place where performers, designers and managers could develop their skills in front of a live, paying audience. He believed that repertory theatre provided the best learning experience for developing professionals, and a rotating performance schedule became the company’s signature format.

Clarence B. Hilberry, Wayne State’s president at the time, took responsibility for securing a dedicated facility for the theatre. Under his leadership, the university acquired the First Church of Christ Scientist. Constructed in 1917 and designed by the architectural firm of Smith, Hinchman and Grylls, the church reflects a Classical Roman Ionic style. The university refitted the building to function as a theatre in the early 1960s, adding tin and uni-strut walls, along with a modified thrust stage modeled after the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. Wayne State also installed the Studio Theatre below the main level as a more intimate venue dedicated to showcasing theatre performed by undergraduate students and directed by graduate students.

In recognition of President Hilberry’s efforts to establish the graduate repertory company in a home of its own, the theatre now bears his name in his honor.

The Hilberry Theatre is deeply connected to the local community, providing educational resources for teachers and making its productions accessible to area school groups and community organizations. Since the Hilberry’s founding, the support of Detroit residents has bolstered its success. Most notably, The Understudies, a formal group of Hilberry Theatre patrons, has played an integral role in ensuring the theatre’s prominent place in the Detroit arts community. The Understudies also donates and raises funds for the company.
The Hilberry’s 45-member company is composed of actors; costume, lighting, and scenic designers; stage managers; and theatre managers. Selected from nationwide auditions and interviews, they work under the direction of theatre faculty and staff and receive training toward a master of fine arts. Hilberry alumni have gone on to make outstanding contributions to theatre throughout the United States and around the world.

The workhorse of live theatre at Wayne State, the Hilberry has hosted an average of seven plays per season since 1963. The theatre has featured more than 5,600 performances, and more than 2 million patrons have walked through its doors. As a result, the facility is showing its age. The basement is prone to flooding, and a lack of space means that designers and stage crews must transport set pieces and costumes between the storage building on Hancock and the theatre on Cass. The condition of the building presents comfort challenges to audience members, actors, and theatre designers and technicians. Additionally, space limitations and the near constant use of the stage have prevented the Hilberry from taking advantage of mixed-use opportunities in collaboration with the Detroit arts community, such as open-mic nights and poetry slams.

A new, revitalized theatre, constructed for theatrical design and production in the 21st century, will attract the most talented and skilled students to its world-class education and performance program. Upon graduation, these students will be even more prepared for successful careers in the arts, ready to continue the legacy of the Hilberry Theatre.
“The best part is that I get to have my career in the state where I grew up, the state where my family is. People tend to think of New York, Chicago or L.A. as the places where you have to be, but I am constantly meeting Hilberry alumni who are top-notch, working artists here in Michigan.”

— James Kuhl, MFA ‘09, Artistic Director, Tipping Point Theatre, Northville, Michigan
Every season, the Hilberry Theatre brings as many as 40,000 people to Midtown Detroit, who attend performances as well as patronize restaurants, visit local shops and add foot traffic to an increasingly vibrant section of Cass Avenue. Recognizing the importance of the Hilberry Theatre to Midtown, the Kresge Foundation awarded a grant to Wayne State University to undertake a planning and feasibility study examining the Hilberry. The Hilberry Gateway Project emerged from this initiative.

Wayne State will launch the Hilberry Gateway Project as a three-phase renovation and construction effort to create a theatre complex that combines new and existing structures. Once complete, the new complex will feature three performance venues—a main theatre, a flexible performance stage and the Studio Theatre. It will provide a home for the Hilberry Theatre company and the dance program in the Maggie Allessee Department of Theatre and Dance at Wayne State, in addition to serving as a vibrant hub for culture and the arts in Midtown Detroit.

The Hilberry Gateway Project will begin with phase one, the construction of a new 500-seat main theatre on the corner of Cass and Forest, adjacent to the current venue. The space will feature a modified thrust stage with appropriate wing space and a fly system. In addition, the theatre will include special effects technology; improved acoustics and audio-visual equipment; and state-of-the-art lighting technology. With these equipment upgrades, the company will be able to pursue more complicated production schemes and smoothly transition between productions.

The main theatre facility also will include new dressing rooms, make-up rooms, production accommodations and box office. Larger facilities for guests will be particularly important. These areas are the front door to the theatre, informing patrons’ first impressions and promoting a professional and positive theatre-going experience.

Occurring simultaneously will be phase two, the construction of adjoining scenic, scenic art and costume studios, as well as scenery storage areas. Completing phases one and two together will ensure that Hilberry productions can continue uninterrupted. When phase two is finished, designers will be able to build sets on site and move pieces from storage to the stage efficiently and safely.
“When we set up my design for Hay Fever, I stood back with the model I had prepared the spring before and just soaked in the fact that all the planning, construction, painting and hard work culminated in an almost exact recreation. It turned out so well, even better than I had hoped, and Jason (the lighting designer) did some really amazing things as well. It was such a spectacular feeling of accomplishment.”

— Rudy Schuepbach, scenic design
Once the new theatre is completed, phase three will commence to reconstruct the current Hilberry stage into a 200-seat flexible performance theatre. The venue will allow for a variety of productions, including performances by the Wayne State dance program, guest lectures, master classes and experimental theatre. The flexible theatre also will contain modern technology, a commons lobby and appropriate multi-purpose rooms for rehearsal and collaborative projects with community groups. The lower-level Studio Theatre also will be renovated so it can continue to serve as a learning laboratory, where productions are entirely student performed and directed.

The historic Mackenzie House, currently located next to the Hilberry Theatre, has been included in the planning process. As part of the Hilberry Gateway Project, the Mackenzie House will be carefully moved to a new location on Forest Avenue.
### Hilberry Gateway Project Cost

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“I have been dreaming about going to the Hilberry for over ten years, and I have always looked at it as a castle on a cloud, a magical place where actors learn and perform. I still feel that way after getting in—it’s like a playground of all of my favorite things.”

— Vanessa Sawson, acting
A NEW HOME FOR DANCE

The Hilberry Gateway Project will provide much needed performance space for the dance program in the Maggie Allee Department of Theatre and Dance at Wayne State. Currently operating out of Old Main, the program’s facilities belie its stature and 100-year history. Although fine for practice, the dance studios in Old Main cannot accommodate the level of interest in the program’s performances. Potential attendees are often turned away because of a lack of space.

The Hilberry Gateway Project will increase visibility for the dance program, providing a high-caliber venue for public performances. The 200-seat flexible performance space will offer ample seating for parents, patrons, donors and interested members of the community. In addition, the space will enable the dance program to feature master classes and lectures, with room for demonstration by visiting artists and observation. The program envisions being able to welcome prospective applicants, as well as high school teachers and students to watch high profile events.

Significantly, the new theatre complex will allow Wayne State to once again host the American College Dance Association, formerly the American College of Dance Festival. The event attracts more than 700 dance students from all over the country. Hosting the event will garner national attention and visibility for the Maggie Allee Department of Theatre and Dance, helping to recruit talented new students. The new performance facilities for dance will enhance the department’s image by reflecting the high caliber of dance students at Wayne State.
A DESTINATION FOR THE ARTS IN MIDTOWN

Upon completion of the Hilberry Gateway Project, the new theatre complex will further solidify the Hilberry’s role as a point of entry to Wayne State and a destination for residents and visitors to Midtown Detroit. More than a place for theatre, the complex will feature a constellation of opportunities for artistic pursuit and appreciation.

The complex’s proximity to the heart of Wayne State’s campus will help ensure its pivotal role in student life. In addition, glass front walls and an open design will serve as an invitation to students, patrons and members of the community passing by on Cass Avenue. At night, the complex will light up the area, and foot traffic will contribute to a bustling neighborhood at Wayne State’s south end.

The Hilberry Gateway Project will help revitalize and expand the Hilberry to reflect its caliber of student talent and expertise. Support for the project will strengthen the arts at Wayne State University and in the city of Detroit.