

# A passion for preservation: Enck discusses Orpheum, other projects

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CHAMPAIGN — For architect and University of Illinois graduate Chris Enck, preservation isn't just about history — it's about sustainability.

"If you think of a building the size of Burnham Mansion, all of those materials — and then of course all the other buildings that were torn down near it — it's just such a waste when something could be reused," he said. "So I'm always interested in exploring ways to reuse buildings and reuse materials so that they can be kept out of the landfill."

One of Enck's latest efforts has involved turning the Orpheum — once a theater and later a children's museum — into an event venue.

The Orpheum Children's Science Museum grew out of an effort started in 1989 to save the theater, which opened in 1914 but had sat empty since 1986. It opened in 1994.

The museum shut its doors in March of 2020 amid the pandemic and closed permanently a few months later.

The building was purchased by "346 N Neil, LLC" in August of 2021. While Enck is listed as the registered agent, he said that purchasing and renovating the property has been a group effort that is "too big for any one person to do on their own."

“There were several of us that kind of came together, because when we heard that the museum was going to move out of the building — it’s such an important building to the community,” he said. “So many people have memories of coming to the theatre or coming to the building as a museum. So we were excited about kind of being able to pick up where (the museum) left off and continue to hold different types of events here.”

Enck described his role as that of a building manager. This includes overseeing building projects and working with the city and the Preservation and Conservation Association to receive the necessary approvals for renovations.

He estimated that the first event held at the Orpheum under new management was 40 North 88 West’s 2022 fundraiser. The venue later held a public open house in spring of 2023.

He added that restoring the property is an ongoing process, with the Orpheum scheduling renovations in between events.

Some of the changes have included lighting and ceiling improvements, putting a removable, modular floor system in the theater to provide a level surface for events, heating and cooling improvements, making the front room more usable as an event space and work to restore the marquis.

The Orpheum isn’t the only local property that Enck is involved with. He has also worked on preserving lofts and office space on Chester Street that once belonged to local professor and architect Jack Baker.

Chester and Locust LLC, which also has Enck as its registered agent, purchased the property in February of 2023.

According to UI archives, Baker worked closely with Professor Margaret Erlanger and the Department of Dance to “integrate performing art and architecture.”

“Nowhere was this merging of art and architecture more evident than in Baker’s loft at 71 1/2 E. Chester Street in downtown Champaign,” the university archives state. “Baker purchased the building in 1957 and transformed the former wagon shop into a living space where performance, art, and architecture melded together. Baker frequently opened this space to students and local community members, hosting seminars, dance and theater performances, poetry readings, exhibitions, and receptions. Baker’s loft constituted one of the earliest examples of adaptive reuse in Champaign.”

Enck said that two spaces at the site are available for short stays through Trautman Short-Term Rentals. One is Baker’s performance loft on Chester Street, while the other is a loft on Locust Street that Baker adapted from the rear storage space of a late 19th century commercial building.

He added the group on this project is working to see if the performance loft can be listed on the National Register of Historic Places, given its significance as an early example of adaptive reuse.

Additionally, Enck is also the registered agent of groups that own 801 W. Oregon St. and 701 S. Busey Ave. in Urbana. According to the city of Urbana, the Oregon Street Property was the original residence of Joseph Royer, a prominent local architect, and the Busey Avenue home was built by Royer as a “mother-in-law” cottage.

When asked about his professional career, Enck said that he does most of his work with REVIVE Architecture in Evanston.

“We do mostly façade restoration projects, historic buildings and newer buildings as well,” he said. “But that’s my background, really, is that sort of problem-solving aspect of figuring out how to repair and restore buildings, mostly from a technical perspective.”

Undertakings such as the Orpheum are side projects, he said.

When asked about why he has continued to be involved with local preservation efforts, Enck said that studying architecture at the UI was a “great experience”, and he’s enjoyed working with the local community.

“There seems to be a lot of interest in preservation and support from the cities of Champaign and Urbana,” he said. “And it’s neat to just kind of have that tie-in with architecture students at U of I as well, to be able to kind of have that connection between real-world projects and what’s going on in school as well.”