

Behind the Curtain

Wareham Hall Episode I

Reintroducing a Landmark Theater
and Its Journey Through Design



Anderson Knight Architects
January 2026

Image Courtesy of the Riley County Historical Society & Museum

Courtesy Riley County Historical Society & Museum, Kansas

A Historic Theater. A Modern Vision.

In the heart of downtown Manhattan, Kansas, sits a building that has quietly watched the city evolve for nearly a century and a half.

Wareham Hall, originally constructed in the early 1880's, is now at the center of one of the most ambitious and meaningful historic theater renovations in the region. What began as a vision to restore a beloved landmark has grown into a multi-year journey of architectural research, design innovation, and community collaboration, all deeply entwined with a respect for the past.

This series, "**Behind the Curtain**", is our way of pulling back the curtain and sharing that journey with you.

What This Series Is:

Over the next 24 months, our team at Anderson Knight Architects (AKA) will be publishing a sequence of in-depth episodes documenting every major chapter of the Wareham Hall transformation. From feasibility studies and historic preservation decisions, to programming, structural solutions, detailed refinement of interior spaces, and construction challenges.

Each episode will explore not only **what** we did, but **why** we did it.

Our goal is simple:

To contribute meaningful insight to the field of theater architecture while telling the real story of what goes into creating a truly remarkable project.



A Team Built for Wareham Hall

Wareham Hall is not the work of a single firm or a single vision. It is the product of a deeply invested, highly specialized design team assembled specifically for the complexity and importance of this project. In total, the Wareham Hall effort brings together ten collaborating companies and more than forty designers, engineers, and specialists.

But this project is not defined by the size of the team. *It is defined by the level of care.*

From the earliest site walks and feasibility studies to the shaping of the final performance spaces, every decision has been made with intention, respect for the building, and a commitment to the community Wareham Hall serves.

We have crawled through tunnels, crab-walked through trusses, documented fragile historic details, debated sight-lines and acoustics, tested materials, modeled design options, and refined countless iterations. We did this not because it was required, but because Wareham Hall deserves it.

Ultimately, when the doors open, the quality of that effort will be felt in every seat, every stair, every note of music, and every shared moment inside these walls. This building will not simply function — it will welcome, inspire, and bring people together. That is the result of a team that believed Wareham Hall was worth doing right.

**Care is not a byproduct of this endeavor.
It is *the* design principle.**

Why Wareham Hall Matters

Wareham Hall has carried the story of downtown Manhattan for nearly a century and a half. It has witnessed generations of performances, gatherings, celebrations, and everyday moments that define what it means to belong to a place. This renovation is not about freezing that history in time. It is about allowing the story to continue.

All across Kansas and throughout the Midwest, there are hundreds of similar historic theaters whose stories are quietly ending. They're sitting empty, under-used, and slowly forgotten. Their marquees go dark. Their seats collect dust. Their role in community life slowly fades.

But here, in Manhattan, something profoundly different has happened. This community — business owners, civic leaders, donors, artists, students, volunteers, and neighbors — came together around a shared belief: that Wareham Hall Matters. Not because it was easy, or inexpensive. And not because the path forward was obvious or without challenge.

Wareham Hall matters because it is woven tightly into the identity of downtown Manhattan. It's a part of how people remember growing up here. It's a part of how visitors experience this city for the first time. And it will continue to tell Manhattan's story long into the future.



What You'll Learn Along the Way

Throughout this series, we're pulling back the curtain to give you a front-row seat into the process, complexity, challenge, collaboration, foundation, and purpose in revitalizing Wareham Hall.

Whether you've ever fallen in love with an old building, wondered how places like this come back to life, care about the design process, or simply want to know more about Wareham Hall, **this series is for you.**

PROCESS

How major design decisions evolve, from first ideas through countless iterations to final solutions.

COMPLEXITY

What it truly takes to restore a historic theater while meeting modern performance needs.

CHALLENGE

The real challenges behind complex projects that don't show up in finished photographs.

COLLABORATION

How collaboration across disciplines shapes better outcomes for both buildings and communities.

FOUNDATION

Why early investigation and documentation matter more than almost anything that follows.

PURPOSE

What it means to design with both history and future audiences in mind.

The Journey Ahead

Over the next two years, our team will be sharing the story of Wareham Hall as it has unfolded. We'll be releasing an episode of Behind the Curtain each and every month. We will be highlighting the real work behind the drawings, the conversations behind the decisions, and the many moments that have shaped this project long before the first piece of steel is set or the first seat is installed.

This series is our way of opening up that process and bringing the community into the journey that has already been underway for several years.

So stay with us.

Wareham Hall is about to step back into the spotlight.
We invite you to follow along.

Behind The Curtain **Anderson Knight Architects**

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