Behind the Curtain

Wareham Hall Episode III

Understanding the Building Before the Commitment

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March 2026

Image Courtesy of the Riley County Historical Society & Museum

An Introduction

Before we could design the future, we had to understand the building as it truly exists.

Before design begins, before budgets are finalized, and often before a building is even purchased, there is a critical step that determines whether a project has a realistic path forward.

That step is **feasibility**.

Why Feasibility Matters

A feasibility study is not about optimism or vision. It is about understanding reality. It asks whether a building can support a proposed use, what challenges exist, where risks lie, and what opportunities might not yet be visible.

For historic buildings in particular, feasibility matters because assumptions are costly. These structures were designed for different eras, different technologies, and different expectations. What appears possible at first glance can quickly become complicated once systems, codes, accessibility, and performance requirements are considered.

The Foundation for Everything That Followed

At Wareham Hall, feasibility was never treated as a formality. It was treated as a responsibility. Before any major commitments were made, the team set out to understand the building as it truly existed, not as it was hoped to be. This set the direction for everything that came next.

This episode focuses on that work — and why it matters.

What a Feasibility Study Is (and Isn't)

At its core, a feasibility study is a structured investigation of a building's capacity to support a proposed vision. It is often misunderstood, which makes it important to first clarify what it is not.

It is not design.

It is not construction documentation.

It is not a guarantee.

Rather than providing final answers, it establishes the conditions for informed decision-making.

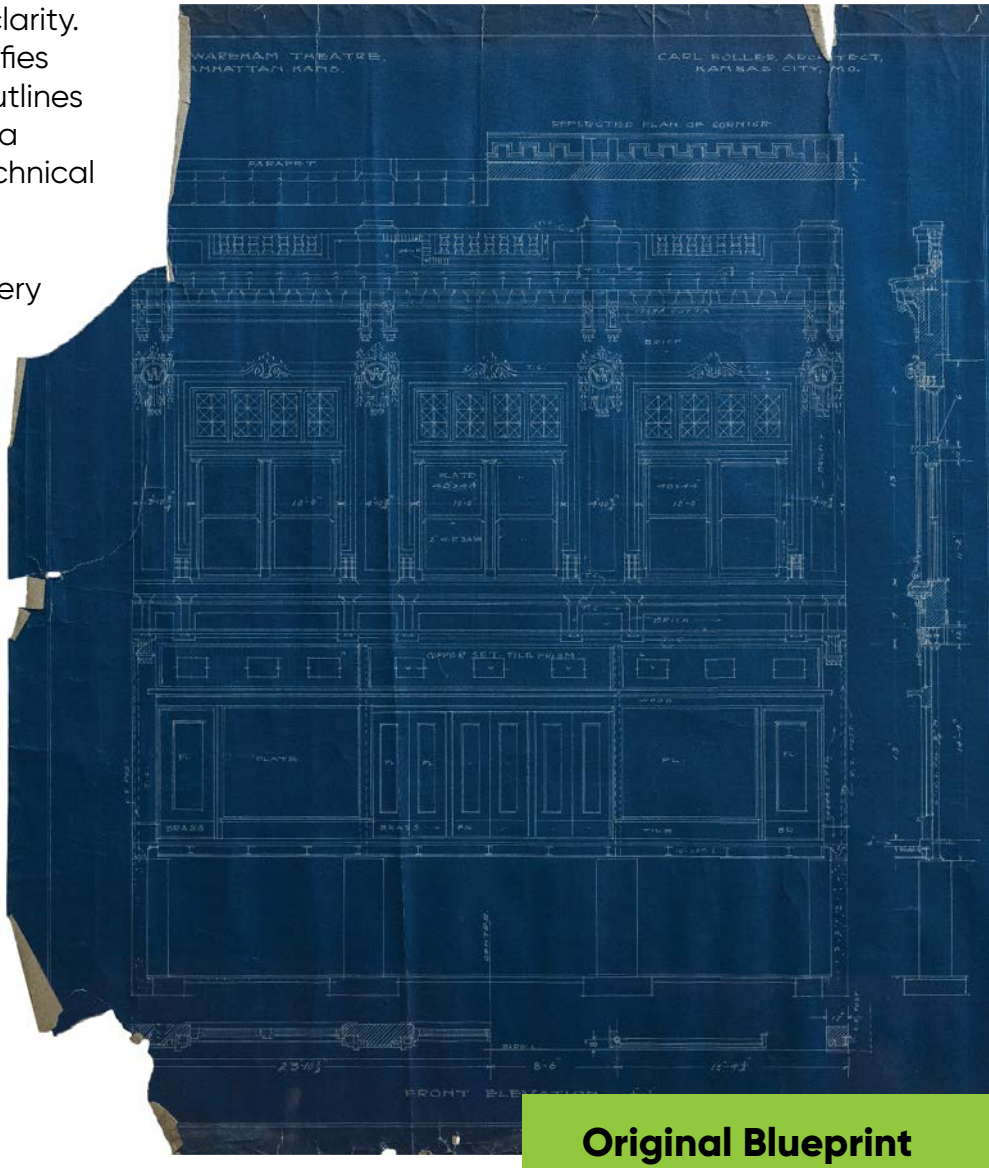
A feasibility study provides informed clarity. It evaluates existing conditions, identifies constraints, tests assumptions, and outlines what is realistically achievable within a building's physical, regulatory, and technical limits.

A feasibility study does not resolve every detail or answer every question. Rather, it creates a reliable framework for decision-making. It replaces guesswork with information and allows owners, communities, and project teams to move forward with confidence.

For Wareham Hall, the feasibility study served as the foundation for everything that followed. It allowed the team to assess the building honestly, weigh opportunities against challenges, and establish a shared understanding before moving into design.

In that way, feasibility was not a hurdle to overcome.

It was the starting point.



Original Blueprint

The Questions We Asked

At Wareham Hall, the team approached feasibility as a multi-layered investigation, examining the building from several interconnected perspectives. Each area of study contributed to a more complete understanding of what the building could support and where careful planning would be required.

Space and Program Feasibility

The first question was fundamental: ***Can the building support the intended use?***

This analysis looked at spatial organization, circulation, audience flow, support spaces, and adjacencies. It evaluated how existing rooms and volumes aligned with theater functions and where limitations would require creative solutions.

Understanding the space early with the digital spatial scan helped establish realistic expectations for capacity, layout, and experience.

Structural Feasibility

The structural analysis focused on the condition and capacity of the existing building.

This included evaluating load paths, structural integrity, and areas where reinforcement or intervention might be required. In a historic theater, structure is not just a technical concern. It directly influences where systems can run, how spaces can be shaped, and what changes are possible.

The goal was not to redesign the structure, but to understand its strengths and limits.

MEP Systems Feasibility

Mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems are often the most challenging components to integrate into historic buildings.

At Wareham Hall, the feasibility study assessed the condition, capacity, and location of existing systems and evaluated how modern performance requirements could be met within a constrained historic envelope.

This analysis helped identify where systems could be reused, where upgrades would be necessary, and where coordination would be most critical moving forward.

Historic Constraints

Because Wareham Hall is a contributing structure within a historic district, preservation considerations were central to the feasibility process.

The team evaluated which architectural elements must remain intact, which areas could accommodate sensitive modification, and where opportunities existed to thoughtfully adapt the building for modern use. This work required balancing regulatory requirements, preservation best practices, and the functional needs of a working performance venue.

Understanding these parameters early ensured that future design efforts would respect the building's historic character while still allowing it to evolve.

Other Considerations

Beyond core systems, the team evaluated several factors that directly affect the building's long-term viability and user experience.

Accessibility and life-safety requirements were reviewed alongside current code implications to understand where the historic building aligned with modern expectations and where thoughtful intervention would be required.

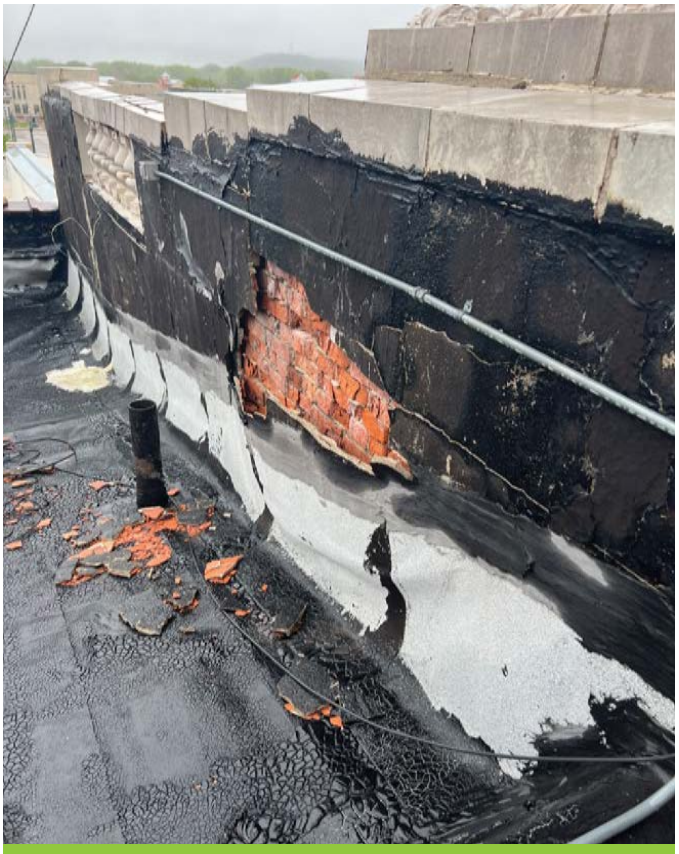
Acoustic analysis was conducted to evaluate how the existing volume would support performance use.

The team also studied stage volume constraints, including width, height, and spatial clearances, to confirm the building could realistically function as a contemporary theater venue.

Individually, each of these considerations matters. Together, they define whether the building can support its intended purpose.

A meaningful feasibility study is defined by the questions it asks.

Existing HVAC Fan



Existing Roof System Failure

What the Feasibility Study Revealed

By the conclusion of the feasibility study, the team had developed a clear and grounded understanding of Wareham Hall.

Where the Building Showed Promise

The analysis confirmed that the building could support its intended future, but not without thoughtful coordination and targeted intervention. Like many historic theaters, Wareham Hall presented a mix of inherent strengths and age-related challenges that would shape the path forward.

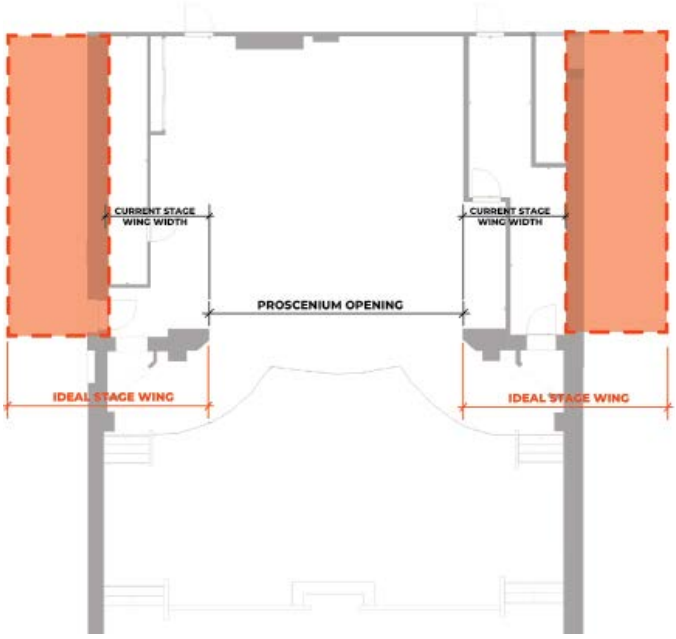
In several areas, the building demonstrated encouraging resilience. The primary volumes and structural framework remained fundamentally sound, and key mechanical equipment, including the original large-format HVAC fan, was found to be operational despite its age. While modern systems will ultimately replace and augment this infrastructure, its condition provided valuable insight into the building's underlying durability.

Where Intervention Would Be Needed

At the same time, the study brought important realities into focus. Localized roof system failure at the southern facade parapet had allowed water infiltration into portions of the masonry wall, requiring targeted repair and envelope improvements. In the basement, areas of steel

Feasibility does not eliminate complexity. It makes it *visible*.

Existing Concrete Degradation



Stage Wing Constraints

beam and concrete footing degradation were identified and documented for reinforcement.

These conditions are not uncommon for a building of this era, but identifying them early allowed the team to plan appropriate corrective strategies.

Code and accessibility requirements also required careful consideration. Over time, regulatory expectations have evolved significantly, and the historic building must now accommodate modern life-safety and accessibility standards that were not part of its original design. Identifying these gaps during feasibility helped establish a realistic scope for future upgrades.

Spatial constraints emerged as another defining factor. The existing stage width, while workable, is notably tight for contemporary performance needs. This limitation does not preclude successful operation, but it does require thoughtful planning and long-term strategic thinking. As the project evolved, expanding backstage and wing capacity became an important opportunity area that would influence future decisions.

From Unknowns To Understanding

None of these findings were surprising. What the feasibility study provided was clarity.

It clarified where the building offered flexibility and where it demanded precision. It revealed where investment would be required and where existing assets could be leveraged. Most importantly, it allowed the project team and ownership group to move forward with a shared understanding of both the building's promise and the responsibility required to realize it.

The feasibility study did not eliminate complexity. It made the complexity visible.

And in doing so, it provided the clarity needed to take the next step.

The Journey Continues

By the end of the feasibility process, Wareham Hall was no longer an unknown.

In the next episode of Behind the Curtain, we follow the team as the work shifts from high-level analysis to close observation. What emerges is a clearer, more complete picture of Wareham Hall and the realities that would shape the work ahead.

The work of truly knowing the building was just beginning.

Behind The Curtain
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