

Theatre Under the Stars to build new arts, education facility in Midtown's Ion District

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Theatre Under the Stars plans to build a new education and arts center in Midtown.

TUTS has seen a lot of growth in its new works development program and both of its year-round theater schools, said Hillary Hart, executive director of TUTS. Demand is high for programming and rehearsal space between the music room and two studios TUTS has at the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts at 800 Bagby St. downtown. Simply put, TUTS was competing with itself for its own space in the organization's existing footprint, Hart said.

TUTS has also wanted to bring its two theater schools, Humphreys School of Musical Theatre and The River, under one roof, Hart said. The River, a program providing arts education to individuals with disabilities and their siblings, currently holds its programming at the Metropolitan Multi-Service Center at 1475 W. Gray St.



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Hillary Hart is executive director of Theatre Under the Stars in Houston.

"When we started talking about bringing River students over to 800 Bagby, when we started talking about new work development and self-producing more work each and every year — you can't do that with three rooms," Hart said.

To continue growing and supporting artists in the Houston community, TUTS plans to build an entirely new education and arts center in the Ion District in Midtown, a more than 16-acre district being developed by Rice Management Co. The district is anchored by The Ion, an "innovation hub" with coworking, office and events space for startups, corporate partners and more.

TUTS wants its Midtown facility to be flexible and have space for students, artists, nonprofit partners and more, Hart said. That means including large rehearsal studio space, medium rehearsal studio space and classroom space. TUTS is looking into including a 300-seat flexible studio theater that could be used for original programming, student-produced works and community engagement events. However, the design and development process is ongoing, and plans are subject to change, Hart said.

"You may need a large studio for rehearsal of a major dance piece, or you might just need a small vocal coaching room in order to privately teach students," Hart said. "What we're intent on is creating a facility that supports the work that's already happening in that amazingly vibrant cultural district."

Hart said TUTS is working closely with Rice Management Co. to identify the appropriate location for the new education and arts center in the Ion District. She anticipates that the TUTS facility will be included in the first phase of development of the Ion District.

"We are delighted to welcome the educational and outreach programs of TUTS to the Ion District," said Ryan Levasseur, managing director for Rice Management Co. "The district's purpose is to be a vibrant urban environment of social immersion and inclusion that engages people with each other and with the city through the arts, nature, food, science and technology. The students and outreach partners of TUTS will add to the vibrance and energy gaining momentum here."

TUTS will continue to hold its main stage professional productions of Broadway shows at the Hobby Center.

"The productions in our mainstage season will still be on the Sarofim stage," said TUTS Artistic Director Dan Knechtges.

"However, we are bursting at the seams, and we need to meet the community's demand for programs that only TUTS provides."

After 18 months without ticket sales due to the Covid-19 pandemic, TUTS kicked off its 2021-2022 season in early October with "Rock of Ages." The season will continue with "Sister Act" starting on Nov. 2.

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