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SETTING A GRAND STAGE - \$10-million Orpheum Theatre facelift peels away tacky
makeover of the 1970s

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It's doubtful the Orpheum Theatre looked this good when it first opened in 1921.

A just-completed \$10 million renovation by Hammel Green and Abrahamson for the Minneapolis Community Development Agency has brought back the downtown theater's Beaux Arts facade, the charming terra cotta wall in the vestibule, the lobby ornaments and the original warm color scheme of maroon, blue and gold. But whimsical touches including a blue-sky ceiling in the main hall have been added.

The theater certainly didn't work as well in 1921 as it will from now on. The former vaudeville house now has a stage enlarged by 20 feet, plus new lighting, extra dressing rooms two new loading docks to accommodate Broadway's biggest blockbusters, like "Miss Saigon," scheduled to open Jan. 14. New technical systems, new rest rooms, rebuilt seats and handicapped facilities make it more workable.

When the city of Minneapolis bought the theater in 1988, the Orpheum was a pit. The walls were a dingy off-white. Black velour with twinkle lights covered the semi-circular lunettes where plaster reliefs used to be, and bare "bug-eye" bulbs hung from the plaster ceiling domes. A black granite ticket office testified to the tacky remodeling of the 1970s. Restrooms were way too small.

The Minneapolis City Council's interest in revitalizing Hennepin Av. as an entertainment street had already set in motion the renovation of the nearby State Theater, and the Orpheum had potential for what the State lacked: a deep stage that could hold the mammoth sets needed for extravaganzas like "Miss Saigon." The city agreed to finance the renovation, issuing bonds to be paid back with a \$2 surcharge on tickets for the Orpheum and State.

The first phase of renovation - enlarging the stagehouse, adding on the dressing room, renovating restrooms and making the theater accessible - began last January. Aesthetic improvements like cleaning the facade and restoring the lobby were to be made in a second phase - until workers made some surprising discoveries. Behind the plain walls in the vestibule they found the terra cotta wall, 85 percent intact. A laborer knocked through a layer of plain plaster and found plaster sculptural reliefs of griffins and urns. Originally probably off-white, they are now bright blue, Pompeian red and gold leaf.

Four tons of plaster and hundreds of gallons of paint later, the lobby has walls painted to look like marble and wooden door frames painted to look like mahogany. Bronze, silver and aluminum leaf accent the warm color scheme of maroon and gold. Glass chandeliers hang from breathtaking ceiling domes. With decades of tacky remodeling undone, the redone Orpheum will be beautiful as well as useful.

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