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The Pantages gets a dramatic facelift

Once an ugly duckling, the beauty of the original 1916 playhouse reached out and grabbed everyone from plaster workers to City Council members.

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Author: Linda Mack

For decades, the Mann Theater was Hennepin Avenue's ugly duckling. The original 1916 Pantages playhouse was buried inside the unsightly Stimson Building, had a plain facade and, after a 1960s remodeling, retained little of the gorgeous interior decoration that Seattle architect Benjamin Marcus Priteca had lavished on it.

When the Minneapolis City Council approved the theater's \$8.93 million renovation in 2000, everyone expected a quick and dirty job: Clean up the auditorium, install a new lobby and make it look good.

Along the way, the beauty of the original building reached out and grabbed everyone from the plaster workers to the council members. Restored with loving care, the interior of the Pantages (which reopened Nov. 8) has become the loveliest of the city's three Hennepin Avenue theaters.

Now, even the architects who spent two years on the project have trouble remembering exactly what the theater used to look like. John Hecker and Ginny Lackovic of Hammel, Green and Abrahamson (HGA) do recall the battleship-gray paint that covered the walls, the ceiling and even the art-glass ceiling monitor. The skylight dome that hangs below the roof had survived intact.

When the project began a year ago, the interior ornament seemed to be gone, except for a small part of the proscenium arch that frames the stage, friezes of faces on the balcony fronts and the violin and lute reliefs on the side walls.

In a 1961 ``modernization,' ' owner Ted Mann had stripped anything that protruded, put wallboard over the plasterwork garlands and lyres and hung heavy drapes to cover the denuded walls. Yet, under the draperies, ghostly outlines of the decoration could be traced on the water-soaked walls. In some places, the ornamentation resurfaced when plaster-workers chipped away the covering.

Still, the initial plan was to restore what was there and fill in the rest - until another discovery was made. In an attic corner that wasn't under the leaking roof, workers found boxes full of original drawings of the interior plasterwork: the 36-foot columns, the pilasters, the elaborate cartouche over the proscenium, even the exit signs. Instead of imagining what the auditorium looked like, the designers could see it.

There was no turning back. The architects redesigned some areas, and the City Council raised the budget. The plaster workers from Custom Drywall and St. Paul Decorating and Fabricating, the construction crew from Penn-Co, the painters from Colorstyles Commercial Painting and everyone involved gave it their all to

create what you see today: a lovely cream-and-gold auditorium punctuated with a touch of blue.

Stripped of the dark gray paint and restored by stained-glass artist Travis Stevens, the monitor is a beauty. The canvas murals that surrounded it weren't restored, but a lovely pumpkin-gold paint on the dome sets off the Kokomo glass. The auditorium's subtle paint scheme, devised by Tony Heinsbergen, son of the original painter, creates a more elegant feel than the State or the Orpheum. Four chandeliers stored in the Orpheum's basement add the perfect touch.

HGA, the Minneapolis Community Development Agency and the Historic Theatre Group, which will book shows at the Pantages, all wanted to create a delineation between the historic auditorium and the new lobby. Its harvest gold tile columns, backlit glass bar and steel framing indeed provide a stark contrast. The marquee and facade also are contemporary.

But the auditorium is a joyous surprise. Extra efforts also created architectural character on the formerly bland mezzanine. An ornamental ceiling was reproduced, and walls boxing in the side stairs were knocked out to reveal the original railings and open up the space.

Hecker and Lackovic added a couple of final fillips. They kept one stairwell wall as it was, to give patrons a visual reminder of the theater's decay. They also left revealed a couple of spots showing the original paint scheme. And they replaced two missing plaster faces on the balcony frieze with plaster masks of themselves. Masterminds of an architectural resurrection, they've earned their place in the history of the Pantages.

- Linda Mack is at [lmack@startribune.com](mailto:lmack@startribune.com).

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