

# Refurbishing theater was no simple act

By Roger M. Showley

STAFF WRITER

September 4, 2005

The resurrection of the 77-year-old North Park Theatre wasn't just a matter of applying a fresh coat of paint, plumping up the seats and turning the lights back on.

The \$8 million job, completed over the last 14 months, meant virtually rebuilding the entire two-story structure at University Avenue at 29th Street from the outside in and the basement up.

Kelly Tyler, project superintendent for Wheelihan Construction of San Diego, said he wondered at times if it would have been easier to demolish the whole thing and rebuild it from scratch.

"It was very challenging not to destroy the building in the process," Tyler said. "Everything that functions in this building was newly constructed."

On a tour of the building last month as construction was nearing its end, project architect Richard Bundy described the difficulty of incorporating modern building-code requirements into a building erected in 1928 by Emil Klicka with a \$350,000 budget.

Outside, the theater's original storefronts have been restored to make way for businesses. At the east end of the building, a Starbucks Coffee shop is scheduled to open at the end of the month, while on the west end, the Fifth & Hawthorn Restaurant will move in early next year under a new name. In addition to the 5,800 square feet of retail space, the building contains 6,700 square feet of office and rehearsal space on the second floor and dressing rooms in the basement.

The missing finials on the roof were reconstructed based on historic photographs. The exterior yellow color was matched to samples buried deep below the most recent coat of brown paint. A new marquee similar to the original was installed in the front.

But the most important exterior changes were a new box office and entrance on 29th Street and conversion of the original lobby on University into an extension of the planned restaurant.

Bundy said the change was prompted by two goals – providing enough retail space to make a new restaurant successful and meeting handicapped-access requirements for the auditorium.

"The front two-thirds could comply (with the access regulations), but the back third was so steep that



B'Hend and Kaufmann Archives

The theater, still thriving in the mid-1950s, lost much of its luster as retailing moved to regional shopping centers.

we couldn't make it comply," Bundy said.

The new entrance was also part of a plan to downsize the theater from about 1,100 to 787 seats, the size considered most economical for local theater groups.

The reconfiguration made possible a new lobby; a state-of-the-art production studio; and extra restrooms for theater patrons.

But much of the old feel of the North Park Theatre has been retained in the redesign. The eight chandeliers were restored by Gibson and Gibson, a Chula Vista lighting company that has worked on many local and national historic properties. The 30-foot stage was extended 12 feet, and a second proscenium arch built, along with a spacious orchestra pit. The San Diego Opera oversaw installation of new rigging in the fly loft to handle scenery changes.

The original seats were repaired and upholstered by David Traino, owner of Bill's Furniture Upholstery, about a block away. He set aside nearly all of his regular contract work last spring to strip and paint the seats, replace the original hay-and-straw stuffing and sew on Teflon-treated upholstery designed to take years of wear and tear.

As he dismantled the seats, Traino came across mint-condition, decades-old pennies and quarters, silver-certificate dollar bills and other artifacts he has retained as curiosities.

Perhaps the most celebrated feature of the theater, its original Wurlitzer theater organ, has been recovered from the family of the late Bill Barker, an organ enthusiast who bought it in the 1950s. It will take about \$100,000 to put the organ in working order behind the elaborate Italian Renaissance-style screens flanking the stage.

"If they use it as a theater organ, that's great," said Connie Reardon, president of the local chapter of the Theater Organ Society.

---

■ Roger M. Showley: (619) 293-1286;  
[roger.showley@uniontrib.com](mailto:roger.showley@uniontrib.com)



NANCEE E. LEWIS / Union-Tribune  
The current restoration is bringing back many design features, including the original neon sign that identified the theater as part of the Fox "West Coast" chain.



NANCEE E. LEWIS / Union-Tribune  
Also returning are the pawnlike finials on the parapet.