

A GEM SHINES ANEW

By Eric Myers

Anyone who entered City Center a mere three months ago would have had a hard time recognizing it. Virtually every part of the interior was hidden by partitions and scaffolding, behind which scurried an army of more than 140 technicians, contractors and conservators. What's now been unveiled is a City Center that can finally assume its place as a jewel in the city's cultural crown.

City Center's reopening on October 25 marks the end of a lengthy gestation process. "We began the renovation in April 2010, but we've actually been planning it for several years," said City Center President & CEO Arlene Shuler. "We've achieved most of our original goals, and it's been really exciting to see the theater transformed."

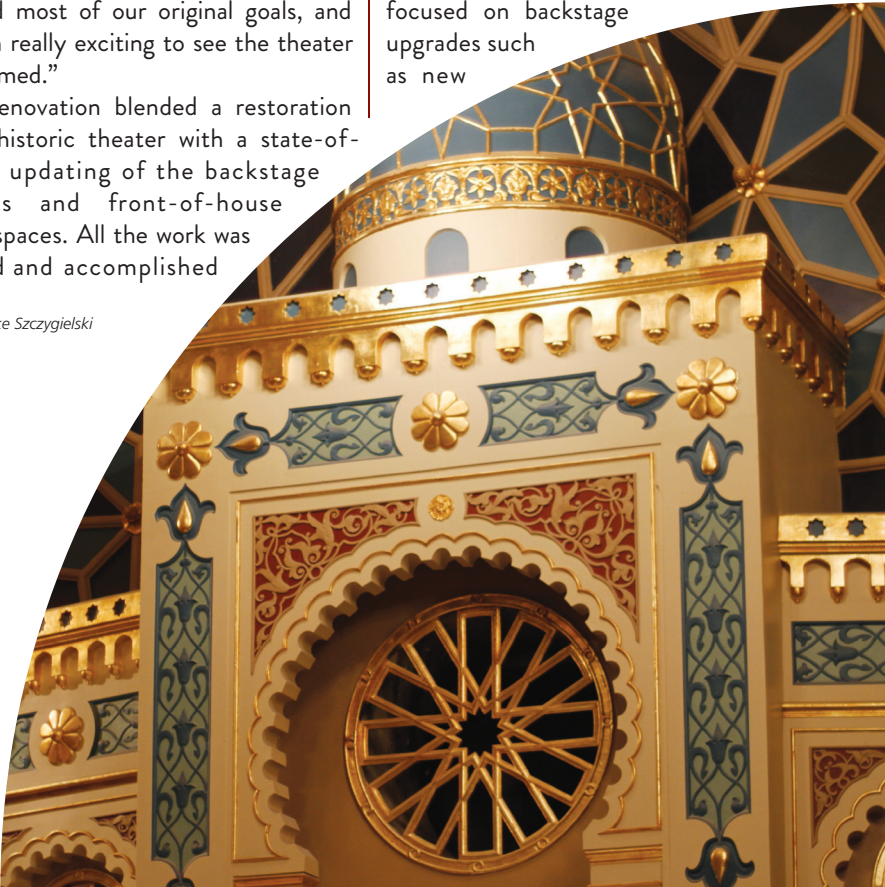
The renovation blended a restoration of the historic theater with a state-of-the-art updating of the backstage facilities and front-of-house public spaces. All the work was designed and accomplished

by Ennead Architects (formerly Polshek Partnership), which has a strong track record in the field of historic preservation and adaptive reuse, perhaps best exemplified by their restoration of Broadway's former Biltmore theater, now Manhattan Theatre Club's much-admired Samuel J. Friedman Theatre.

"Our goal was to bring it up to the 21st century," said Duncan Hazard, Partner-in-Charge of the renovation. "But we also wanted it to still be City Center – this great, unique hall that New Yorkers have known for many, many years."

The first phase of the project, which took place from April to September of 2010, focused on backstage upgrades such as new

Photo by Luke Szczygielski



rigging, dressing rooms, and a freshly sprung stage for dancers. The second and final phase, which lasted from March to October of this year, brought the most dramatic changes – most notably the colorful auditorium in which you now sit.

When the building was constructed in 1923, it was designed as a meeting hall for the Ancient Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine. The stage had been conceived as little more than a platform to be used for speakers and ceremonies. But, like most Shriner's lodges and Masonic halls of that era, the auditorium was elaborately decorated, its walls and domed ceiling boasting an eye-popping, exuberant mosaic of color. All of that was lost around the midway point of the twentieth century, however, when such décor was considered excessive, and the auditorium was painted over in off-white.

Hazard and his associates stripped away layers of paint to reveal the original jewel-like tones that lay underneath. "The new color scheme is only a slight adjustment from the original," Hazard said. "Our historic paint analysis showed that the original Twenties scheme was a little darker, a little browned-out in that sepia range that was so popular then. We kept that same spirit and tried to freshen it."

The auditorium's seating layout has also changed for the better. The Grand Tier and balcony have been re-raked and their rear walls brought forward; seats have been widened and legroom increased. This has resulted in the elimination of about 500 seats, mainly from areas where sightlines were already compromised.

In the front of the house, the magnificent terra-cotta tilework of the outer lobby gleams with new luster, and the east wall is now home to a bar that will be open for service during intermissions. The box office lobby's travertine floor has been extended into the inner lobby, giving a flow-through feeling that renders both lobbies as one.

And the inner lobby has gained an additional seven feet of space with the repositioning of the dividing wall between the lobby and the auditorium.

That wall is now punctuated with a striking video gallery that will display curated video works through a partnership with the New Museum. (Don't be surprised if you see the image of a dancer leap from screen to screen.) Beyond the wall, the auditorium entrances have been moved to either side, more ground-floor restrooms have been added, and another elevator has been installed.

Up in the Grand Tier lobby, conservators spent the summer months painstakingly recapturing the brilliance of the ceiling decorations and Arabian Nights-style frescoes. Razor blades, Q-tips, and even toothbrushes were among the tools used to reverse years of dulled varnish and insensitive retouching, resulting in a true conservator's restoration.

The building's exterior also got a face-lift. "The façade has a whole new lighting scheme, which emphasizes the arch and the colored terra-cotta entrance tiles with the lancet windows above," said Hazard. "When you're on Seventh Avenue or Sixth Avenue now and you look down 55th Street, this will be a kind of billboard for City Center. There's a whole sense of light, and presence, and excitement to it." Adding to that presence is a large marquee extended over the sidewalk, with lighting and heaters built into the underside. The effect is that of bringing the lobby into the street.

The extensive labor that has gone into every aspect of City Center's renewal has not come cheaply – particularly during the recession – but it has been accomplished on time and on budget. "There's a real feeling of pride throughout the organization," Shuler says. "Right before we closed this past spring, the ushers hugged me and said, 'This is going to be so exciting – we can't wait to come back!'"