

Solutions Database

#1406: Cutler Majestic Theatre Boston, Massachusetts

Vision And Perseverance

At the time of its opening in 1903, *The Boston Globe* called the Majestic Theatre, a Beaux-Arts opera house designed by John Galen Howard, "the most beautiful playhouse Boston has yet seen." The Majestic was also noted for its technical innovations: cantilevered balconies that provided unobstructed sightlines from every seat in the house, and electric lighting designed as an integral part of the building rather than in imitation of gas or candle lighting. Under Lee and J. J. Shubert's direction, the theater evolved with the performing arts and entertainment industries, presenting opera, theatrical productions, vaudeville, and motion pictures, including the Boston try-outs of Rodgers and Hart's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and the Gershwins' *Of Thee I Sing*.

In 1955, the Shuberts sold the Majestic to Sack Cinemas, which ran it as the Saxon movie theater for nearly 30 years. By the time Emerson College acquired the Saxon in 1983, it was showing X-rated films, had fallen into severe physical decline, and faced imminent demolition -- a metaphor for the derelict condition of Boston's Theater District. The College embarked on a comprehensive restoration campaign that culminated in 2003 with the re-opening of the theater as the Cutler Majestic Theatre at Emerson College, with a completely restored exterior -- including the terra-cotta facade and the priceless stained glass windows -- and a gleaming gold interior. Today, the Theatre is as beautiful and inviting as it was when it opened 100 years ago.

1983–1989: purchase, cleanup, repair, reopen

Vision and perseverance have been the hallmarks of Emerson College's stewardship of the Majestic Theatre (formerly the Saxon) since the college purchased the theater in 1983. From the beginning, Emerson committed its own resources to the Majestic, and enlisted hundreds of volunteers, dozens of private donors, 16 foundations, more than 10 corporations, and city and federal governments in the 20-year restoration effort. The college envisioned a restored theater for its own use and as a venue serving the nonprofit performing arts community.

The sight of the Augean theater lobby and auditorium that first greeted college administrators and restoration consultants would have extinguished all but the strongest vision. But the college persevered: administrators, performing arts faculty, and alumni volunteered to remove debris so that restoration could begin. Between August 1988, and April 1989, the college completed phase one of the restoration, which brought the heating, cooling, electrical, and plumbing systems up to code, and the building into compliance with fire, landmark, and handicap access requirements. The terra-cotta facade was repaired and the stage floor rebuilt. The college's production of *George M!* returned live theater to the re-named Emerson Majestic Theatre for the first time in 49 years.

1989–2000: audience growth, economic revival, fundraising, restoration

During this period, the Majestic hosted more than a hundred productions by nonprofit organizations that had no other venue in downtown Boston, greatly increasing the audience for local, non-commercial theater, dance, and music performances. The presence of the Majestic, lighted night after night, and the establishment of Emerson's "Campus on the Common" in the Theater District brought new life to the area, encouraging the development of restaurants, housing, and related commercial activity -- including the \$500 million Millennium Place -- that continues to this day.

Founded in 1991, the Friends of the Majestic Theatre, composed of performing arts patrons and members of the Emerson community, continues to be a steady source of support for the Majestic. The college garnered additional support from individuals, corporate, and foundation sources, particularly the J. Paul Getty Trust and The George B. Henderson Foundation in Boston, as well as from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Massachusetts Cultural Council. In 1993, the terra-cotta facade and the William de Leftwich Dodge paintings in

the lobby were painstakingly restored.

In 2000, the college assembled the team that would complete the restoration of the Majestic Theatre. The architects had done adaptive re-use projects for Emerson for ten years, and would design and oversee both the restoration and the construction of the 11-story performance and production center to be built immediately behind the Majestic. Dressing rooms and green rooms for the theater would be built below grade in the new building with connections to backstage. The theater systems consultant would also work on both buildings. The painting and stained glass companies had been involved in earlier restoration assessments of the theater. The goal: to restore the Majestic to its original splendor, while upgrading its technical systems.

2001–2003: a 21st century theater inside a 19th century landmark

A leadership gift of \$2 million from Ted Cutler, the chair of Emerson's board of trustees, and his wife, Joan, enabled the final phase of restoration to begin. Another round of major gifts and grants, including from the U.S. Department of Education, together with college funds propelled the project forward. In April 2002, the Majestic closed for 13 months to permit uninterrupted work in the theater. The plaster grape arbors, pomegranates, and leafy vines; the 5,000 replica light fixtures; the marble, *scagliola*, *marezzo*, tile, and brass; the seating and carpeting inspired by 1903 designs; the stained glass attributed to Tiffany and Company -- all slowly emerged from decades of dirt and neglect. For patrons, the theater was outfitted to modern standards of comfort and safety: increased seating; improved legroom; expanded restrooms; additional lobby areas with more food and drink amenities; and improved heating and cooling. For artists, new dressing rooms and 21st century stage systems were installed. When the re-named Cutler Majestic Theatre at Emerson College opened its doors in May 2003, John Galen Howard would have had difficulty telling it from his original creation.

Emerson College's vision, perseverance, and commitment of \$14.8 million over 20 years to restore the Majestic has resurrected an American Beaux-Arts masterpiece, assured the future of the college's performing arts programs, contributed to the economic re-birth and social vitality of the Theater District, and strengthened the Greater Boston Arts community of which the college is a part.

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