

September 2018

Properties

NORTHEAST OHIO'S MONTHLY

REALTY, CONSTRUCTION & ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE

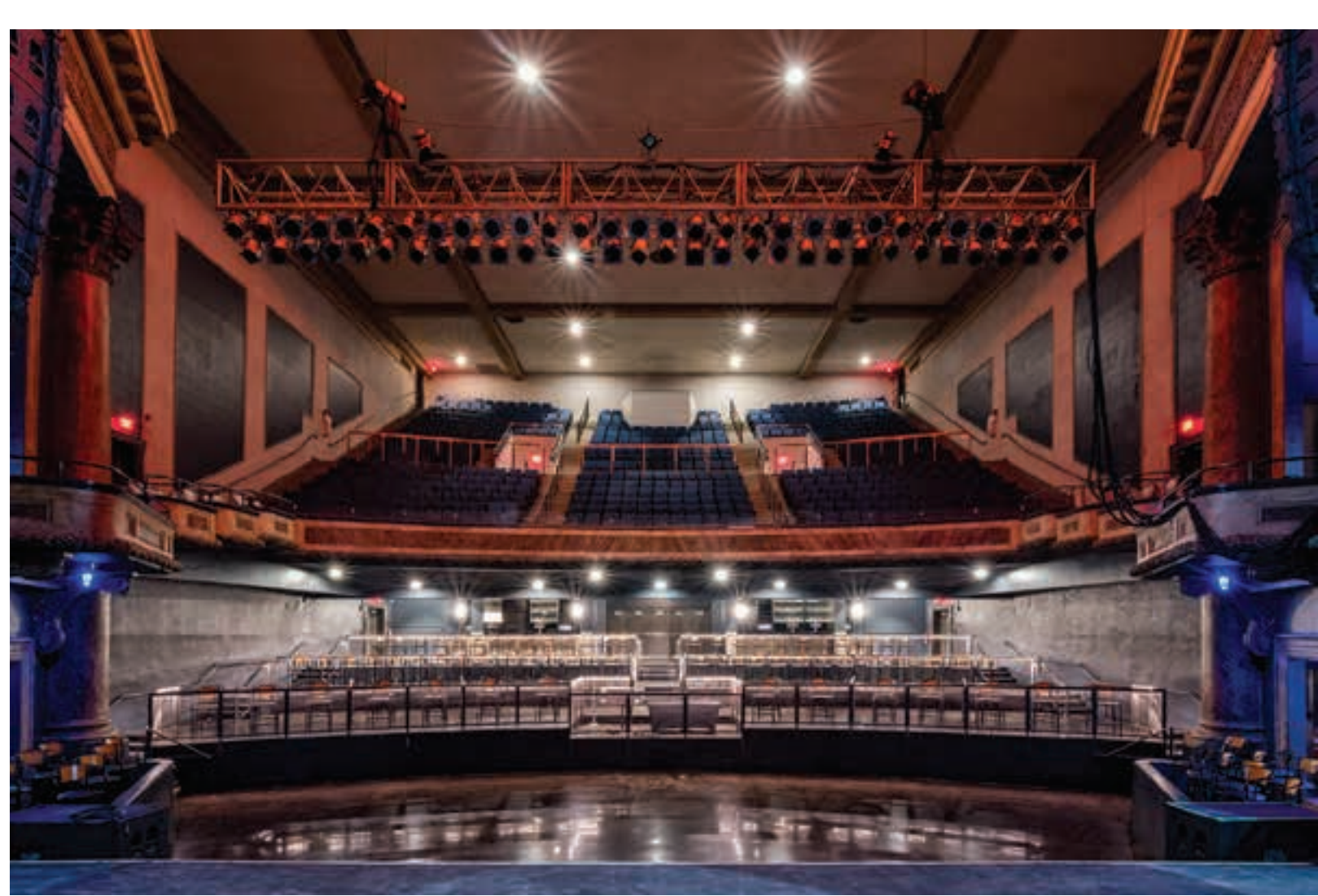
Encore Performance

Agora Theatre and Ballroom
renovation mixes history,
state-of-the-art technology



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Encore Performance

Agora Theatre and Ballroom renovation mixes history, state-of-the-art technology

By Bob Sandrick | Photos by Sergiu Stoian

Initially, the recently renovated Agora Theatre and Ballroom on Euclid Avenue in Cleveland was to include a new, contemporary-looking entry lobby. That plan changed after early demolition work unveiled an architectural gem that would change the entire project.

Workers ripped off black plywood that hid the lobby's original walls and a linoleum-covered wood-framed deck on the floor. They found a sloped floor and walls made of colorful tiles, installed when the building was first constructed in 1913 as the Metropolitan Theatre opera house.

After a little research, it was determined that the tiles were crafted by The Grueby Faience Co., a ceramics firm that operated in Massachusetts in the late 1880s and early 1900s. The tiles featured Grueby Faience's calling card – a non-glossy matte cucumber green glaze.

The discovery caused AEG Presents, the Los Angeles-based firm that pur-

chased the historic Agora last year, and its designer, LDA architects in Cleveland, to rethink their design of the building. They decided to play up the lobby's historical character and extend it throughout the theater.

"When you find something like that, which nobody does anymore, you preserve it," says Justin Miller, general manager of AEG Presents. "From my perspective, we're obligated as stewards of the building to preserve a find like that. It's irreplaceable."

The renovated Agora celebrated a grand reopening on July 19. The project, which cost more than \$3 million, included upgraded sound systems, a

resurfaced theater stage, improved stage-lighting grids and control panels, and remodeled dressing rooms. New and additional bars and 564 new cushioned balcony seats were installed.

Nuts-and-bolt repairs included upgraded electrical and plumbing components, rebuilt restrooms and a refurbished marquee. For the first time, the building has air conditioning. Six new glass doors lead into the theater and a new reflective roof improves energy efficiency inside.

To reflect the lobby's historic nature, original decorative plaster and architectural embellishments were restored. Also, the theater is promoting the

FRESH MIX The fast-tracked renovation included installation of new balcony seating (top), new aesthetic updates in the ballroom (middle) and thoroughly upgraded restrooms (bottom).

fact that it used to hold the offices of WHK-AM, founded in 1921 as one of the first six radio stations in the United States. The WHK letters now adorn the back of the building, and the call letters in the entry vestibule's terrazzo floor were preserved.

Because of the historic approach, AEG and LDA have secured credits from the Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives program and are in the process of placing the building on the National Register of Historic Places

“Without the historic tax credits, the tiles in the entry lobby would not have been exposed and restored,” says Michael Sanbury, a historical restoration expert with LDA.

The Agora renovation was completed on a fast-track two-month schedule,

“AEG didn’t have a template it wanted to force onto the theater. It allowed us to highlight all the accents and all the wonderful architecture in this building, and keep the Agora’s design and history.”

Jesse Sweigert
LDA

even though surprises appeared every time a nail was pulled or floor lifted.

“We found repairs and changes people had made 50, 60, 70 years ago, and we had to fix them,” says Jason Antill, project manager with C.T. Taylor Construction, in Hudson, the Agora renovation’s construction manager. “There were electrical issues, and we had to get plumbing up to code. We still had some of the old pipes, and old wiring had to be replaced and relocated. The trick was in not disturbing the old plaster.”

Miller says he couldn’t be happier with the results. “The amount of work we got done, in the amount of time we had, and the quality of work we have here,





READY FOR REVIVAL The Agora Theatre and Ballroom has occupied the space since 1986, hosting countless legendary music acts over the years. By 2017, however, the facility was showing its age (above) and a renovation was planned.

and the potential this room now has – I didn’t see it being this good when we started,” Miller says. “It has absolutely exceeded my expectations.”

Kevin Glinski, operations and facility manager with the Agora, adds, “The project has brought a lot of excitement back to the music scene.”

A piece of history

The venue known as the Agora was established in 1966 by the late Henry “Hank” LoConti Sr. The theater, which has relocated more than once over the years, has hosted countless legendary acts, including Bruce Springsteen, U2, Patti Smith, The Clash, Duran Duran and ZZ Top.

The Agora moved into the former Metropolitan Theatre, at 5000 Euclid Ave., in 1986. The capacity is 2,000 in the main theater and 500 in the side ballroom.

About four years ago, Chris Zitterbart, who owned the club Peabody’s DownUnder before it closed in 2013, joined forces with LoConti at the Agora. At the time, the Agora was scheduling a limited number of concerts, mostly in the ballroom. Zitterbart brought in heavy metal and hard-rock bands, which were his specialty.

Before he died in 2014, LoConti donated the Agora to MidTown

Cleveland Inc., a neighborhood non-profit. But Zitterbart still had a heart for the Agora, so he bought the club from MidTown.

Throughout this time, LoConti and Zitterbart had several conversations with AEG Presents, and ended up visiting Miller, who operated a rock club called Royal Oak Music Theatre outside Detroit. For a while, Miller ran Royal Oak in partnership with AEG, which owns, manages and schedules more than 80 clubs and theaters throughout

“When you [uncover historic details] like that, which nobody does anymore, you preserve it. From my perspective, we’re obligated as stewards of the building to preserve a find like that. It’s irreplaceable.”

Justin Miller
AEG Presents

the world, and produces and promotes regional and global concert tours. Then, in 2016, AEG absorbed Miller’s business.

For years, LoConti and Zitterbart discussed how AEG might become involved in the Agora.

“Everybody in this city has a story that goes along with the Agora,” Miller says. “That’s largely due to how well Hank ran

this place. That’s probably why it kept popping up on AEG’s radar.”

AEG finally acquired the Agora in July 2017. The company knew that to attract a wider range of bands, it would have to renovate. The project would be unique from other AEG clubs.

“AEG fosters an entrepreneurial spirit in each market, and people who run these rooms have a lot of autonomy,” Miller says.

The key was finding the right people for the renovation. Luckily, the team fell into place.

Assembling the team

By the time AEG purchased the Agora, Glinski, the club’s manager, had become acquainted with Jesse Sweigart, architect with LDA. They were bound to meet – LDA is next door to the Agora and is located in what once was the club’s tour-bus garage.

Sweigart showed Glinski some of LDA’s drawings, and Glinski was impressed. He also knew that LDA had designed and managed the renovation of Collinwood’s historic La Salle Theatre in Euclid. The La Salle isn’t unlike the Agora, and LDA had obtained federal historic tax credits for that project. So when AEG needed an architect for the Agora project, Glinski vouched for LDA.



FRESH LOOK In the lobby, gold plaster ceiling details stand out, as do the original rosettes above concrete arches leading up the staircase to the theater balcony. The refreshed space also includes new flooring and a bar with a quartz countertop and custom millwork wood shelving.

“LDA had done a lot of work in the Midtown area [where the Agora is located], and they had a vested interest in the style of Midtown,” Glinski says. “It just seemed like it made a lot of sense.”

Meanwhile, LDA had worked with C.T. Taylor on past projects, including an addition to the Orlando Baking Co. on Grand Avenue in Cleveland. Sweigart liked how C.T. Taylor “was all over the worksite,” catching and untangling problems.

The Orlando Baking addition was an open-book project. Instead of soliciting bids for construction, the project owner chose a construction firm best suited for the work. The contractor estimated the project based on the architect’s drawings, hired subcontractors and earned a percentage of the final cost.

The Agora would involve the same open-book approach, largely because it doesn’t require the approval of change orders, which would have significantly slowed the theater renovation.

“Everyone knew that there were so many unknowns in this theater, we would never have been able to spot and call out every single item for a hard bid,” Sweigart says.

Miller said AEG interviewed several construction firms before choosing C.T. Taylor, not only due to its relationship with LDA but because the contractor could perform much of the work inhouse, without hiring subcontractors. For example, all new railings inside the Agora were made by C.T. Taylor.

Down to the bone

Renovation planning started in early fall 2017. When AEG arrived to evaluate the Agora, it found a solid steel and masonry building. Steel I-beams wrapped in concrete supported the theater. It could survive Armageddon.

AEG and LDA wanted to restore the original entry lobby, which had been converted to a space for selling merchandise. Patrons used a separate side door to enter the theater.

The lobby space also contained the club’s largest and best-selling bar. But if the former entry lobby was to become the entry lobby again, the bar would interfere with the flow of people entering. AEG and LDA decided to move the bar to the main lobby, closer to the theater.

“The bar in the [entry] lobby worked fairly well when you were doing a lot of smaller ballroom shows, but when we transitioned to theater shows, we needed to change things up,” Miller says. “We knew we would have to spruce up the bar locations to make them more appealing to the patrons and easier for our employees to work through.”

The concrete roof needed repair. LDA and C.T. Taylor added structural steel to the roof so that it could support HVAC units. They covered the roof with white thermoplastic olefin, or TPO, which holds up under the sun’s rays and deflects heat to help control air conditioning costs.

The restrooms were gutted and rebuilt. Walls were reframed, pipes replaced and



BIG REVEAL During demolition early in the project, workers ripped off black plywood that hid the lobby's original walls and a linoleum-covered wood-framed deck on the floor. They found a sloped floor and walls made of colorful tiles, installed when the building was first constructed in 1913 as the Metropolitan Theatre opera house.

vanities added. New floors, partitions, tile and mirrors were installed.

"Before, you would have been afraid to wash your hands in there," Miller says.

Outside, the original fire escapes were no longer safe. LDA and C.T. Taylor reinforced the existing stairs with weathering steel to match what was there, since weathering steel produces a rusty appearance after years of exposure.

Sweigart at first believed AEG would aim merely to bring the Agora up to code. Then he realized the company had a wide-open mind toward the project.

"AEG didn't have a template it wanted to force onto the theater," Sweigart says. "It allowed us to highlight all the accents and all the wonderful architecture in this building, and keep the Agora's design and history, while meeting the demands needed to make the theater successful."

Decorative gold

Construction began January 1, one day after the Agora's last concert of 2017,

and had to wrap up by March 1, when the club's 2018 concert season kicked off. Some pre-construction demolition was done in December.

That's when workers found the antique tiles in the entry lobby. Glinski says the floor and walls had been covered with wood in the 2000s because the space had become a mini-market place.

Miller noticed that each tile was handmade, with subtle differences. Unfortunately, nails had been hammered through the wood-framed deck above and into some of the tiles, and on the walls, some tiles had been stained with black paint. Workers were able to fill the holes and remove the paint, and today the tiles shine.

"It took a lot of thought from all parties to figure out how we could feature that tile without making it look gaudy, without overdoing it, without making that room look like it doesn't fit with the rest of the rooms," Miller says.

"We didn't want to over-polish this thing, we didn't want to remove the character from the room," he adds. "There are flaws in that tile still. It's 105 years old. It's been walked on for a lot of years. It shows its age. But the job that people fixing it have done is absolutely remarkable."

Also in the lobby area, some of the original plaster – including decorative gold plaster – was missing from the walls and ceiling. To restore it, workers created a latex mold of the plaster that remained, applying a form-release agent to make sure the latex and original plaster didn't stick together.

Gold plaster trim details in the lobby ceilings stand out, as do the original rosettes above concrete arches leading up the staircase to the theater balcony. In the theater, the old wooden steps in the seating aisles were ripped out and replaced with concrete, which is steadier and safer.

Chandeliers – which are not original to the building but aren't new – were

LASTING IMPRESSION AEG and LDA preserved a dressing-room brick wall on which musicians have always been encouraged to leave their marks (top). Outside, a rejuvenated sign draws attention from passersby (bottom).

kept in the main lobby. The bar in the main lobby, which replaced the entry lobby bar, is new and has a quartz countertop and custom mill-work wood shelving with integrated lighting. Miller found an antique mirror for behind the bar.

In the ballroom, the original neon Agora Ballroom sign was moved from behind the stage, where bands typically covered it with their own logos and backdrops, to the side wall, where guests clearly see it upon entering. Patrons can take selfies in front of the sign.

Stairs descending into the ballroom were pulled back to create more room.

“When you see buildings like this, and how they were built, using the equipment they had back then, compared to what we have now, it’s just amazing how beautiful they are. It was an amazing feat.”

Jason Antill

C.T. Taylor Construction

A new epoxy-based liquid-metal floor is visually appealing.

An amazing feat

The main theater’s plaster ceiling had been water-damaged. Antill says about half the ceiling was patched or copied and replaced. The entire ceiling was painted, as were the walls and floors.

Original faux marble plaster columns near the main theater’s opera boxes were restored. The opera boxes were renovated, receiving new carpet. New LED lights replaced the old, darker lights, and a touch screen now controls all the light-



CENTER STAGE Work in the theater included meticulously repaired plaster walls and ceilings, restored faux marble plaster columns, new paint and updated lighting.



ing. The original acoustic panels remained on the theater walls. And much of this work was all done at the same time, with scaffolding everywhere. “The entire theater was a walking platform,” Sweigart says.

A second bar was added to the main theater, and another bar was renovated on the second-floor lobby leading to the balcony.

“Hank always envisioned more bar space in the theater,” Glinski says. “So we have the two bars in there, just to keep the customers in the room and listening to music.”

AEG and LDA preserved a dressing-room brick wall on which musicians have always been encouraged to leave their marks.

“It’s a little bit of a fingerprint of this building that we left intact,” Miller says.

Most of the renovation was finished by the end of February, although some final touches, like painting and plaster repair, continued until the July grand opening.

Antill says it was a joy taking part in the project.

“I’ve been working in construction since I was 13 years old,” he explains.

“When you see buildings like this, and how they were built, using the equipment they had back then, compared to what we have now, it’s just amazing how beautiful they are. It was an amazing feat.” **P**

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