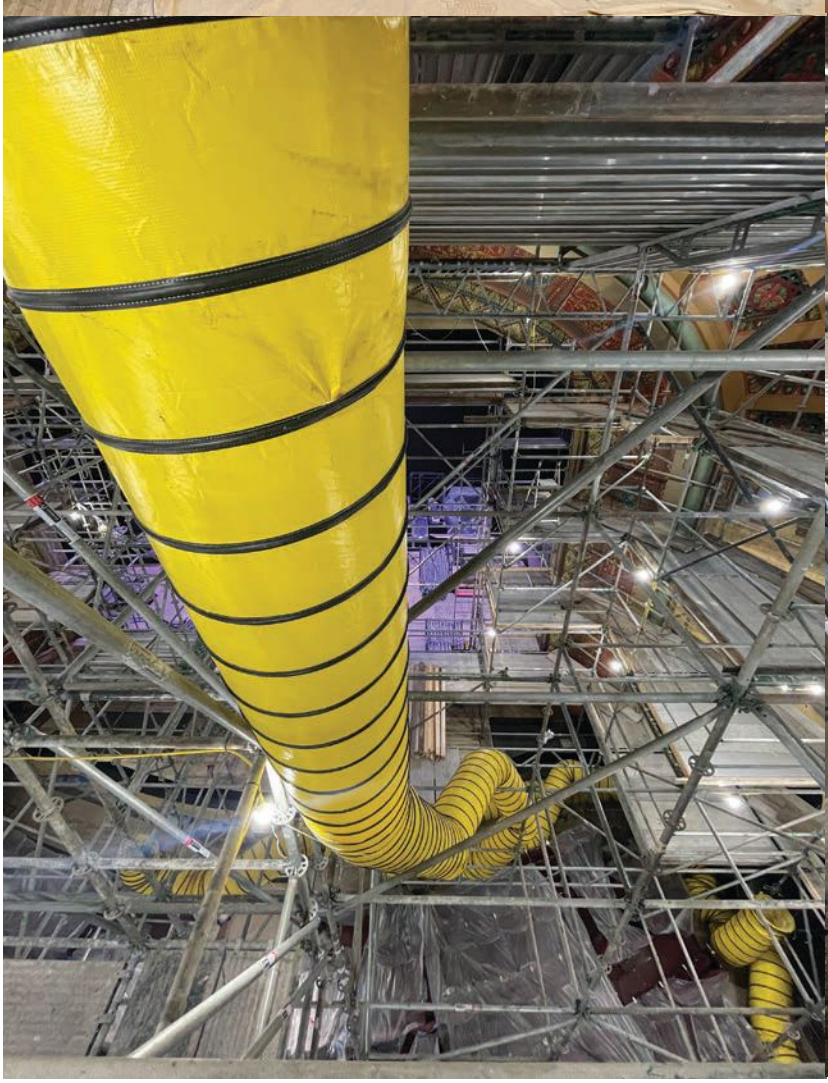
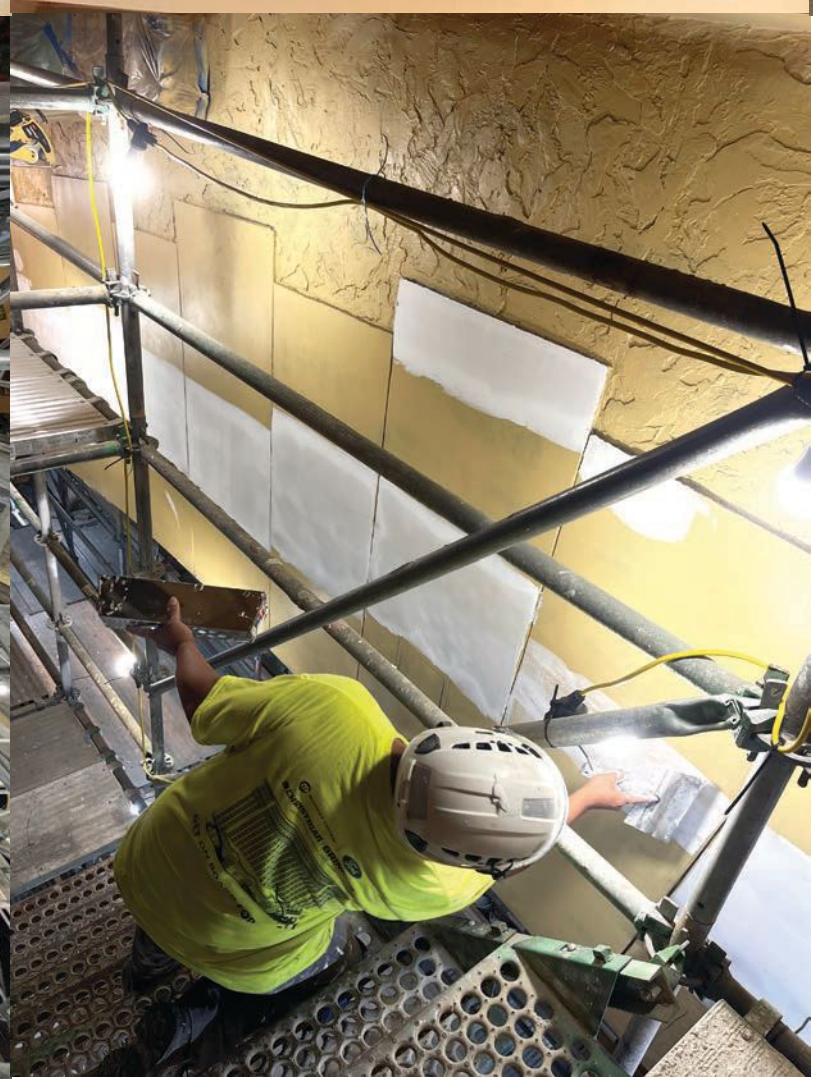
Florida Theatre Restoration

SETS STAGE FOR NEXT CENTURY

By Lorrie DeFrank Photos by Lily Snowden





It's showtime again at the Florida Theatre and competing for top billing is the building itself. Restored to its original magnificence, it's set for a 50-year encore—at the very least.

In preparation for the historic landmark's 100th anniversary in 2027, a major—but not final—phase of the renovation was completed while it was closed from July to October this year. Patrons attending *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* on October 28 were the first theatergoers to see the transformation. But there was nothing spooky about the freshness, beauty, and comfort.

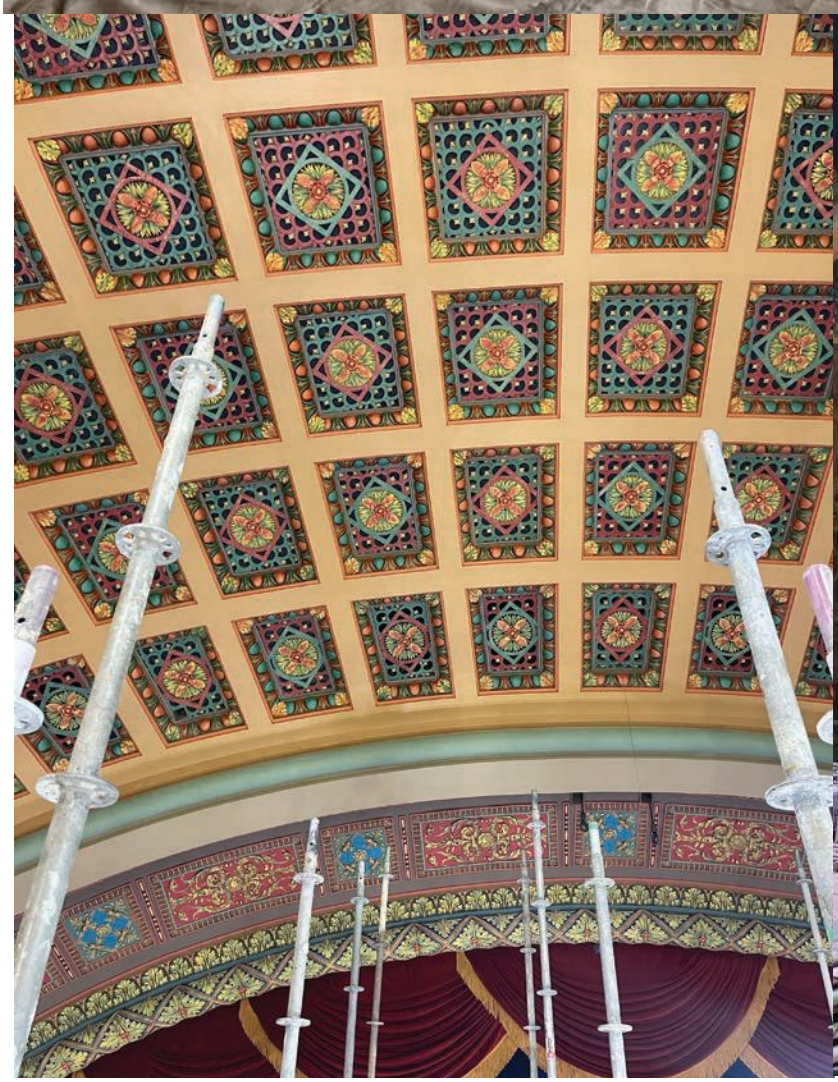
Closed, yes. Deserted, hardly. Crammed from floor to very high ceiling with scaffolding, the theater at Forsyth and Newnan streets in downtown Jacksonville was bustling with tradespeople performing their magic on decades of significant deterioration. Some contorted themselves into impossibly tight spaces to fix, replace, clean, and paint. As many as a dozen artists—painters, plasterers, and conservators—from one renowned studio alone were there at any given time removing peeling decorative plaster and replacing layers of old paint with new. Meanwhile, the heavy work that theatergoers won't see but likely is the most important change of all went on around them as contractors replaced the entire HVAC system and moved the massive electrical vault from the first to the third floor.

"We're getting ready for the next hundred years," says Numa Saisselin, theater president, of this phase and work yet to be done before the centennial.

Project manager Brian Couch can see the Florida Theatre from where he works at KBJ Architects at the top of the Bank of America Building. "That was called theater row. There were several theaters there," he says, pointing down Forsyth Street. "Florida Theatre is the only one that survived, and it's only one of four remaining high-style movie palaces built in Florida during that period."

He pulled out large original drawings from 1927 that show the theater connected to an office building, which he says is another of its unique features. KBJ was responsible for Florida Theatre's last big renovation in the early 1980s, when it was transformed into a performing arts center. Couch says he frequently used the hand art from the 1920s and drawings from the 1980s in his position as quarterback of the team of engineers, historical consultants, and other

A forensic analysis of layers of old paint chips precedes the process of repairing the flaking decorative plaster and painting the lobbies and auditorium with fidelity to the 1927 color palette. Teams of artists meticulously hand paint the glazed textured plaster work.



experts in the recent work.

The 1,900-seat Florida Theatre was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983. The Florida Theatre Performing Arts Center, Inc., is a private, not-for-profit organization founded in 1987 in partnership with the city of Jacksonville, which owns the building. For theaters under 2,000 seats, Florida Theatre is in the top five most attended theater venues in the world, according to Pollstar, a trade publication for the concert and live music industry.

The nationally acclaimed EverGreene Architectural Arts, headquartered in Brooklyn, New York, has renovated and preserved numerous theaters, museums, and other distinctive buildings, including the Library of Congress. Florida Theatre is no less worthy of its expertise, according to Jeff Greene, founder and executive chairman.

"I would call this a palace, not a little neighborhood theater or opera house," Greene says. "It's the architecture, but also how people feel about it. Florida Theatre becomes part of how people identify Jacksonville as where they want to live because of the culture and repository of their memories. I call it the living room of the city."

"Working with EverGreene, we're very confident this was the original palette," says Saisselin, describing the paint colors as carnival but not by any stretch garish. "They did samples and could see all the layers back to the beginning through a microscope."

From the forensic analysis of looking at chips to see the chromachronology, Greene is almost certain the paint technique dates to John Eberson, one of the country's most famous theater architects. He designed the Tampa Theatre, which opened in 1926 and also was recently restored. Four tapestries with a medieval theme high on the balcony walls are identical to those in the Tampa Theatre, he says.

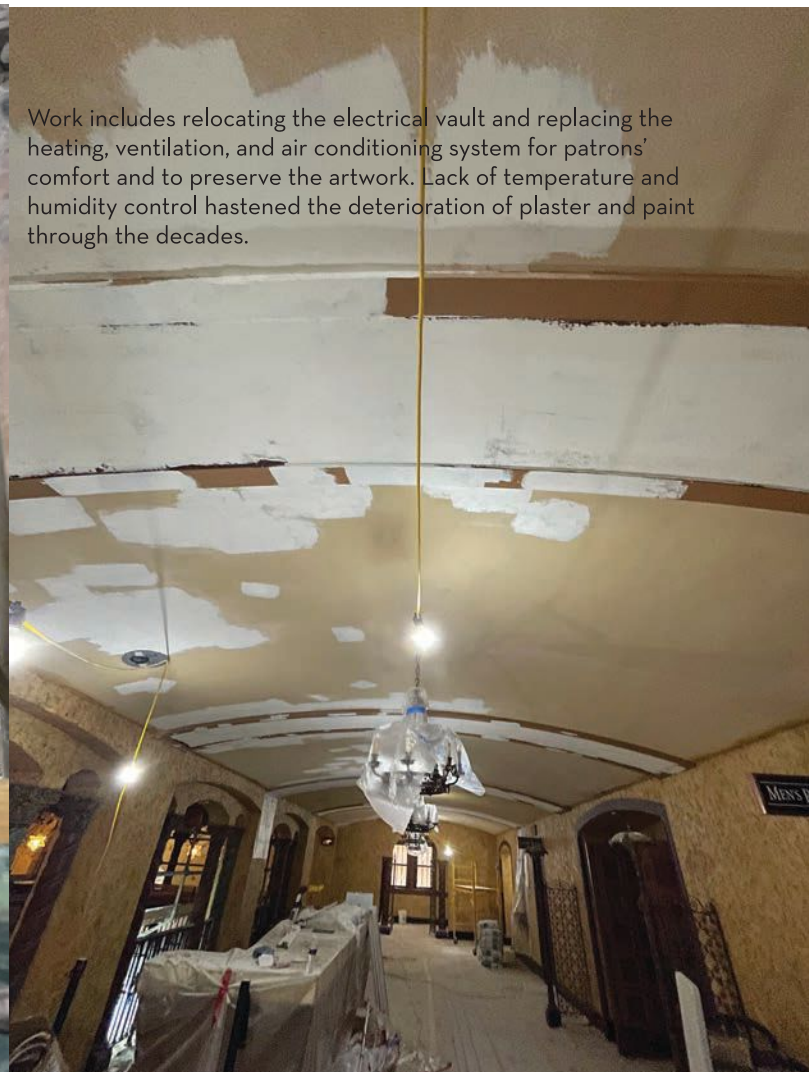
"We're taking it back closer to what the original architect's intent was," says Greene, a preservation artist himself who has worked on more than 400 theaters.

With plaster flaking everywhere and decades of grime and large areas of multidimensional designs to be intricately hand-painted various colors, completing the work in four months for the plaster, washing, and painting teams required precision. "The biggest challenge was all that glazed, textured plaster work," Greene says. "Then there was marbleizing and wood graining and stenciling." Beams and other structures that appear to be wood are actually plaster.

"If they didn't know there was a renovation, the average person would notice the theater is brighter and more vibrant," Couch says. "Taking off those years of dirt and

During the four-month restoration, a massive network of scaffolding provides access to workers who transform the entire theater to its original elegance. Theatergoers will notice the brightness and vibrancy.

Work includes relocating the electrical vault and replacing the heating, ventilation, and air conditioning system for patrons' comfort and to preserve the artwork. Lack of temperature and humidity control hastened the deterioration of plaster and paint through the decades.



age just popped it."

Greene says when they took down the nearly 100-year-old tapestries, part of the dry-rotted fabric ripped in his hands. EverGreene shipped them separately to a restoration workshop in New Jersey. But one package did not arrive. After an unsuccessful two-week mail search, the theater's marketing department turned to social media for help. Within 24 hours the missing package was located in Charlotte.

"We're happy to have them back," says Saisselin, noting that the recreated tapestries are half restored and half new.

He says when workers took the old tapestries down, they found signatures of people who had worked on previous theater projects on the tops of the wooden boxes used to hang them. The oldest was from 1950.

In 2017 when Hurricane Irma flooded much of downtown, the water came within a half block of the Florida Theatre. This restoration phase included relocating its electrical vault from the first to the third floor to avoid a potential catastrophe. The third floor had to be reinforced to withstand the enormous weight of the equipment.

Furthermore, the building's lack of temperature and humidity control contributed greatly to the flaking plaster, according to Greene.

"For the first time in 96 years Florida Theatre has a thermostat," says Saisselin of the completed work to replace the entire heating, ventilation, and air conditioning system by Sauer Mechanical. "We've had only on and off—blistering heat or freezing chill, often during the same show. Being able to keep the temperature at 70 degrees at all times will be like entering the space age for us."

This phase also included updating all public restrooms, some of which dated to the 1930s, Saisselin says.

Construction of a new members' lounge in 2022 included one new men's room and two new women's rooms. At the same time, a new men's room was added to the mezzanine lobby. Last summer, the seven remaining public restrooms were renovated. Sloan Valve Company in Illinois contributed fixtures for the new restrooms at a substantial discount.

"The renovations and state-of-the-art mechanical system upgrades that Auld & White Constructors led at the Florida Theatre represent our unwavering commitment to preserving history and building for the future," says Buck Smoak, director of business development at Auld & White, the project's general contractor. "As we approach the centennial celebration of this cultural gem, these 50-year solutions will elevate the visitor experience and ensure the theater's functionality for generations to come."

All the work so far has been fully funded and they're raising money for the next round, Saisselin says. Since the Centennial Campaign started in 2019, they have raised and spent $15 million and have about $8 million worth of work still to do. Through what he calls a "really good public/private partnership," the city of Jacksonville, matching the theater's contributions dollar-for-dollar, committed

up to $5 million over five years and renewed the commitment for another $5 million starting in 2023 for five more years. About $4 million came from private donors. Other money came from city and state grants and a $4.50 per ticket fee the theater has charged the last few years.

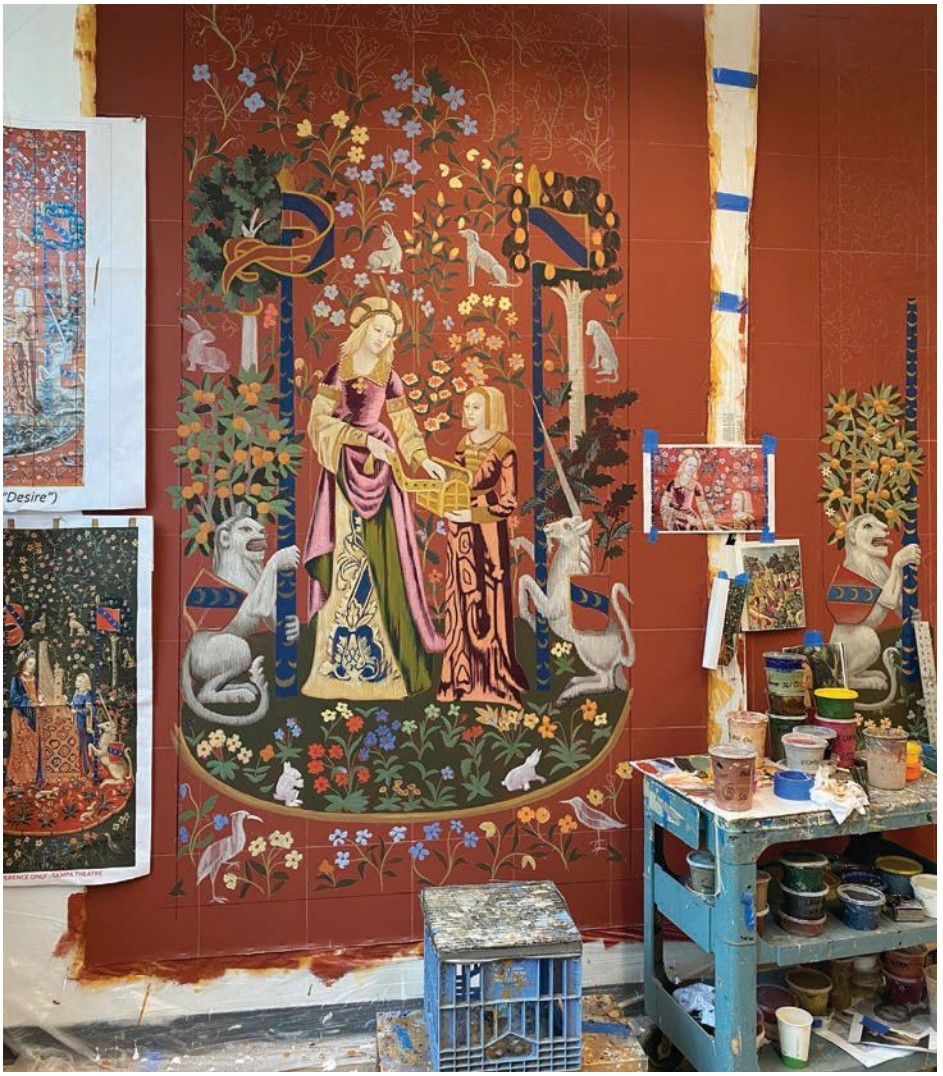
"When we have a good year, we pile the money back in the theater," says Saisselin. "We are a nonprofit dedicated to maintaining and programming this building. Our batting average is pretty good; 70 percent of the time, we make money—enough to have good year."

When the theater was closed for renovation, bookings and shows continued at such venues as Ponte Vedra Concert Hall and WJCT Soundstage.

Previous work included replacing the seats, upgrading the lighting and sound systems, and constructing the 3,000-square-foot Remedy Lounge for theater members on the second floor. It features a donors' wall, historic memorabilia, full bar, and TVs that show what's on stage.

Moving the electrical vault allows for expansion and renovation of the ground floor lobby, which will be part of the next phase along with improving the dressing rooms and administrative offices and restoring the marquee.

"I've been to several concerts there and can't wait for my kids to see concerts there, too," says Couch, who has lived in Jacksonville most of his life. "The way it was built, Florida Theatre will last another hundred years. They don't build buildings like that anymore."



Half preserved-half new, the 96-year-old threadbare tapestries with a medieval theme hanging on balcony walls are restored to their original state.