



LOS ANGELES HISTORIC THEATRE FOUNDATION

Dear {{patron_first_name}},

May is **Historic Preservation Month** and LAHTF is proud to introduce what we plan to be a regular feature: shining the spotlight on the work, oftentimes unseen, being done to preserve our historic theatres.

Here we bring you the in-depth scoop on recent preservation work undertaken at the **El Capitan Theatre** in Hollywood.

Just like you, we are missing being able to enjoy our historic theatres and movie palaces right now. When things get back to normal we look forward to seeing you at, and showing you around, some of our historic theatres throughout Los Angeles!

For now, stay well.

Mike Hume, Board of Directors - LAHTF

Spotlight on: the El Capitan Theatre

The responsibility of managing a historic theatre is no easy task.

Theatres are high traffic spaces and often have complex surfaces such as painted murals, drapery, and plasterwork – all of which can require expensive specialist attention to maintain and preserve.



In our work with Los Angeles theatres, LAHTF often sees projects which are not necessarily obvious yet demonstrate the commitment to preserving these historic theatres for both current and future audiences.



LAHTF sat down (virtually!) with **Chris Gembinski**, Director of Technical Services at Building Conservation Associates, to hear about the recent restoration and conservation work carried-out on the ticket lobby of the historic El Capitan Theatre in Hollywood.

El Capitan Theatre: Brief History

Opened in May 1926, the *El Capitan Theatre and Department Store Building* was designed by Morgan, Walls & Clements with the theatre interior by G. Albert Lansburgh. Lansburgh chose an "East Indian" theme for the theatre, noting it had never been used in Southern California before. In his own words, that was what made the style suitable for Hollywood, because "the residents demand the extraordinary".

Morgan, Walls & Clements' building exterior façade and ticket lobby got a Spanish theme. Lansburgh described their design for the ticket lobby as "most attractive", as anyone who has looked-up when entering the theatre will surely be aware.

In 1942 the ticket lobby received a bland drop ceiling as part of the major transformation into the Paramount Theatre.

Disney joined forces with Pacific Theatres in 1989 to undertake a full restoration of the theatre, overseen by prolific theatre designer Joseph J. Musil. The drop ceiling of the ticket lobby was peeled-back, the historical surfaces restored, and a mid-1920s themed central ticket booth installed to complete the look. The theatre reopened in 1991 and continues to showcase first-run Disney movies and host movie premieres.

Ticket Lobby Restoration Project

After nearly 30 years the team at Disney recently noticed that some of the paint on the flat panel surfaces of the ticket lobby ceiling was starting to crack and lift from the plaster substrate.



Closeup of painted surfaces exhibiting lifting finishes (© Building Conservation Associates Inc)

Building Conservation Associates were brought in to analyze and advise Disney on all the possible options for repair of the historic surfaces, both painted panels and cast/molded areas of the ceiling and walls. No evidence of water ingress was found yet some of the historic gilded and stenciled areas had deteriorated beyond repair and would need to be replicated rather than conserved. Testing was carried out and mockups of the several conservation and replication methods were evaluated.



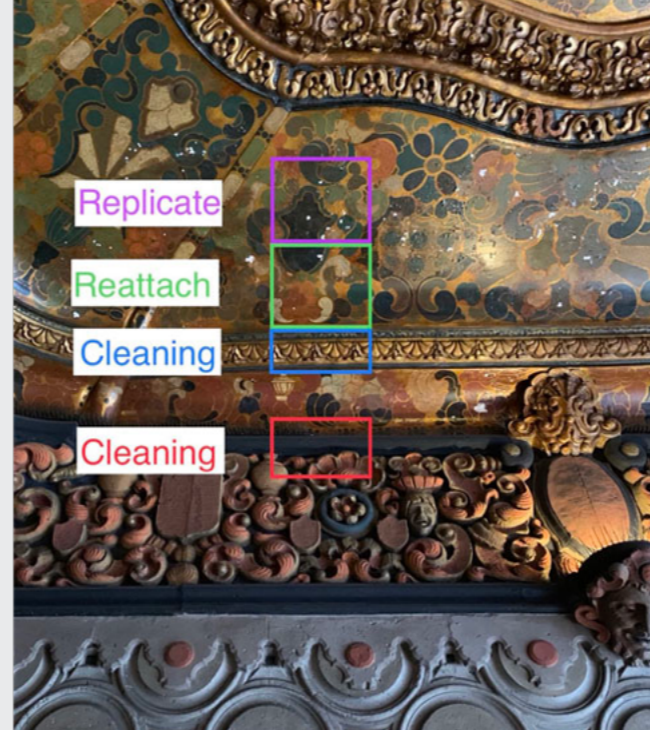
Assessing gilded and stenciled surface finishes of the ticket lobby (© Building Conservation Associates Inc)

EverGreene Architectural Arts were brought in to carry out the conservation and replication work. The gilded and stenciled ceiling panels were cleaned and conserved in the areas where possible. In areas where deterioration could not be reversed and the historic finishes retained, mostly on the flat surfaces of the ceiling soffit, an appropriate percentage of the ceiling was replicated. The team was able to apply a clear tape over deteriorated finishes to remove representative areas of the stenciled design, flip them over, use them to create new stencils, and create an exact replica of the original finishes. In the course of the work it was found that the prior restoration 30 years earlier had simplified some of the painted detail and the team was able to restore the original design.

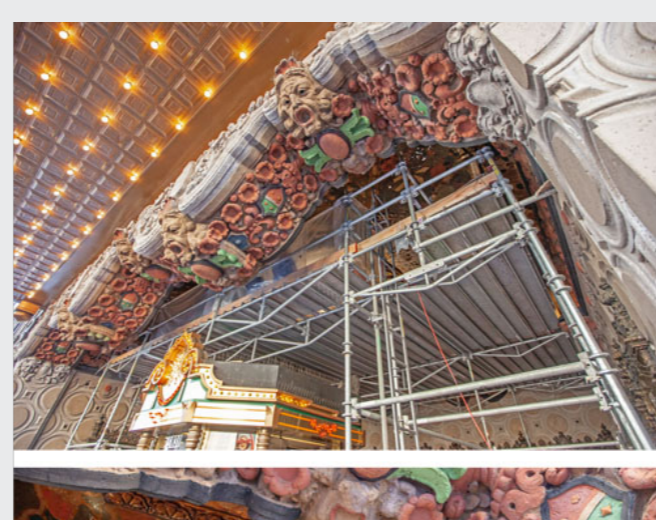
The metallic painted central sunburst and band courses, and painted polychrome plaster molding and cast stone motifs were all cleaned and conserved. Although pigeon spikes had done their job of keeping birds out of the ticket lobby, large amounts of dust and other debris had collected on all of the relief surfaces, all of which were cleaned. The bird deterrent was reinstalled.

An area of the ceiling has been left as original and conserved. Next time you are in the ticket lobby you can see this decorative gilded and stenciled cove molding running the perimeter of the lobby just above the cast stone frieze. See if you can spot the difference between this original area and the rest of the ceiling.

During the course of the project it became clear just how much detail the painted and stenciled flat panels contain. Next time you are in the ticket lobby take some time to look up to see if you can spot **Cherubs, Owls, and even Griffins!** The relief, plasterwork also holds surprises in the forms of dramatic masks and other ornate features.



Conservation approaches used in the restoration of the finishes (© Building Conservation Associates Inc)



Restoration work underway at the theatre in late 2019

In terms of timescales the survey, mockups, and testing period took about one week, shorter than usual due to a large amount of archival information (particularly on identifying the composition of the existing materials), drawings, and photographs available from the previous restoration.

Conservation, restoration, and replication work lasted approximately two months as it was threaded around movie premiere events still taking place at the theatre.

Looking to the future, Disney is considering options for refurbishing the historic ticket lobby floor and installing accent lighting to highlight the now shimmering lobby ceiling.

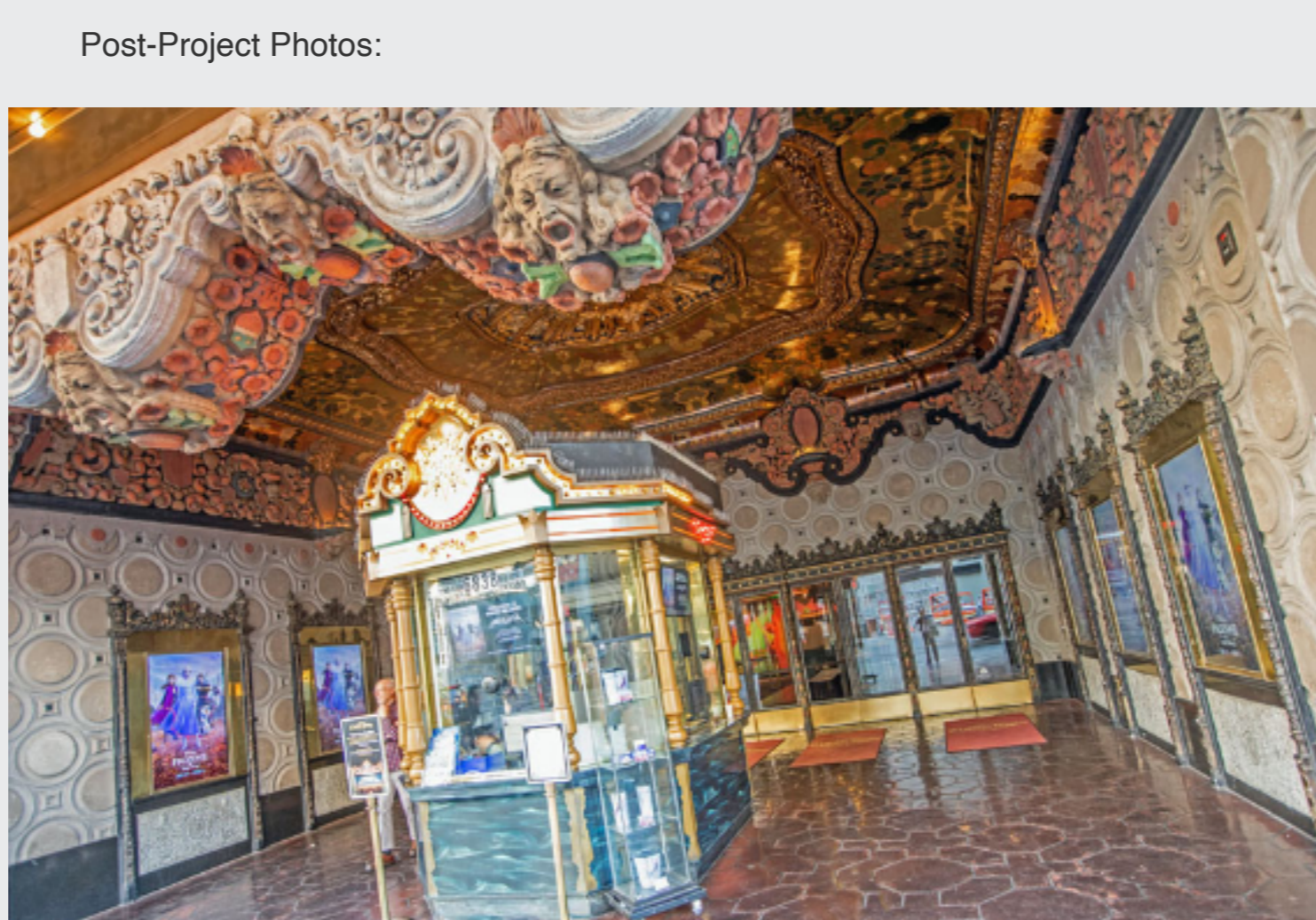
Restoration of the ticket lobby was the last major project overseen by Ed Collins, general manager of the El Capitan since 1989. At Ed's retirement in early 2020, Disney announced the renaming of the space as the **Ed Collins Historic Lobby** as a tribute to his years of love and dedication to the theatre.

The Ed Collins Historic Lobby restoration serves to demonstrate Disney's commitment to maintaining and conserving the historic fabric of the El Capitan Theatre for future generations to enjoy!

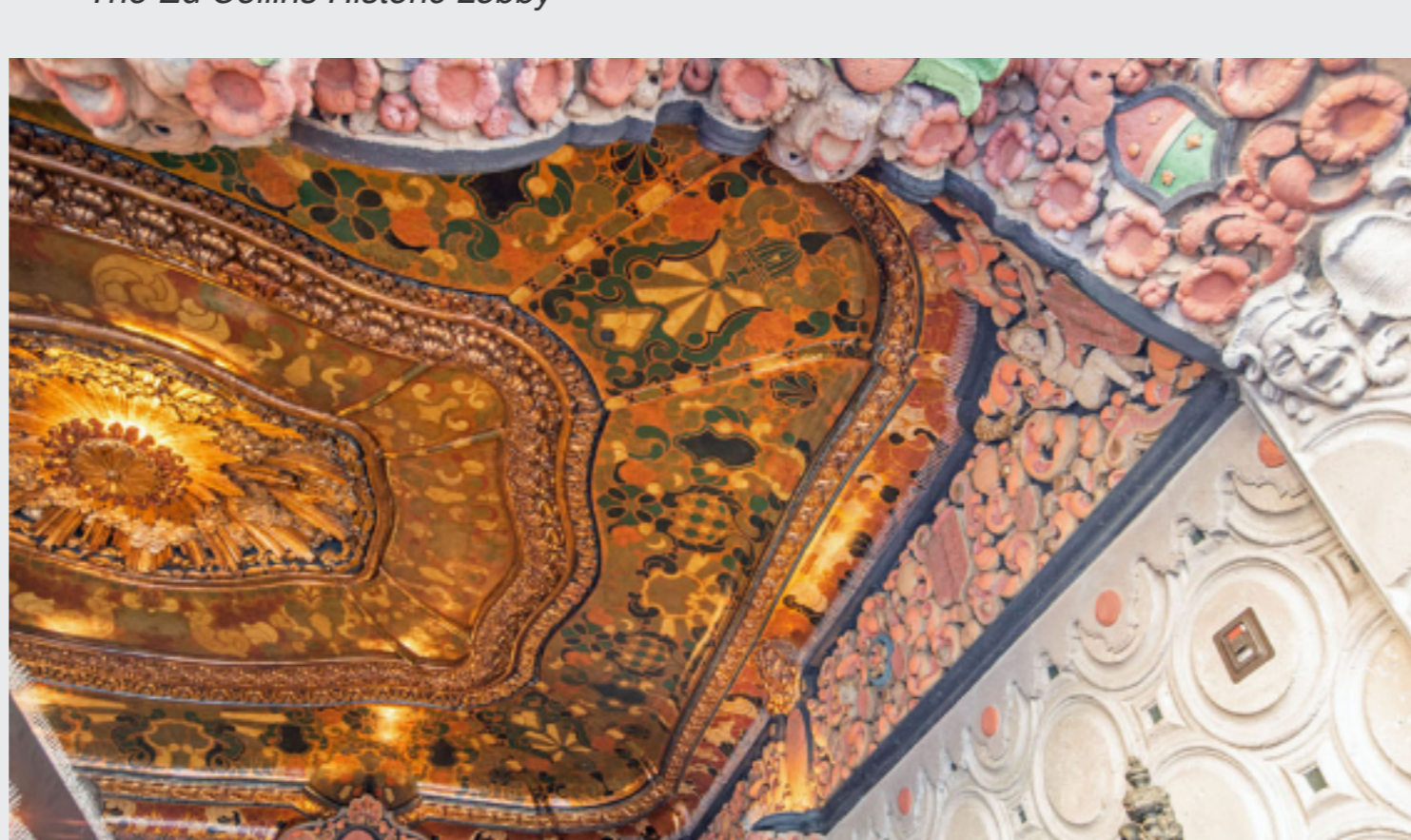
Further information and resources:

- [El Capitan Theatre](#)
- [Building Conservation Associates Inc](#)
- [EverGreene Architectural Arts](#)

Post-Project Photos:



The Ed Collins Historic Lobby



Closeup of the ceiling post-project

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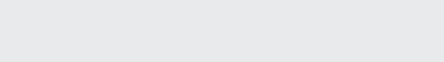
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The Los Angeles Historic Theatre Foundation rises to its crucial mission to protect, preserve, restore and sustain the operation of Southern California's historic theatres on the strength of the generosity of its supporters.

Your support can help the LAHTF save and use irreplaceable theatres by filling historic stages and screens with great entertainment and their beautiful auditoriums with large and appreciative audiences.

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