The Tabernacle: Phoenix Award Winner for Excellence in Restoration

By Casey M. Geisler

Historical buildings face a myriad of challenges to keep them in pristine condition while maintaining their functionality. Modernizing a building without losing its historical charm is a challenge in itself, and restoring these buildings takes skill and dedication to preserve their history. This year, the recipient of the Phoenix Award for Innovation in Restoration took on the task of preserving a nearly century old building.

Built in 1910, The Tabernacle in Atlanta, Ga., was originally named for Dr. Leonard Gaston Broughton. First known as the Broughton Tabernacle, this building was the birthplace of the Georgia Baptist Medical Center and nursing school. From there it was converted into the Third Baptist Church, with over 4,000 active members until the mid 1980s. It was vacant until 1996, when it was then turned into a House of Blues Club during the Centennial Olympic Games. The Tabernacle is currently owned by Live Nation music and utilized as a live music venue and site for corporate functions.

On March 14, 2008, this historical landmark was struck by the tornadoes tearing through downtown Atlanta. Throughout its modernization the original stained glass windows, maple flooring, millwork and hand-crafted plaster details of the structure were preserved. The devastating tornado had compromised the structure of this landmark. In need of restoration in a timely manner, Rolyn Companies, Inc. (www.rolyncompanies.com), of Rockville, Md., responded to the call. Utilizing their abilities and resources, and despite numerous challenges, Rolyn was able to complete the restoration within 73 days, in time for the next scheduled music event.

The Tabernacle suffered damage to both its interior and exterior. The strong tornado blew portions of the roof off of the building, exposing the attic and rafters to the elements. The chimney collapsed through the roof, falling 50 feet on the performance stage below and exposing the interior woodwork to the weather and possible water damage. The original stained glass windows were shattered with some pieces of glass found up to 250 feet away from the building.

In order to begin working on the building, Rolyn crews first had to make sure that the building was structurally safe for workers. The hole in the roof posed a threat to workers because of the falling bricks and other roofing debris. Rolyn began by removing as much debris from the roof as possible using a 120-foot bucket truck with a drop-pan. Any unstable debris and the compromised HVAC system were removed, and Rolyn teams constructed a temporary tarp roof


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to protect the building's interior. The broken windows were then sealed to further minimize damage to the interior wood flooring and mullions from the rain storms.

To further protect the workers, create a safe workspace, and to enable the teams to control the amount of damage on the stage area below the hole in the roof, mitigation crews fashioned a cushion of tires and deflection ramps to capture any loosened debris. A negatively pressurized containment plume was also used.

Further inspection of the interior revealed that there were rodent droppings and coal dust debris from the original coal-burning heating system in the rafters above the plaster ceilings. This discovery increased the risk of histoplasmosis and contributed a new set of challenges. Rolyn teams now had to prevent cross-contamination from occurring as well. Using the already established containment, crews utilized air scrubbing and negative pressure with HEPA filtration in the entire work area, thus preventing the spread of dust particles and other environmental hazards.

Using moisture meters, hydrometers and thermal imaging technology, teams completed their moisture surveys and assessment of the building's interior. They began the drying process by setting up three 6000 CFM desiccant dehumidifiers, numerous air movers and low-grain refrigerant dehumidifiers. Rolyn was then able to monitor the drying process over several days, looking for improvements and identifying when the building was dry. During the drying phrase, Rolyn

faced the challenge of dealing with more rain storms and the resulting damage that could compromise the antique furnishings and original flooring. To combat the challenge, Rolyn decreased the cubic air space in the affected areas and intensified the effectiveness of the LGRs to achieve more air exchanges per hour.

The key component to this project was completing the installation of the roof. Working with the insurance company, Rolyn crews provided a quick bid on the cost for approval. They also continued to remove any damaged mansard shingles. During this process they discovered part of the original roofing with the painted words "Baptist Tabernacle," that had been covered over during modernization and were still completely in tact.

Before repairing the roof, crews considered to how to incorporate modern lumber into the century old building's original structure. They found a solution that would not further compromise the history of the building. The damaged areas were repaired and the roofing was completely replaced while still preserving the original trim details.

With only five weeks left to complete the project before the next scheduled event, Rolyn teams began to tackle the interior of the building. Time was spent debating how to best handle the task of repairing the plaster ceilings. Not wanting to lose the ceilings, Rolyn worked closely with Tabernacle officials to assess the damage. Replacing the ceilings would be a time-consuming project and could diminish the historical nature of the interior. In the end, it was decided that too much damage had been done and the ceilings would have to be replaced in the main auditorium despite the mitigation crew's best efforts.

In order to complete this part of the task, Rolyn crews had to remove 90 tons of plaster using a 50-foot tall scaffolding system that created a temporary work surface ending just six feet below the existing ceiling. Once the ceiling was demolished, a new ceiling was designed and put into place, closely emulating the original molding and trim details. The process took 30 days to complete with the teams working three shifts per day, seven days a week.

During the auditorium restoration, the teams encountered an antique chandelier, a gift to the Tabernacle from the Loews Grand Theatre, which

needed to be protected and cleaned. This particular chandelier graced the entry of the theatre during the world premiere of *Gone with the Wind* in 1939, and was appraised with a value of $2 million. It was lowered to the floor and placed in a vault to protect it for cleaning of the framework and individual crystals.

A few modifications were made to the building during the restoration. Two large refrigeration coolers and other trade items were replaced along with the extensively damaged stage. The new stage was designed to allow for more technologically advanced performances. Light grids and lighting were upgraded along with the addition of a new sound system.

Since the auditorium was not the only room damaged, crews also worked on

restoring and reconstructing individual rooms used for other purposes. On the top floor of the Tabernacle there is a lounge known as the *Blue Room*. Here, crews had to reconstruct most of the area due to the collapsed roof. It took 23 days to install new ceiling joists, replace damaged windows and lay new hardwood flooring, all in keeping with the historical specifications.

On the lower level of the Tabernacle, the Cotton Club and kitchen sustained heavy water damage and needed to be renovated. This included new structural framing, abatement of the asbestos floor tiles and a new ceiling grid with light system. The kitchen equipment was removed and cleaned before being tested and reset. During this process the management group for the Tabernacle decided to upgrade the bathrooms, electing to have the existing stalls, fixtures, lighting and walls replaced.

In order to complete the restoration, Rolyn thought it best to contact the original painters who were part of the redesigning process in 1996. The company arranged for them to travel from California to Atlanta to repaint all of the freshly renovated rooms. The artists were able to successfully blend the newer areas of custom faux painting with the existing finishes. Upon completing the project, Rolyn sought out a stained glass specialist. Using photographed copies of the glass, the specialist was able to create replicas of the damaged and missing window panes.

Rolyn created a perfect blend of preserving the historic look and feel of the building, while upgrading with modern technology and materials; a valued approach that saved both time and expense on the project. ■

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