

Preservation, people, and politics in the restoration of the National Theatre of Panama: a case study

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Abstract

This paper describes the complex international aspects of the recent restoration of the National Theatre of Panama and the technical, political, and aesthetic compromises that occurred in order to restore the building to working condition. Located on the shores of the Pacific Ocean in the old quarter of Panama City, the National Theatre is an Italian opera house built between 1905-08. Italian architect Gennaro Nicola Ruggieri designed the building to emulate great Italian opera houses such as LaScala in Milan. Panamanian artist Roberto Lewis was commissioned to paint the murals. In June 2000 a large section of the theatre's main ceiling mural collapsed during a ballet rehearsal. Fortunately, no one was killed. This prompted an evaluation of the structure and an urgent call for restoration and repair of the leaking roof. Emergency funds were donated from the German and American governments through the Panamanian Institute of Culture (INAC) and in 2002 just the ceiling was restored. The First Lady of the Panama took an interest in the theatre's poor condition and secured funding from the government of Taiwan, with additional donations from the government of Japan for a complete restoration. Architects prepared a study of the building's condition and a five million dollar construction budget. Conservators were hired to restore the painted decoration. Work began in June 2002, and it was to conclude on Panama's centennial on November 3, 2003. However, because of numerous bureaucratic problems the work was not completed until August 2004. The conservation staff educated the public about the project through the media, web site, publications and guided tours. The technical aspects of the work included conservation of the art, and putting in a new stage, seats, lighting, air conditioning, and new dressing rooms. Nearly every problem was taken care of except a new roof, the cause of the mural collapse in the first place. Roof leaks had prompted restorations in 1941 and 1971-74. Now after nearly 100 years, the theatre is again awaiting a new roof and government action.

Keywords: Panama, preservation, budgets, art conservation, politics, National Theatre, restoration, priorities.





Figure 1: Colorized photo of the National Theatre in 1908 with original color scheme.

1 Background

The National Theatre of Panama was the first cultural edifice built by the government after independence from Colombia on November 3, 1903. The provisional government ordered construction of a “National Theatre” by way of Law 52, in May 1904, as well as a National Palace for the seat of the new government.

The National Theatre, and the adjoining National Palace, is the work of Italian architect, Gennaro Nicola Ruggieri, who emulated the great Italian opera houses such as LaScala in Milan, LaFenice in Venice and the Petruzelli in Bari. Construction of the Theatre and Palace, located on the Pacific Ocean began in November 1905 with a budget of \$600,000. The work took over two years to complete and was officially declared finished in March 1908, when Panamanian artist Roberto Lewis (1874-1949) installed his oil on canvas murals in the theatre and Italian decorator Enrico Corrado completed his decorative work in the theatre and adjoining Palace. The two buildings were state of the art for the time, complete with modern conveniences of plumbing, electricity, potable water, as well as European style architecture, featuring the murals that Lewis had painted in Paris on canvas and shipped to Panama for installation.

The theatre was finally opened with the inauguration of Jose Domingo de Obaldia as the second president of the Republic on October 1, 1908, followed by the cultural opening on October 22, 1908 with the presentation of the opera *Aida* from a traveling Italian opera company. This concluded the construction of the largest and most ambitious cultural project in the history of Panama.

2 History of the theatre building

Since opening in 1908 the theatre has undergone several restorations and renovations and has oscillated between periods of intense care and absolute neglect. Architect Ruggieri, familiar with the dry Mediterranean climate and its architecture was unaccustomed to building in a hot, damp, tropical climate with rainfall averaging 28" per year. Almost immediately after completion the roof began to leak, because the roof above the foyer is flat. The seams between the roof and walls have been and continue to be a major area of water infiltration. By 1926 the entire exterior of the building required painting, and patching of the roof. With the worldwide Great Depression the Theatre's budget was eliminated and by 1938 the government of Panama was renting the theatre as a movie house. Roberto Lewis convinced the government to restore the theatre and upgrade its structure. He conserved his own murals in 1941 with the assistance of Abelardo Tapia (b.1909), a trusted theatre employee who later became the theatre's director.

The Theatre was again renovated in 1958, when it celebrated 50 years of operation. The years between 1958 until 1970 were the darkest period in the theatre's history. Declining government revenue, television, social unrest, revolution and benign neglect forced the government to close the theatre in 1969.

Through the concerted efforts of individuals such as Dame Margot Fontyne and others, the Panamanian chief of state, General Omar Torrijos was convinced to save the theatre. Between 1971-74 his government spent approximately \$1,000,000 to renovate and restore the building. Local architect Rene Brenes carried out major alternations in the vestibule, stairwells, and theatre hall. He enclosed the theatre balconies so that air conditioning could be installed. Corridor ceilings were lowered and the beautiful Italian tile floors were covered with wall-to-wall carpeting. Back stage, new dressing rooms were carved out of the stage area, and new theatre curtain machinery installed. In addition, Roberto Lewis' son, Gilberto Lewis (1924-2001) and artist Juan Manuel Cedeno (1914-1997) restored the Lewis murals throughout the theatre. Dioscoro Bruggiatti (1894-1977) replicated Enrico Corrado's decorative design. On August 15, 1974 General Torrijos inaugurated the renovated theatre and declared the work complete. At that time the National Institute of Culture (INAC) was created and the theatre's care was placed under its charge. However, within a few years the theatre was once again suffering major problems related to roof leaks, broken fixtures and government employee apathy.

In 1997 the entire old quarter of Panama City was declared a World Heritage site, including the National Theatre. Even though the designation by UNESCO provided no funds for restoration, it helped call attention to the district's needs.



3 Ceiling collapse and art conservation

In March 2000 an illustrated preliminary report was prepared by conservators concerning the theatre's general condition. The report noted water leaks, broken toilets, termite infestation, and other problems. On June 6, 2000, after a written warning of its imminent collapse a large section of the Lewis ceiling mural fell during a ballet rehearsal. Fortunately no one was killed.

Immediately after the collapse INAC closed the theatre and had the ceiling inspected. A detailed report was prepared noting that several more sections were about to fall and that emergency work was required to save the mural. While awaiting a government decision action was taken to secure the ceiling with aluminum strips and felt-covered plywood. Due to bureaucratic red tape, it took two years to prepare the emergency conservation contract, while the roof kept leaking. The restoration was generously funded through the Cultural Fund of the German Republic and the Ambassador's Fund from the American government. Jointly the donation was approximately \$50,000. INAC owns the theatre but has no capital campaign funds of their own, though its architects supervised the conservation work.

The ceiling project began in January 2002 and consisted of conserving the fallen canvas fragments and cleaning the ceiling, which measures 16 meters in diameter. The conservators discovered that during the 1974 work many areas of the ceiling had been repainted with oil paints, and oil pastel. This could not be removed easily, as it had cross-linked with the original paint. The extensive repainting was left untreated. The focus of the recent conservation effort was saving as much of the original as possible and stabilizing the mural. The fallen fragments were adhered to a new canvas support with BEVA 371 adhesive in a process called lining, and brought up to the ceiling where they were glued in place with an industrial high tack glue and placed under pressure with wooden braces. After drying for several weeks the braces were removed and work continued. The mural was cleaned with dilute Vulpex soap and varnished with Acryloid B-72 resin. Inpainting or retouching, was done with Maimeri restoration colors. A dozen individuals worked on this phase of the project.

The Theatre Hall ceiling mural conservation generated good publicity, and the public favored the total restoration of the building. There was television and press coverage almost on a weekly basis, which helped to get the word out about the project and generate goodwill with the local populace. This was critical for the success of the next phase of the theatre's restoration.

4 The master plan

The ceiling collapse was the wakeup call that alerted the government to the theatre's poor condition. The First Lady of Panama, Mrs. Ruby Moscoso DeYoung, took a personal interest in the project, and funded a thorough architectural and engineering study by the local firm of Hache Uve, lead by architect Daniel Young. Because of the theatre's extensive decorative murals, painted finishes and faux marble, Mrs. DeYoung's office decided to move ahead



with the art restoration aspect of the project before all the technical studies had been completed, such as the acoustical and lighting proposals. The government of Panama invited Anton Rajer to direct the work of art conservation. That part of the project began in June 2002.

The Hache Uve Architects in Panama City prepared an extensive master plan for the theatre, noting all aspects of its construction, history of alternations, and a plan for its restoration and renovation, which included replacing the electrical, HVAC, roof, lighting and sound systems, as well as building new bathrooms and dressing rooms. The firm Hache Uve has a strong background in historic preservation of monuments and prepared a proposal costing an estimated \$5,000,000.

The major difficulty was funding. The Institute of Culture has no restoration funds, and because Mrs. DeYoung took a personal interest in the project, authority to restore the building was temporarily switched to the President's Ministry and hence the First Lady's office. The First Lady approached several international organizations for support. It was the government of the Republic of China in Taiwan that agreed to underwrite the project with a grant limited to three million dollars. In addition, through INAC the government of Japan agreed to sponsor the installation of new Japanese lighting, stage and sound equipment, valued at \$500,000. The work was to be completed by November 3, 2003, in time for Panama's centennial. In order to save money the government chose to directly supervise the work without contracting architects. The restoration was handled directly by an engineer representing the First Lady's Office with assistance from the National Department of Heritage, which is a branch of INAC.



Figure 2: 1908 photograph of theatre hall showing the Lewis ceiling mural and balconies. Photograph by Carlos Endara from the R. Lopez-Arias collection.

By June 2002 the art restoration aspect of the project was well underway, working first in the theatre foyer and then proceeding to other areas. In theatre hall the stage frame and 39 theatre balcony fronts were restored and gold leafed with 50,000 sheets of gold. The original 130-balcony ceiling stencils were replicated and the Platea walls painted to imitate marble, as it appeared in 1908. Conservators replicated the vestibule and main staircase color scheme and conserved the marble statues on the theatre's exterior.

Dovetailing the Hache Uve architectural report was the chromatic study of the building's interior and exterior historic colors. This report was prepared by the art conservators. Contrary to popular belief, the building was originally painted in a rainbow of colors, typical of the Umbertino style in early 20th century Italian architecture. In order to sample the high areas of the theatre a ladder truck was borrowed from the Panama Fire Department. The research indicated that the theatre's interior and exterior had a strong color relationship based upon reds, pinks, light green, yellows, beige, and touches of blue. However, popular memory in Panama recalls the building, as being painted off-white, the color used in the first major renovation and repainting in 1926. This disparity caused no end to controversy.

In January 2003 the architectural component of the project got underway. This entailed demolition of the wooden stage, the attic ceiling, bathrooms, electrical, and old HVAC systems, but not the roof, which was once again patched. The 1974 movie theatre seats were also removed as well as the old sound system.

A major debate occurred when the acoustical engineer, Gonzalo Duran, recommended that the angle of the stage and that of the seating be changed. Architect Ruggieri, following standard practices of the time, had placed the stage at a 3% incline and the seating at 4%, facing each other. The engineer thought it best to have a flat stage, which would have necessitated demolishing part of the original theatre hall floor in order to raise it and increase the angle. In addition, the land where the theatre is situated was originally a convent with a cemetery. If excavated, government archaeologists would have had to be brought in, as the building is a national monument. This would have caused further delays in the project. From a preservation point of view the conservators favored respecting the architect's original intent and leaving the stage and seating angle. The First Lady's office agreed.

Seating became another issue. In 1941 the original 1908 Italian seating by Bordalli was removed. In 1974 the seating was changed again, to a movie house version. In 2003 several experts favored more contemporary seating. The conservators, on the other hand, favored a more classic early 20th century style but with modern cushions. The acoustical engineer wanted hard stiff seats, which are better for acoustics. After reviewing several examples of seating a compromise was reached with an antique style and medium hardness. The original 1908 theatre hall plan with aisles down the center and around the sides was replicated.

Yet another major problem was where to perform conservation of the 1908 theatre curtain, which measures 11 meters by 11 meters. Initially it was thought



that the work could be done on the theatre stage, but since the stage had been removed, there was now only an open pit. Near the theatre is a Catholic Church with an unused convent. The parish priest, Father Verar allowed the use of the convent's little theatre, which has a sound roof and a level floor at a 3% angle. The theatre curtain was moved to the convent and a studio was set-up to clean, re-enforce, and retouch the curtain. It is the only one left from the theatre's early days and was painted by Lewis in Paris.

At the same time that the theatre project was occurring, the adjoining National Palace was restored. The Palace project started with installation of a new roof. Then renovation began one floor at a time, while government offices were shifted around to accommodate the project's progress. Corrado's original decorative schemes were uncovered and conserved. The government of Taiwan also funded the restoration of the National Palace along with the National Theatre, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Saint Philip Neri church. Overall the government of Taiwan made a considerable investment in restoration of Panama's heritage between 2000-2004.

5 Project documentation

Despite the fact that all of the original architectural drawings from 1908 had been lost, a few published articles were found that briefly described the construction of the building. Following standard international guidelines for heritage documentation, the recent project in Panama was thoroughly documented with written and photographic reports that included the following: the building's history, including oral interviews with staff, archive research, architectural and engineering plans of the building as it existed before the recent restoration, and proposed architectural and engineering alterations. Condition reports of the artwork and its conservation, and study of the interior and exterior color and paint history. Multiple copies of the art conservation reports were given to the National Library of Panama and National Archives. Several short videos were also produced about the project.

6 Cultural and social aspects of the theatre restoration

The public is endlessly fascinated with the idea of restoration, heritage, and archaeology. Children and adults are inquisitive about the mysteries of the field. That is true not only in the developed counties but also in developing nations such as Panama. Unfortunately heritage preservation specialist, often overlook that aspect of the job and the important role they can play as educators. During the National Theatre restoration project the conservators transformed the environment into an exciting educational laboratory for the staff, public, and visitors. Accordingly the doors were kept open as long as possible. The educational mission was accomplished in several ways and appealed to different sectors of society including university students, school children, adults, and specialists.



The conservators realized that the project was a unique opportunity to educate not only the public but also the theatre staff and laborers. Large sheets of plywood were painted with historic theatre colors and covered with photos and copies of historic documents about the theatre and other opera houses around the world. The boards were placed in the various rooms undergoing restoration. In addition, to demonstrate the relationship between the interior, and exterior colors, large chromatic color samples were painted on the buildings exterior for everyone to see.

The small staff of on-site conservators needed help, so paid stipends were offered to local university students interested in heritage and culture. Although schedules and skill levels had to be considered the overriding idea was to give people an opportunity to participate in an important heritage preservation project. Moreover school groups, with advanced bookings were allowed to visit the site and talk with the conservation staff. Over 1000 children saw the theatre during the restoration.

Many aspects of the conservation/restoration profession are unknown in Panama, so several Saturday workshops were offered to the public, in stencil decoration, faux marble and gold leafing, done jointly with the restoration staff at the adjoining National Palace project. These workshops were so popular that they often had a waiting list.

In addition, for professionals in the field, such as the local chapter of ICOMOS specialized tours of the theatre project were offered after work hours or on Sundays. This helped to keep local colleagues informed about the work. Furthermore a bilingual web site about the project was created to reach a broader community. The site is at (teatronacionaldepanama.com)

For community outreach the conservators gave talks at local universities as well as at civic clubs and luncheons. Reaching the elite of Panamanian society was another matter. On several occasions INAC wanted to reassume control of the theatre. On one such occasion a local firm, PanaBank, approached the Institute with the novel idea of renting the theatre in its current condition in order to host an elegant reception celebrating the nation's centennial and the theatre restoration. Despite many technical difficulties such as the lack of seats, bathrooms, or stage the evening reception actually took place. The champagne and wine helped to sooth tempers. Four hundred people attended the event where restoration staff and university students acted as guides and heritage helpers, explaining their work within the theatre. It was a win-win situation for everyone. For the attendees they could see restoration actually taking place.

The theatre's location was potentially helpful to the restoration project. It is located only a few miles from the Panama Canal, where there is a steady stream of cruise ships. Many ships stop and take tourists on buses around the old city with stops at the National Theatre. The tourists enjoyed being able to see "restoration in action" and even wanted to donate money. Unfortunately, since the Ministry of Finance regulations forbids unsupervised donations the theatre could not accept the tourist's money.

Tourists and students were not the only guests. The local diplomatic community took an interest in the project, especially the embassies that were



sponsoring it. Many foreign guests came to see the project including American Ambassador Linda Watt, German ambassador Georg von Neubronner, the President of Taiwan Shen Shui-Bian, the Japanese foreign minister, and dozens of embassy staff and wives. There was an endless stream of high profile visitors, each had to be escorted and told about the project some even helped to do gold leafing.

7 The future of the theatre

The major administrative problem with the preservation of the theatre is that it is run by bureaucrats who are given the job through political favor. A proposal was made to create a National Theatre of Panama Foundation modeled after the Italian Ente Autonome, which vests responsibility of a theatre's operation in qualified individuals and a board of directors. In addition the proposal was made to create a museum about the theatre and its history. Fear is that without administrative reform the theatre will slide again into a state of decadence and malaise and that the oscillating cycle of care and neglect will continue.

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