

AN ICON'S SECOND ACT

WRITTEN BY | ALEX ABARBANEL-GROSSMAN

A Theater Restoration
Updates Critical Systems
While Strengthening
Community Ties and
Improving the Relationship
Between Audience
and Performer

PHOTOS: FRANCIS DZIKOWSKI/OTTO (unless otherwise noted)



Known as the birthplace of renowned performers like Richie Havens, Jay-Z and Chris Rock, Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood has long been a focus of cosmopolitan African-

American culture in New York City. Standing at the intersection of the community's geographic edge and artistic heart, the Billie Holiday Theatre has served as a focal point of this cultural expression for more than 45 years. Thanks to a recent and long-overdue renovation designed by New York City-based Murphy Burnham & Buttrick Architects (MBB), improvements to the theater's performance and support spaces, as well as new technology and crucial life-

safety upgrades, bring this beloved space into the present.

Opened in 1972 by the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corp., New York, "The Billie," as it is fondly referred to—named for famed jazz singer Billie Holiday—was seen as a platform for homegrown talent. It also aimed to expose the nation's second-largest black community to the arts and to enhance local pride. Playing host to performers like Samuel L. Jackson and Debbie Allen, the 200-seat

theater quickly grew into a hub of African-American performing arts and culture. Over time, the theater also became a focal point for the community at large, serving as the anchor for a superblock called Restoration Plaza. By the 2000s, though, the facility itself struggled to keep up.

"The structure originally had been a bottling plant for the Sheffield Farms dairy company, so the building was not designed to support a performing arts program," says Jeffrey Murphy, FAIA, MBB partner and project lead. "Out of necessity, the building structure was modified to accommodate the theater functions into an existing space and, as a result, we encountered a number of overlapping programmatic challenges."



“With a limited budget, we had to prioritize needs. We focused on providing state-of-the-art performance infrastructure and strengthening the features that make ‘The Billie’ an ideal community theater. —Jeffrey Murphy, FAIA, partner and project lead, Murphy Burnham & Buttrick Architects”



↓ Retrofit Team

ARCHITECTURE AND INTERIOR DESIGN // Murphy Burnham & Buttrick Architects, New York, www.mbbarch.com
 ■ Jeffrey Murphy, FAIA, partner in charge
 ■ Jose Miranda, AIA, project manager

PROJECT OWNER // Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corp., New York, restorationplaza.org

CLIENT'S REPRESENTATIVE // New York City Department of Design & Construction, www.1.nyc.gov

STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING // CRAFT Engineering Studio, New York, craftengin.com

MECHANICAL AND ELECTRICAL ENGINEERING // Plus Group Consulting Engineering, New York, www.plusgroupce.com

ACOUSTICS // Lally Acoustical Consulting, New York, www.lallyacoustics.com

THEATER DESIGN // Auerbach Pollock Friedlander, New York, www.auerbachconsultants.com

COST CONSULTANT // Pavilion Financial Corp. (formerly Slocum Consulting), New York, www.pavilioncorp.com

CODE CONSULTANT // William Vitacco Associates, New York, www.vitacco.com

↓ Materials

ACOUSTIC CEILING TILES // Armstrong Ceiling and Wall Solutions, www.armstrongceilings.com

CARPET // Tandus-Centiva, bit.ly/2E0wGWW, and Interface, www.interface.com

FABRIC CURTAINS // KM Fabrics, www.kmfabrics.com, and Rose Brand, www.rosebrand.com

GLAZED CERAMIC WALL TILE // Daltile, www.daltile.com

HANDRAILS // Julius Blum, www.juliusblum.com, and McMaster Carr, www.mcmaster.com

LAMINATE // Formica, www.formica.com

PAINT // Benjamin Moore, www.benjaminmoore.com

PORCELAIN FLOOR TILE // Casalgrande Padana, www.casalgrandepadana.com

WOOD FLOORING // Maple plank flooring

VINYL FLOOR TILE // Azrock from Tarkett, commercial.tarkett.com

WOOD PANELS // Rulon International, rulonco.com

Constraints presented by the former factory building, for example, required the stage to be asymmetrical and located far above the seating area, which compromised sightlines for much of the audience. “The theater also had limited wing area and fly space,” Murphy says. “Equally limiting, the stage’s construction precluded dynamic, high-impact dance performances.”

The project team faced another issue: Because the theater had never received a major renovation, the updated facility needed to address legacy issues relating to accessibility and life safety. “Other than a few isolated mezzanine seats reserved for persons with disabilities, the theater, its stage and its support spaces were not fully accessible,” Murphy explains. Additionally, despite basic upgrades over the life of the theater, major systems were beyond their useful life, and new upgrades to lighting, fire- and life-safety systems, as well as stage infrastructure, were needed for the theater to function as a top performance venue.

Improving the Theater's Features

Despite previous challenges to finance repairs to the facility, the Billie Holiday Theatre benefited from city funding through the New York City Department of Design and Construction Design Excellence Program, initiated by the Bloomberg administration. Introduced in 2004, this initiative matched cultural institutions and design-focused architecture firms to undertake municipal or publicly funded projects. By connecting top-level firms with important cultural commissions at a reasonable fee, the Design Excellence program ensured millions of dollars of work and opened the door for mid-size firms, like MBB, to get involved in a sector previously dominated by larger offices.

On the other hand, the project’s budget and schedule demanded a cost-effective and highly creative approach to problem-solving—while capitalizing on facility opportunities. Murphy and the project team had a relatively modest outlay of \$4.1 million for the entire gut renovation and expansion of this major performing arts space. With founding Executive Director Marjorie Moon and later Executive Director Dr. Indira Etwaroo’s visions of strengthening the theater’s bond with the community, enhancing its well-established identity and



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improving the relationship between audience and performer, the process could have been daunting. "With a limited budget, we had to prioritize needs," Murphy notes. "We focused on providing state-of-the-art performance infrastructure and strengthening the features that make 'The Billie' an ideal community theater."

With the joint goals of supporting performers and improving the overall audience experience, the project team undertook a series of upgrades to the 3,200-square-foot theater space itself. Redesigning the stage with a symmetrical thrust and reconfiguring the seating riser slope brought the performing surface into closer alignment with the seating area, creating improved sightlines. By expanding the stage area with new, sprung-maple flooring, the project team also opened the door for dance performances and other types of dynamic programming that the Billie Holiday Theatre hoped to bring the community.

Upgrades to outdated theatrical equipment—such as the addition of new catwalks and a control panel with a fully motorized lighting and rigging system—freed up floor space and provided increased wing room to facilitate a wider range of productions. Improvements to the theater space also addressed auditory issues. Acoustical sealing at all doors helped eliminate excessive noise from adjacent spaces and the street. By symmetrically reshaping the interior walls and adding acoustic panels to the ceiling, the redesign also ensured better sound projection from stage to audiences. The project team isolated the control booth from the theater and equipped it with the best technology available. These improvements allow the sound crews to more effectively communicate with performers, support stage activities with video projections and enhance the viewer experience.

Creating better accommodations for audiences—a longstanding, limiting factor for the Billie Holiday Theatre—included the removal and replacement of old, too-narrow seats, the addition of accessible, comfortable new seating and improvements to circulation. The more-efficient theater layout meant the seat count could be increased from 191 to 200 while a ramp now connects the lobby, backstage area and the stage. Reconstruction of the

theater also extended from the backstage to the basement with the creation of new support facilities like an enhanced green room and additional, shower-equipped dressing rooms. The new dressing rooms are accessible, more spacious and bright. Better access to the stage is now possible with the addition of a wheelchair lift.

Theater as Gift

The renovation work improved support spaces and vital infrastructure throughout the building, too. A new sprinkler deluge system and fire alarm that communicates with the base building alarm “dramatically improve life-safety,” according to MBB Project Manager Jose Miranda, who also notes that lighting was brought up to code to facilitate safe circulation and egress.

Other extensive improvements made to the theater’s infrastructure include new boilers and several new air-conditioning units that work with the building’s existing geothermal system, reducing energy consumption by 25 percent and significantly improving sustainability for the organization. The project team also installed a new connection to the municipal water main for the advanced, standalone fire suppression system.

Throughout the renovation process, the project team sought small but meaningful ways to highlight the venue’s history and importance to the community, says Murphy. “During early reconstruction, the contractor uncovered a wall blanketed in original, faded performance posters,” Murphy recalls. “It was such a perfect expression of how history is layered into the theater, so the project team proposed scanning the posters and printed them as a custom wallcovering.” Now lining a hallway that leads to the green room, this thoughtful touch helps bridge the past to the present and cements the theater’s role in the community.

After an official grand reopening in spring 2017, the newly revived Billie Holiday Theatre hosted its first full-run performance later that year. The verdict is clear, and it reflects the value of a sensitive approach to restoring important community spaces: “The beauty of the theater is a gift to the audience,” Etwaroo says. “But in many ways, it’s also a gift to the artists who can now expand the worlds that they’re building.”

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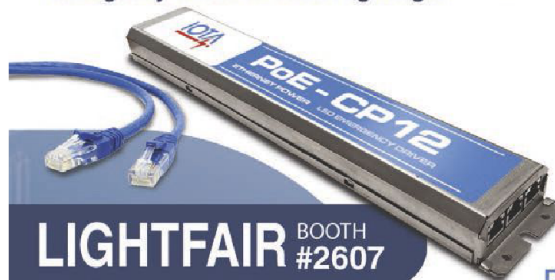
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