

Architecture

A perfect marriage of old, new

On Washington Street, Emerson College unveils striking Paramount Center

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Some stories have a happy ending. The new Paramount Center on Washington Street is one of the triumphs of recent Boston architecture and urbanism.

The center, which was scheduled to host its first performance last night, is the perfect marriage of the right client and the right place. The client is Emerson College, which brings the kind of vital youthful activity that can regenerate a neighborhood. The place is the Paramount Theatre, a classic movie palace designed in 1932, at the height of the Art Deco period, but abandoned since 1976.

This is also a marriage of old and new. The old is the Paramount Theatre, now lovingly restored to its original seductive glamour. The new is all the amazing and exciting modern stuff that's been added to it. Some of that is in the Paramount Theatre itself, and some is next door in the center's other building, known as the Arcade. There's a black-box theater, a film screening room, rehearsal and practice rooms, a new backstage with a truck dock, lobbies, classrooms, offices, a student cafe, you name it. There's even, up above everything where the views are, a top hat of dorm rooms for 262 future students.

Both the new and the old are the work of the Boston firm Elkus Manfredi Architects. It has re-created the Paramount interior with immense love and skill. After decades of abandonment, little was left of the original decor. And Emerson wanted to shrink the space from 1,500 seats to 596, in part to accommodate a new stage and orchestra pit. Somehow, by studying what few traces remained on the walls



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The Paramount Theatre (above) has not been so much restored as replicated, retaining the original's grandeur and theatricality while accommodating a new stage and orchestra pit.

and ceilings, and by hunting down old photos and other images, the architects succeeded in creating a new, smaller theater that retains the rich grandeur and theatricality of the original. It's a replica more than a restoration, a sort of set design of the original. But isn't that what theater is?

The architects also had the good sense not to attempt to do phony Art Deco in the new areas. Instead they've been bold and contemporary. I especially admire the screening-room lobby,

an angular, double-height volume with a boldly painted red wall and a black steel beam that crashes through the space like a wayward jet. It's high drama, and it's very 2010.

This is what makes good cities: the juxtaposition of new and old in one place, so you feel connected to history while you look forward to the future. Paramount Center embodies the wonderful urban paradox in which memory meets invention, the old and new converse with each other. The Paramount

interior looks all the more 1930s because of its contrast with the neighboring architecture of 2010.

Emerson and its architects pursued the new-old paradox in other ways, too. It's the leitmotif of the whole project. The graphic consultants, the firm of Sussman/Prejza of Los Angeles, contributed an astonishing set of interior wall murals. These all work as education, recalling the history of the many stars and theaters that occupied this site over the decades. They're memory murals. My favorite is a vast wall of names, looking a little like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, of thousands of performers who worked here once, mostly in vaudeville. Some weren't yet famous. Next to the name of Broadway composer Jerome Kern, for example, is the note "accompanist," which is all he was when he performed here. More weirdly, silent screen star Fatty Arbuckle is listed as "vocalist."

The memory murals will be part of the experience of the students and the guests who attend performances. They remind us of what a busy theater center Boston once was. Between 1900 and 1930, the city, on average, gained a new theater every 18 months. The murals root us deeply in that past. They also offer a delightful game of trivia. Which names, which faces can we identify?

There's memory outdoors, too. The original Paramount marquee and its upright 7,000-bulb illuminated sign have been restored to their original glitter. As historian Douglas Shand-Tucci has written: "The Paramount marquee and upright . . . are really better symbols than any skyscraper of 'downtown' in the early twentieth century."

The granite facade of the Arcade next door is another example of memory confronting invention. The origi-



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Above: the 21-century-style Bright Family Screening Room.

nal granite front of 1860 has been carefully restored. But its windows are now lined with LED lights, which can be programmed to create a multi-story image that will seem to be lurking just behind the rows of windows. The LEDs should turn out to be a lively 21st-century riff on the jazzy neon of the past.

To anyone who's been around Boston for a while, the Paramount Center seems like a miracle. I can remember when a developer owned the theater and proposed to plant a new office tower on top of it. I can remember, too, when Emerson planned to abandon Boston and build a new campus on a vacant site in faraway Lawrence.

Instead, Emerson has remained to become a powerful force for Boston. No activity works better than a mass

of college students for reviving a decayed urban area. Students are energetic, they're out and about, and they're not scared of the dark. By moving into this and other buildings of what was once Boston's Combat Zone, a district of dealers, strippers, and hookers, Emerson has performed a great benevolence.

Mayor Thomas M. Menino gets credit, too, for pushing the preservation of three key theaters on Washington Street, the Paramount, the Opera House, and the Modern. Only the Modern remains unrenovated. And the cranes are at work there, now, too.

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