

The Palladium Theater History

The Palladium Theater was born in June 1998, when a group of local leaders, headed by Paul Stavros, Bill and Hazel Hough, Mary Wyatt Allen, George Rahdert, and Gus and Frances Stavros, forming The Palladium Theater Inc., took possession of the 73-year-old First Church of Christ, Scientist. The price, \$575,000 covered the building and two parking lots; by today's prices, the purchase counts as a very good investment. A year after the transfer, the Palladium Theater played host to the Florida Orchestra. It has been presenting music, drama, dance, and virtually every other land of performance ever since, with an emphasis on showcasing local performers, composers, and writers.

The change from church to theater included some \$300,000 of alterations. Seats were removed at the front to allow for a usable stage. The most noticeable changes, however, are the acoustic cloud under the ceiling (it absorbs sound that would otherwise continue upwards into the arched ceiling) and the grid from which the theater's lighting system is suspended. Other changes included modern sound, light, and electrical systems, a sprinkler system, handicapped access, and the conversion of the downstairs Sunday School room into the Stavros Great Room, a facility for meetings, parties, and smaller events, including the current "Side Door Jazz" performances. The original 1926 Skinner organ remains in the building, and it is slated for renovation in the coming years.

When it was built in 1925, the First Church of Christ, Scientist, provided the city with an excellent example of architecture in the Romanesque Revival style. This style, unique to the southern states, was popular for bank buildings, churches and other religious buildings, and public buildings because its masonry construction implied solidity, security, and commitment to purpose. Architect Henry Lovewell Cheney chose his style, and his influence -- Brunelleschi's Foundlin Hospital in Florence, Italy, built in 1419 - well. For the First Church of Christ, Scientist, Cheney designed a basilica. But although he chose a form that has its roots in early medieval church architecture, the building was a product of the 1920s, and it has served St. Petersburg for more than seventy-five years.

The hallmarks of the Romanesque Revival are easy to see. The golden brick Fifth Avenue facade is a little unusual; stucco was much more common. But the terra cotta roof is typical of the style, as are the finely detailed

Corinthian capitals that top the limestone pillars across the front. Climb the front steps and you can see the high vaulted ceiling of the portico and the ceiling's richly detailed metal chancellors. Inside, you see how well the basilica's plan works for the Palladium, and how well it worked for the church. Aisles flanking the high central space provide efficient circulation and easy access to the theater's seating and efficient circulation.

Most visitors to the Palladium are awed by the exceptionally beautiful tiles found throughout the theater. These tiles were ordered for the Palladium from the workshop of Ernest Batchelder, a renowned artisan who became known worldwide for his arts-and-crafts-style tilework. All of the Palladium's lovely tiles, including the floor tile, were made in Batchelder's workrooms in California and shipped to St. Petersburg for use in the theater.

Howard Lovewell Cheney, the architect of the First Church of Christ, Scientist, designed several buildings for the federal government, as well as the Court of Peace for the 1939 World's Fair in New York City and National Airport in Washington, D.C. He also designed a Christian Science church in Riverside, Illinois, that is similar in design to the Palladium Theater; it was listed on the Illinois Historic Structures Survey in 1972.

The Palladium was built by the George A. Fuller Construction Company, one of the oldest and most distinguished construction companies in the United States. The company's namesake building, The Fuller Building, was completed in 1902 in New York City; today it is better known by its current name, The Flatiron Building. The George A. Fuller Construction Company also was the builder of the Supreme Court and Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC.

In February 2007, the Palladium Theater became part of St. Petersburg College. In accepting the property, the College made a commitment to continue to operate the Palladium as a community theater, while adding college functions where appropriate. Under the umbrella of St. Petersburg College, the Palladium enjoys access to funding and organizational support that will assure the theater of a long-term future as a vital part of the cultural life of our community.