Yiddish Art Theater Renovation: From 1926 to the Future

Vincent Colletti & Co. Inc., of Rye, New York, recently completed renovation work on the old Yiddish Art Theater at Second Avenue and 12th Street in New York City. The original theater, built in 1926, has been transformed into the Village East Cinema, a lavish seven-screen movie theater with all the details of the original.

Sholom Aleichem’s widow, Olga Rabinowitz, laid the cornerstone for the original theater in 1926. The playhouse was originally designed by Harrison G. Wiseman with, according to a New York Times article at the time, “the appearance of an Oriental temple rather than that of a theater.”

It served as a playhouse for the troupe of Maurice Schwartz through 1950, and later became a movie theater. Plans for its renovation were discussed through the 1980s, but nothing was done until 1988 when City Cinemas, which currently owns, operates or manages nine movie houses with a total of 17 screens in Manhattan, took over the renovation project.

The architects, Averitt Associates of Manhattan, have preserved or restored much of the original auditorium, including the ceiling, proscenium and boxes. Elsewhere, they have found room for six new theaters.

According to Vincent Colletti, renovating the original plastering work presented some challenges. They used original plaster where possible, and in places where it was not usable they had to match forms and surfaces exactly. The work was time-consuming and required great skill.

At the center of the original ceiling, for example, high above the floor, is a Star of David, framed by an undulating star-shaped border, centered in a shallow dome that is 40 feet in diameter and bordered by concentric decorative courses. The dome is surrounded by a field of eight-pointed coffers that have an almost organic quality.

The theater, which reopened in December, is not a landmark, although it is being considered for designation. This type of work, which generated a great deal of publicity within the New York area (including articles in the New York Times), is particularly satisfying to Mr. Colletti because it allows him to utilize the skills his company possesses.