

A Brooklyn Landmark Gets Its Crown Back

At Music Academy, Color Supplants Grime

By Glenn Collins

The terra cotta cherubs are getting new little fingers and noses. Some of the 22 full-size lions' heads have been reconstructed, and all have been cleaned. But best of all, the Brooklyn Academy of Music is getting its cornice back.

Once 280 feet long and 15 feet high, the richly ornamented crown of the 1908 opera house and concert hall had gone missing generations ago. Its brutalist substitute was grimy stucco. Now, however, as scaffolding is removed after two years of construction, passers-by can view more and more of the riotously colorful, neo-Classical north façade that was once a cynosure of downtown Brooklyn.

Both the building and the borough have changed significantly since the cornice was removed five decades ago. "This is an emblem for the revitalization of the borough as well as BAM," said Karen Brooks Hopkins, the academy's president.

Ms. Hopkins, an unabashed Brooklyn chauvinist, ticked off an unprecedented roster of nearby architectural achievements and would-be wonders: the futuristic new \$63 million entrance pavilion designed by James Stewart Polshek that opened last month at the Brooklyn Museum; the proposed \$485 million New Jersey Nets arena being designed by Frank Gehry; the \$39 million expansion of the Brooklyn Children's Museum designed by Raphael Viñoly, and the new library being designed by Enrique Norten adjacent to the \$22 million new theater to be created by Mr. Gehry and Hugh Hardy in the academy's parking lot.

"When you add all those projects to the glorious Art Deco of the Williamsburgh Bank Building and the newly restored BAM," Ms. Hopkins said, "you have to say that the future architectural epicenter of New York City will be right here in Brooklyn."

The \$8.6 million exterior restoration of the academy – universally known as BAM – has been a decade in the planning and has taken two years of toil. The most spectacular aspect of the original structure, the celebratory crown of the academy's 80-foot-high façade, is almost finished.

The complete restoration is to be unveiled in October, but a 130-foot-long entrance canopy of undulating glass is to be revealed some months later.

Day by day, more of the façade emerges. "Who knew that the building would be so colorful after so many decades of grime?" Ms. Hopkins said, "It will be so much more welcoming now to all the different audiences that come through the door."

The academy is "certainly on of the most colorful city-owned buildings, although City Center might give it a run for its money," said Kate D. Levin, the city's cultural affairs commissioner, whose agency was the principal sponsor of the restoration.

The academy rents the building, part of a historic district given landmark status, from the city for \$1 a year. Its restoration was also supported by the City Council and the Brooklyn borough president, Marty Markowitz, along with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

The opera house and concert hall at 30 Lafayette Avenue was designed by Herts & Tallant, the premier theatrical architects of their day who helped define the early 20th-century architecture of the New York theater and brought their over-the-top interpretation of the Beaux-Arts style to the Lyceum and New Amsterdam Theaters in Manhattan.

The façade was originally designed to be increasingly colorful as it got higher. And so the building's resplendent cornice "was Herts & Tallant at their most effulgent," said Mr. Hardy, founding partner of Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates, which has accomplished the reconstruction along with a restoration consultant, Building Conservation Associates.

The original architects showcased Brooklyn's premier performance hall with ornamental terra cotta medallions and moldings of brilliant yellow, bright green, vibrant white, bold ochre and deep cerulean blue. They placed five large double doors embellished with the little cherubim at the Lafayette Avenue entrance.

Ultimately the building was taken over by the Board of Education and chopped into classrooms. So profound was the neglect, and so rapid the disintegration of the original cornice, that for safety reasons, the north façade over the academy's current entrance "was literally decapitated in the 1950's when they took the building's head off," Mr. Hardy said. A draconian budget dictated its replacement by a grim cap of stucco.

Joseph V. Melillo, the academy's executive producer, said that "younger generations that had never seen the original didn't necessarily know that so much of the façade was missing, but everyone knew that something was wrong." He added, "The missing cornice was so severe, there was a nakedness to the building's exterior."

Although planning for the reconstruction had begun early in the 1990's, it wasn't until 1998 that an engineering survey uncovered a higher level of deterioration than had previously been suspected. Although the building was still structurally sound, brick was rotting; and behind the disintegrated façade the original steel supports had gone beyond rust to exfoliation. Key flashing had failed, and walls were bulging with water damage and age.

According to Raymond M. Pepi, president of Building Conservation Associates, more than half of the brick supporting the parapet and cornice had to be taken apart, removed, salvaged, cleaned or replaced, and put back together. Workers rebuilt lintels, refurbished the building's stained-glass windows and partly replaced the roof. A replica of the original cornice and its topmost balustrade was reconstructed from original plans and photographs and written descriptions, and the colors were matched with terra cotta from other parts of the building. "The restored colors haven't weathered, and they're so vivid that, viewed up close, they are almost shocking," Mr. Pepi said. "But from a distance, they harmonize with the existing colors."

Mr. Hardy said his goal was "to recreate the mad joyousness of it all," he said. More mundanely, the façade of cream-colored terra cotta bricks – some of them embossed with tiny lyres to reference the building's musicality – has been repointed and cleaned.

It is not only the first time the academy building has been restored, but also there is no evidence that it has ever before been cleaned, said Mr. Hardy, who has been involved for two decades in the restoration and renovation at the academy.

If Herts & Tallant had high hopes for the building in 1908, they perhaps could not have imagined the current influx of hungry audiences seeking theater, opera, symphonic music, film, jazz, gospel groups and avant-garde performances, Mr. Melillo said.

The underutilized Helen Carey Playhouse at the academy has been transformed into the four-screen BAM Rose Cinemas; a second-floor BAMcafé performance space, restaurant and bar have been added along with a Shakespeare & Co. bookstore, and the academy has branched out to the nearby Majestic Theater at 651 Fulton Street, now the Harvey Theater.

Attendance is 400,000 a year, up 40 percent from five years ago. Where once 60 percent of the academy's audience arrived from Manhattan, now that portion has dropped to 45 percent; another 45 percent comes from Brooklyn and the remaining visitors are regional, national and international cultural tourists.

The restored building celebrates that new vibrancy, Mr. Melillo said, and melds the present and the past. Although contemporary craftsmanship is often considered inferior to that of earlier generations, the new repair effort has employed some techniques and materials superior to the originals, enhancing the building's structure and longevity, Mr. Hardy said. The original copper gutters were riddled with pinholes, but a vast new gutter of lead-coated copper and stainless steel is expected to be much more durable. And the silicon sealants being used to protect the joints between structural and decorative elements "are far better than the original materials, which were linseed oil and oakum," Mr. Hardy said.

Certainly the building workers insist that this isn't just another job. "This building is something beautiful," said Walter Freyre, a 48-year-old welder who has taken on some of the trickier challenges of the steelwork restoration. "This job means more to us because it's..." he paused, then added, "it's like art."

To Mr. Melillo, "we are the stewards of this building," he said, adding: "finally we can pass it on, and be able to say, now we are complete."

Beyond this, Mr. Hardy said he has high hopes for the future. "That's because the building, and everything that BAM is, now has a real constituency in the community," he said. "I hope that such a beloved place will never again suffer from neglect."