

Garde Arts Center New London, CT

Built in 1926 as a Vaudeville and Silent Film House that would later be “updated” with coats of paint over its original design, a recent renewal project restored the beautiful and colorful Moroccan-themed interior, which was a popular style back in the day!



THE GARDE ARTS CENTER

The Garde Theatre in the Garde Arts Center in New London, CT is a Nationally Recognized historic theater named for Walter Garde, a local businessman who opened the theater in 1926 on land purchased from a local “newspaper magnate” who wanted the development of the land to be used “for the good of New London.” Originally opened for Vaudeville acts typical of their popularity in the 1920s, the Garde was created with some unique features – like a Moroccan themed décor – as well as some highly desirable ones – like eight dressing rooms and an orchestra pit large enough to hold 26 musicians.

A restoration project as part of New London’s efforts to revitalize its downtown area in the 80s brought the theater back into regular operation, and a large renewal project started in 2021 made improvements to the original architecture in the lobbies, entrances backstage, support facilities, and more. As part of those upgrades, the Garde Theatre needed to update its lighting infrastructure for both the stage and house lights. PORT was asked to bid on the work and it turned out to be one of our most interesting AND challenging projects.

RESPECTING THE ARCHITECTURE

When we attended the walk-through with the Garde team and the other bidders, we were immediately struck by one particular challenge being highlighted for us – a beautiful domed ceiling structure which at the time was assumed would need to be cut open in order to bring in the new rigging that was being asked for as part of the upgrades. No one had any enthusiasm for this part of the job, as no one likes the idea of intentionally cutting up part of a beautiful historical architectural detail that itself was only recently restored. Unfortunately, that is often unavoidable when bringing modern technology and equipment into something originally built to handle much less ambitious lighting requirements.



In 2022, The Garde Arts Center earned the Outstanding Historic Theatre Award from the League of Historic American Theatres, an organization of 380 historic theaters and organizations.



Fortunately, however, be it from our team's innate curiosity, one of our team members had wandered away from the group and returned to where he had previously noticed a large panel on a side wall.

Upon further inspection, it revealed itself to be an old, out-of-use ventilation shaft that connected directly to the outside of the building. This sparked an idea for our team that led us to a solution that would ultimately result in PORT getting the contract for the upgrades. But while the alternative to cutting open the dome was far preferable, we knew our solution would still require a lot of careful planning and some very challenging hands-on work on the weekend it needed to get done.

OUR UNIQUE "RIGHT OF PASSAGE"

While we knew that our solution to use the access panel was the right one, we also knew that it was not going to be the EASY one. The key element to the entire project was the installation of a new hoist, which in this case was a very significant 660 pounds for the powerhead alone (with bulky dimensions of 100"L x 25"H x 14"W)! Whether we may or may not have been awarded this project for our creative approach to bringing in the new equipment, we still had to succeed at doing it, and there were a number of challenges to overcome.

Our solution involved temporarily installing an I-Beam that traversed the length of the original ventilation shaft and extended outside from where we brought the hoist and then proceeded to cantilever it through the shaft, keeping it as high as possible to avoid any contact and potential damage with the newer HVAC that was now in use in the theater.

Follow the pictures and their captions to see how this maneuver was executed. With a clearance of fewer than two inches in its final placement, and only 5 days to complete this and other upgrades in what was an active theater season, it was one of those projects where the PORT team felt the same sense of urgency we would have if we were supporting a large-scale event with all the pressures and jitters that are present leading up to a big show!

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01



SCENE 1: Our first challenge was raising the hoist up to the level of the shaft cover high on the outside of the building – including a temporary installation of rigging to cantilever the large hoist from the building's internal steel structure to get it in safely!

02



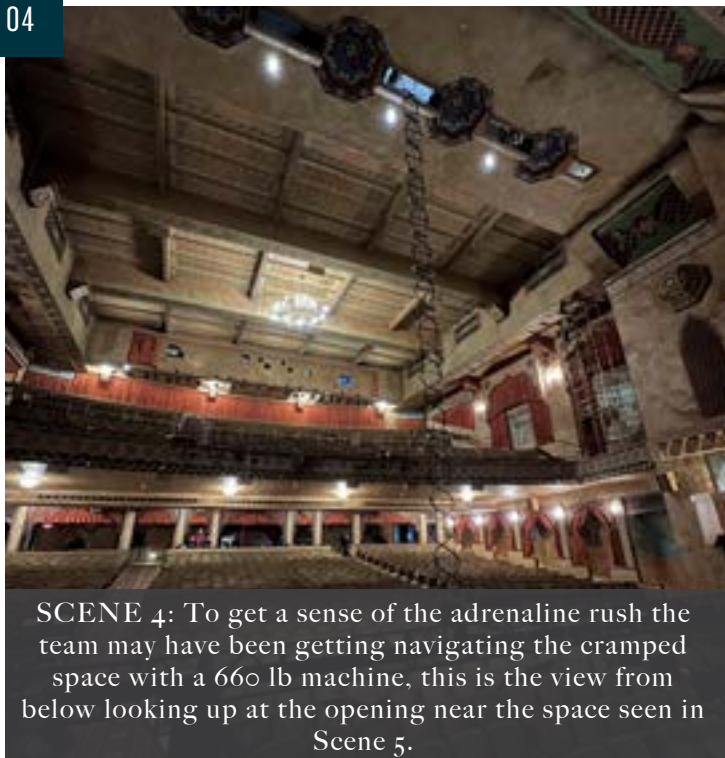
SCENE 2: Once we had the hoist up to the shaft opening, we were able to move it along the inside of the shaft using a custom temporary rail assembly and chain motors we rigged up that allowed us to ensure it could be moved safely and without coming into contact with other equipment.

03



SCENE 3: At the midpoint of its journey, the hoist needed to go left from here and into an even smaller access hole above the ceiling. The space shown here is above the proscenium and had ample working room, but the tight space above the ceiling had access of only 44" and the space above the plaster dome where the hoist lived was 25 1/2" giving us the smallest clearance margin. With the hoist in position above its destination, we could close up the outside entry point, disassemble the rail, and prepare to lower it into position.

04



SCENE 4: To get a sense of the adrenaline rush the team may have been getting navigating the cramped space with a 660 lb machine, this is the view from below looking up at the opening near the space seen in Scene 5.

05



SCENE 5: And while the hard part MAY have seemed to be getting the hoist into the building, there was a special set of unique challenges getting it into position here where it had to navigate laterally between two beams with less than 2" of clearance on each side for a distance of FIFTEEN FEET from where it went up from the spot shown in Scene 3.

06



SCENE 6: With the hoist secured in place, tested, and the remaining rigging and lights installed, the Garde Theatre is once again ready for showtime - all in a weekend!

THE SHOW WILL GO ON

As noted above, this was one of those special projects that has a little bit of everything - the thrill of taking part in upgrading and restoring an older venue of historical significance, the opportunity to work with a diverse set of equipment and tools that required some brainpower to solve the "puzzle," and the sense of urgency required when upgrading a theater over a single weekend in the middle of the season!



FOR MORE ABOUT THE GARDE THEATRE:

Garde Wins Best in Nation! | Garde Arts Center
Garde Renewal | Centerbrook Architects
& Planners

Garde Arts Center | Theaters & Theater
Companies | Non Profit - ChamberECT

MUSICALS ENLIVEN OLD THEATER AGAIN

- The New York Times (nytimes.com)

New London's Garde Arts Center honored
at League of Historic American Theatres
2022 National Conference
(thamesriverheritagepark.org)

FOR MORE PICS: Garde Theater New London
Architecture - Bing images

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