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# A Lesson Well Learned

## New Methods of Disaster Preparation for Atlanta's Fox Theatre

Atlanta's Fox Theatre is unique among movie theaters in Georgia in that it is individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is also a Georgia Landmark Museum Building. The Fox functions as both a working theater and a state and nationally recognized museum that holds several collections of artifacts that are in constant use. The collections include the building's original furniture, photography from 70 years of performances as well as of the extraordinary building, original and carefully reproduced lighting fixtures, vintage projection equipment and accessories, and architectural drawings.

The Fox Theatre suffered extensive damage from a 1996 fire that devastated portions of the General Offices and caused smoke and water damage in adjacent areas of the theater. The consequences of the fire led to a serious re-evaluation of the theater's methods of archival storage, care for its collections, and the safety of the building itself. These investigations resulted in new efforts to prevent and mitigate future disasters, especially as the potential consequences could affect the safety of the Fox's collections. These new efforts included analysis of firestopping in the building (blocking to slow the spread of fire within the wall cavity) and attempts to resolve breaches in protection through reconstruction, and new safety and precautionary procedures for the staff.

As the Fox is a working theater, open more than 200 days a year, many of the items in its collections cannot be taken out of service; they are used everyday. The items that are not used everyday—photographs, architectural drawings, bromograph slides, movie posters—are

stored in the theater's special collections room. In general, the Fox Theatre reserves its collections space for those items that are so valuable or delicate that public use is inappropriate, which makes the security and safety of the archives room critical.

### **Conditions Before the Fire**

Many of the items in the Fox Theatre's collections had, until 1996, been stored in the basement of the building.<sup>1</sup> The room measures roughly 33 by 15 feet and contained several wood and metal shelves, long wooden tables, and nine filing cabinets into and on top of which were piled the holdings of the Fox's archives and collected theater ephemera. The room was below grade, of fire resistant construction, and was surprisingly consistent in temperature and humidity levels.

### **New Archives Space Construction**

The 1996 fire did not severely damage the old collections storage space, but it did destroy the office of the Restoration department, which is the staff group responsible for the management and care of the archives. The reconstruction of the Restoration office provided an opportunity to create a new archives space designed to fit the security and safety needs of a valuable collection.

*Fox Theatre Collections Room before the fire in 1996.*





*Fox Theatre collections room now.*

The new collections space measures roughly 28 by 14 feet, with a 12-by-6-foot corridor on one side (slightly smaller than the old space, but designed with an eye toward efficiency). The safety features of the new space include a sprinkler system, two perimeter walls of four-hour masonry construction with one-hour rated gypsum wall board on metal-stud framing, and two perimeter walls of two-hour rated metal stud and gypsum wall board.

The new collections area is outfitted with rolling compact storage, oversize flat files for large architectural drawings and other large paper artifacts, a modular drawer cabinet, and a freezer for proper storage of photographic materials. The cabinets, manufactured by Rousseau Metal, Inc. and SpaceSaver, are composed of 14-gauge steel posts with 20-gauge steel shelves in steel carriages. All components have a powder-coated finish of epoxy-polyester. The rolling storage system is similar to those used in many libraries, as a steel track allows the shelves to be pushed closely together to conserve space while not in use. The flat files by PlanHold and modular drawer cabinet were manufactured by Rousseau as well, and feature similar construction and finishes. The freezer, intended for storage of photographs and slides, is a standard commercial food freezer that measures 36 by 84 inches. Photographic materials are packaged in small groups and housed such that each unit enjoys its own stabilized microenvironment.

#### **Collection Catalogs**

Because the Fox is a working theater, many of its collections are in constant use all over the building. After the fire, the Fox staff reconsidered the nature of this use and the various ways in which mishandling through overuse could be avoided. Several measures were taken to ensure that delicate items would be stored primarily in the new collections room, and that unnecessary handling and temporarily insecure placement would be kept to a minimum.

A significant factor in the reduction of handling is a series of catalogs developed by the theater's archivist, Michele Schuff. Her ongoing efforts<sup>2</sup> to organize and index each of the items in the Fox's collections have produced itemized catalog entries for each artifact, each of which includes a photograph, description, and in some cases a repair record and recommendation.

Each catalog has been created with a computer database program called FileMaker Pro.<sup>3</sup> The database program creates simple finding aids for artifacts, while the printed catalogs allow easy transport of information about the collections. Several catalogs are printed for each collection: at least one copy on archival paper and printed with a toner-based process<sup>4</sup> for the archives room reference, and several copies with standard paper and ink for everyday use.

For example, the collections of bromograph and lantern slides (used by the projectionist during the annual summer film festival) are permanently stored in the collections room in an additionally secured, custom Rousseau modular drawer cabinet. When an organist prepares the song list for a performance, he/she simply searches through a slide catalog in the projection booth to choose the accompanying slides. The organist then gives a list to the archivist, who delivers the slides directly to the projection booth and returns them to the collections room after the performance.

Likewise, many of the architectural drawings of areas of the Theatre are either very old and delicate or are legally significant contract documents that should not be handled regularly. All of these drawings hang on plan racks in the archives room, but staff members may reference drawings easily and quickly through the computer database or in a catalog that contains an 11-by-17-inch reproduction of each drawing.

All of the photographs in the Fox's collection are stored in archivally secure envelopes in the freezer in the archives room. Cold storage guarantees both the chemical and physical stability of photographic materials, as the individual and grouped housings, in conjunction with the freezer itself, maintain a constant temperature and condition not affected by seasonal variations.<sup>5</sup> When the photograph catalog and database are complete, it will be possible to access both a paper and digital image of each photograph without disturbing the artifacts in the freezer.

Both the furniture and lighting collections are in constant use throughout the theater, and thus cannot be stored in the collections room. Efforts to mitigate the vulnerability of these collections include fireproof materials in new building construction and comprehensive catalogs of each collection.<sup>6</sup> Each entry in the furniture catalog includes an exhaustive description of the piece, including an analysis of its structural, surface, and upholstery conditions, as well as a service history and photograph. The catalog functions as a repair schedule as well as a comprehensive record of each piece in the collection. In the event of a future disaster, it is hoped that the detailed description and photograph in the catalog would provide instructions for an appropriate repair or reproduction.

### **Back-up Procedures**

Since all of the Theatre's collections are documented with computer databases, it is necessary to ensure the permanence of these references. One way to do so is with the archival quality printed catalogs. Some of the collections (most notably photography and architectural drawings) grow every day, however, which dates printed catalogs quickly. To resolve this problem, the restoration staff makes regular updates of the collections databases.

Strict procedures for compact disc back up of each of the computer databases<sup>7</sup> have been developed, with careful consideration of the necessity of back-up intervals and storage. Back-up compact discs are stored both in the Theatre's archives and in off-site storage in case of extreme disaster.

### **Conclusion**

The 1996 fire taught the owners and staff of the Fox the importance of security and proper handling of the artifacts in its collections. Fortunately, the Fox lost very little of its archival collections in the fire, but the experience necessitated a re-thinking of storage and handling methods in case of any other similar disaster. The result of the change in procedures and construction materials is a much more secure environment for the artifacts in the collection, as the new procedures considerably limit their vulnerability.

One of the most unique and appealing aspects of the Fox Theatre is that it continues to provide the public with beautiful, delicate, and historically significant pieces of its collection. The building itself, with its original restored hardware, plumbing fixtures, heating and cooling sys-

tems, and masonry details, is a testament to the Fox's effort to continue to include beauty and history in public spaces. The new post-fire procedures simply enhance and ensure the Fox's continued display and use of its notable collections.

### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> This excludes the majority of furniture and lighting fixtures, which are located throughout the building's many lounges, lobbies, and ballrooms, as well as the projection equipment, which is stored in the auditorium projection booth.
- <sup>2</sup> Michele Schuff continues to organize and catalog each of the collections. In March 2000, the lantern slide, brenograph slide, architectural drawing and furniture catalogs are complete. Work on the photography catalog is in progress.
- <sup>3</sup> FileMaker Pro is made by the Claris Corporation. We use version 5.0 for both Macintosh and Windows.
- <sup>4</sup> The Fox Theatre uses 8 1/2-by-11-inch sheets of Permalife brand, 20-pound white acid-free bond paper made of 25% rag stock. This paper has a lifespan of 300 years when stored properly. Each page is printed on an Alps MD-2010 Micro-Dry Photo-Realistic Color Printer with Alps permanent, water-proof, fade-proof inks in cyan, yellow, magenta, and black.
- <sup>5</sup> Please see Douglas Nishimura, "Storage Guide for Color," Image Permanence Institute, 1997. Mr. Nishimura is a research scientist who was kind enough to help the Fox Theatre make determinations about the methods and materials they used in archiving their photography collection. It was his research into the effects of cold storage on photograph permanence that led the Fox to their purchase of a freezer for the new archives space.
- <sup>6</sup> The lighting collection has not yet been cataloged. This work is scheduled to begin next year, once the photography catalog is complete.
- <sup>7</sup> The Restoration computer databases include several that are not part of the archives. Each year the Restoration department completes nearly 100 architectural and restoration projects, each of which is carefully documented in a computer database. After five years, each project file and database is evaluated. Information that is deemed archivally or historically significant is then included in the archives.

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*Mary Catherine Martin, AIA, the Restoration Project Manager for the Fox Theatre, is a registered architect who oversees all restoration and construction projects in the theater and is responsible for a staff of 11 full-time restoration architects, painters, archivists, and craftsmen.*

*Lila King, the restoration assistant at the Fox Theatre, assists Mary Catherine and the restoration staff in documenting the restoration and construction projects in the theater.*

Photos by John Reilly.