



CASE STUDY: VIRGINIA REPERTORY THEATER How Signage Restores the Glamour of Virginia's Downtowns

Historic restorations of theaters are one of the few remaining applications for neon lighting and signs, which is gradually being replaced by greener LED lighting technology. "This could be the last big neon job we'll do," said Bob Morin, owner of Holiday Signs of Chester, Virginia. Bob was referring to his project for the Virginia Repertory Theater, located in downtown Richmond.

The Virginia Repertory Theater got its start in 1911 as the November Theater and passed through many hands on the way to its current ownership. It was shut down during the decline of American downtowns which left many areas of Richmond abandoned and empty. Several community theaters in town were underfunded and this project was the result of consolidation of a few of them. Holiday Signs worked with Kjellstrom & Lee and Commonwealth Architects. Competitive pricing and experience with historically-true renovations were the main reasons why Holiday Signs was awarded the contract.

Restoring the Glitz

The biggest challenge of the project involved accurately restoring the theater's signage to its original glory. The theater was still using the old, dilapidated marquee. It was rusted and falling apart. Part of the requirements of receiving HUD funding for renovations was that restorations had to be historically accurate. The general contractor had stripped the old skin down to the bare structure and getting a good fit for the radius surface of the marquee was difficult. The building's framing was hand built back in the days when lumber sizes varied from board to board. There were many inconsistencies and over the course of a century, many things were out of line. "It's hard to build a sign of that size with a radius working in modern conditions, but even harder as a renovation," explained Wade Gentry, production manager at Holiday Signs.

Another challenge was related to the urban setting of the theater. Sight lines and viewing considerations for downtown signage projects differ from projects in other



*The old marquee sign as it looked in the 1960's (left);
The marquee after renovation by Holiday Signs as it appears today (right).*

areas where there is much more room and distance around the sign to the viewer. Because urban signs are in closer quarters, there has to be more attention to detail. The marquee and sign above was only part of the entire project. In addition to the marquee, there was also a large flag-mounted sign, signs for the neighboring theater space and donor recognition signage.

Lighting involved with the sign renovation was extensive. The curved surface reader-board had skeleton neon tubing all around it which was brought back to life in the restoration process. The lighting under the canopy of the marquee had 500' of light bulbs and the new entrance way to the theater has been described as both "quaint" and "cool" at the same time. Phil Whiteway, the theater's managing director, loves the sign. "It lights up West Broad Street like a beacon of vitality," he said. "We're really happy with the outcome of the whole project! The name change was very important to us and the sign was laudable and a very important element of our re-branding and historic renovation."



Detailed View of Under-Canopy Lighting.

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