



# Bravos for Karastan and the Boston Opera House Restoration



Historic preservation has hit a high note with the restoration of the Boston Opera House. It represents the repurposing of a magnificent entertainment palace of the past for today's high-tech shows and extravaganzas.

In its original incarnation, it was a vaudevillian theater, built in 1928 by Edward Albee as a tribute to his partner, Benjamin F. Keith, "the father of vaudeville." Evolving along with the changing tastes of American audiences, it also became a movie theater, as well as the stage for other performances. In 1978, The Opera House Company of Boston moved in. But, following the fate of so many other illustrious theaters throughout America, by 1990 the structure was deteriorating, neglected and, finally, closed—facing its final curtain.

The Opera House was acquired by Clear Channel Entertainment/Theater Management, which was committed to bringing the theater back to life and bringing more of Broadway to Boston. Martinez & Johnson Architecture, a Washington, DC-based firm, won the rescuing role. The challenge was to preserve and restore the Baroque interiors while also creating a state-of-the-art facility fully equipped with every possible technology needed for the sophisticated staging of shows such as *The Lion King*, which was to be the inaugural presentation. What's more, it was important that the project comply with the Secretary of the Interior standards for preservation and restoration work so that it could be eligible for tax credits.

Sepia images and original drawings were the starting point in yielding clues for the design team to formulate its plans for the interiors. They also peeled back layers of finishes and fabrics from past renovations to discover the original fabrics, wall coverings and floor tiles for color and finish treatment.

The carpet, an obviously integral design component for the 105,000 sq. ft. space, was hard to read from the faded black and white photos. Fortunately, a piece of the original was salvaged from under a stairway, unearthed from fallen plaster and other debris that had resulted from more than a decade of decline. Having specified Karastan for the job, the architects turned over this one precious scrap to the mill's design team to help them recreate the pattern. It was thoroughly cleaned to reveal an ornate but appropriately dramatic decoration: a thick rope-like trellis pattern punctuated by medallions with a stylized floral motif. And, the color palette was now clearly visible: black





and golden tan, the ultimate in simplicity and elegance. Karastan set to work to produce a replica.

The first step was for Karastan's designers to hand draw the pattern into the computer. According to Summer Culbreth, supervisor of product development for Mohawk Industries, the parent of Karastan, "A custom job like this one really puts us to the test. But, we passed. It was a design that required exacting artistic detail, and because we have such highly skilled and experienced talent, we succeeded in accurately imitating the original."

For the weaving, Karastan turned to the company's Wilton looms in Landrum, SC. This facility, shared by other of The Mohawk Group brands, has the distinction of being the world's largest for manufacturing woven carpets, and only the Wiltons there could adequately manage the intricacy of the repeat pattern plus the 12' width. Uniquely, too, the 3,500 yard job was specified to be a continuous pattern to sufficiently cover the extraordinary expanse of the rooms but avoiding too many seams where the match up had to be absolutely flawless.

The architects consciously chose the woven Karastan because of its extraordinary durability. "Woven carpet was essential," explained Gary Martinez, principal of the firm. "We considered other types, but woven gives us the definition, clarity and precision in the design and construction and accuracy in the repeat pattern. Also, with long-running, sold-out shows like *The Lion King* being featured, the foot traffic was projected to be inordinately heavy. Woven holds up and performs well. The beauty of the carpet is apparent to all." A professed fan of Karastan floor coverings, Martinez is specifying the brand in two current renovation projects, also historic theaters.



Installed in 2004 for the Opera House reopening, the carpet is stellar and contributes to the surprising warmth of the cavernous and palatial space. As Martinez noted, "The original pattern was well thought out. Given the elaborate detailing in the finishes—all the millwork, gilding, paint and plastering—the carpet is understated enough so as not to detract from the other elements." It is used throughout the theater, including a clubby reception lounge that features its own fireplace. A sweeping staircase suggests theatrical entries into this room, and it, too, is carpeted. Of

course, the grand staircase in the lobby is equally as impressive, echoing former eras of pomp and ceremony that were synonymous with the theater.

The glorious outcome of the entire restoration project earned Martinez & Johnson and Clear Channel this year's Interiors Award presented by *CONTRACT* magazine. In naming The Boston Opera House, one of the jurists said, "The designers were very rigorous in their research and have succeeded in their attempt to bring back the glamour and exuberance of the original design." It's obvious the encore for this performance center is bravura.

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