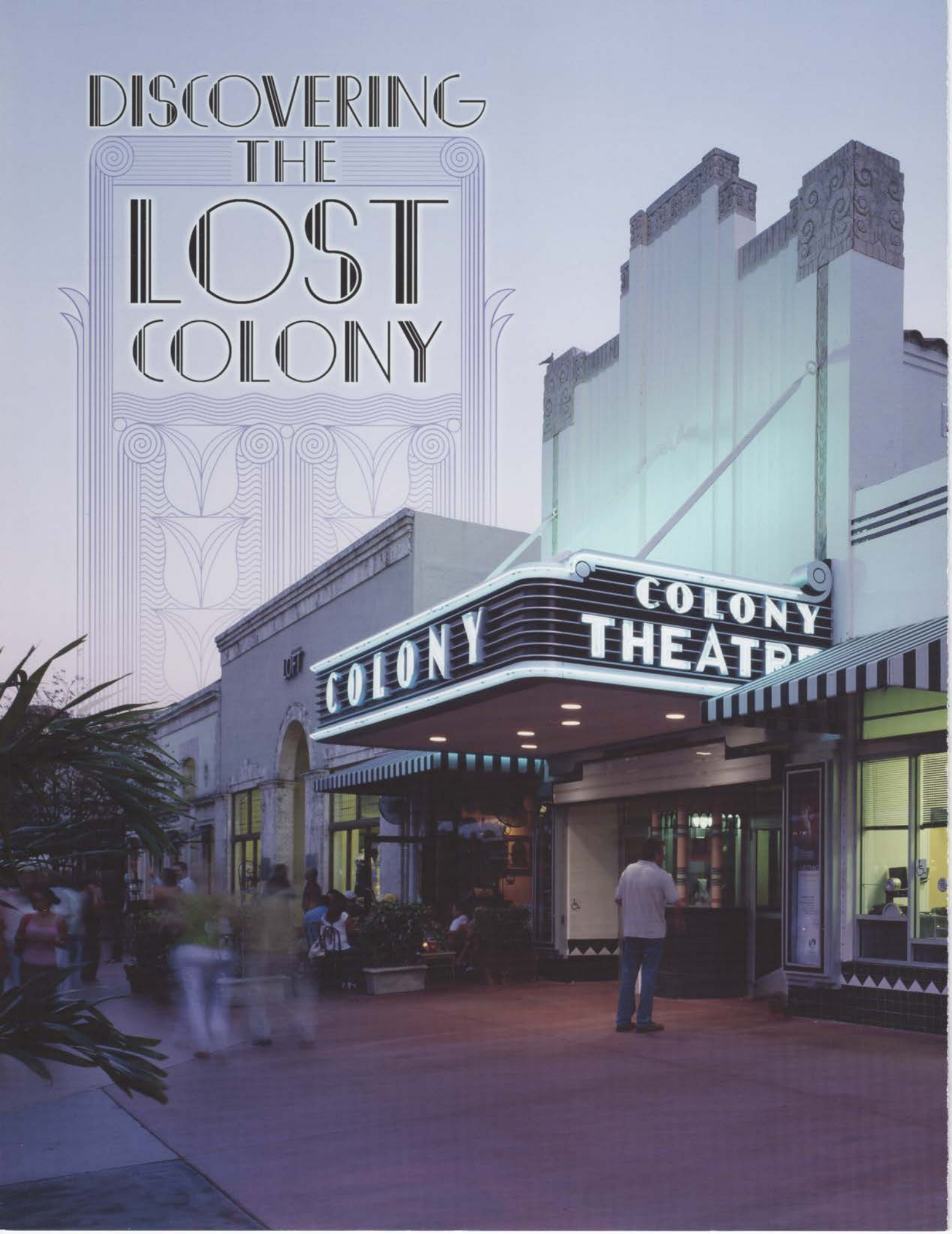


DISCOVERING

THE

LOST

COLONY





USING CSI-LIKE TECHNIQUES, ARCHITECT RICHARD HEISENBOTTLE RESTORES A LINCOLN ROAD JEWEL.

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Architect Richard Heisenbottle is standing in the vestibule of the newly restored Colony Theatre, on the west end of Lincoln Road. From behind the wire frames of his Armani eyeglasses, he stares up at the ceiling. "This is the secondary ceiling that surprised us; we didn't know it was there," he says. "A plumber found it while putting in some pipe. We tore out the drop ceiling that was hiding it and now we're back to the original vaulted ceiling."

The vestibule ceiling is just one of the original elements Heisenbottle brought back to gleaming Art Deco life during the three-year, \$7 million renovation of the former 1930s Paramount Pictures movie house. Amazingly, the architect, who also helmed the renovation of downtown Miami's Gusman Center, had only a couple of old photos and some worn-out drawings from the Colony's heyday to go on. Heisenbottle used clever detective work, educated guesses, and high-tech techniques such as polarized microscopy paint analysis to re-create the look and feel of the original theatre.

The challenge was not simply to reach 70 years into the past but to undo the effects of an earlier renovation. In the early 1980s, the Colony was redesigned by acclaimed architect and original Lincoln Road mall designer Morris Lapidus, who, among other things, moved the entrance to the corner facing Lenox Avenue and took out the original balconies to accommodate the stadium seating that exists today. What Lapidus was unable to do, however, was overcome the theatre's movie house layout, which provided almost no wings or space for theatrical rigging and lighting, both essential for a performing arts venue.

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BY REGGIE RUDDOCK

PHOTOS BY RAUL PEDROSO



Heisenbottle was able to re-create the Colony's original carpet using only a scrap he found in a storeroom

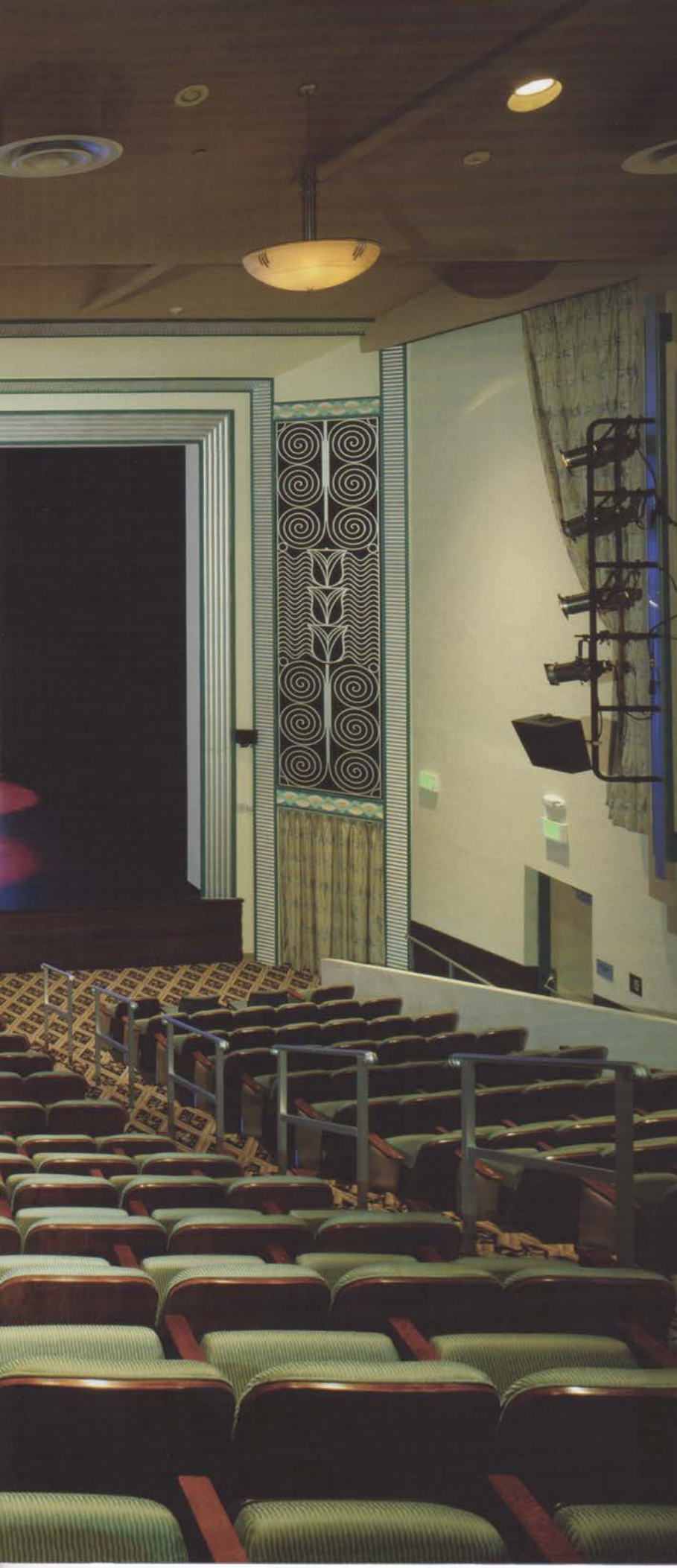
Enter Heisenbottle. "Our charge from the city [which owns the Colony] was to restore as much as possible to the original design and make the theatre as exciting and usable for patrons as possible," he explains. For starters, the marquee was refurbished and the entrance moved back to Lincoln Road. The old box office—detailed in sea foam green, coral, and red—is now the will call booth.

The lobby is resplendent. Reflections of the terrazzo and tile floor gleam in the brushed and polished steel entry doors. Indian head sculptures, reminiscent of theatrical masks, adorn the doors. The vaulted ceiling soars to meet three low-relief plaster seagulls with outstretched wings. "Those seagulls were only visible—barely visible—on a photo we had on microfilm. We redrew the dimensions in AutoCAD and filled in the blanks," says the architect.

Other aspects of the restoration were more involved. The interior colors came courtesy of work by paint analysis expert Matthew John Mosca, a noted preservationist. Heisenbottle says he's so good at reconstructing original materials, colors, and conditions that "you almost expect him to tell you the name of the guy who was holding the brush when the wall was painted." Heisenbottle sent Mosca samples from interior moldings.



A perfect view
from the back
of the theatre



"I carefully removed the top layers to get back to the original finish using a scalpel here in the laboratory and then looked at that original finish under high magnification using controlled light sources," explains Mosca, speaking from his firm, Artifax Ltd., in Baltimore. "You try to get as much information about the paint finish in terms of how it was made and what the components were, so you eliminate the surface dirt and cope with the discoloration aspects from fading or oil binders. [Then I look] at the color in white light, according to what's called 'the Kelvin degree rating.' That way, I can figure out what the original finish was."

Mosca says the Colony samples were in pretty good shape and consistent with the Art Deco palette he has seen on other projects in Florida. Using modern acrylics, Mosca created a color standard—basically, swatches of paint like those found in a hardware or paint store—that matched the samples perfectly. "We based the rest of our color schemes on the results of that historic research and paint analysis," says Heisenbottle.

The striking carpet inside the 440-seat performance hall is another example of using technology to bring the past to life. Heisenbottle found only a beat-up scrap of the original carpet in a storeroom. "It wasn't more than two and a half feet long but it gave us the complete pattern. Portions were pretty faded, but others were very much intact. We sent that off to Brintons Ltd. [a carpet manufacturer in England]. They analyzed it and gave us a strike-off. We rejected the first due to inconsistencies, but the next one came back flawless. That's what's in the theatre now."

Of course, the goal was not to re-create a 1934 movie house but to transform it into a new performance venue, so some changes had to be made. A three-story stage house was constructed; the property line was pushed to Lenox Avenue, giving the theatre about 10 feet of additional wing space; and the new backstage was furnished with a complete fly loft, dressing rooms, offices, laundry, crew room, storage space, and wings. Surround sound, a new mixing board, and advanced theatrical lighting systems have been added as well. All of which make the "new" Colony a perfect marriage of vintage charm and modern technology.

"While not completely authentic in every way, the theatre stills [harks] back to the Art Deco era," says Heisenbottle. "I think for arts groups looking to perform on Miami Beach, and in a theatre of this size, the Colony will become the theatre of choice." ☉



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The Colony
lobby in all of
its Art Deco
splendor