

# QUEENS THEATRE

QUEENS, N.Y.  
CAPLES JEFFERSON ARCHITECTS

TEXT BY SARA HART  
PHOTOS BY ALBERT VECERKA





**FLUSHING MEADOWS CORONA PARK**, in the borough of Queens, N.Y., is larger than Manhattan's Central Park, and this former swamp and ash dump now provides an array of cultural and sports activities. Which is why, in this vibrant urban green space, a collection of enormous architectural ruins—the graveyard for New York State's contribution to the 1964–65 World's Fair—is, at best, an unexpected sight. The glory has long since faded from the once awe-inspiring structures designed by Philip Johnson with Richard Foster and structural engineer Lev Zetlin. The decrepit remains include the Tent of Tomorrow, Astro-View Towers, and Theaterama. Adding insult to neglect is the proximity of the modern U.S. Tennis Association Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, host of the U.S. Open every August and September, and Citi Field, the new home of the New York Mets.

The contrasts are stunning, and one wonders why the remains of the World's Fair haven't either been repurposed or removed. Economics and bureaucratic inaction notwithstanding, the relevant answer is that there's still life there. Theaterama, which Johnson envisioned as a venue for avant-garde art at the fair, was a technological marvel when it opened because of its use of slip-form concrete construction. Recognizing its commercial value, the city converted the cylinder, measuring 44 feet tall and 100 feet in diameter, into the Queens Theatre in the Park in the early 1980s, then commissioned a major renovation of the space in 1993.

In the early 2000s, the theater's growing success and popularity created a critical need for more space and accessibility. The city commissioned Long Island City, Queens-based Caples Jefferson Architects to undertake modernization and expansion of the theater for the limited price tag of \$20 million. The program called for a renovation of some existing spaces, new offices and a 75-person cabaret in an addition that wraps around the existing theater building, and a mechanical system overhaul. The most noticeable new space, however, is a reception center, which provides a 600-person preperformance gathering area and leasable venue for non-theater-related events.

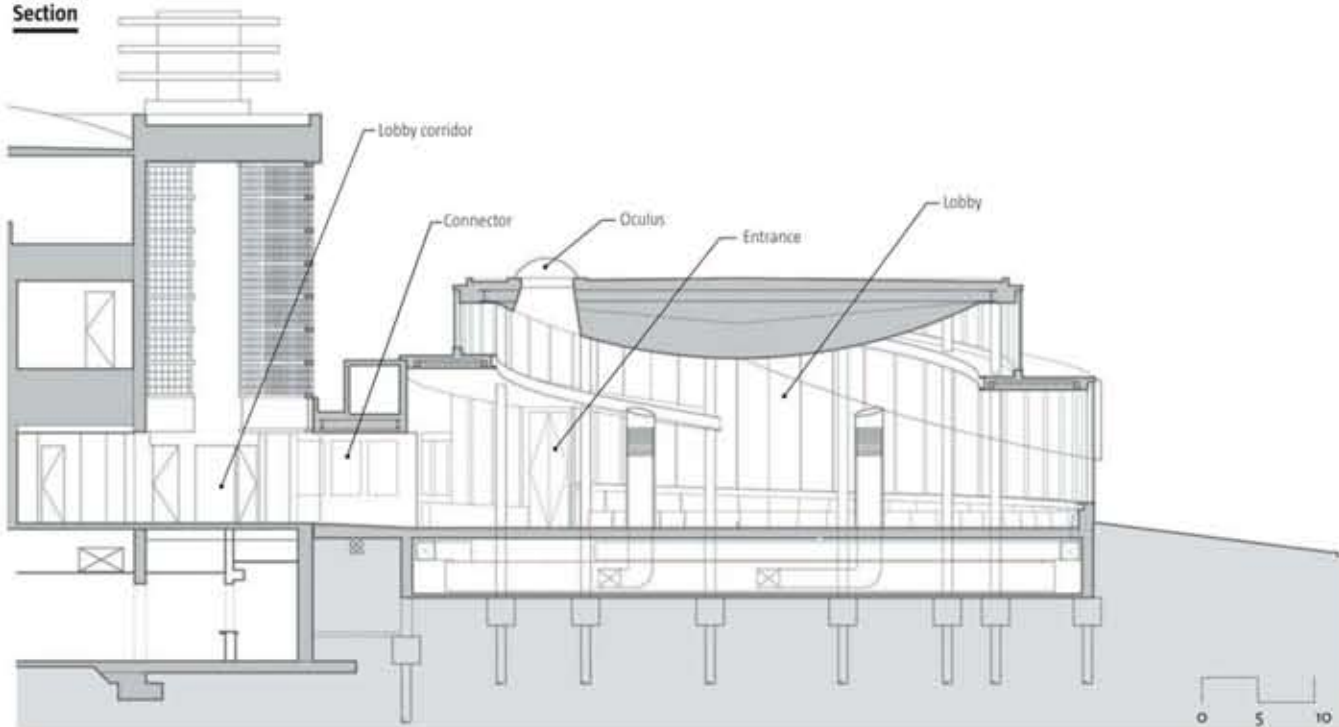
Caples Jefferson designed a glass cylindrical structure to complement the circular geometry of the existing theater. It's a translucent form that subtly juxtaposes Johnson's opaque one. The two volumes are conjoined at the 1993 theater entrance, but the reception hall is sited on axis with the skeletal remains of the gargantuan Tent of Tomorrow, with a view of the rusted observation towers—a move that cleverly concedes the visual clutter of the site, and frames it as strange beauty from another era.

"The challenge was to create the impression of round spiraling forms with large, flat, structurally glazed units," explains principal Sara Caples, AIA. The architects designed a unitized curtainwall made of 5,000 unique glass panels to suggest a perfectly round cylinder. Aluminum fins at the vertical joints in the system intensify the perception of a vanishing perspective as the fins move (and disappear from view) around the curving wall, and 2-inch-deep aluminum tubes on the interior surface of the glass breaks trace horizontally around the curving form. The project did not pursue LEED certification, but the architects diligently sought to make the building energy-efficient. They accomplished this by installing gas-filled insulated glazing units with low-E coatings to reduce solar heat gain, and by using silicone sealant joints rather than metal mullion caps. Laminated outer glass lites allowed for a larger unit size and help protect against vandalism.

Inside, the ceiling plane is an inverted gypsum dome, clad in acoustic plaster over sound insulation, with three skylights rendered by deep round voids—a composition inspired by artist Barbara Hepworth's sensuously carved marble sculptures. The ceiling and oculus walls are tinted orange and set the space ablaze when the sun passes over. At night, colored, cold-cathode lighting fixtures, muted behind a translucent acrylic fascia, spiral upwards around the perimeter.

Caples Jefferson demonstrates that additions, even to sites as loaded as this one, don't need to mimic the past. The new pavilion doesn't ape the site's architectural relics, but neither does it dismiss them; more importantly, it brings new life to the site.

## Section



In the shadow of the remnants of Philip Johnson's 1964 World's Fair Observation Towers and Tent of Tomorrow, Caples Jefferson Architects' renovation to Queens Theatre included the addition of a new reception venue (previous spread). Cylindrical in form to reference the geometries that typified Johnson's works on the site, the addition is glazed and lit with colorful cold-cathode lighting (this image), creating a bright counterpoint to the dark relics nearby.



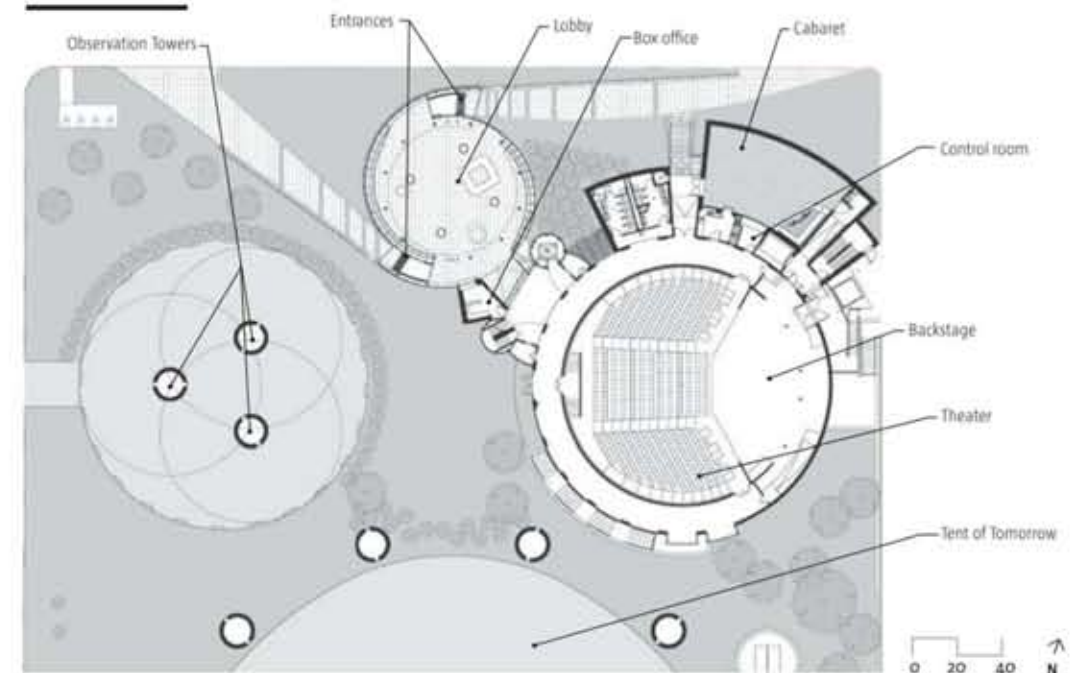




One of the largest new program elements is a new reception venue (this image), which features an orange, inverted-dome ceiling plane and bronze-clad air trees that provide ventilation to allow a 600-person occupancy. This new space was created to serve as pre-show space for the theater (opposite), and to hold independent events.

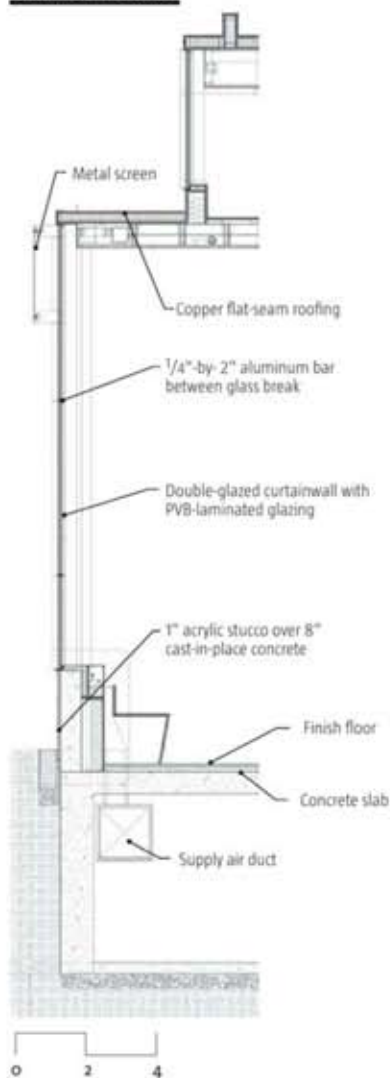


#### Ground-Floor Plan

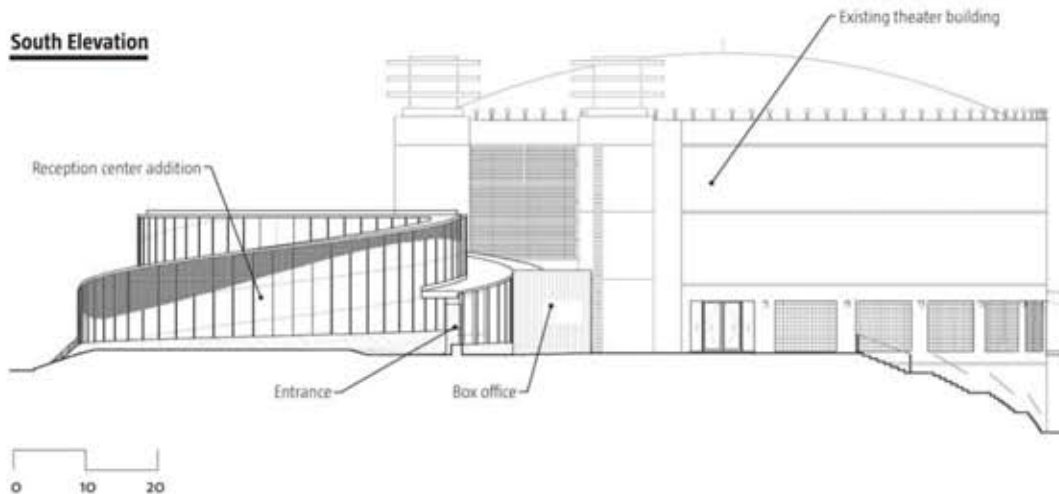




## Curtainwall Section



## South Elevation



## Project Credits

**Project** Queens Theatre, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Queens, N.Y.  
**Clients** Queens Theatre-In-The-Park; NYC Department of Cultural Affairs; NYC Department of Design and Construction  
**Architect** Caples Jefferson Architects, Long Island City, N.Y. — Sara Caples, AIA, Everardo Jefferson, AIA (principals)  
**Joint-Venture Architect** John M.Y. Lee / Michael Timchula  
**Construction Manager** Hill International  
**General Contractor** C. & I. Contracting  
**Curtainwall** Zimmcor; Gordon H. Smith Corp.  
**Mechanical Contractor** Northstar  
**Plumbing Contractor** Aspro  
**Electrical Contractor** Interphase  
**Structural Engineers** GACE Consulting Engineers  
**M/E/P Engineers** Joseph R. Loring & Associates (phase 1); Shenoy Engineering (phase 2)  
**Civil Engineers** Langan Engineering and Environmental Services  
**Geotechnical Engineers** Robert Alperstein (phase 1); Louis Berger (phase 2)  
**Lighting Design** L'Observatoire International (nebula); Berg Howland Associates (cabaret)  
**Landscape Architect** EKLA  
**Food Service** Pascoe Jacobs  
**Cost Estimating** VI Associates  
**Acoustics and Audio-Visual Consultants** Shen Milson Wilke  
**Theatrical Consultants** Auerbach Pollock Friedlander  
**Building Department Consultants** Metropolis Group (phase 1); Berzak Schoen Consultants (phase 2)  
**Specifications** Aaron Pine  
**Size** 11,000 square feet (new additions)  
**Cost** \$20 million (additions and renovations)

## Materials and Sources

**Acoustical System** Baswa Acoustic [baswa.com](http://baswa.com)  
**Adhesives and Sealants** Thoro Consumer Products [thoroproducts.com](http://thoroproducts.com)  
**Carpet** Lees the mohawk group [lees.themohawkgroup.com](http://lees.themohawkgroup.com)  
**Exterior Wall Systems** Thoro Consumer Products [thoroproducts.com](http://thoroproducts.com)  
**Flooring** Dex-o-tex [dex-o-tex.com](http://dex-o-tex.com)  
**Glass** Viracon [viracon.com](http://viracon.com)  
**Gypsum** USG Corp. [usg.com](http://usg.com)  
**Lighting Control Systems** Lutron Electronics Co. [lutron.com](http://lutron.com)  
**Lighting** National Cathode Corp. [nationalcathode.com](http://nationalcathode.com)  
**Masonry and Stone** A. Ottavino Corp. [hstrial-melkody1.homestead.com](http://hstrial-melkody1.homestead.com)  
**Paints and Finishes** Benjamin Moore [benjaminmoore.com](http://benjaminmoore.com)  
**Roofing** Revere Copper Products [revere.copper.com](http://revere.copper.com)  
**Windows, Curtainwalls, and Doors** Zimmcor [zimmcor.com](http://zimmcor.com)