

Historic facades given new life

After a long and careful restoration process, three historic Forbes Avenue façades are showcased on the new Pittsburgh Playhouse at Point Park University.

The careful deconstruction of the façades was successfully completed in 2017, and about 95 percent of the 685 individual pieces were salvaged, according Elmer Burger, the University's architect.

The pieces of the façades, depending on size, were fastened to backup walls in a variety of ways, necessitating a slow and careful removal process. The removal team was delicate in its approach to avoid chipping or damaging the corners of individual pieces. The glazed face of the terra cotta is fragile and can be easily damaged.

"We have been told it's the largest terra cotta salvage and rebuild in Pittsburgh," Burger said. "It was a pleasant surprise to be able to salvage so many intact, whole pieces of the façades. Repairs were necessary – terra cotta is a clay product and it's been fired and exposed to the elements for a long time – but the high percentage we were able to reinstall is remarkable."

The façades at 320, 322 and 330 Forbes Ave. were documented and numbered for careful dismantling, cataloging and storage before being reinstalled in the Playhouse's urban courtyard. Franco Associates was contracted to handle the removal, storage and reconstruction of the façade pieces. The removal work cost \$160,793, while reinstallation cost another \$200,000.

Although the lower sections were long-ago removed by previous owners, the upper façades represent a fine example of the commercial architecture that once characterized the district, said Ellis Schmidlapp, president of Landmark Design Associates, a longtime partner of Point Park that oversaw the removal and restoration.

"The historic value of these buildings rests in the terra cotta ornament on the façades, so we concentrated our preservation efforts there," Schmidlapp said. "The most sculptural is the façade of the Royal building."



Above: A worker holds a piece of the Royal façade from 330 Forbes Ave.

Below: Pieces of the Palace façade at 320 Forbes Ave., are laid out for inspection.

