

Architecture

# Regal rebirth

## A fanciful theater is restored to its original splendor

By Paul Gapp  
Architecture critic

In the recent outpouring of publicity about the New Regal Theater, scarcely a word has been printed or uttered about the architects, engineers and artisans who transformed the building from a decaying, dirty hulk into a bright new venue for black entertainment.

First things first, then: d'Escoto, Inc., a Chicago architecture-engineering-construction management firm, was in charge of the New Regal project. D'Escoto teamed up with Conrad Schmitt Studios, Inc., of New Berlin, Wis., a crack-crack restoration firm whose work is nationally known.

The same two companies worked together in the late 1970s and early 1980s to renovate the now elegant Paramount Arts Center in Aurora; the opulent Rialto Theater in Aurora; and the impressive Egyptian Theater in De Kalb. Their success on those jobs practically guaranteed a competent ensemble performance at the New Regal.

Today, one enters the renovated theater at 79th Street and Stony Island Avenue to find that the team has, indeed, achieved another success. The New Regal was never among Chicago's finest stage-and-screen palaces, nor has its restoration been of what is known as museum quality. Still, it is a delightfully fanciful and lavishly ornamented theater that has been brought back to a state more than approaching its original splendor. Only a tiny number of such grand old theaters survive in Chicago. Thank goodness that the New Regal has been given an extended life.

Yet the ramifications of the New Regal go beyond the art of restoration. The theater's rebirth is recollective of black entertainment history, urban decay, fragmentation of black neighborhoods and the continuum of bigotry and racial discrimination that has torn and reshaped Chicago for many decades. Unless some of this background is comprehended, the symbolic as well as pragmatic importance of the reborn theater does not come into sharp focus.

The New Regal (until recently named the Avalon) is intended to replace in spirit and in kind the original Regal at 47th Street and King Drive. The splendorous old Regal, designed by Edward Eichenbaum, opened in 1928 and was torn down in 1973. It seated 2,797 and its Spanish Baroque facades concealed an interior intended to be Moroccan—well, "North African," actually, a style thought appropriate for the all-black audiences who would patronize the theater.

The old Regal's single most impressive decorative feature was the auditorium ceiling, magically or-



Tribune photo by Charles Osgood

The New Regal Theater at 79th and Stony Island Boulevard is now the city's foremost venue for black entertainment.

namented to resemble an enormous tent. It is said that architect C. Howard Crane copied the tent idea when he designed the twin Fox Theaters in St. Louis and Detroit.

Much has been written about black stars who played the old Regal, among them Cab Calloway, Billie Holiday, Nat Cole, Duke Ellington and Dinah Washington. Nor has interesting minutiae about the theater been neglected by such black writers as Dempsey Travis. One example: A teenager named Harold Washington (now His Honor) sat through the same sports newsreels at the Regal time after time to get glimpses of champion hurdlers whose technique might improve his prowess on the Du Sable High School track team in the late 1930s.

But if the original Regal was a breathtaking venue for enjoying some of the best black stage entertainers in the nation, it was also a reminder that racial segregation extended deeply into show business, as well as everything else, in the years before World War II.

Blacks who ventured to downtown vaudeville and movie houses in the old days often entered through doorways reserved for non-whites and sat in segregated sections of balconies. Even black superstars were barred from white hotels and restaurants. In 1933, white fan dancer Sally Rand came to the Regal to give a special performance during her memorable Century of Progress engagement. She made the gesture, a rather daring one for its time, because blacks were not allowed to attend shows at many of the lakefront fair pavilions.

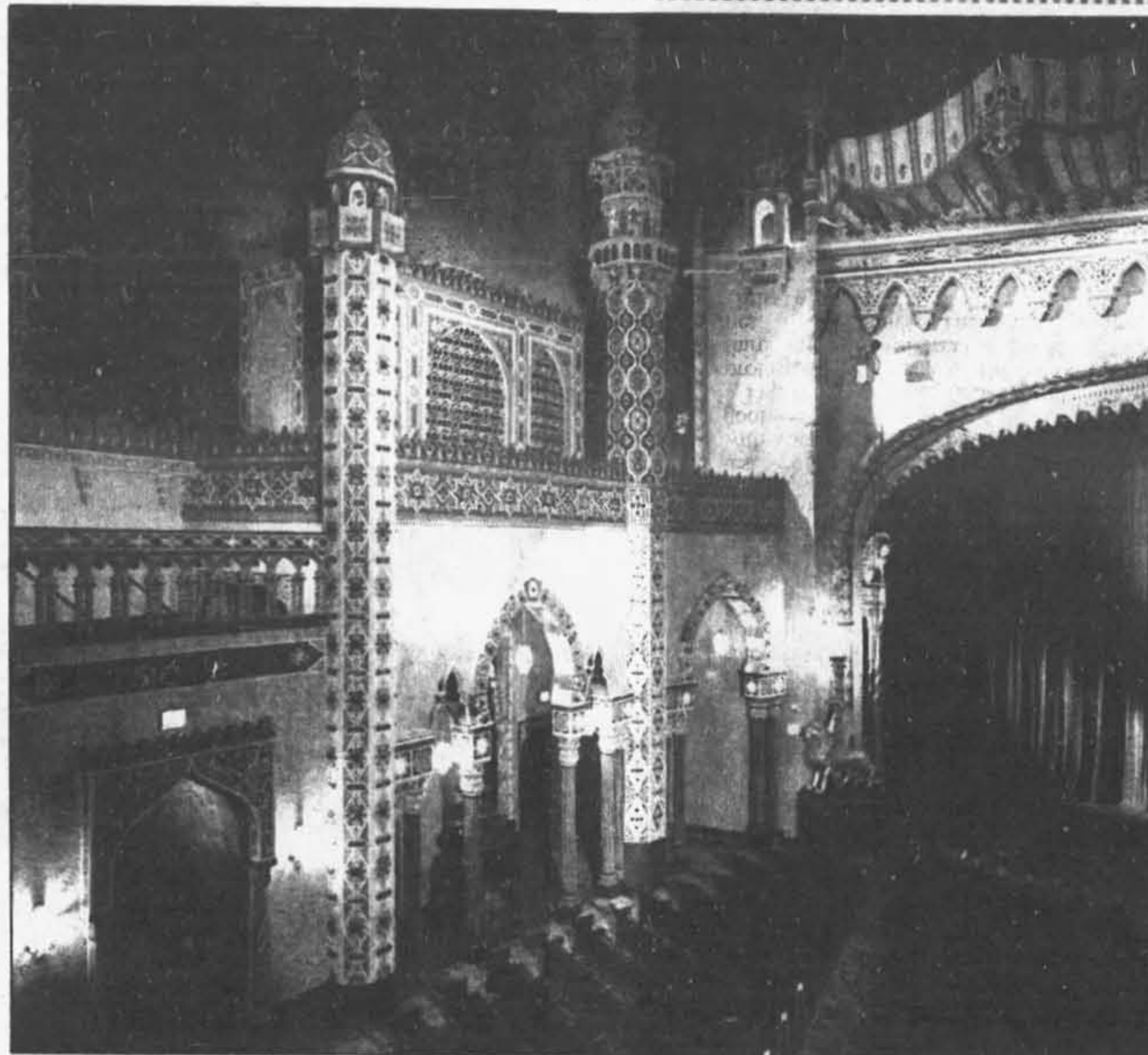
As Chicago and other cities passed through a period of turbulent change in the 1950s and 1960s, big stage-and-screen houses



The Avalon Theater, now the New World War II, as it looked when it opened in August of 1927.

went into decline. Television, suburbanization and shifting socio-economic patterns began choking off live downtown entertainment for the masses. As vaudeville and burlesque died, so did many of the theaters that served them. Surviving entertainment palaces went to a movies-only policy, often degraded by the booking of nothing but kung fu and other exploitation films aimed at blacks, who, by the 1970s, constituted most of the downtown movie customers.

Yet the changes were hardly limited to downtown. White flight out of the city, physical decay, ex-



Tribune photo by Charles Osgood

The New Regal auditorium's Islamic architecture evokes the days when movie theaters were palaces.



Tribune photo by Chuck Berman

It was tuxedos and VIP treatment at the New Regal on opening night.



Tribune photo by Ovie Carter

The original Regal, at 47th Street and King Drive, was torn down in 1973.

pressway construction, the disruptions caused by urban renewal and the damage resulting from riots and social despair ravaged neighborhoods. On the South Side, the "Bronzeville" of old was no more, its commercial and social infrastructure having been done in. Sixty-Third Street and other bustling main drags of the Black Belt were decimated. At 47th and King, the Regal and its next-door companion, the Savoy Ballroom, went broke and were demolished.

As the old entertainment palaces vanished from both black and white neighborhoods, nobody except a few theater buffs paid much attention. Stuffy architecture scholars turned their backs on the wild eclecticism of such places. Preservation groups already had their hands full, trying to prevent developers from wrecking world-famous buildings by the likes of Louis Sullivan.

But while the Regal fell, the Avalon at 79th and Stony Island remained among a few old large neighborhood theaters that survived. The once-white environs of the Avalon had become black, and commercial activity along main streets in the area had gone into a slump. Still, a matrix of solid housing helped sustain the partly blighted area, and there seemed to be hope for a genuine renaissance.

It was at that point, about three years ago, that black businessman Edward Gardner and his wife, Bettina, conceived the idea of renovating the dingy but structurally solid Avalon and making it the anchor of a performing arts and



Tribune photo by Charles Osgood

An intricately colored mosaic is one of several in the lobby of the New Regal.

retailing complex. Private and public funds were raised, and today the non-profit New Regal Theater Foundation administers the theater, renamed for its renowned predecessor.

When architects and engineers from d'Escoto, Inc., made their first exploratory visit to the 2,300-seat theater late in 1985, they found a leaky roof, three feet of water in the basement, plaster damage, worn-out upholstery and a pervasive layer of grime resulting from years of neglect (the Avalon had not served as a movie house since 1970, and had most recently served as a church of more than modest means).

Luis F. Era, d'Escoto's chief operating officer, said it was the most difficult theater restoration job in which his firm has collaborated. Budget constraints were tough, the technical problems were many and the work had to be done rather swiftly to meet the development groups' timetable.

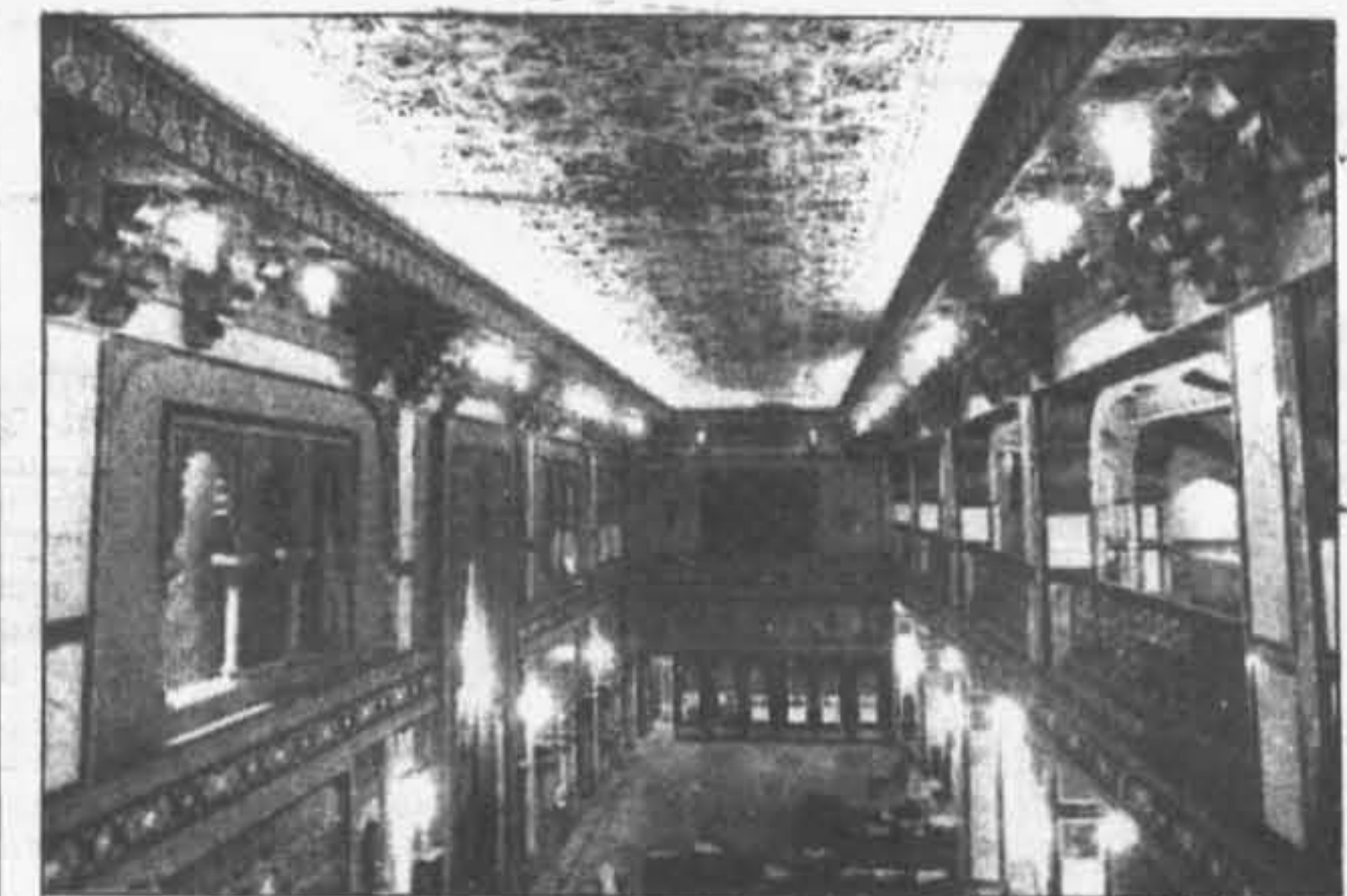
The work by d'Escoto and the artisans of Conrad Schmitt Studios speaks for itself, however. The New Regal is a comfortable, acoustically impressive and visually enchanting theater that again projects the panoply of form, color and ornamental overstatement almost exactly as it was concocted by architect John Ebersson in 1927.

Ebersson gave the exterior of the theater a domed and minareted Islamic look not far removed from something you might find in Baghdad. Inside, the lobby, auditorium and other spaces are crafted with marble, tile, carved wood, glass and intricately shaped and painted plaster. Ebersson seems to have exempted no color from his palette, an approach that shows up most strongly in mosaic murals depicting men, women, elephants and other creatures engaged in idyllic pursuits.

The single most striking sight is the lobby ceiling, which is made to appear as an enormous oriental rug studded with huge, glittering

Tribune photo by Charles Osgood

A minaret tops the elaborate brick and tile facade of the New Regal.



Tribune photo by Charles Osgood

The ceiling in the New Regal's lobby resembles a jeweled Oriental rug.

jewels. The auditorium ceiling provides the illusion of an immense sky twinkling with stars. Other decorative objects range from winged lions and elaborate grills to glittering light fixtures and an aquarium.

A few finishing touches to the theater will be completed soon, and a couple of larger projects, including a backstage VIP room, are to be undertaken later. At this writing, painters have almost

completed a huge mural that covers the west exterior of the building and depicts famous black entertainers. One might fault the mural as an incongruous element in its Islamic setting. Still, it does enliven a wall that was left barren and ugly when an adjoining building was torn down some time ago.

The reincarnated New Regal deserves a long and successful life. If it can act as a catalyst for a thriving new business and cultural corridor along 79th Street, so much the better. The Gardner's deserve applause for bringing off the entrepreneurial end, and huzzahs must go to the patient craftsmen who did the restoration work. But see for yourself the next time the New Regal books a show that captures your fancy.

A guided tour of the New Regal will be held at 10 a.m. on Oct. 31st, under sponsorship of the Theatre Historical Society. A donation of \$5 will be requested.

