

## 2016 Governor's Historic Preservation Awards

Project: **California Theatre**

The California Theatre is a cornerstone of the New York Landing Historic District in Old Town Pittsburg. It was designed by architect A.W. Cornelius in a classic revival style and constructed by Sylvester and Salvatore Enea in 1920. The theater quickly became a landmark for Pittsburg, showing the best in Hollywood films and vaudeville acts and setting the stage for the San Francisco Orpheum, Oakland Fox, and San Francisco Curran. The theater was later restored to incorporate many of the Art Deco features present today.

The California Theatre showed its last film in February 1954. Decades of neglect added to the deteriorating conditions. In 1994 the City conducted a cleanup and stabilization of the theater. However, due to the extremely high cost of renovation, no further improvements were made until 2006, when the City committed serious effort toward the renovation. Funding assistance was received from the Redevelopment Agency of the City of Pittsburg (Agency) as part of an overall plan to continue to improve Pittsburg. Renovation of the California Theatre met the Agency's goals to improve the quality and mix of uses in the downtown area, and promote the area as the social, cultural, and entertainment center of the community.

The City and the Agency were sensitive to the historical significance of the structure, and hired a veteran theater restoration team from Architectural Resources Group (ARG) as the architect. Although design began in 2007, the theater's extremely deteriorated condition and scarce resources available for the renovation delayed the start of actual work until 2010. The building was seismically retrofitted, and mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems upgraded. By conducting community outreach, City staff received valuable information about the theatre's historical interior design and artwork. Light fixtures, handrails, and a tiled drinking fountain in the lobby were faithfully restored. Restoration artist Beate Bruhl recovered or recreated artwork in the entryway, balcony, and auditorium. With input from the community about desired theater amenities, the City Council approved additional funds for completion of the stage, installation of seating in the main theatre, and other operational improvements.

Through the efforts of prioritizing projects, allocating funding, building partnerships between agencies, and gaining community support, the curtain rose once again at the historic California Theatre in January 2013. Today the City-owned facility is home to the Pittsburg Community Theatre troupe, comedy shows, dance performances, films, and other community events. A booklet was created chronicling the restoration process, and Enea family members and other community members' memories about the theatre were recorded on video. The California Theatre project stands as testament to the community's determined commitment to preserve its collective heritage.