

Partner Noted for Helping Preserve 90-Year-Old Theater

July 3, 2019 Frank Ruttenberg

For more than three decades, Haynes Boone Partner Frank Ruttenberg has played a key role in the preservation and restoration of San Antonio's historic Majestic Theatre – an institution that is making headlines today as it celebrates its 90th anniversary.

The city's *Rivard Report* featured Ruttenberg extensively in an article about the history of the Spanish Mediterranean-style theater, which is a National Historic Landmark.

Also known as the Greater Majestic Theatre, the 2,264-seat theater opened to much fanfare in 1929 as the largest theater in Texas and the first public facility in the state to be air-conditioned. Headlines such as "Seats of Latest Design Provide Utmost in Comfort" trumpeted the grand new entertainment venue in a special edition of the San Antonio Light newspaper dated June 9, 1929, five days before the grand opening.

A history of the theater on its [website](#) describes the conditions that forced its closure as "changing entertainment habits," generally attributed to the rise of suburban malls pulling entertainment patrons away from downtown. Despite that challenge, forces in San Antonio mobilized to save the theater.

"Thankfully you had the right people involved in the process of putting this all together," Ruttenberg told the *Rivard Report*. "This theater closed temporarily [in 1974] and kept closing and reopening and closing and reopening, struggling ... right up until the time we started the renovation process" in the late 1980s."

With philanthropist Jocelyn L. "Joci" Straus, in 1988 Ruttenberg helped establish Las Casas Foundation to manage the preservation and restoration of the historic theater, along with its downtown twin, the Charline McCombs Empire Theatre. Ruttenberg currently serves as the foundation's chairman.

Compared with today's numbers, Ruttenberg said, the amount needed to restore the Majestic seems relatively small at \$17 million. But the city could only afford to dedicate \$5 million, leaving a gap of \$12 million for the foundation to cover, Ruttenberg said. He enlisted Straus, and the project began in November 1988 with the ambitious goal of reopening in September 1989 in time for the San Antonio Symphony's first season in its new dedicated home.

The theater has run successfully ever since, with no subsidies from the City necessary to maintain operations, Ruttenberg said. "So they got something for their money. ... They've got these great amenities for their city, which has been terrific."

The dedication to tradition and historic preservation remains apparent in the Majestic's restored and continually maintained exterior and interior, the *Rivard Report* states.

The Ambassador Theatre Group manages current programming and maintains the building.

"They get the whole concept of how valuable these assets are," Ruttenberg said. "They don't think twice about continuing to invest in and keeping these theaters immaculate. ... They look as

beautiful as they did when we completed the restoration back in 1989.”

During the restoration process, Ruttenberg said, the artisans involved “fell in love with the project” and practically lived at the theater. “It wasn’t just a paycheck to them,” he said, “it was a piece of art that they were getting to restore. To them it was like a Mona Lisa.”

To read more about the theater effort, click [here](#).