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Press Release

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IMMEDIATE

Grand Central Terminal's "Whispering Gallery" To Be Renovated

Acoustical Anomaly Will Not Be Affected

MTA Metro-North Railroad has begun repair work on the ceiling tiles in Grand Central Terminal's famous "whispering gallery" in front of the Oyster Bar restaurant on the Lower Level.

But don't worry: The popular acoustical anomaly that allows visitors to stand in diagonal corners and whisper to one another as the sound carries across the arc of the ceiling will remain the same after the work. The only change: The entire space will look a lot cleaner and brighter.

"After a century in place, the mortar has weakened and some tiles are loose," said George Monasterio, Chief Architect for Metro-North, which operates and maintains Grand Central. "So we are going to replace broken ones, remove loose tiles and reinstall them, if possible, or replace them with new tiles if not, and then clean the tiles. The tiles will be pinned to secure them and all the grout will be raked out and replaced."

"Guastavino" refers to a method and material patented by Rafael Guastavino, an immigrant from the Catalonia region of Spain, who arrived in New York in 1881. His domes and vaults are seen in many places around New York City, including the old City Hall Subway Station, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the Elephant House at the Bronx Zoo, and the underside of the 59th Street Bridge, which houses the eponymous restaurant "Guastavino."

Guastavino's method of arch construction uses layers of thin, glazed terracotta tiles set in mortar in a herringbone pattern. The tiles are naturally fireproof and as strong as steel or wooden beams but weigh much less.

At Grand Central, conservators tapped or "sounded" each tile and determined whether it was loose, hollow sounding, which could mean it's loose, or intact and secure. This condition report by Building Conservation Associates, Inc. was the basis for a contract awarded to

Graciano Corp., of Pittsburgh, PA to do the repairs.

The new tiles will be fabricated in the Guastavino style (the family business closed in 1962) by Boston Valley Terra Cotta of Buffalo, NY.

All tiles are not created equal. The color, width and the depth of the ridges and the size of the tiles themselves are different. The tiles in Grand Central are 11½" by 6" flat tiles and are bisque white. The tiles are fabricated from clay and a special recipe for texture and color is used for a precise match with existing tiles.

"It's a painstaking effort to duplicate the tile that's there," Monasterio said.

About 200 tiles must be replaced in the 2,000-square-foot whispering gallery, but Metro-North ordered 250 tiles to have some in reserve. The former taxi stand on the Vanderbilt Avenue side of the building also has a Guastavino ceiling.

The work will be done in four stages with one quarter of the gallery enclosed behind a plywood barrier at a time. The first quadrant to be restored is the northeast corner. (While the barricades are in place only one diagonal is available for whispering.)

The work will be done by hand except removal of the grout between the tiles, which will be done with a router after 11 p.m. to minimize noise impacts on customers.

The ceiling in the 7,000-square foot Oyster Bar restaurant, plus the 2,200-square-foot kitchen, will be repaired under a separate project that is not yet scheduled. BCA has "sounded" those tiles as well.

The \$450,000 whispering gallery maintenance project is scheduled for completion in November before the busy holiday season begins, when it is not unusual for nearly a million people to pass through the Terminal in a given day.