The Historic Dimension Series

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If You Tear It Down Did It Exist?

The Case for Saving Historic Movie Theaters

by Katie Adams **Fall 2020**

"Across America, there are buildings that have the capacity to live beyond the stories of their past. But like all precious things, they need love and to be shown that they matter." Jason Forney, AIA

Film has brought relief to the masses during the Great Depression, world wars, and even a pandemic. Film has done far more than influence fashion but also is believed to influence emotion and wellbeing. But what about the spaces where we have watched these films? Often the very space in which you are watching the feature film is what makes the experience so amazing.

As Tom Sherak, President of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, stated: "Film is a reflection of society, both present and past. I think the film and its innovations sometimes have to catch up to society, but sometimes it leads society too. Movies are stories, movies are people who come out with ideas about something they want to say, something they want to tell someone. Movies are a form of communication, and that communication, those stories, come from societies—not just where society is presently and what it's doing now—but where society has been. It's been that way for as long as movies have been around!" (Shah, 2011). This is an excellent statement that can easily be applied to the spaces in which we watch these films.

There are certain memories and emotions we have that are specifically derived from a place and places of meaning. What happens to our collective memory when these spaces where we created memories of time spent with family and friends in the dark watching the latest film are no longer with us? The theaters in which we watched them tell so much about our society and community by reflecting architectural styles and electronic advancements. What does our community lose when these historic structures are torn down, including the lost economic revenue? What are some examples of successful adaptive reuse strategies so that another historic theater does not end up in a landfill and the only thing left to show for it is a parking lot?

This brief will explore the loss of the historic built landscape as it relates to collective memory when a historic theater is torn down and explore successful adaptive reuse strategies for historic theaters that will benefit communities well into the future.

Impact on Architectural Identity

The city of Asheville, North Carolina, is widely known for its large collection of Art Deco buildings. Asheville suffered greatly during the Great Depression and had the highest per capita debt burden of any city in the United States. Because of this, Asheville was forced to spend the next 50 years paying off the debt—and not on redevelopment as many other cities did. Many other cities tore down their Art Deco structures to rebuild with popular skyscrapers.

The Imperial Theater, in Asheville, NC, which opened in 1922, was an 1,176 seat Art Deco theater in the heart of downtown Asheville. Even undergoing renovations in 1972 to celebrate their 50th anniversary was not enough to save it from the wrecking ball. The former site of the Imperial is now a parking lot.

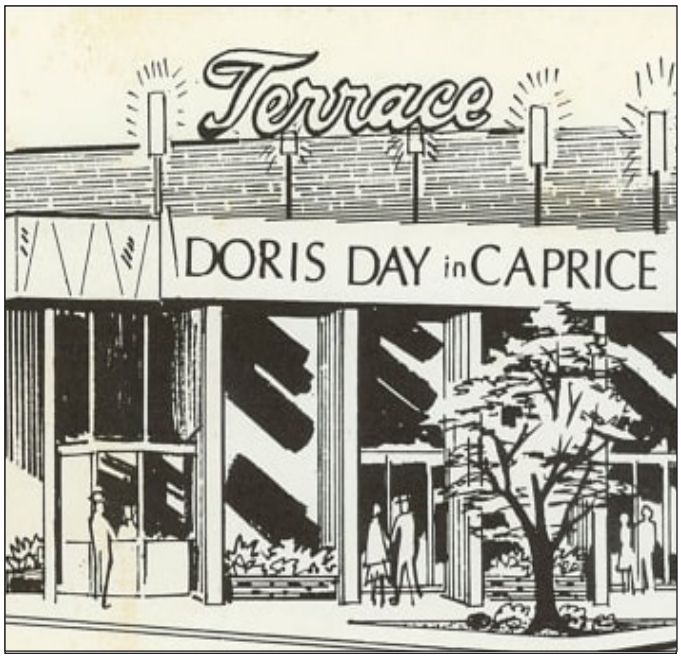

Fig. 2: The Terrace Theater in Asheville, NC, was a single screen theater that boasted a curved screen known as "Ultravision."

While downtown Asheville is well known for its Art Deco architecture, a rarer style of architecture in Asheville is Modernist. The on-line movie theater guide *Cinema Treasures* lists "The Terrace theater built in 1967 was Asheville's first-ever 'Ultravision' Theater with its 750 seat auditorium having a round widescreen curve that had a full 180 degree Ultravision screen that was quite impressive." The Terrace Theatre was designed by the Asheville architectural firm Six Associates. (See Figure 2) Six Associates designed several other well-known modernist structures in Asheville, such as the Governor's Western Residence. Even with Modernism's surging popularity in Asheville and other examples of successful local small theaters, the theater was not spared from the wrecking ball. The Terrace was demolished after years of neglect in 2012. The former site of the Terrace is now an empty lot (See Figure 3).

Another example of Modernism or, more specifically, Brutalist architecture, was The Mall Twin, which opened in 1975 behind the Asheville Mall. The Twin had two screens and boasted Dolby Sound. The Mall Twin was incredibly rich architecturally (See Figure 4) but not even that could save it from the wrecking ball. The theater was closed in 1999 and demolished soon after. The loss of this significant structure is a loss to the community. The theater's former location is now a parking lot, and the mall is expanding to add a theater and draught house.

With Asheville's community losing its most luxurious Art Deco theaters, space-age movie theater, and Brutalist twin theater, it has lost a significant part of the architectural vernacular that makes the city unique. The sequential architectural styles paint a more accurate picture of the experience and growth of a city. With this gone, it erases the memory of this time period and poses the question, did it even exist?

Fig. 3: The Terrace Theater site in Asheville, NC, in 2020

Collective Memory of a Community

"Architecture is not really about buildings, any more than poetry is about vowels" is a powerful statement made by the award-winning architect Sam Rodell (2020). Rodell is speaking about the emotions associated with buildings, and we can relate his statement to beloved spaces such as theaters. Jay Adams, an Asheville native, has fond memories of attending films at the Imperial. The Imperial was located near his father's law office, and they would often attend movies together, or he would meet friends after leaving his father's office. The Imperial was also the first local theater to have air conditioning and debuted the moonshine movie Thunder Road, which was filmed in Asheville. However, Jay's favorite theater was the luxurious Plaza with 1,322 seats on Pack Square in the middle of downtown. (See Figure 5) The Plaza was incredibly rich with architectural detail and old Hollywood glamour. Unfortunatley, this did not save it from the wrecking ball, and now, strangely enough, it is a plaza.

Brent Wyatt and Warren Fluharty, Asheville locals, reflected on the demolition of The Plaza and Imperial with shame as there was no pushback from the community at the time to save these structures. Brent recalls looking out of his office window, where he was employed by a movie company that was filming in Western North Carolina at the time, and watching the demolition of The Plaza. These are spaces that share great memories for both Brent and Warren.

As Graziadei tells us, the Italian architect Aldo Rossi theorized in *The Architecture of the City*, "One can say that the city itself is the collective memory of its people,

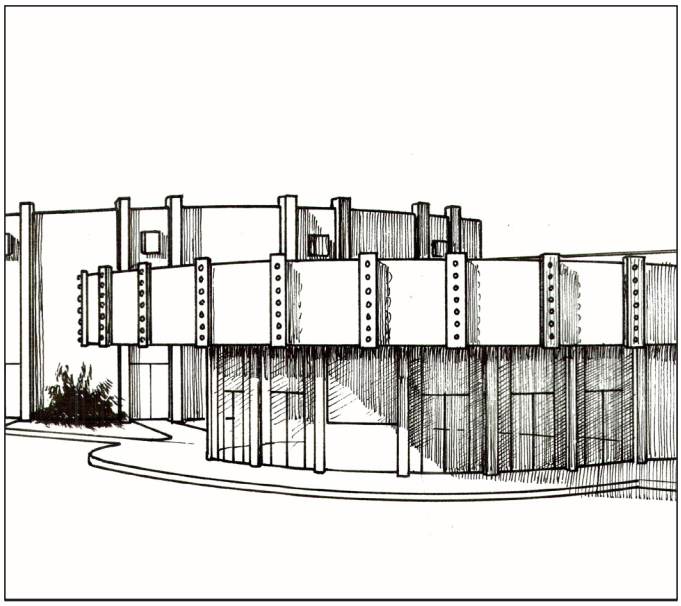

Fig. 4: The Mall Twin in Asheville, NC, was a brutalist concrete structure that has since been torn down for a parking garage.

Fig. 5: The luxurious Plaza Theater in Asheville, NC

and like memory, it is associated with objects and places. The city is the locus of collective memory. This relationship between the locus and the citizenry then becomes the city's predominant image, both of architecture and of landscape, and as certain artifacts become part of its memory, new ones emerge." (Over time, we moved from single-screen theaters to modern multiplexes as we migrated to the suburbs and away from downtown life. This migration led to the slow demise of our cities and towns and our single-screen theaters, in effect, losing the collective memory between the citizens and their locus.

Preserving a Community's Collective Memory

Japan has shown an effective way to display their past architecture without erasing it from the collective memory through innovative "theme parks." These parks are not made up of imaginary lands or fairy tales but actually house important Japanese architectural and cultural structures. Because land is scarce in Japan, when a culturally significant building or monument needs demolition so another structure can take its place, it is disassembled and moved to one of the nation's outdoor parks. Each park is categorized by design style or empirical ruling period. This ensures that these structures and the stories they tell about their culture are not lost to the nation's collective memory. Mike Rangel of Asheville Pizza and Brewing, a preserved theater and brewery in Asheville, states it perfectly, "Preserving a link to the past and saving places where people have met socially in large groups is more important now than ever as society and individuals seem to isolate more." We have a fuller understanding of ourselves when we do not lose the connection to the totality of our past.

There are creative ways to tell the history of demolished theaters. One example is the recent exhibit at the National Building Museum entitled, "Flickering Treasures: Rediscovering Baltimore's Forgotten Movie Theaters." (nbm.org). The exhibit included an oral history of Baltimore's movie houses, architectural relics, and photography. The goals of the exhibit were to convey memory, loss, and preservation. The National Building Museum notes about the exhibit, "Through the lens of theater design, construction, and use, the exhibition engages with a familiar architectural form that few may have considered in relation to urban history…." (www.nbm.org/exhibition/flickering-treasures). Today, as cities embrace and experiment with new models of urban revitalization and downtown living, it is important to explore the vital ways theaters have historically contributed to our urban landscape's character and quality. It is the author's opinion that also preserving the collective memory of a community is a valid case for the preservation of these structures.

Economic Impact of Theater Preservation

As Michael R. Schnoering, AIA, shows in his article, Making the Case for Historic Theaters, historic theaters make great economic sense (2014). "When a community's residents become collectively invested in historically important buildings, there is a clear pride of place that follows." In the same article, Schneoring quotes Numa Saisselin., president of the 1927 Florida Theater Performing Arts Center, Inc., in Jacksonville, Fla., remarks that "the Florida Theatre's activity generates about $7 million a year of economic benefit, which supports the full-time equivalent of over 200 jobs in addition to the 15 full-time and 253 part-time jobs on the theatre's own payroll."

Often when a historic theater is revitalized, you see the community around it revitalize as well. This has happened in Asheville with the renovation of the Fine Arts Theater (See Figure 6) by local arts entrepreneur John Cram. Built in 1946, the Fine Arts Theater is the only his-

Fig. 6: The Fine Arts Theater in Asheville, NC, was an adult film theater before becoming a small art house theater.

toric movie theater left standing in downtown Asheville. Cram purchased the historic movie theater, which had become an adult film theater, and subsequently opened it as a premier art-house movie theater in 1996 when downtown Asheville was not the thriving art, music, and food scene it is today. Certainly, the actions of Cram and The Fine Arts Theater led to the growth of downtown, which shapes our experience and enjoyment of the city today.

Another incredible story of saving an aging theater to create jobs and economic prosperity is the Merrimon Twin, which is now Asheville Pizza and Brewing (See Figure 7). Asheville Pizza and Brewing is a thriving brewpub that serves pub-style food and charges just $3 for movie tickets. Pre-Covid the theater would sell out over 90% of their shows, averaged $4 million in sales per year. The pizza theater alone employs 115 people. Owner and President of the company, Mike Rangel, purchased the business in 1998. In a 2018 article in the Mountain Xpress (2018) newspaper, Rangel stated that there was standing water in the second theater when he purchased the business. The growth has been so phenomenal that now there are other Asheville Pizza locations in the city and a new business venture named Rabbit Rabbit. During Covid, they have stopped showing movies in the theater but have pivoted to showing outdoor movies at the new Rabbit Rabbit outdoor event venue.

The House Theater (See Figure 8) in the small picturesque town of Marion, NC, has recently been purchased and is undergoing restoration. The House was built

Fig. 7: Asheville Pizza and Brewing in Asheville, NC, was formerly the Merrimon Twin and is now a successful brewery and restaurant.

in 1950 and served a prominent role in the life of the community. Jake Laurent, new owner of The House, stumbled across the listing for the theater while in his final semester in college. After driving from Wisconsin to see the theater, he decided this was an opportunity that could not be missed. The newly renovated theater will be a great economic hub for the downtown area of Marion. Viewing himself as a preservationist, always working on older things and bringing them back to life. Laurent is working hard, looking forward to contributing something fun for everyone in the city of Marion.

Impact of Covid-19 on Historic Drive-In Theaters

There is much speculation that Covid-19 will renew the drive-in movie theater's popularity and has increased its economic viability. An iconic part of American culture is the drive-in movie theater, whose popularity peaked in the 1950s with 4,000 theaters in the US. Unfortunately, there are only 305 that remain. The drive-in theater's popularity was synonymous with car culture but currently feeds the need for safe, socially distanced entertainment.

Not all theaters are strictly showing movies. In the article,"How the American Drive-In Staged a Comeback" (Bloomburg City Lab), Brandon writes about the summer of 2020: "With most live events on pause, the drive-in movie theater became Covid Summer's go-to venue. In April, Doc's Drive-In Theatre in Buda, Texas, welcomed 85 cars for a socially distanced wedding live-streamed on the theater's two screens. Churches resumed drive-in services, reviving a practice rooted in the 1950s. In cities around the world, idled shopping malls and empty parking lots hosted ad-hoc screens for pop-up community movies, while existing drive-ins expanded their offerings to include concerts, art shows, and stand-up comedy performances."

The Twin City Drive-In Theatre in Bristol, Tennessee, (See Figures 9 and 10) has been owned and operated by the same family since 1949. In a 2020 interview on WHJL, the owner quipped that they had been socially distancing since 1949. The family and community are

Fig. 8: The House Theater in Marion, NC, is currently being reovatied to be a live music and event space.

very happy to have a place to socialize during a pandemic safely. Danny Warden, the owner of the Twin City Drive-In, said that it has been an interesting season because they had to close during April. Ever since reopening in May, attendance has been steady with his gross being off, but with the lower movie rental prices, he has been able to do well. Things started changing in September, and his customer base began growing again. October 2020 showed sales twice as big as any on record. The theatre has had to make some changes because of COVID-19, such as removing the old sound speakers, but the changes are worth it to stay in business. Moviegoers now tune into a radio station for sound, but Warden said it is the kids that miss the speakers the most.

Adaptive Reuse for Historic Theaters

There is much potential for the use of preserved theaters—they are not only for showing movies. As there has been a push to revive downtowns and a return to city dwelling, there has been a resurgence in efforts to save historic theaters. There are many great adaptive reuse projects for historic theaters in Asheville and beyond. In the thriving district of West Asheville, the historic Isis Theater (See Figure 11), which had been turned into an Italian restaurant, has undergone a remarkable renovation and is currently a live music venue and restaurant. Beyond live music venues, the El Anteneo Grand Splendid in Buenos Aires, Argentina, is an enormous bookstore. Many church communities are meeting in old theaters, and artists are turning theaters into galleries.

Conclusion

As Jason Forney and Mason Sanders stated, "Buildings shouldn't be preserved in formaldehyde. But discarding the buildings that reveal our nation's history, with all their patina and rust, isn't the solution, either. The

Fig. 9: Twin City Drive-In Theatre in Bristol, TN, has been a family owned and operated drive-In since 1949.

infrastructure that we have is here to stay, even if the enterprise that once occupied its space is obsolete. The architecture of the future must focus on transformation. It must desurface the potential in our existing built environment with a respect for the past and an eye to the future." (www.architects.org/stories/lost-and-found)

As noted preservationist and economist Don Rypkema has written, when a building is standing even if empty, you have four options: do nothing; stabilize; rehabilitate; tear it down. If you tear down, you eliminate the other options. By cities choosing to allow the destruction of our historic structures, they are eliminating a future business or opportunity for that structure to add meaningful experience back to the community. And by effectively erasing important collective memories, we lose the ability to tell our stories fully to future generations.

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Fig. 10: The original Twin City Drive-in ticket booth

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Fig. 11: The Isis in West Asheville, NC, is a historic theater that was once an Italian restaurant. The Isis has undergone a major restoration and is now a restaurant and live music event space.

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