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How to save a theatre: The Orpheum, Vancouver

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Biography

Richard Laing is Professor of Built Environment Visualisation at Robert Gordon University. Since 1999 he has undertaken significant work concerning public space, building conservation, and digital representation of the built environment. He holds qualifications in value assessment of the built heritage, surveying and history.

Abstract

Purpose - This paper concerns the Orpheum Theatre in Vancouver, which survived the threat of major internal demolition and rebuilding during the 1960s and early 1970s. The building has subsequently undergone significant restoration and conservation work, including the incorporation of modern acoustic improvements, and the construction of a new entrance area.

Understanding the mechanisms through which the building was restored and brought back into use formed a central strand of the work.

Design/Methodology/Approach - The research employed a single case study approach, and used the Orpheum Theatre to simultaneously study and consider the practical and heritage implications of the restoration project.

Findings - The manner in which the building was restored was unusual and rooted in the community, and holds resonance for many similarly at risk theatres and cinemas, in both Canada and elsewhere.

Practical implications - The paper is interesting both from the perspective of that refurbishment, and also from the fact that it was designed by a prominent Scottish architect, B. Marcus Priteca, who designed a large number of early movie palaces in Canada and the USA.

Social implications - The heritage value of the building is influenced by layers of historical, social and cultural information, which combine to provide a rich picture of the theatre.

Originality/value: Through exploration of the processes involved in saving the building, the paper draws conclusions regarding its importance to the continued vibrancy of the city.

Keywords Restoration, theatre, Vancouver, Scotland, heritage, skills, design

Paper type Research based case study

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Orpheus. *A Thracian minstrel. He became so adept at music that his playing and singing charmed wild animals and caused stones and trees to follow him when he wished.* (1)

This paper concerns an early 20th-century Canadian theatre for vaudeville and as a 'movie palace', which survived the threat of major internal demolition and rebuilding during the 1960s and 1970s. The Orpheum theatre is interesting in a number of respects. The building was designed in Seattle and built in Vancouver in 1927. The design was by a Scottish architect, Marcus Priteca, on behalf of prominent developer and theatre owner Joseph Langer. Whilst one focus of this paper is the public and financial processes which were followed in order to secure the long-term future of the theatre, the building is also of great interest due to the manner in which methods and approaches borrowed from interior design and scenography have been utilised to provide a building which offers a rich experience. The theatre was originally used to house low cost vaudeville performances and movies, for the working classes. More recently, and following refurbishment, it houses classical and operatic performances, including providing a home for the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra.

The theatre faced interior demolition in the early 1970s, but was saved by widespread civic protest and the actions of a heritage group. The mechanisms through which the building was restored and brought back to use formed a central strand of the work. In addition to its architectural value, the manner in which the building was restored was unusual and rooted in the community, and holds resonance for many similarly at risk theatres and cinemas, in both Canada and Scotland. This has been discussed previously in the literature, with particular regard to the manner in which a layering of information can alter, and often enhance, the extent to which older buildings are valued (2).

The paper also addresses an issue concerned with the manner in which society values, assesses and protects buildings which might be regarded as part of the built heritage. As stated, the building considered within this paper could well be viewed from the perspective of how it sits within a 'heritage' of similar theatrical buildings located throughout North America. Therefore, one could certainly study the theatre within research which considered it as being part of a longer timeline of theatres located in a wider geographical region. Likewise, the building could also be studied within the context of the manner in which Vancouver developed as a city, following incorporation in 1886, over the course of the 20th century. Each of these approaches would most certainly add to a collective understanding of specific, and selective, readings of history. In turn, they could add to our collective appreciation of the theatre, and thereby influence the manner in which the building might be treated, protected and used in the future. Likewise, it is argued that the perspective taken within the study adds an important strand to our collective understanding of the buildings history, and one which is concerned with the early lineage of the architect. Therefore, the theatre arguably becomes attributed with a 'perceived heritage', wherein values may be drawn from identifiable and still existing architectural links between Vancouver and the towns and cities in Scotland where Priteca trained and worked as an apprentice.

As part of the buildings eventual restoration and refurbishment, attention was also given to the need to improve acoustic performance in the main auditorium. In some very important respects the case study itself, and its refurbishment, offer important exemplars of how traditional construction skills and decorative arts can be combined with modern materials and techniques, to preserve buildings in such a way that they become sustainable through finding new uses.

The architecture of theatres, as well as that associated with cinema buildings, has had a lasting and prominent effect on the layout, appearance and architectural heritage of town and city centres in many countries. The building footprint required to accommodate a theatre of significant size is such that buildings not necessarily designed to become landmarks nevertheless achieve such status over time due to their scale.

The study reported in this paper examined prominent remaining architectural work of Marcus Priteca, the overall study included a photographic record of the Orpheum Theatre itself, and a desk study of the processes undertaken to recognise its heritage value and ultimately its restoration.

The Orpheum Theatre, which during its history was used to stage a range of burlesque, theatrical, operatic and cinema programmes, had fallen into disrepair by the 1960s (3). At this time the Famous Players Movie Company had planned to demolish the theatre and redevelop the building as a multiplex

of numerous smaller screens. However, political and local efforts combined to save the theatre (4) and eventually persuaded the City of Vancouver in the 1970s to buy the building and to divert significant amounts of money towards its preservation, including acoustic improvements (5). In addition to carrying importance due to its strong links with Scottish architecture and North American theatre architecture, the building as it stands today is also of wider interest due to the manner in which the building was saved.

PRITECA'S PREVIOUS SCOTTISH WORK

Benjamin Priteca was born in Glasgow in 1881, and educated at George Watson's College in Edinburgh until 1904 (6). Before moving to Seattle in 1909, Priteca undertook further study at the University of Edinburgh, whilst working as an apprentice under Robert Macfarlane Cameron. Although it is difficult to determine Priteca's personal input to architectural work undertaken by Cameron during this period, it is nevertheless interesting to note that Cameron's practice undertook some significant projects during this time, which are still in existence. These include the Haymarket Inn (remodeling interior, Edinburgh), the Forth Bridge Hotel (repair work after fire damage, South Queensferry) and the Edinburgh dental hospital and school (Chambers Street, Edinburgh). Following his apprenticeship, and once in the USA (after 1909), Priteca established himself as a theatre architect, with examples of his work still surviving in many cities (where the majority of his work was undertaken for either Alexander Pantages or the Orpheum Chain).

Among those Scottish buildings on which Priteca most probably worked, the current listing record for 30 and 31 Chambers Street, Edinburgh (formerly the Edinburgh dental hospital and school) notes that the building in existence today replaced the previous dental Hospital, most probably designed by Cameron. Photographs in the collection of the Lothian Health Services Archive (available for academic use through www.scran.ac.uk) record images of the exterior. The Forth Bridge Hotel (currently known as The Ferry Tap) is located in the High Street of South Queensferry, although it is difficult to determine those alterations undertaken by Cameron, and the extent to which they remain intact. The building is noted in the category B listing record as having appeared on an Ordnance Survey map in 1856, and remains a distinctive building in the centre of South Queensferry.

Haymarket Inn is a prominent building within Edinburgh, familiar to many due to its location outside the main entrance to the present Haymarket railway station. Record suggests that Cameron's practice was responsible for remodeling of the interior, within a building dating from the mid-1800s. Observation of the building in the present-day suggests strongly that the practice would have been involved in the creation of carved timber arcades at the ground-storey level. The building is listed at category B, indicating a building of national importance, and retains many significant interior and exterior details, all of which are catalogued in the listing record.

Nevertheless, and bearing in mind the manner in which he was required to deliver very grand buildings to a decidedly austere budget, what the case studies in Edinburgh do display are examples of architecture on a relatively modest scale, yet incorporating elements of stylised decoration whose purpose extends beyond the immediate practical needs of the building to hand. Considering the line of thought raised within the introduction to this paper concerning the manner in which a juxtaposition of information can lead to new insights, it is undoubtedly true that the way in which one might consider the Orpheum, or any of the case studies still existing in Edinburgh from Priteca's time as an apprentice, is coloured and changed through a collective awareness of all of these buildings, and of their shared history.

Figure 1: 'stone' pillars in the foyer area

HISTORY AND RENOVATION

The design of the theatre is interesting from aesthetic and technical perspectives. Whilst one may have anticipated that the architect would draw inspiration from the buildings which he designed or experienced during his apprenticeship in Scotland, the Orpheum is actually of greatest interest due to the manner in which the available budget was utilized to provide a building interior which successfully gives the impression of having used a variety of expensive materials, where in actual fact much of the finishes have been constructed using highly skilled plaster on lath. Indeed, we explore the Scottish work of the architect, undertaken prior to his move to America, in a later section of this paper.

Figure 2: plaster mouldings

Figure 3: plaster on lath (detail shows suspended auditorium ceiling)

The Orpheum was originally intended to be used as a vaudeville theatre, and continued in that vein throughout much of its life up until the 1970s. This is in contrast to the theatre's current use as a major venue for both classical and popular music. It has been noted (3) that the theatre described and discussed in this paper was in fact the fourth venue in Vancouver to be named the Orpheum. Priteca had been employed by Alexander Pantages, an entrepreneur working in theatre since 1911, when they designed and developed the Pantages theatre in San Francisco (3).

From a technical perspective, the building was originally designed to incorporate an innovative and, by modern standards, low energy and very quiet air ventilation system. Using an ice cooling system, located in the basement, and with most of the seating areas supporting air flow through vents under the seats, the auditorium provided a reasonable air quality for the audience during performances. Of course, the use and importance of natural ventilation without fan noise has been explored in the literature, and the incorporation of such an approach in the Orpheum would prove to be an interesting case study in itself (7,8).

Figure 4: air vent in basement, leading to under-seat ventilation

However, by the mid 1960s, the building as a whole had fallen into a state of disrepair, and pressures from television meant that audiences for longer theatrical productions were shrinking. The theatre was felt by many to no longer meet the requirements of a modern theatre-going audience. Surfaces within the auditorium itself had become either discoloured through many decades of cigarette smoke, or had been damaged through regular wear and tear. Furthermore, acoustics within the auditorium, although acceptable for some forms of performance, largely failed when it was necessary to clearly project sound from classical orchestras.

REFURBISHMENT

Most cities and towns, certainly across developed regions, during the 20th century saw a very rapid growth in the construction of new cinema and theatre buildings (9). Indeed, an architectural language developed during that period which came to define not only the external appearance of new cinemas and theatres, but which also contributed to the aesthetic appearance of many town and city centres. The Orpheum is interesting from this perspective in that the highly prominent street sign, and the theatre frontage on Granville Street, for many generations helped to aesthetically define an important public area within Vancouver (known as 'Theatre Row'). However, the nature of public entertainment during the 20th century was such that many forms of theatrical performance enjoyed only transient periods of success. This applied particularly to both cinema (affected by the advent of television) and light entertainment theatre, which in turn led to an obvious questioning of the value inherent in buildings such as the Orpheum.

A successful campaign was launched (4), garnering public, political and financial support, ultimately leading to the reinstatement of the Orpheum as the major classical music venue in Vancouver in the 1970s. Nevertheless, the process of saving the theatre from imminent demolition through to eventual full restoration took a period of several years, and required significant public and private support. That support included both political will and the injection of finances to support rebuilding, and the restoration of highly skilled decorative work.

In March of 1974, Vancouver City Council passed a vote to purchase the theatre, with the city contributing almost C\$3 million, with the federal government contributing a further C\$2 million, to support both purchase and restorations (3). Federal funding was provided on the basis that the theatre become a base for the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra.

The refurbishment included improvement of the theatre acoustics, and the re-decoration of the auditorium ceiling. Figure 5 illustrates the rear stage enclosure which was added as a key element of the acoustic improvements. The enclosure itself was constructed using a framework of metal lathing, over which plaster was added. This process included the application of sound absorbent materials in

specific locations, in recognition of the theatre's intended use as the home for a symphony orchestra. Although Priteca gave consideration to the natural projection of sound in the original design of the building, at the refurbishment stage this was complemented through the addition of amplification technology at the balcony level (10). Acoustics within theatre were further improved in 1995, using a process which included prototyping using a 1:50 scale model of the auditorium itself (5,11).

Figure 5: Stage area, including acoustic curved panels at the rear of the stage

Figures 3 and 6 together illustrate the technical structure and the painted visible surface of the suspended auditorium ceiling. It is interesting to note that those responsible for the refurbishment project were able to secure the services of Tony Heinsbergen, a prolific decorative artist and muralist and more importantly the artist who worked on decoration of the original Orpheum in 1927 (12). This quite overt link with the history of the building, which also recognises the value and importance of traditional craft skills, gives credence to the notion of this refurbishment project enhancing the heritage value of the theatre, in addition to improving its usefulness to the city of Vancouver.

Figure 6: Re-painted suspended auditorium ceiling

Figure 7: Newly constructed public entrance area

The process through which the theatre was a refurbished and subsequently reopened, as an auditorium to host classical music concerts, is interesting in that it depended on a juxtaposition of political will, which led to the necessary economic resources to support technical and artistic improvements to the building. Of course, it is also true that none of these drivers would arguably have been brought to bear had there not been a ground swell of social and community support for the project.

The political and economic context prevalent during the early 1970s was important to the future of the theatre. Between 1972 and 1974 the theatre itself was subjected to feasibility studies dealing with its capacity to house a symphony orchestra including assessment of practical, technical and financial implications. It is also worth drawing attention to the manner in which procurement documents, including a fully costed bill of quantities, managed to integrate the essential and specialist traditional skills which were required to enable the aesthetic upgrade of the auditorium, and in particular the painted ceiling (although no funding was available for the mural in the original budget).

The theatre reopened as a new home for the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra in 1977, and was further extended through the construction of a new public entrance area ("West Coast Hall" illustrated in figure 7) in the early 1980s. That extension cost a further \$2.85 million and added additional lobby space, bars, a restaurant and improved access to the theatre through the installation of an elevator (4).

Figure 8: Granville Street frontage. Note the narrow original opening underneath the sign.

DISCUSSION

This field study has identified a series of important themes within the work of Priteca, and the recent efforts to recognise and protect his architectural legacy. The author will endeavour to explore key issues including the financial, procedural and conservation skills elements, and to disseminate these points through written journals, and presentation at public events and conferences.

The buildings identified as case studies within Scotland provide us with very interesting and useful contextual information pertaining to the formative years and training of Priteca. Although it becomes clear upon study of his subsequent work in North America that his architectural design took a distinctive and very different direction following his emigration, perception of the buildings he left behind in Edinburgh and those he was responsible for upon arrival in the USA and Canada is altered and refined due to this wider knowledge of the architects background and early experiences. An obvious point worth restating of course is that there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that Priteca's training and practice experience in Scotland, prior to his emigration to the USA, contained any experience of working on large-scale public building projects, let alone buildings designed to house theatrical performances. Indeed, it would be interesting to undertake further research which studied the specific drivers and opportunities which led to the architects choice of architectural line, and subsequent illustrious career. Information regarding those influences which Priteca drew upon in his

theatrical design vary in both content and reliability, and there is no indication of him having studied under other theatre designers.

The Orpheum is interesting in that the interior of the building was designed in such a way that the budget, arguably more appropriate to the construction of an informal theatre, was used successfully to produce an interior design which mimics materials and decoration not otherwise available. It is suggested that this approach to design, which borrows heavily from scenography, could in itself form a fruitful path for further research. The auditorium design and decoration has clearly found a long-term life, and has recognisable value within the built heritage of Vancouver, and appears to represent a tangible link between aesthetics, perceived materials and significance, yet is clearly indebted to illusions afforded by techniques more commonly used within theatrical set design.

Figure 9: Alternate view of Granville Street (illustrating lighting, and narrow original frontage)

Both press and specialised 'heritage' articles from the early 1980s make it clear that the Orpheum had come to provide enjoyment and utility to the people of Vancouver, both in terms of its usefulness as a theatre and its prominent position as a local identifiable landmark. Reminiscent in some ways of Baudrillard's polemics on what society might regard as 'real' (13), important debate sprang up regarding the importance of the external signage (14), which arguably speaks volumes about their actual age and populist history of the building (Figures 8 and 9), showing the wider urban context). Many previous studies have attempted to better understand the economic value of the built heritage (15,16), including both social and environmental contributions.

The Orpheum is an excellent example of a building which has become an important part of the cultural and physical landscape in downtown Vancouver, and for which the wider benefits of its conservation and revival have in turn become clear since the 1970s. Continued recognition of this, coupled with an awareness of connections between the building and associated architecture (both of the architect, and from the period) adds greatly to the richness and complexity of the building.

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FIGURES

Please note that all photographs are © the author.



Figure 1: 'stone' pillars in the foyer area

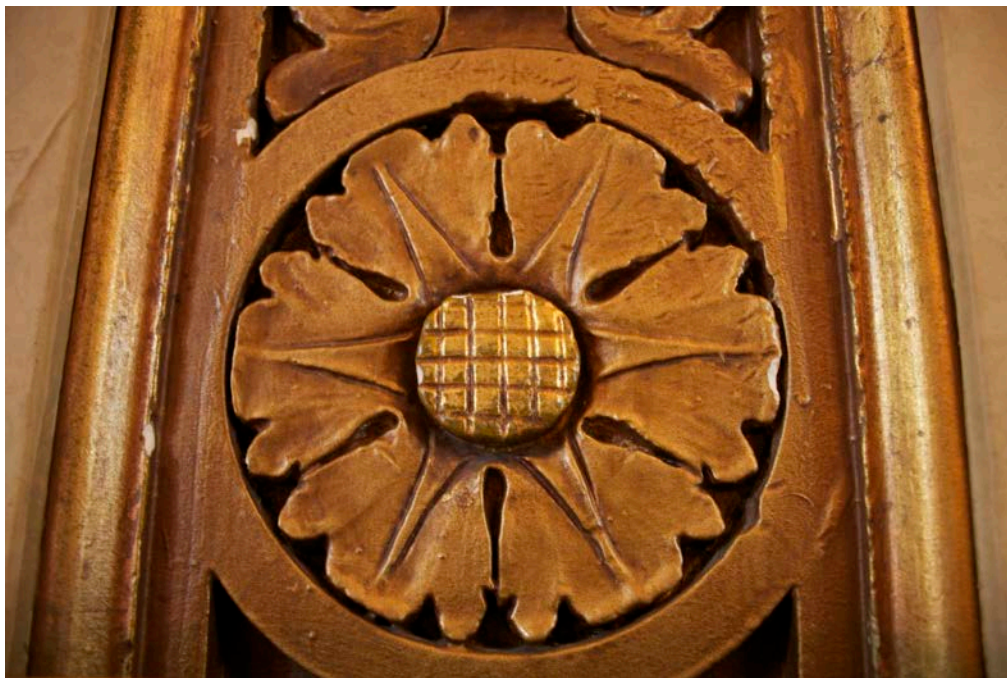


Figure 2: plaster mouldings



Figure 3: plaster on lath (detail shows suspended auditorium ceiling)



Figure 4: air vent in basement, leading to under-seat ventilation



Figure 5: Stage area, including acoustic curved panels at the rear of the stage



Figure 6: Re-painted suspended auditorium ceiling



Figure 7: Newly constructed public entrance area



Figure 8: Granville Street frontage. Note the narrow original opening underneath the sign.



Figure 9: Alternate view of Granville Street (illustrating lighting, and narrow original frontage)