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Preserving the Neighborhood Theatres of William Harold Lee

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Preserving the Neighborhood Theatres of William Harold Lee

Abstract

The American cinema tradition faces pressures to adapt architecturally, economically, and culturally to the postmodern age as Hollywood-oriented megaplexes, the internet, satellite/cable television, and DVD mail delivery services such as Netflix compete with the communal neighborhood theatre. Consequently, each year numerous historic theatres are either demolished or gutted to provide more commercially viable alternatives, prompting the National Trust for Historic Preservation to designate historic American movie theatres as one of the "11 Most Endangered Places" in 2001. Without concentrated efforts to preserve and to adaptively reuse these endangered movie theatres, many theatre proponents argue that cinematic experience will soon become depersonalized and placeless, and communities will lose an important anchor institution to stimulate their urban environments. However, relatively few academic resources offer guidance on how concerned stakeholders can effectively preserve and adaptively reuse such scarce historic resources.

Keywords

Historic Preservation; Philadelphia, Theatres, William Harold Lee

Disciplines

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Comments

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PRESERVING THE NEIGHBORHOOD THEATRES
OF WILLIAM HAROLD LEE

Mark Edward Donofrio

A THESIS

in

Historic Preservation

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION

2010

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents and to my Breton muse.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... | iii |
| LIST OF FIGURES..... | vii |
| PREFACE..... | viii |
| CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION..... | 1-7 |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Decline of the Neighborhood Theatre..... | 1 |
| CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW..... | 8-24 |
| Introduction..... | 8 |
| Why Preserve the Neighborhood Theatre?..... | 8 |
| Conclusion..... | 11 |
| How to Preserve the Neighborhood Theatre..... | 12 |
| <i>Sponsorship</i> | 13 |
| <i>Financing</i> | 16 |
| Conclusion..... | 23 |
| CHAPTER 3: THEATRE SURVEY..... | 25-35 |
| Introduction..... | 25 |
| William Harold Lee..... | 25 |
| Remaining Neighborhood Theatres..... | 31 |
| <i>Operational Theatres</i> | 32 |
| <i>Converted Theatres</i> | 33 |
| <i>Potentially Operational Theatres</i> | 34 |
| Conclusion..... | 34 |
| CHAPTER 4: OPERATIONAL THEATRES..... | 36-79 |
| Introduction..... | 36 |
| The Main Line Suburbs..... | 36 |
| Bryn Mawr Theatre Timeline..... | 38 |

| | |
|------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Anthony Wayne Theatre Timeline..... | 41 |
| Hiway Theatre Timeline..... | 42 |
| Narberth Theatre Timeline..... | 45 |
| Bryn Mawr Theatre Discussion..... | 48-53 |
| <i>Events Leading to Continued Use</i> | 48 |
| <i>Current State of Preservation</i> | 50 |
| <i>Impact of Preservation Ordinances</i> | 51 |
| Anthony Wayne Theatre Discussion..... | 53-56 |
| <i>Events Leading to Continued Use</i> | 53 |
| <i>Current State of Preservation</i> | 55 |
| <i>Impact of Preservation Ordinances</i> | 56 |
| Hiway Theatre Discussion..... | 56-62 |
| <i>Events Leading to Continued Use</i> | 56 |
| <i>Current State of Preservation</i> | 60 |
| <i>Impact of Preservation Ordinances</i> | 61 |
| Narberth Theatre Discussion..... | 62-65 |
| <i>Events Leading to Continued Use</i> | 62 |
| <i>Current State of Preservation</i> | 64 |
| <i>Impact of Preservation Ordinances</i> | 64 |
| Philadelphia County..... | 65 |
| Walnut Street Theatre Timeline..... | 67 |
| Walnut Street Theatre Discussion..... | 71-77 |
| <i>Events Leading to Continued Use</i> | 71 |
| <i>Current State of Preservation</i> | 74 |
| <i>Impact of Preservation Ordinances</i> | 76 |
| Conclusion..... | 77 |

CHAPTER 5: CONVERTED THEATRES.....80-90

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| Introduction..... | 80 |
| What are the Necessary Components of Historic Theatres?..... | 81 |
| Sedgwick Theatre Discussion..... | 82-86 |
| <i>Events Leading to Present State of Use</i> | 82 |
| <i>Current State of Preservation</i> | 84 |
| <i>Impact of Preservation Ordinances</i> | 85 |

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Jefferson Theatre Discussion..... | 86-88 |
| <i>Events Leading to Present State of Use</i> | 86 |
| <i>Current State of Preservation</i> | 87 |
| <i>Impact of Preservation Ordinances</i> | 87 |
| The Remaining Theatres..... | 88 |
| Conclusion..... | 89 |
| | |
| CHAPTER 6: POTENTIALLY OPERATIONAL THEATRES..... | 91-106 |
| Introduction..... | 91 |
| Lansdowne Central Business District..... | 92 |
| Lansdowne Theatre Timeline..... | 93 |
| Lansdowne Theatre Discussion..... | 96-102 |
| <i>Events Leading to Present State of Use</i> | 96 |
| <i>Current State of Preservation</i> | 100 |
| <i>Impact of Preservation Ordinances</i> | 101 |
| Conclusion..... | 103 |
| | |
| CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION..... | 107-114 |
| Summary..... | 107 |
| Recommendations..... | 109 |
| Further Research..... | 113 |
| | |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY..... | 115 |
| | |
| FIGURES..... | 127 |
| | |
| INDEX..... | 150 |

LIST OF FIGURES

- Figures 1-2.** Anthony Wayne Theatre
Figures 3-4. Bryn Mawr Theatre
Figures 5-6. Hiway Theatre
Figures 7-9. Narberth Theatre
Figures 10-13. Walnut Street Theatre
Figure 14. Century Theatre
Figure 15. City Line Center Theatre
Figure 16. Eric's Place/Trans-Lux Theatre
Figures 17-18. Forum/Ellis/Xtasy Theatre
Figures 19-20. Grand Theatre (Bristol)
Figure 21. Grand Theatre (Philadelphia)
Figure 22. Green Hill Theatre
Figures 23-24. Holiday/Ace/Windsor Theatre
Figure 25. Holme/Penypack Theatre
Figures 26-27. Jefferson Theatre
Figures 28-29. Lawndale Theatre
Figures 30-31. Lindy Theatre
Figures 32-33. Model Theatre
Figure 34. Northeastern Theatre
Figure 35. Rialto Theatre
Figures 36-37. Sedgwick Theatre
Figure 38. Suburban Theatre
Figure 39. Royal Theatre
Figures 40-44. Lansdowne Theatre

PREFACE

Introduction

The American cinema tradition faces pressures to adapt architecturally, economically, and culturally to the postmodern age as Hollywood-oriented megaplexes, the internet, satellite/cable television, and DVD mail delivery services such as Netflix compete with the communal neighborhood theatre. Consequently, each year numerous historic theatres are either demolished or gutted to provide more commercially viable alternatives, prompting the National Trust for Historic Preservation to designate historic American movie theatres as one of the “11 Most Endangered Places” in 2001.¹ Without concentrated efforts to preserve and to adaptively reuse these endangered movie theatres, many theatre proponents argue that cinematic experience will soon become depersonalized and placeless, and communities will lose an important anchor institution to stimulate their urban environments. However, relatively few academic resources offer guidance on how concerned stakeholders can effectively preserve and adaptively reuse such scarce historic resources.

Objective

This thesis intends to 1) document the decline of historic theatres, and to 2) determine the most effective strategies for their preservation and adaptive reuse by focusing on the remaining neighborhood theatres of William Harold Lee (1884-1971).² William Harold Lee, an apprentice of Frank Furness and early employer of Louis Kahn, was a prolific cinema architect who designed and renovated over 200

¹ The National Trust for Historic Preservation, “Historic American Movie Theatres” (accessed November 5, 2009).

² Baldwin Memorial Archive of American Architects: William Harold Lee, 28 April 1971, William Harold Lee Folio, The American Institute of Architects.

theatres within driving distance of the Philadelphia-metropolitan region—the fifth largest metropolitan region in the United States.³ His theatres proved to be eclectic throughout the century, utilizing elements from Art Deco, Art Moderne, Spanish Revival, Oriental, Beaux-Arts, Mayan, Aztec, Adam Brothers, and various other styles.⁴ Many of these theatres are still extant and in different stages of use and condition; and thus this thesis argues that William Harold Lee’s remaining theatres are indicative of the broad range of decline and revitalization of historic theatres. The author only considers William Harold Lee’s Pennsylvania theatres within the Philadelphia-metropolitan region—Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia Counties—to limit the scope of research to relatively dense urbanized regions within one common state boundary.⁵

Chapter Ordering

Chapter One begins with an introduction to the current state of cinema and the threats posed to neighborhood theatres by megaplexes, the internet, DVD mail delivery services, and cable/satellite television. Chapter Two summarizes the extant literature for the preservation and adaptive reuse of the neighborhood theatre. Chapter Three introduces William Harold Lee, discusses his contribution to cinematic architecture, and indicates the fate of his remaining neighborhood theatres in Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia Counties. Chapters Four through Six consider three thematic case studies of William Harold Lee’s remaining theatres—operational theatres, converted theatres, and potentially

³ Ibid.; Johnson, Lewis, and Leiberan, *Drawn From The Source: The Travel Sketches of Lewis I Kahn*, 6; Koyle, *American Architects’ Directory*; Select Greater Philadelphia, “Quick Facts about Greater Philadelphia” (accessed April 12, 2010).

⁴ Glazer, *Philadelphia Theatres, A-Z: A Comprehensive, Descriptive Record of 813 Theatres Constructed Since 1724*, 258; Longstreth, “William H. Lee,” 7-12; *National Register of Historic Places Information System Database*, “Lansdowne Theatre” (accessed April 12, 2010); *National Register of Historic Places Information System Database*, “Seville Theatre” (accessed April 12, 2010).

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, “Metropolitan Statistical Areas and Components, December 2003, With Codes,” (accessed April 12, 2010).

operational theatres, respectively—to determine the most effective strategies for theatre preservation and adaptive reuse. Chapter Seven concludes with future recommendations for the preservation and adaptive reuse of historic neighborhood theatres based on lessons learned from the three thematic case studies.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Of the forty-seven known theatres designed or renovated by William Harold Lee within Philadelphia and its surrounding suburbs, thirty-four of which were commissioned in Philadelphia County, only five continue to operate under a cinematic/theatrical venue.⁶ Even more telling is that four of these five operational theatres are located within Delaware and Montgomery Counties.⁷ William Harold Lee's thirty-four other theatres in Philadelphia County, except for the Walnut Street Theatre, have been demolished, left vacant, or converted into other uses.⁸ Though one could naively blame Philadelphians for being poor stewards of William Harold Lee's neighborhood theatres, such a phenomenon is better explained by endemic demographic, consumptive, and technologic trends affecting urban neighborhood theatres throughout the United States. Therefore, to better understand the current economic predicament of the neighborhood theatre, Chapter One summarizes the historical conditions contributing to the neighborhood theatre's inexorable decline, starting with the post-war era of suburban expansion and concluding with the contemporary era of megaplexes, the internet, cable/satellite television, and DVD mail delivery services.

Decline of the Neighborhood Theatre

Although film exhibition patterns have undergone many transformations throughout the history of cinema, the post-war era of suburban expansion created the modern economic and demographic conditions portending the decline of the neighborhood theatre: movie attendance dropped from over 80 million per week

⁶ Refer to Chapter 3 of this thesis.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

in 1946 to 20 million per week by 1964, when families formerly accustomed to war rationing and economic turmoil began spending a greater percentage of their time and income on vehicles, single-family suburban housing, consumer appliances, vacations, the radio, the next generation of baby boom children, and later the television.⁹ The location of new suburban developments sited on inexpensive land along the countryside fringe also made it impractical and expensive to frequent downtown movie theatres.¹⁰ As a consequence, struggling urban theatres closed down by the hundreds as exhibitors constructed ready-made drive-in theatres within proximity to suburban subdivisions.¹¹ Such a “paradigm shift” in film exhibition allowed informally dressed suburban housewives, crying children, and rambunctious teenagers to conveniently access Hollywood from the confines of the vehicle.¹²

By the early 1960s, increasing demand for single-family housing and suburban shopping centers with ample parking enticed exhibitors to sell or to redevelop their once rural drive-in ventures.¹³ Author Gomery explains,

The number of shopping centers grew from a few hundred in 1950 to nearly three thousand in 1958 to more than seven thousand in 1963. Extraordinary growth took place in the 1960s and 1970s. By 1980 the United States had twenty-two thousand shopping centers. The bulk of retail trade moved to the edge of the city, even in New York City, Chicago, and San Francisco. New regional centers emerged at the intersection of major new highways built with funds from the 1956 Federal Highway Act.¹⁴

⁹ Forsher, *The Community of Cinema: How Cinema and Spectacle Transformed The Downtown*, 79-85 (hereafter cited as Forsher); Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*, 83-105 (hereafter cited as Gomery); Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington, D.C.: An Illustrated History of Parlors in the Metropolitan Area, 1894-1997*, 168-179 (hereafter cited as Headley); Melnick and Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures: A New Look at Classic Movie Theatres*, 115-139 (hereafter cited as Melnick and Fuchs).

¹⁰ Forsher, 79-85; Gomery, 83-105; Headley, 168-179; Melnick and Fuchs, 115-139.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Gomery, 94.

Cinema exhibition in suburban shopping centers and malls thus became the prevailing norm as real-estate developers used theatres as anchor tenants to generate retail activity.¹⁵ The concurrent trend towards the multiplex theatre, beginning with the success of the first generation of duplexes and twins during the early 1960s, also encouraged exhibitors to construct increasingly compartmentalized theatres with prosaic names such as “Cinema 5,” and to convert extant single-screen theatres into multiple auditoriums.¹⁶ As a result, architectural quality began to decline over the next two decades as space constraints and concession revenues became increasingly paramount, until by the 1980s, movie auditoriums became little more than austere concrete boxes to view the occasional blockbuster release.¹⁷ Despite the dominance of the multiplex, weekly box office sales stagnated, increasing by only 1 million between 1978 (23 million per week) and 1995 (24 million per week).¹⁸ In comparison, weekly box office sales were over 80 million per week in 1946.¹⁹ Many critics argued that moviegoing was becoming obsolete.²⁰

The consolidation of theatre ownership during the 1980s and the building boom after the 1990-1991 recession created new opportunities for film exhibition that still exist today.²¹ Cinema chains responded to complaints about claustrophobic auditoriums with poor sightlines, low-ceilings, narrow aisles, filthy floors, talking audiences, and awkward design configurations by inundating the market with a pastiche of the 1920s movie palace—the megaplex.²² Defined as a multiplex theater containing over 12-16 screens (depending on the expert), megaplexes offered patrons every conceivable amenity to rival the home theatre such as stadium

¹⁵ Forsher, 79-85; Gomery, 83-105; Headley, 193-215; Melnick and Fuchs, 115-139.

¹⁶ Ibid.; Melnick and Fuchs, 145-160.

¹⁷ Ibid.; Melnick and Fuchs, 165-175.

¹⁸ Melnick and Fuchs, 179-181.

¹⁹ Epstein, “The Vanishing Box Office” (accessed April 12, 2010) (hereafter cited as Epstein); Forsher, 79-81; Gomery, 83-105; Melnick and Fuchs, 137.

²⁰ Gomery, 103-115; Headley, 216-221; Melnick and Fuchs, 165-175.

²¹ Gomery, 103-115; Headley, 216-221; Melnick and Fuchs, 165-193.

²² Forsher, 85; Gomery, 103-115; Headley, 216-221; Melnick and Fuchs, 179-193.

seating, tiered rows, large auditoriums, resplendent lobbies, deluxe concession stands, rapid ticketing, professional staff, and the latest audio/visual technology.²³ Many neighborhood theatres succumbed during this same period, unable to compete against the megaplexes' superior quality, accessible location by regional highways, abundant parking, choice film distribution options, and monopolistic economies of scale.²⁴ Authors Melnick and Fuchs lament,

As each megaplex went up, other theaters were forced to become second-run art or art-house venues, or to close altogether. For smaller and independent operators, a new megaplex nearby often meant the end of a business that had weathered all the economic hardships of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, only to be felled by the industry's expansion—and not by its often predicted implosion.²⁵

Recent innovations in home entertainment from such media as Netflix, Tivo, satellite/cable television, flat-screen plasma televisions, and the internet present further challenges for the neighborhood theatre. With affordable options to view almost any film in the convenience of one's home, audiences may just skip out on the neighborhood theatre altogether in favor of increasingly sophisticated home entertainment centers—some of which even mimic the function and interior décor of theatre auditoriums. The home is now the postmodern equivalent of the traditional movie theatre. Author Edward Jay Epstein warns,

Whatever the box-office blips, the regular movie audience has been so decimated over the past 56 years that the habitual weekly adult moviegoer will soon qualify as an endangered species. In 1948, 90 million Americans—65 percent of the population—went to a movie house in an average week; in 2004, 30 million Americans—roughly 10 percent of the population—went to see a movie in an average week.²⁶

Political scientist Robert Putnam similarly notes,

²³ Forsher, 85; Gomery, 103-115; Headley, 216-221; Melnick and Fuchs, 179-193.

²⁴ Forsher, 85; Gomery, 103-115; Headley, 216-221; Melnick and Fuchs, 172, 179-193.

²⁵ Melnick and Fuchs, 184.

²⁶ Epstein.

As late as the middle of the twentieth century, low-cost entertainment was available in primarily in public settings, like the baseball park, the dance hall, the movie theatre [...]. [Now] [...] electronic technology allows us to consume [...] entertainment in private, even utterly alone.²⁷

Evidence for the negative impact of home entertainment technology on recent ticket sales is mixed, however. Even though the radio, television, VCR, and DVD have been historically associated with declining box office ticket sales, the 2008-2009 recession is delaying such a technological trend as Americans substitute expensive vacations, deluxe outings to the sports stadium, and even the weekend to the shore with a comparatively less expensive night out at the cinema.²⁸ Reiterating a July 2009 article by *The Economist*,

The downturn has affected Hollywood in a way that few expected. Michael Lynton, head of Sony Pictures Entertainment, says that if he had been asked to predict whether the recession would encourage people to stay at home watching the large televisions on which they had spent so much or go out to cinemas, he would have guessed wrong. So far this year box-office receipts are up by 12% over last year.²⁹

But are neighborhood theatres also selling more tickets? One would think that the affordable ticket prices offered by historic theatres would tempt the cash stripped American. According to an unscientific November 2008 survey by the League of Historic American Theatres (LHAT), the leading nonprofit advocate for the preservation of historic theatres, the answer is paradoxically no.³⁰ Twenty-two percent of LHAT's operating theatres responded to the survey; and of those theatres, 10% reported higher ticket sales than the same time one year ago, 34% reported the

²⁷ Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 216-217.

²⁸ Cieply, "In Downturn, Americans Flock to the Movies" (accessed April 12, 2010).

²⁹ *The Economist*, "Hollywood in the Recession" (accessed April 12, 2010).

³⁰ The League of Historic American Theatres, Inc., "How Are LHAT Member Theatres Faring in the Current Economic Climate" (accessed November 6, 2009) (hereafter cited as LHAT).

same, and 50% reported lower (6% were N/A).³¹ The most likely explanation for the divergent performances of megaplexes and historic theatres during roughly the same period is that film audiences are growing younger; and the 14-24 age bracket, the largest demographic for ticket sales, rarely frequents historic theatres.³² Thus, attracting younger audiences is one of the primary concerns of historic theatre operators in the November 2008 LHAT survey.³³ Nostalgia is not enough to attract those who grew up only knowing the megaplex and the internet.

Over time, these younger, more technologically savvy demographics will replace the aging baby boomers. Neighborhood theatres therefore face a declining clientele in absolute numbers based on current youth preferences for the digital realm and the megaplex. Factoring in rising insurance premiums, stricter code regulations, considerable renovation/preservation expenses, and minimal capital reserves to weather slumps in ticket sales, neighborhood theatres are becoming progressively dependant on community, governmental, private, or institutional support to remain operational.³⁴ Those theatres that survive exclusively under private ownership often require the dedication of the passionate minority of operators and owners willing to tolerate stagnating profits and even prolonged losses.³⁵ The rest unfortunately must close, facing demolition, or likely conversion into shoe stores, churches, gyms, restaurants, pharmacies, warehouses, office space, and housing.³⁶

Not all hope is lost, however: many historic theatres, including those

³¹ Ibid.

³² Screen Australia, "Get the Picture" (accessed April 12, 2010).

³³ LHAT.

³⁴ Fox, "Recession Sidesteps Theatres, Up to a Point" (accessed April 12, 2010) (hereafter cited as Fox); Georgeson and Tapper, "Why Theatres Cost So Much" (accessed April 12, 2010) (hereafter cited as Georgeson and Tapper); Hautaluoma and Schoenfeld, *Curtains Up: New Life for Historic Theatres*, 3-14 (hereafter cited as Hautaluoma and Schoenfeld).

³⁵ Fox.

³⁶ Refer to Chapter 3 of this thesis.

originally designed for silent cinema and vaudeville, are now reinforcing their inimitable place qualities by incorporating piano scores, director discussion sessions, film lectures and courses, festivals, stage theater, burlesque dancing, themed movie nights, giveaways, and other specialty acts into their weekly programs to appeal to broader audiences.³⁷ Analogous to the movement towards local produce, a dedicated niche of theatre audiences are willing to pay for a personalized and intimate communal experience that cannot be reproduced by the commodified megaplex and the cloistered home entertainment center. Subsequent chapters of this thesis further explore how stakeholders and cinema operators can make historic cinemas relevant, both culturally and economically, to contemporary audiences.

³⁷ Fox.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

It is surprising there is such a limited amount of literature on the preservation and adaptive reuse of the neighborhood theatre, given the simultaneous interest in and endangered status of historic theatres. That is, the majority of sources on historic theatres forward aesthetic, cultural, and historic arguments justifying the intrinsic value of historic theatres or present isolated case studies of successfully rehabilitated theatres. However, almost none of these sources evaluate how stakeholders can feasibly save such valued structures that unfortunately require considerable financial support from governmental, foundational, or institutional entities to become or to remain operational. Chapter Two thus summarizes the available literature justifying why it makes economic sense to preserve and to adaptively reuse the neighborhood theatre. Chapter Two then outlines the necessary stages for theatre acquisition and rehabilitation. Chapter Two concludes with a recommendation to evaluate the fate of a representative population of historic theatres within a defined geographic area.

Why Preserve the Neighborhood Theatre?

Among the few written sources offering an economic rationale for theatre preservation, James Forsher argues that movie theatres historically served as anchor institutions catalyzing the development of downtown entertainment districts—the precursors to the contemporary central business district. Starting with the success of the first nickelodeons, movie theatres offered affordable prices to compete with the expensive vaudeville houses during the early 20th century.³⁸ Due to the

³⁸ Forsher, *The Community of Cinema: How Cinema and Spectacle Transformed the Downtown*, 137-140 (hereafter cited as Forsher).

popularity of nascent film exhibition, diverse demographic populations would commune in centralized locations with agglomerative economies of film exhibition, dining, and retail—until the gradual collapse of downtown entertainment districts after the Second War World.³⁹ Therefore, just as these historic cinemas had served as “major players” to the development of the downtown entertainment district, Forsher believes their demise had negative implications for the contemporary central business district.⁴⁰ Quoting Michaan, a local theatre exhibitor and activist, Forsher reports,

[...] the theatre is the magnet that brings in the people and the local activity that comes along with them. That is what powers and fuels the downtown business district. And as that portion goes away, everyone else suffers. Some businesses suffer, some businesses go under, but everyone is hurt. I think it creates a sense of community. The value is basically being something where you have a core business district where they congregate and feel comfortable at night. Because they are not alone. Because they have a place to go out and walk around and mingle and go into restaurants and window shop and whatever, it's fun for people.⁴¹

Deconstructing the above quote reveals five subtle arguments: neighborhood theatres 1) contribute to a local sense of place, 2) foster communal gathering and interaction, 3) provide downtown destinations for leisure activity, 4) extend the profitable hours for adjacent businesses, and 5) support local economic development. Author Kevin Corbett identifies similar statements during his ethnographic survey of owners, employees, and patrons in over forty small towns, noting that many of the respondents emphasize the idiosyncratic place qualities and communal experiences of the neighborhood theatre.⁴² “Underlying all the symbolic, economic, and even political issues that surround the historic-small

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Forsher, 117.

⁴² Corbett, “Bad Sound and Sticky Floors: An Ethnographic Look at the Symbolic Value of Historic Small-Town Movie Theatres,” 233-248 (hereafter cited as Corbett).

town movie theater," Corbett writes, "is the fact that, for many towns where these theaters managed to survive, the theaters are central to the identity of the town."⁴³ Thus, as one of his respondents bluntly states, "Without historic preservation we'd become just another four-lane highway with strip malls on either side."⁴⁴

Although neither Forsher and Corbett nor their interviewees measure the economic impact of theatre preservation, a 2005 Georgia Institute of Technology economic impact study prepared for the Americans for the Arts, "the nation's leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts in America," provides some limited support for their claims.⁴⁵ The study states, "[the] typical attendee [of nonprofit arts and cultural organizations] spends an average of \$27.79 per person, per event, in addition to the cost of admission"; "nonlocal audiences spend twice as much as their local counterparts (\$40.19 vs \$19.53)."⁴⁶ The study concludes that, contrary to conventional wisdom that nonprofits arts and cultural organizations drain public funds, these organizations promote broader economic development via increased spending on event-related activities such as dining, parking, transportation, shopping, babysitting, and lodging.⁴⁷ Though the conclusions from the 2005 Georgia Institute of Technology economic impact study only apply to the general category of nonprofit arts and cultural organizations, this thesis suggests that one can infer for-profit neighborhood theatres yield similar results.⁴⁸ The study also does not mention the costs incurred for subsidizing nonprofit arts and cultural organizations.

Finally, a 2003 economic impact study prepared for the Playhouse Square

⁴³ Ibid., 244.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Americans for the Arts, "About Us" (accessed April 12, 2010).

⁴⁶ Americans for the Arts, "Arts & Economic Prosperity III: The Economic Impact of Nonprofit Arts and Culture Organizations and Their Audiences" (accessed April 12, 2010).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 9-10.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 17-23.

Foundation by Cleveland State University economists concludes that the operating activities of five preserved historic theatres in downtown Cleveland produced \$43 million in additional spending, 422 additional jobs, and \$10.5 million in increased household earning for the Cleveland-metropolitan area in 2003 alone.⁴⁹ These outcomes, the authors believe, would not have been replicated if the theatres were demolished, left vacant, or converted into alternative functions, because the historic theatres transformed a segment of Cleveland's disinvested downtown district into an anchor for popular entertainment.⁵⁰ The authors observe,

The emphasis on arts and culture as tools for economic development has enjoyed renewed interest, as quality of life has become a prime factor in the location choices made by individuals and businesses. The place where recreational spending occurs is critical for at least three reasons: recreational spending generates local tax revenues; the placement of recreational facilities affects land use and commuting patterns and encourages the reuse of existing infrastructure; and it can have a catalytic effect on the development and reuse of surrounding land.⁵¹

Conclusion

All the sources cited in this section generally observe that the place qualities and cinematic/theatrical function of neighborhood theatres increase visitor traffic to and within downtown business districts, especially during the evening hours. The increased visitor traffic is a positive externality for neighboring businesses because theatre patrons tend to shop, dine, "hang-out," and otherwise spend money and invigorate the street during their movie-outing experience. Nevertheless, the author believes additional economic studies are necessary to corroborate whether neighborhood theatres actually have such an impact, since

⁴⁹ Sadowski, Norton, Austrian, and Rosentraub, "Playhouse Square Center: Economic Impact and Contribution to Northeast Ohio" (accessed April 12, 2010).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

only the results from the Georgia Institute of Technology study, funded by the Americans for the Arts, can be broadly inferred to all historic theatres. The other sources cited in this section either rely on anecdotal evidence or contain data that is specifically applicable to the unique conditions of one city, such as in the case with the Cleveland State University study of Playhouse Square. Moreover, the author believes future studies should also consider the opportunity costs for subsidizing the rehabilitation of historic theatres—as opposed to only measuring the benefits—since historic theatres often require considerable public, private, institutional, and nonprofit investment to become or to remain operational.

How to Preserve the Neighborhood Theatre

Before discussing the extant literature on theatre acquisition and rehabilitation, a brief note of methodology is in order. This section primarily relies on *Curtains Up: New Life for Historic Theatres* (1993) by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, *Movie Palaces: Renaissance and Reuse* (1982) by Joseph M. Valerio and Daniel Friedman, and “Why Theatres Cost so Much” (2006) by Scott Georgeson and Lee Tapper—the only three sources that exclusively outline the theatre preservation process. The author condensed the information from these aforementioned sources into two stages—sponsorship and financing—to summarize the factors necessary for theatre redevelopment. The author also, wherever relevant, incorporated contemporary real estate information from *Revitalizing Main Street* (2009) by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and *Real estate Development: Principles and Process* (2007) by the Urban Land Institute to supplement the financing and feasibility information from the three aforementioned sources.

A) Sponsorship

Valerio and Friedman identify four fundamental “decision-making entities” or sponsors that organize and manage the theatre acquisition and renovation process: institutional, community/nonprofit, public, and private. Though, there is significant overlap in practice given the legal, proprietary, and financial constraints inherent with the rehabilitation of historic theatres.⁵² Stakeholders interested in the preservation and adaptive reuse of an historic theatre first need to determine which of these sponsors or combination of sponsors fit their personal and/or organizational objectives.⁵³ This section discusses the four sponsors below based on the above classifications by Valerio and Friedman:

A1) Institutional sponsorship occurs when an educational or religious organization—university, church, charter school, etc.—provides the resources and finances for theatre renovation or assumes ownership and management responsibilities.⁵⁴ Reasons to purchase historic theatres are usually contingent on the need for more office, educational, recreational, and religious space. In many cases, it is more affordable to convert an historic theatre into a house of worship, gymnasium, or performing arts center than to construct one anew.⁵⁵ Institutional support is unique in that educational and religious organizations often have sizable endowments, and numerous members/alumni from which to solicit capital improvement funds.⁵⁶ Partnerships with nonprofits and local communities also allow institutions to defray variable operational and management expenses.⁵⁷

⁵² Valerio and Friedman, *Movie Palaces: Renaissance and Reuse* (accessed April 12, 2010), 40-96, 98-100 (hereafter cited as Valerio and Friedman).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 100; Cascade Theatre, “Project History” (April 12, 2010) (hereafter cited as Cascade); Majestic Performing Arts and Cinema Center, “Mission Statement” (April 12, 2010) (hereafter cited as Majestic).

⁵⁶ Cascade; Majestic; Valerio and Friedman, 100.

⁵⁷ Cascade; Majestic.

A2) Community sponsorship refers to the scenarios in which concerned stakeholders form nonprofit corporations and foundations with limited liability protection and tax-exempt status to raise finances to purchase, renovate, and manage threatened or derelict historic theatres.⁵⁸ Valerio and Friedman write, “With tax-exempt status, an organization is allowed to solicit private-tax-deductible contributions, both locally and nationwide. Such financing leverage allows the immediate implementation of campaign strategies to support project start-up costs.”⁵⁹ Tax-exempt status also waives nonprofit revenues from federal income tax requirements if the revenues further the nonprofit’s mission without “inuring” or benefitting private interests.⁶⁰ Limited liability protection shields the individual members of the nonprofit from civil suits and creditors because the nonprofit corporation itself assumes responsibility for any incurred debts.⁶¹ Negotiations over theatre ownership can then commence when nonprofits are able to gather enough donations to purchase or to delay the redevelopment of the property.⁶² If the nonprofits have tax-exempt status, theatre owners have the option to donate their property for a charitable tax-deduction equal to the value of the property.⁶³

A3) Public sponsorship varies from community sponsorship in that governmental institutions provide the funding “often generated through bond issues” for the purchase, renovation, and management of the neighborhood theatre.⁶⁴ Like that of institutional support, local governments sometimes permit nonprofits to manage the daily operations of the theatre to reduce costs.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Valerio and Friedman, 98-99.

⁵⁹ Valerio and Friedman, 99.

⁶⁰ Primoli, “Tax Aspects of Historic Preservation” (April 12, 2010), 1-14 (hereafter cited as Primoli).

⁶¹ Business Practice Law Group of Smith Rayl Law Office, LLC, “Nonprofit Basics” (accessed April 12, 2010), 1-3.

⁶² Valerio and Friedman, 40-96.

⁶³ Hautaluoma and Schoenfeld, 14.

⁶⁴ Valerio and Friedman, 40-96, 106-107.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

Governmental interventions usually revolve around the conversion of an aging theatre into a community or performing arts center in conjunction with other downtown redevelopment initiatives.⁶⁶ Sometimes community pressure provides the impetus for future acquisitions—e.g. a local government may provide assistance after a community group fails to raise enough financing for a popular theatre.⁶⁷ Cooperation with governmental authorities is necessary given that “building codes, zoning restrictions, ancillary services, and tax programs all fall under the aegis of such civic authority [...]”⁶⁸

A4) Private sponsorship, ranging from a small family-run operation to a national theatre chain, is the independent ownership of an historic theatre for commercial purposes.⁶⁹ Private enterprises have the option to renovate theatres that are individually listed in the National Register, or that are contributing buildings in a National Register District or certified local district for a 20% tax credit if the renovations conform to the ten *Secretary of Interior’s Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*.⁷⁰ Unlisted theatres constructed prior to 1936 are eligible for a 10% tax credit.⁷¹ State and local tax credits may also apply. The federal tax credit provisions require owners to obtain the approval of the State Historic Preservation Officer and the National Park Service prior to the planned renovations; and the renovations must “exceed the greater of the adjusted basis of the building and its structural components or \$5,000.”⁷² Owners who fail to comply with the *Secretary of Interior’s Standards* forgo the tax credits.⁷³ However, in the absence of federal

⁶⁶ Valerio and Friedman, 40-96.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 99.

⁶⁹ Valerio and Friedman, 99.

⁷⁰ National Park Service, “Historic Preservation Tax Incentives” (accessed November 8, 2009) (hereafter cited as NPS).

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² NPS; Primoli, 1.

⁷³ NPS.

funding and local preservation ordinances stating otherwise, there are no legal restrictions preventing private owners from improving their theatres contrary to the *Secretary of Interior's Standards*.⁷⁴

B) Financing

Once an established sponsor expresses interest to acquire an historic theatre, planning for theatre acquisition and renovation becomes necessary for the theatre to become operational. This section discusses the two primary variables common to all four sponsors during the planning process: the feasibility study, and development financing.

B1) Feasibility Study

The Urban Land Institute's *Real Estate Development: Principles and Practice* concisely states that "[a real estate] project is feasible if its estimated value exceeds estimated costs."⁷⁵ That is, if the estimated value exceeds the estimated costs, then the real estate project is expected to be worth more than what the sponsor will eventually invest in the real estate project.⁷⁶ If the estimated costs exceed the estimated value, then the sponsor is expected to lose money, unless public subsidies and private donations make up the gap between cost and value.⁷⁷ Two indicators are important in this regard: the debt-service-coverage-ratio, and the loan-to-value ratio.⁷⁸ First, the debt-service-coverage ratio is determined by dividing the estimated income by the anticipated loans needed to finance the real estate project.⁷⁹ As such, the resulting quotient needs to be positive so that one

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Miles and others, *Real Estate Development: Principles and Practice*, 14 (hereafter cited as Miles).

⁷⁶ Miles, 150; Dono and Glisson, eds., *Revitalizing Main Street: A Practitioner's Guide to Comprehensive Commercial District Revitalization*, 95 (hereafter cited as Dono and Glisson).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Miles, 406, 183-186; Valerio and Friedman, 107-108.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

can earn enough income to pay off his or her monthly debt service payments plus interest.⁸⁰ More specifically, the Urban Land Institute writes,

For real estate projects, lenders generally require a DSCR between 1.20 and 1.60. Lenders on projects deemed riskier than average require a higher DSCR, and lenders on projects deemed relatively low risk accept a lower DSCR. A lower-risk property would likely have a roster of creditworthy tenants on long-term leases that occupy most, if not all, of the building.⁸¹

Second, the loan-to-value ratio is determined by dividing the anticipated loan by the value of the property.⁸² The resulting quotient, from the perspective of the lender, should be the smallest percentage possible, since borrowers are more vulnerable to defaulting on high interest, “no money-down loans.”⁸³ In particular, Valerio and Friedman comment that lenders usually prefer loan-to-value ratios to be below 75% and even as low as 60% for riskier reuse projects—though one should be careful to note that these percentages may be outdated.⁸⁴ The remaining percentage not covered by the loan must derive from the sponsor’s equity or from a third-party subsidy.⁸⁵ Valerio and Friedman, Georgeson and Tapper, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the Urban Land Institute mention some or all of the following variables needed to estimate the feasibility of an historic theatre renovation project:⁸⁶

- *Ownership*—Ownership status affects the availability and purchase price of an historic theatre.

- *Zoning*—Local zoning ordinances may enforce land-use controls on use,

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Valerio and Friedman, 184.

⁸² Ibid., 107-108; Miles, 406, 183-186.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Valerio and Friedman, 107-108.

⁸⁵ Ibid.; Miles, 406, 183-186.

⁸⁶ All bulleted items derive from the following sources: Dono and Glisson, 45-50, 69-101; Georgeson and Tapper; Hautaluoma and Schoenfeld, 3-14; Melnick and Fuchs, case studies; Miles, 299-321, 391-432; Valerio and Friedman, 40-96, 100-114.

bulk, site design, and parking, as well as modifications to historic fabric. Theatres in historic districts and business improvements districts (BID) may also be eligible for historic tax credits, grants, and public funding.

- *Documentation*—Documentation of a theatre’s existing conditions and historical status/assets aids in cost estimating decisions regarding future use, insurance, renovation expenses, project team selection, design alternatives, funding, and tax credit eligibility. Knowledge of a theatre’s history also generates stakeholder interest and support.

- *Equity*—The availability of private capital and the acquisition of grants, donations, subsidies, etc. greatly impacts a project’s feasibility because such equity reduces the amount of financing needed from a lender.

- *Market*—A market study should consider the market capitalization rate, existing and potential competitors, surrounding demographics, real estate trends, demand for a renovated historic theatre, ticket and concession prices of cinematic/theatrical venues, rental prices of housing and retail (if the historic theatre has available space for mixed-use functions), availability of parking and public transportation, access to regional highways, and site context factors (neighboring businesses, urban design, crime levels, neighborhood quality, etc.) to help sponsors estimate future revenues and real estate value.

- *Programmatic Concept*—Sponsors need a proposed use and organizational objective to guide future development decisions and to prove the restored theatre satisfies market demand. Possible uses range from mainstream movie theatres, independent art-house cinemas, and film institutes, to community/performing arts centers, recording studios, stage theatres, opera houses, and churches. Many historic theatres also supplement income by incorporating mixed-use functions such as restaurants, cafes, museums, retail, and office space.

- *Renovation Expenses*—Sponsors need to estimate the future renovation expenses needed to satisfy the programmatic concept. Factors to consider include project phasing, construction team selection, proposed design interventions, and conservation philosophy. For example, some sponsors with operational theatres preserve the majority of interior fabric on a piecemeal basis as funding becomes available; other sponsors requiring more modern facilities only retain the marquee and the exterior envelop, and instead redevelop the interior via one large project. Many renovation projects fall in-between the two extremes. Listed below are some of the more significant expenses associated with theatre preservation assuming the continuation of cinematic/theatrical venues:

- *Safety*—Renovated theatres must conform to modern building and fire codes; and there may be considerable retrofitting expenses pertaining to structural systems, fire sprinklers and exits, ADA access, roof/building envelops, and lead/asbestos removal. Waivers may be granted to preserve historical authenticity.

- *Stage*—Theatres intended for stage performance may require new or renovated stages, prosceniums and curtains, backstage rehearsal space, wing-access corridors, and dressing room facilities.

- *Auxiliary Space*—Theatres may require additional space for modern audio/visual technology, theatre props, administrative offices, mechanical and engineering systems, cafes, parking/loading facilities, storage, or future expansion.

- *The Lobby and Box Office*—Sponsors need to determine whether the lobby and box office spaces where people congregate need to be preserved or redesigned since circulation, ticket/concession sales, and bathroom facilities are integral components of an operating theatre.

- *Auditorium*—The configuration of the auditorium affects how patrons experience cinematic/theatrical venues. For instance, many sponsors choose to convert historic theatres into twins and multiplexes at the expense of historic authenticity and acoustical quality to increase ticket sales and movie diversity. Modern seating and aisles widths are also larger and more spacious than those originally used by historic cinemas thus affecting sight lines and auditorium capacity.

- *Mechanical and Electrical Systems*—Most mechanical and electrical systems such as lighting, wiring, HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning), and plumbing will require replacement, given their limited service life and the venerable age of historic theatres. “The cost of refurbishing the mechanical and electrical systems,” the National Trust writes, “is likely to be one of the largest expenditures of the restoration budget, often in the range of 20 to 50 percent of total project costs.”⁸⁷

B2) Development Financing

Development financing is the solicitation of capital needed for the “acquisition, alteration, and operation” of an historic theatre.⁸⁸ In other words, sponsors often need borrowed money to purchase the property, to renovate the historic theatre into its future programmatic use, and to pay for operating and management expenses. Financing strategies differ according to initial purchase price, historic tax-credit eligibility, acquisition of funding and public bonds, available capital reserves, the market capitalization rate, project scope and expenses, anticipated revenue, and numerous other variables specific to the feasibility study. Valerio and Friedman mention cases in which theatres were donated, financed

⁸⁷ Hautaluoma and Schoenfeld, 7.

⁸⁸ Valerio and Friedman, 106.

with long-term loans, purchased outright, and funded entirely with public bonds or private/institutional endowments.⁸⁹

Assuming the sponsor needs permanent financing to cover the majority of its acquisition and renovation expenses as is the common development scenario, standard loan practice usually requires an initial high interest 2-4 year construction loan for the risky land acquisition and rehabilitation expenses, then a low interest long-term loan to pay for both the mortgage payments, and the initial construction loan with interest.⁹⁰ The reason real estate financing is a two-step process is that no lender would issue a long-term loan, especially in this current recession, without a “certificate of occupancy” proving that a theatre is built to code and operational, and evidence of a stabilized income stream to pay off monthly debt-service payments.⁹¹ Likewise, no lender would grant a short-term construction loan without guaranteed permanent financing, unless the sponsor possessed enough capital reserves for loan recourse if the project should fail.⁹² This is why the debt-service-coverage-ratio and the loan-to-value ratio determined during the feasibility study are so important for permanent financing because lenders can assess whether a sponsor is prone to loan default via excessive financing or limited income potential.⁹³

Unfortunately, historic theatre rehabilitation projects generally pose more risk than lenders are willing to accommodate due to the substantial renovation expenses needed to transform historic theatres into income producing properties, and to the historically stagnating ticket sales associated with cinematic exhibition.⁹⁴ For example, compared to new offices, churches, and cinemas, which average

⁸⁹ Ibid., 40-96, 107.

⁹⁰ Miles, 170-174, 183-200.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Refer to Chapter 1 of this thesis.

\$130/SF, \$145/SF, and \$128/SF, respectively, renovated historic theatres average \$265/SF.⁹⁵ More specifically, Georgeson and Tapper explain,

In 2006 dollars, it is not uncommon to see theatre project costs range from \$250 per square foot to over \$450 per square foot. [...] When you compare a typical four-story office building and a typical 1930s movie palace with a balcony, the buildings are actually the same height and have the same roof area and wall height. Yet, when you compare this typical building with a theatre, the difference in complexity is striking. The typical office building is based on small repetitive structural bays and simple structure with medium loads and stiffness and is fairly inexpensive. The typical theatre is long span, has cantilevers, heavy point loads, is very stiff, and every bay and connection is different. Numerous fire separations are also required. Each fire wall requires special hardware, wall details and mechanical penetrations. The theatre's complexity makes it very expensive.⁹⁶

Thus, without additional funding and third-party support, there is often an incentive gap between the anticipated cost and the expected value of historic theatres. Many historic theatres thereby remain vacant or undergo conversion into low-end retail uses with minimal renovation expenses and higher sales-per-square-foot.⁹⁷

Nevertheless, permanent financing may be easier to obtain for operational theatres with proven income potential prior to acquisition because they do not require a speculative construction period prior to exhibiting films. For example, nonprofit sponsors with tax-exempt status often cover mortgage payments with ticket, membership, and concession sales, then later schedule nonessential preservation projects on an incremental basis as additional funding, revenues, and donations become available.⁹⁸ Private sponsorship has limitations in this respect since owners must personally pay for preservation projects, unless they receive

⁹⁵ Georgeson and Tapper.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Please refer to Chapter 3 of this thesis.

⁹⁸ Melnick and Fuchs, case studies; Valerio and Friedman, 40-96, 114.

capital from third-party sources. If the renovation costs exceed the anticipated benefits from increased property values, applicable tax credits, and additional ticket and concession sales, private sponsors do not have a financial incentive to reinvest in their theatres—a rational, profit maximizing tendency which explains why so many private theatres are so poorly preserved. The theatre ownership cycle therefore tends to follow a succession of private enterprises that operate historic theatres until the breakeven point.⁹⁹ Nonprofits then acquire some of the more viable theatres and rehabilitate them on an incremental timeline.¹⁰⁰ The rest are converted or left vacant, excepting the occasions when institutions and public agencies take a proactive interest.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

Economic research on theatre preservation is for the most part limited. Valerio and Friedman, Georgeson and Tapper, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation provide a needed summary of the necessary considerations for the preservation and adaptive reuse of historic theatres. However, these sources, as well as *Cinema Treasures: A New Look at Classic Movie Theatres*, only go so far as to present nonrandom case studies of successfully rehabilitated theatres to demonstrate the potential of theatre rehabilitation efforts. Additional research is necessary to make recommendations for historic theatres under less than ideal conditions. In particular, by considering a large sample of remaining historic theatres within a defined geographic area, one could determine the success rate and composition of various theatre preservation interventions. It would therefore be possible to account for vacant or poorly converted theatres, and to evaluate whether certain decisions have proven to be more or less effective in maintaining

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

the form, fabric, and function of historic theatres. As an example of such a study, subsequent chapters of this thesis consider the fate of the remaining neighborhood theatres of William Harold Lee in the Philadelphia-metropolitan region.

CHAPTER 3: THEATRE SURVEY

Introduction

As concluded in Chapter Two, the author wants to determine the most effective strategies for the preservation and adaptive reuse of neighborhood theatres by focusing on a large sample of remaining historic theatres within a defined geographic area. Accordingly, the author has chosen architect William Harold Lee for such analysis given his unsurpassed output of neighborhood theatres across Pennsylvania's Philadelphia-metropolitan region (the formal state metropolitan statistical boundary of urbanized regions within southeastern Pennsylvania). The following counties comprise this larger boundary: Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia.¹⁰²

Chapter Three thus begins with an overview of William Harold Lee and his contribution to cinematic architecture to provide contextual information on the architect responsible for so many neighborhood theatres within the Philadelphia-metropolitan region. Chapter Three then documents the fate of William Harold Lee's remaining neighborhood theatres within Pennsylvania's Philadelphia-metropolitan region. Of these theatres, the author divides them into three thematic groups—operational, converted, potentially operational—for case study analysis in Chapters Four, Five, and Six, respectively.

William Harold Lee

William Harold Lee was born in the small coal mining and mill town of Shamokin, PA on 9 December 1884.¹⁰³ Not much is known about his early life except

¹⁰² U.S. Census Bureau, "Metropolitan Statistical Areas and Components, December 2003, With Codes" (accessed April 12, 2010).

¹⁰³ "Baldwin Memorial Archive of American Architects: William Harold Lee, 28 April 1971," William Harold Lee Folio, The American Institute of Architects Archives (hereafter cited as WHL—AIA); "PADCO

that he attended Shamokin High School (1902-1905) and Trinity College (1905-1906), and presumably transferred to The University of Pennsylvania to study architecture where he later received a “Certificate of Proficiency of Architecture” in 1908.¹⁰⁴ Thereafter, he returned to Shamokin to work at the Shamokin Lumber Company (1908-1912), though he also reportedly worked as a draftsman with Furness & Evans Co. in 1910 and “designed and supervised the construction of the Majestic Theatre [in] Pottsville” that same year.¹⁰⁵

By 1912, William Harold Lee started his own architecture practice in Shamokin on 30 East Independence Street, working on such Philadelphia projects as the Frankford Elevated Railroad stations (1915-1919), and the restoration of the Knickerbocker Theatre (1914-1919); but he only achieved prominence after moving his practice to Philadelphia in 1919 at 32 South 17th Street.¹⁰⁶ A partnership with A.A Ritcher of Reading, PA soon followed in 1920, and the newly formed Ritcher-Lee Co. would go on to renovate the famous Walnut Street Theatre between 1920 and 1921.¹⁰⁷ Numerous theatre commissions quickly ensued throughout the Philadelphia-metropolitan region; and although he later developed a successful career as an academic architect for Temple University, the University of Maine, Franklin and Marshal College, and Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Eastern College, William Harold Lee would subsequently be remembered for his sixty year output of affordable neighborhood theatres by the time of his eventual

Communication, 7 February 2001,” William Harold Lee Folio, The Athenaeum of Philadelphia (hereafter cited as WHL—Athenaeum); *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*, “William Harold Lee” (by Sandra L. Tatman) (accessed April 12, 2010) (hereafter cited as PAB).

¹⁰⁴ “Certificate of Proficiency of Architecture Communication, 31 December 1927,” William Harold Lee Folio, The American Institute of Architects Archives; PAB; WHL—Athenaeum.

¹⁰⁵ Koyle, *American Architects' Directory* (New York: R.R. Bowker Co., 1956); PAB; WHL—AIA; WHL—Athenaeum.

¹⁰⁶ Longstreth, “William H. Lee,” *Marquee*, 3 (1971): 7-12 (hereafter cited as Longstreth); PAB; WHL—Athenaeum.

¹⁰⁷ Glazer, *Philadelphia Theatres, A-Z: A Comprehensive, Descriptive Record of 813 Theatres Constructed Since 1724* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 234-236 (hereafter cited as Glazer); PAB.

death on 5 February 1971.¹⁰⁸ In particular, architectural historian Richard Longstreth comments, “Lee’s designs became exhibitions of half a century’s Fashion [...],” ranging from Art Deco, Art Moderne, Spanish Revival, Oriental, Beaux-Arts, Mayan, Aztec, Adam Brothers, and various other styles.¹⁰⁹ Longstreth goes on to write,

Preliminary designs, which only infrequently differed appreciably from the finished product, were often whipped up in the matter of a week or less. Their evolution was effectively reversed hitting its climax at the start with a scheme sure to please the savvy, though not necessarily tasteful clients.¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, while William Harold Lee may have compromised aesthetic creativity to quickly profit from popularized architectural templates, he has proven to be ahead of his time in functionality and marketability.¹¹¹ Drawing from his small town origins, William Harold Lee advocated for simple two-story theatres with just enough exotic flair to pique the interest of the average moviegoer.¹¹² In this regard, William Harold Lee was responding to the ubiquitous and profligate downtown movie palaces of the pre-depression era, once presciently writing in a September 1928 *Exhibitor* article titled “Why Millions for Theatres?”:

[The] day of the multi-million-dollar theatre, [...] on the “Broadways” of America, is [over]. The gilded palaces with their ornate [...] have had their vogue and have [...] to lure the elusive patron. Today it [is the] entertainment within and not the trimmings of the building that fills the [seats] nightly. The cathedrals of motion picture are no longer novelties and are [...] apt to be empty when the picture [...]

¹⁰⁸ Longstreth, 7-12; “Obituary of William H. Lee,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, February 4, 1971; “Obituary of William Harold Lee,” *Swathmorean*, February 5, 1971; PAB; WHL—Athenaeum; WHL—AIA.

¹⁰⁹ Glazer, 258; Longstreth, 7-12; *National Register of Historic Places Information System Database*, “Lansdowne Theatre” (accessed April 12, 2010); *National Register of Historic Places Information System Database*, “Seville Theatre” (accessed April 12, 2010).

¹¹⁰ Longstreth, 7-12.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *The Exhibitor* (33, 45-46), September 1928, William Harold Lee Folio, The Free Library of Philadelphia Rare Books Department (hereafter cited as WHL—Free Library); Longstreth, 7-12.

as are the older places of amusement.¹¹³

To address these criticisms, he argued that architects should instead adapt theatres to the modern motion picture experience because cinema patrons were more concerned about the actual movie than the quality of the theatre, provided that the theatre was sufficiently pleasing to the eye.¹¹⁴ More specifically, William Harold Lee writes,

No theatre has ever succeeded in developing a steady patronage to view its architectural wonders. The house stands or falls by its ability to furnish satisfying entertainment and the atmosphere of the auditorium or the remainder of the playhouse is merely the comfortable envelop which unconsciously should assist in making the two hour visit to the theatre a very pleasant stay.¹¹⁵

Such a statement may seem obvious today with the emphasis on generic megaplexes, Hollywood blockbusters, stadium seating, correct site lines, and sound quality, but movie palaces of the 1920s were essentially retrofitted stage theatres with garish façades, sumptuous interior décor, high ceilings, orchestra pits, balconies, bawling rooms, gentlemen's lounges, etc.—features meant to attract large volumes of patrons accustomed to an extended evening of mixed vaudeville acts and silent cinema.¹¹⁶ The coming era of synchronized sound (1927) and economic turmoil (1929) later obviated the need for these gratuitous amenities as exhibitors constructed smaller theatres exclusively adapted for cinematic exhibition.¹¹⁷

Anticipating these developments, William Harold Lee designed more

¹¹³ WHL—Free Library, 33.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 33, 45-46.

¹¹⁵ WHL—Free Library, 45.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33, 45-46; F. Andrew Hanssen, "Revenue Sharing and the Coming of Sound," in *An Economic History of Film*, ed. John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny (Abingdon, OX: Routledge, 2005), 92-102 (hereafter cited as Hanssen); Melnick and Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures: A New Look at Classic Movie Theatres* (St. Paul, MN: MBI Publishing Company, 2004), 60-75, 95-101 (hereafter cited as Melnick and Fuchs).

¹¹⁷ Hanssen, 92-102; Melnick and Fuchs, 60-75, 95-101.

modest theatres by eliminating extraneous space, elaborate interior ornament/decoration, improper sightlines, and unnecessary architectural vestiges such as the stage dividing proscenium arch—essentially anything that did not contribute to the sole purpose of watching a movie in a darkly lit auditorium; and he standardized exterior façades and interior details according to simple and easily constructed “Western Mediterranean” motifs—“Spanish, Italian, Modern French, and Moorish”—associated with Period Revival architecture.¹¹⁸ Though, he also juxtaposed many formalistic elements from Moderne and Art Deco styles—most likely due to the influence of Armand D. Carroll, William Harold Lee’s chief theatre designer between 1920 and 1933—before both styles became prevalent in cinematic architecture during the 1930s and 1940s.¹¹⁹ For example, Carroll once wrote in 1926,

In general, then, the new theatre should express simplicity if it is to be modern. Someone once said that simplicity is the keynote of modernism. But there are certain other characteristics that help to be modern. These might be summed up as follows: continuity of line (as we find it in the stream line of an automobile or in the long unbroken lines in fashion); contrasts in colors; and sharp contrasts in light and shadow, created through definite angular mouldings and broken planes.¹²⁰

Cinema critics of the time apparently approved of these sleek designs. David Barrist of *The Exhibitor* essentially restates the above quote by Carroll:

But it is in the comfort that Lee-designed theatres excel. Comfort means not alone well-upholstered chairs and deep-tufted carpets. It means correct sight lines that permit a proper view, free from distortion, of the picture of the screen. It means harmony of line and color. It means little corners and deft touches by the artist-architect that lull the senses, satisfy the aesthetic taste and contribute to the

¹¹⁸ WHL—Free Library, 33, 45-46.

¹¹⁹ R. W. Sexton, *American Theatres of Today*, 9, 12 (hereafter cited as *American Theatres of Today*); Longstreth, 7-12; 5-12; Melnick 95-101.

¹²⁰ *American Theatres of Today*, 9, 12.

patron's enjoyment of the evening as a whole.¹²¹

William Harold Lee thus obtained over two hundred theatre commissions based on his strict adherence to utilitarian and stylized theatre templates—a commercial branding strategy presaging the consumptive marketing tactics later adopted by fast food franchises, suburban banks, and big box chain stores.¹²² More specifically, moviegoers quickly associated the eclectic façades, iconic marquees, and functional auditoriums of his theatres with the “modern motion picture experience”; and exhibitors needed an affordable and reliable architect who could upgrade/redecorate obsolescent vaudeville theatres and silent movie houses, as well as design small-scaled theatres for an ever expanding suburban population.¹²³ The two following quotes, one about renovation and the other about new construction, testify to Lee's reputation as a versatile theatre architect:

William H. Lee rejuvenates theatres—makes them ten or twenty years younger by his process of renovation. Under his wizard touch the ugly lobby becomes a beautiful Spanish patio; the musty older interior, a fine example of modern French beauty, and the creaky balcony an exclusive loge where the elect may enjoy the privilege of paying higher prices of admission. Has your theatre grown out-of-date? Read this article and you will learn how, by the expenditure of \$25,000 or \$50,000, you may make it a new house.¹²⁴

Just before I decided to erect a theatre in town I determined to make an inspection of the various theatres in this city. It did not take me long to decide that Mr. Lee was a man on his job. I discovered that not only are his buildings of beautiful design, but that no space is wasted, but rather economically used and at a minimum cost. Very Truly yours, J.V. Schreck, Ashland Theatre, Ashland, Pa.¹²⁵

¹²¹ WHL—Free Library, 34.

¹²² Longstreth, 7-12; WHL—AIA.

¹²³ Longstreth, 7-12.

¹²⁴ WHL—Free Library, 60.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

Unfortunately, William Harold Lee's reign as the dominant theatre architect of the northeast would not last forever. The post-war years of suburban expansion, the radio/television, shopping centers, and drive-in theatres marked a time when community neighborhood theatres no longer elicited the same popular response, and his hybrid theatres soon devolved into the realm of the kitsch.¹²⁶ Recognizing this reality, William Harold Lee left his practice to retire as chief architect for Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Eastern College in 1947; though he would later partner with Walter Thaete as a theatre consultant—Lee and Thaete Associates—from 1964 until his death in 1971.¹²⁷ His last significant design was the renovation of Thomas Lamb's Trans-Lux theatre into the futuristic and awkwardly retro Eric's Place theatre in 1970.¹²⁸ Thereafter, mirroring the fate of other historic theatres throughout the United States, many of William Harold Lee's theatres were subsequently demolished and converted into alternative uses.

Remaining Neighborhood Theatres

As far as the author could determine, William Harold Lee designed or renovated approximately thirty-six to forty-seven theatres within Pennsylvania's Philadelphia-metropolitan region—Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia Counties—based on the following sources: "William H. Lee" by Richard Longstreth, *Philadelphia Architects and Builders, Cinema Treasures*, and *Philadelphia Theatres, A-Z* by Irvin Glazer.¹²⁹ The reason for the eleven theatre discrepancy is that Longstreth credits William Harold Lee for theatres that cannot be corroborated by the other three sources; and since many of these theatres in question have no other known documentation, there is little chance of determining

¹²⁶ Longstreth, 7-12.

¹²⁷ PAB; WHL—AIA.

¹²⁸ Glazer, 227.

¹²⁹ Cinema Treasures, "William Harold Lee," Architect Search (accessed April 12, 2010); Glazer, 258; Longstreth, 7-12; PAB.

whether Longstreth was correct. Nevertheless, this thesis considers all forty-seven theatres to gather a more inclusive sample of historic theatres to represent the population of historic theatres in Pennsylvania's Philadelphia-metropolitan region. Of these forty-seven theatres, the author independently verified that twenty-four remain as operational, converted, or potentially operational theatres. The rest have been demolished. Please refer to the three categories below for specific information on the fate of these remaining theatres.

Operational Theatres

This thesis defines operational theatres as the remaining theatres that still operate under a cinematic/theatrical venue. As such, only five theatres associated with William Harold Lee meet this criterion, translating into an eleven percent operational rate for all his known theatres within the Philadelphia-metropolitan region. However, the operational rate drops markedly if one only considers William Harold Lee's Philadelphia County theatres, since only one out of his thirty-four known theatres (3%) persists as an operational theatre. This contrasts with the 29% operational rate for all his suburban theatres—or four out of his fourteen known theatres in Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery Counties. Thus, even though William Harold Lee designed or renovated over twice as many theatres in Philadelphia County, four times as many of his theatres currently operate in the surrounding suburbs. Listed below are the specific venues of these five operational theatres **(Figures 1-13)**:

- *Anthony Wayne Theatre (109 W. Lancaster Avenue, Wayne)*: Commercial cinema.
- *Bryn Mawr Theatre (824 W. Lancaster Avenue, Bryn Mawr)*: Nonprofit cinema/film institute.
- *Hiway Theatre (212 York Road, Jenkintown)*: Nonprofit cinema.
- *Narberth Theatre (129 N. Narberth Avenue, Narberth)*: Commercial cinema.

- *Walnut Street Theatre (827-833 Walnut Street, Philadelphia):* Nonprofit performing arts theatre.

Converted Theatres

This thesis defines irrevocably converted theatres as the remaining theatres that have been transformed, gutted, and altered to such a degree that they will probably never again operate under a cinematic/theatrical venue. Seventeen theatres, fifteen of which are located in Philadelphia, meet this criterion. Of these theatres, the vast majority are now warehouses, budget retail/food service stores, or churches. Listed below are the specific functions of these seventeen converted theatres **(Figures 14-38)**:

- *Century Theatre (Erie Avenue and Marshall Street, Philadelphia):* Laundromat.
- *City Line Center Theatre (7600 City Avenue, Philadelphia):* T.J.-Maxx.
- *Eric's Place/Trans-Lux Theatre (1519 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia):* Shoe store.
- *Forum/Ellis/Xtasy Theatre (5231 Frankford Avenue, Philadelphia):* Wine & spirits state store.
- *Grand Theatre (422 Mill Street, Bristol):* Apartment complex/office space.
- *Grand Theatre (Seventh and Snyder, Philadelphia):* Industrial supply house.
- *Green Hill Theatre (6217-6219 Lancaster Avenue, Philadelphia):* Church.
- *Holiday/Ace/Windsor Theatre (4204-4212 Kensington Avenue, Philadelphia):* Vacant adult cinema for rent.
- *Holme/Penypack Theatre (8049 Frankford Avenue, Philadelphia):* Dollar Tree/Pizza Hut/Wing Street.
- *Jefferson Theatre (2217-2223 N. 29th Street, Philadelphia):* Church.
- *Lawndale Theatre (Rising Sun Avenue and Fanshawe Street, Philadelphia):* Daycare center.
- *Lindy Theatre (6900 Elmwood Avenue, Philadelphia):* Supermarket.
- *Model Theatre (425 South Street, Philadelphia):* Shoe store.
- *Northeastern Theatre (6031-6039 Torresdale Avenue, Philadelphia):* Mechanic shop.
- *Rialto Theatre (6153 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia):* Church.
- *Sedgwick Theatre (7133-7141 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia):* Artist workshop

(auditorium), rental community space (lobbies), and housing (upper floor).

- *Suburban Theatre (St. James Place and Montgomery Avenue, Ardmore):* American Eagle Outfitters

Potentially Operational Theatres

This thesis defines potentially operational theatres as the remaining theatres that have the potential to operate under a cinematic/theatrical venue. These theatres differ from converted theatres for two primary reasons. First, they remained vacant since their last operation as neighborhood theatres. Thus, subsequent owners have not modified the interior and exterior historic fabric of these theatres. Second, they are located near or within central business districts that are amenable to the rehabilitation of an historic theatre. The two following theatres meet both of the two aforementioned criteria (**Figures 39-44**):

- *Royal Theatre (1524-1534 South Street, Philadelphia):* Vacant theatre located near the Avenue of Arts, Philadelphia's downtown performing arts district.
- *Lansdowne Theatre (29-33 N. Lansdowne Avenue, Lansdowne):* Semi-vacant theatre/emerging nonprofit performing arts center located within Lansdowne's central business district.

Conclusion

The approximately twenty-four remaining neighborhood theatres associated with William Harold Lee represent a broad sample of historic theatres in different stages of use and condition within Pennsylvania's Philadelphia-metropolitan region. Based on these twenty-four remaining theatres, the author will conduct three thematic case studies of operational, converted, and potentially operational theatres to determine the most effective strategies for the preservation and adaptive reuse of the neighborhood theatre. In particular, Chapter Four

discusses the factors contributing to the preservation and adaptive reuse of the five currently operational neighborhood theatres. Chapter Five, conversely, takes a closer look at the seventeen converted theatres to determine whether there are preferable ways for preserving and adaptively reusing neighborhood theatres that otherwise lack a functional market for cinematic/theatrical exhibition. Chapter Six concludes the case studies by evaluating the future viability of the Lansdowne Theatre—one of the two potentially operational theatres.

CHAPTER 4: OPERATIONAL THEATRES

Introduction

This chapter documents the factors leading to the preservation and adaptive reuse of William Harold Lee's five operational theatres in Pennsylvania's Philadelphia-metropolitan region. Rather than discussing each theatre in isolation, the author has grouped the five operational theatres into two sections—the Main Line Suburbs and Philadelphia County—in recognition of the political, geographic, and economic variables underlying rehabilitation decisions. Within each section, the author provides a brief introduction to the area of analysis, outlines the pertinent stages of theatre acquisition and redevelopment, and concludes by discussing how each theatre adapted to contemporary development pressures. Information used to document the renovation of each theatre primarily derives from county property data, archived news sources, site visits, theatre folios from the Radnor Historical Society, the Philadelphia Historical Commission, and the Old York Road Historical Society; and blog discussions on the *Cinema Treasures* website regarding observed theatre alterations.

The Main Line Suburbs

The Main Line, named after the 19th century Main Line route of the Pennsylvania Railroad, is an informal label for the affluent suburban communities that run north-northwest of Philadelphia along SEPTA's R5 commuter train routes (Paoli-Thorndale and Lansdale-Doylestown).¹³⁰ Before automobile use became prevalent, the Bryn Mawr, Anthony Wayne, Narberth, and Hiway theatres, as well as many other theatres in the region, were built within a five minute walk from the nearest station stop to capitalize on the frequent commuter rail traffic to and

¹³⁰ Sipes, *The Pennsylvania Railroad: Its Origin, Condition, Construction, and Connections*, 77-87.

from the City of Philadelphia. These Main Line theatres are atypical in that they operate in or near areas with household incomes far exceeding that of the average Philadelphia household. For example, the estimated 3-year 2006-2008 American Community Survey mean/median household incomes of Philadelphia County residents are \$50,673/\$36,222, while those of the suburban residents of Lower Merion, Radnor, Abington, and Cheltenham townships are \$192,302/\$116,543, \$148,638/\$85,227, \$98,849/\$77,363, \$98,487/\$75,594 respectively.¹³¹ Additionally, given that cinema patrons historically accessed these suburban theatres via small local roads and commuter rail, these theatres thrived without significant competition for the greater part of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, during the past thirty years, the proliferation of regional shopping malls, multiplexes, and megaplexes eroded the profits of the then single-screen Main Line theatres or contributed to the early departure of major theatre chains, such as AMC and the United Artists Theatre Circuit. The operational Main Line theaters associated with William Harold Lee thus became increasingly vulnerable to conversion as property owners (or the estates of longtime property owners) considered selling off or leasing their theatres to speculative developers and tenants who were more interested in increasing land values, garnering higher rents, and eliminating the expenses associated with renovating aging historic theatres. The author has summarized these trends for each theatre as well as provided commentary on how each theatre adapted to contemporary development pressures in the timelines and the discussion sections that follow.

¹³¹ U.S. Census Bureau, “2006-2008 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates” (accessed March 22, 2010).

Bryn Mawr Theatre Timeline

- **1926:** Owner, Philip Harrison, opens the Bryn Mawr Theatre, then known as the Seville Theatre.¹³²
- **1946:** William Goldman Theatres, a mid-century Philadelphia theatre chain, becomes the tenant of the Bryn Mawr Theatre.¹³³
- **1972:** Budco Theatres acquires the William Goldman theatre chain.¹³⁴
- **1978:** Budco Theatres twins the single auditorium of the Bryn Mawr Theatre.¹³⁵
- **1987:** AMC acquires the Budco theatre chain.¹³⁶
- **1996:** AMC does not renew its lease with the Bryn Mawr Theatre, citing a shifting corporate focus on megaplex theatres.¹³⁷ United Artists subsequently becomes the tenant of the Bryn Mawr Theatre.¹³⁸
- **August 2000:** Facing “slumping profits,” Chapter 11 Bankruptcy, and pressure from investors to pull out of unprofitable neighborhood theatres, United Artists leaves the Bryn Mawr Theatre and the nearby Ardmore Theatre.¹³⁹ Both theatres close.¹⁴⁰ Town Sports International, parent corporation of the Philadelphia Sports Club franchise, immediately seeks a zoning variance to redevelop the Bryn Mawr Theatre.¹⁴¹
- **November 2000:** The Harrison family estate transfers ownership of the Bryn

¹³² *National Register of Historic Places Information System Database*, “Seville Theatre” (accessed April 12, 2010) (hereafter cited as National Register—ST).

¹³³ Cinema Treasures, “Theater Search,” Bryn Mawr Theatre (accessed April 12, 2010) (hereafter cited as Cinema Treasures—BMT).

¹³⁴ Cinema Treasures, “Theater Search,” Anthony Wayne Theatre (accessed April 12, 2010) (hereafter cited as Cinema Treasures—AWT).

¹³⁵ Cinema Treasures—BMT; National Register—ST.

¹³⁶ Cinema Treasures—AWT; Giles, “Classic Stages: Old Theater Gets New Looks” (hereafter cited as Giles—CSOTGNL); Vigoda and Rickey, “Bryn Mawr Theater to Close for a Change” (hereafter cited as Vigoda and Rickey).

¹³⁷ Giles—CSOTGNL; Rozansky, “Art Films Could be on the Marquee” (hereafter cited as Rozansky—AFM); Sama, “Will It be Curtains for Wayne Theater” (hereafter cited as Sama); Vigoda and Rickey.

¹³⁸ Vigoda and Rickey.

¹³⁹ (quote) Blakinger, “Theaters Shut Down in Bryn Mawr” (hereafter cited as Blakinger—TSDB); (quote) “Metropolitan Area News in Brief” (hereafter cited as Metropolitan Area News); Blakinger, “Bryn Mawr Theater’s Flicks May Give Way to Curls and Presses” (hereafter cited as Blakinger—BMTFMGRCP); Kerkstra, “Small Theaters Losing Audiences” (hereafter cited as Kerkstra—STLA); Schogol, “On Main Line, Fitness Business is Bulking Up” (hereafter cited as Schogol—OMLFBBU).

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Blakinger—BMTFMGRCP; Dale, “Fitness, Not Films, On the Marquee Now” (hereafter cited as Dale); Schogol—OMLFBBU.

Mawr Theatre to the Friedman family.¹⁴² The estate of the Friedman family then leases the Bryn Mawr Theatre to Greg Wax, second-generation general manager of the Narberth Theatre.¹⁴³ Stolz Management, owner of the Ardmore Theatre, vacates the remaining tenants.¹⁴⁴

- **January 2001:** Juliet Goodfriend, trustee of Bryn Mawr College, forms the “Bryn Mawr Film Project” nonprofit, later known as the Bryn Mawr Film Institute (BMFI), to gather support and donations to renovate and to operate the Bryn Mawr Theatre.¹⁴⁵
- **April 2001:** The Lower Merion Hearing Board rejects the variance for the Bryn Mawr Theatre, “[...] citing parking problems and incompatibility with the neighborhood.”¹⁴⁶ However, the Lower Merion zoning officials state that the Ardmore Theatre only needs a “simple administrative review” for approval.¹⁴⁷ Bryn Mawr residents, including Commissioner Charles Bloom, publicly talk about converting the Bryn Mawr Theatre into a community arts center.¹⁴⁸
- **March 2002:** The Philadelphia Sports Club formally opens in the Ardmore Theatre.¹⁴⁹
- **May 2004:** The BMFI announces a 25-year lease/purchase option agreement with the Main Line Health Realty, prospective buyer of the Bryn Mawr Theatre.¹⁵⁰
- **July 2004:** The BMFI partnership with the Main Line Health Realty collapses as the estate administrator announces that it intends to renovate the property for further cinematic use and to enter into a long-term lease agreement with Greg Wax of the Narberth Theatre.¹⁵¹

¹⁴² Blakinger—BMTFMGRCP; Montgomery County Property Records, “Parcel Id: 400029780006” (accessed March 17, 2010) (hereafter cited as Montgomery County PR—400029780006); Montgomery County Recorder of Deeds Online Services, “Parcel Id: 400029780006” (accessed March 17, 2010) (hereafter cited as Montgomery County RD—400029780006).

¹⁴³ Blakinger—BMTFMGRCP.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.; Kerkstra, “Bryn Mawr Theater Fails to Work Out for a Gym” (hereafter cited as Kerkstra—BMTFWOG).

¹⁴⁵ (quote) McCaffrey, “Bryn Mawr Theater Gets New Lease on Life” (hereafter cited as McCaffrey—BMTGNLLOL); Carey, “Boomers Building a Better World” (hereafter cited as Carey—BBBW); Janco, “Theater Will Rise Again for True Fans” (hereafter cited as Janco).

¹⁴⁶ (quote) Kerkstra—BMTFWOG; Dale.

¹⁴⁷ Kerkstra—BMTFWOG.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Dale.

¹⁵⁰ McCaffrey, “Bryn Mawr for Sale—or Not” (hereafter cited as McCaffrey—BMS); McCaffrey, “Bryn Mawr Theater Gets Hope—and 25-Year Lease” (hereafter cited as McCaffrey—BMTGH).

¹⁵¹ McCaffrey—BMS; McCaffrey, “Metropolitan: There is No Deal on Bryn Mawr Theater” (hereafter cited

- **October 2004:** The BMFI purchases the Bryn Mawr Theatre outright for \$1,950,000.¹⁵² Juliet Goodfriend announces that the BMFI intends to raise \$4 million to convert the theatre into a film school/art-house cinema with an additional auditorium, modernized facilities, a restored marquee, and preserved historic fabric.¹⁵³
- **December 2004:** The BMFI formally obtains title to the Bryn Mawr Theatre. Greg Wax discontinues first-run cinema operations, and the theatre closes for initial renovations.¹⁵⁴
- **March 2005:** The BMFI opens for second-run art-house exhibition under the new management of John Toner, director of the Ambler Theatre and the County Theatre.¹⁵⁵ Sir Ben Kingsley attends the grand opening.¹⁵⁶
- **November 2005:** The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission lists the Bryn Mawr Theatre on the National Register of Historic Places.¹⁵⁷
- **April 2006:** The BMFI obtains a \$500,000 Pennsylvania “Anchor Building Grant.”¹⁵⁸ Goodfriend announces that “nonprofit operates in the black after only a year in existence” and expects to invest \$9 million into the theatre.¹⁵⁹
- **March 2007:** Milkboy Café, an artist/music café, leases the storefront space of the BMFI.¹⁶⁰
- **September 2008:** Governor Rendell offers a \$2.5 million matching grant.¹⁶¹
- **2009:** BMFI receives the Preservation Alliance of Philadelphia Grand Jury award for the installation of a new marquee and the restoration of the atrium skylight.¹⁶²

as McCaffrey—Metropolitan).

¹⁵² Blanchard, “Art-House Plans for Bryn Mawr” (hereafter cited as Blanchard); McCaffrey—BMTGNLLOL; Montgomery County PR—400029780006; Montgomery County RD—40002978006.

¹⁵³ McCaffrey—BMTGNLLOL.

¹⁵⁴ Allison, “Bryn Mawr Film Institute Now a Reality” (hereafter cited as Allison—BMFINR); Montgomery County PR—400029780006; Montgomery County RD—40002978006.

¹⁵⁵ Boccella, “Success Ahead of Projections”; Rubin, “XPN Fest Goes Where It’s Greener: Camden”; Siteman, “Bryn Mawr Rolls Out the Red Carpet” (accessed 8, March 2010).

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ National Register—ST.

¹⁵⁸ (quote) Price, “Film Institute Gets Grant of \$500,000” (hereafter cited as Price).

¹⁵⁹ (quote) Price; Carey—BBBW.

¹⁶⁰ Cook, “Bryn Mawr Gets a Jolt of Java.”

¹⁶¹ Allison, “Rendell Arrives Bearing Grants” (hereafter cited as Allison—RABG); Raymond, “Bryn Mawr Film Institute a Local Treasure” (hereafter cited as Raymond).

¹⁶² Weilbacher, “Shining Light on Bryn Mawr Film Institute’s Latest Transformation” (hereafter cited as

- **2010:** BMFI, which arguably has the largest enrollment of any art-house nonprofit in the country, plans to construct a third theatre to increase film capacity and to exhibit more experimental films.¹⁶³

Anthony Wayne Theatre Timeline

- **1928:** Owner, Harry Fried, opens the Anthony Wayne Theatre.¹⁶⁴
- **1940:** William Goldman Theatres, a mid-century theatre chain, becomes the tenant of the Anthony Wayne Theatre.¹⁶⁵
- **1972:** Budco Theatres acquires the William Goldman theater chain.¹⁶⁶
- **1983:** The Anthony Wayne Theatre Partnership purchases the Anthony Wayne Theatre from the Girard Trust Company/Trust of Harry Fried.¹⁶⁷ The single-screen auditorium of the Anthony Wayne Theatre is subsequently twinned.¹⁶⁸
- **1987:** AMC acquires the Budco theatre chain.¹⁶⁹
- **1994/1995:** The Anthony Wayne Theatre Partnership announces that the Anthony Wayne Theatre is up for sale at \$1.2 million.¹⁷⁰ Wayne residents start to talk about transforming the Anthony Wayne Theatre into an independent community-based cinema modeled after the nonprofit County Theater in Doylestown, and the “Friends of the Anthony Wayne Theatre” is subsequently formed.¹⁷¹

Weilbacher).

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Blakinger, “A Movie House Comes Back to Life in Wayne” (hereafter cited as Blakinger—MHCLW); Cinema Treasures—AWT; “Harry Fried’s Death Loss to Community,” July 16, 1948, Anthony Wayne Theatre Folio, Radnor Historical Society; Johnson, Lewis, and Leiberman, *Drawn From The Source: The Travel Sketches of Lewis I Kahn*, 6; *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*, “Anthony Wayne Theatre” (accessed March 22, 2010).

¹⁶⁵ Cinema Treasures—AWT.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Delaware County Public Access Inquiry System: Real Estate and Tax Records, “Folio Number: 36010030700” (hereafter cited as Delaware County RETR—36010030700); Delaware County Public Access Inquiry System: Recorder of Deeds, “Folio Number: 36010030700” (hereafter cited as Delaware County RD—36010030700).

¹⁶⁸ Cinema Treasures—AWT.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.; Giles—CSOTGNL; Vigoda and Rickey.

¹⁷⁰ Sama.

¹⁷¹ (quote) Blakinger—MHCLW; Naedele, “It’s Not the Last Picture Show Yet at the Old Movie Houses” (hereafter cited as Naedele—INLPS); *The Marquee*, Winter 1995, Anthony Wayne Theatre Folio, Radnor Historical Society (hereafter cited as Marquee 1995).

- **1996:** AMC does not renew its lease with the Bryn Mawr Theatre, citing a shifting corporate focus on megaplex theatres.¹⁷² Numerous developers offer to purchase the theatre, one of which intends to convert the theatre into a furniture store.¹⁷³ The Friends of the Anthony Wayne Theatre also offers to operate the theatre as a second-run art-house cinema.¹⁷⁴
- **1997:** 100 W Partners, headed by developer Stephen Bajus, purchases the Anthony Wayne Theatre for \$850,000.¹⁷⁵
- **1998:** Clearview Cinemas, a smaller theatre chain eager to enter the market of “community-based theatres in suburban Philadelphia,” enters a 30-year lease with 100 W Partners and invests roughly \$1 million to renovate the interior of the Anthony Wayne Theatre into a five-plex, and to preserve decorative Art Deco detailing and ornament.¹⁷⁶ The Friends of the Anthony Wayne President, Harry Hurst, expresses satisfaction with the patience of the developer to find a suitable tenant as well as with the quality of the renovations.¹⁷⁷
- **March 2010:** No major renovations or transfers of ownership occurred since 1998. The Anthony Wayne Theatre remains as a popular entertainment anchor in the Wayne commercial district.¹⁷⁸

Hiway Theatre Timeline

- **1914:** The Jenkintown Auditorium Company opens “the Auditorium,” the original name of the Hiway Theatre.¹⁷⁹
- **1921:** Hunt’s Theatres, Inc., an east coast cinema conglomerate, purchases and operates the Auditorium.¹⁸⁰
- **1925:** The Glenside Amusement Company purchases and operates the

¹⁷² Rozansky—AFM; Vigoda and Rickey.

¹⁷³ Brennan, “In Promoting Films, Price is Often No Object” (hereafter cited as Brennan); Sama.

¹⁷⁴ Blakinger—MHCLW; Naedele—INLPS.

¹⁷⁵ Blakinger—MHCLW; Delaware County RETR—36010030700; Delaware County RD—36010030700; Naedele—INLPS.

¹⁷⁶ (quote) “Clearview Cinema Group Enters Suburban Philadelphia Market” (hereafter cited as Clearview Cinema Group); Blakinger—MHCLW.

¹⁷⁷ Blakinger—MHCLW.

¹⁷⁸ Schogol, “Wayne Taking Over as a Local Hot Spot” (hereafter cited as Schogol—WTOLHS).

¹⁷⁹ Harper, “Jenkintown’s Hiway Theatre,” *Old York Historical Society Bulletin Volume LX* (2004): 18-19 (hereafter cited as Harper).

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

Auditorium.¹⁸¹ The Auditorium (later renamed the Embassy Theatre) is subsequently renovated by architect William Harold Lee.¹⁸²

- **1936:** “[...] [As] a result of the Depression, the Jenkintown National Bank [forecloses] on Herbert Effinger’s Glenside Amusement Company.”¹⁸³ Theodore Kirmse subsequently assumes control, and the Embassy Theatre (later renamed the York Road Theatre) is renovated by architect William Ellis Groben.¹⁸⁴
- **1940:** Charles and Ruth Kahn purchase the York Road Theatre.¹⁸⁵ The theatre (later renamed the Hiway Theatre) is modernized, and the Stanley-Warner Company assumes daily operations.¹⁸⁶
- **1982:** The nearby Willow Grove Mall on York Road starts to compete with Jenkintown’s Main Street corridor.¹⁸⁷
- **1985:** Irvin Merlin, a banker and real estate investor, purchases the Hiway Theatre for \$170,000.¹⁸⁸
- **1987/1988:** Merlin hires Leonard G. Berwick to restore the theatre’s interior for approximately \$160,000.¹⁸⁹ However, due to construction delays and to negotiations with future tenants over programmatic use, the theatre remains vacant for over a year.¹⁹⁰ Jenkintown residents express concern over the delays, and Jenkintown Main Street Manager, Darrell Painter, as well as other vocal residents, pressure Merlin either to sell or to renovate the theatre.¹⁹¹ Merlin eventually restores the theatre without a committed tenant and then offers to sell the property for \$325,000.¹⁹²

¹⁸¹ Harper, 21-24; *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*, “Hiway Theatre” (accessed March 22, 2010).

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Harper, 24.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 24, 28; PAB—Hiway Theatre.

¹⁸⁵ Harper, 28.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ Prichard, “Revitalizing a Diamond in the Rough” (hereafter cited as Prichard—RDR).

¹⁸⁸ Giles, “Hiway Theater in Jenkintown Put Up for Sale” (hereafter cited as Giles—HTJPS); Montgomery County Property Records, “Parcel Id: 100005288003” (accessed March 17, 2010) (hereafter cited as Montgomery County PR—100005288003); Montgomery County Recorder of Deeds Online Services, “Parcel Id: 100005288003” (accessed March 17, 2010) (hereafter cited as Montgomery County RD—100005288003).

¹⁸⁹ Giles, “At Hiway Theater, Return to Grandeur” (hereafter cited as Giles—HTRG); Giles, “Next Attraction: A Refurbished Hiway Theater” (hereafter cited as Giles—NARHT); Giles—CSOTGNL; Giles, “Residents Urge Show to go on at the Hiway Theater” (hereafter cited as Giles—RUSGHT).

¹⁹⁰ Giles—NARHT; Giles—RUSGHT.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² Giles—HTJPS; Giles—RUSGHT.

Jenkintown residents again worry that the theatre could be redeveloped.¹⁹³

- **1993:** Joseph J. Galanti Jr. purchases the Merlin Theatre for \$100,000.¹⁹⁴
- **1998:** Joseph D. Galanti Sr. purchases the Merlin Theatre for only \$1,379.90 after the theatre goes on sheriff's sale.¹⁹⁵
- **1999:** Chuck's Theatres, Inc., owned by Charles Peruto Jr., purchases the Merlin Theatre (later renamed the Chas III theatre) for \$200,000.¹⁹⁶ Peruto then waits for a suitable developer as he operates the theatre with almost no staff to break even.¹⁹⁷ Residents, with the support of the Jenkintown Borough Council, also establish the Jenkintown Community Alliance (a nonprofit modeled after the Main Street Program) to preserve the borough's historic character and to obtain funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED).¹⁹⁸
- **2002:** Peruto puts the property up for sale.¹⁹⁹ Residents, organized by David Rowland (President of the Jenkintown Business and Professional Association), immediately gather donations and negotiate to acquire the Chas III Theatre.²⁰⁰ Many prominent businessmen as well as Michael Golden (Jenkintown Borough Council Member, founder/Vice President of the Jenkintown Community Alliance, and Chair of the Building & Zoning Committee) join Hiway Theatre, Inc.'s board of directors.²⁰¹
- **April 2003:** The Jenkintown Business & Professional Association expresses support for the restoration.²⁰²
- **November 2003:** Michael Golden publicly connects the rehabilitation of the Chas III Theatre to the revitalization of the Jenkintown Main Street corridor the same day that Hiway Theatre, Inc. purchases the Merlin

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Montgomery County PR—100005288003; Montgomery County RD—100005288003.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Hiway Theatre, Inc.: A Community Theatre Plan, March 4, 2003, Hiway Theatre Folio, Old York Road Historical Society (hereafter cited as Hiway Theatre, Inc.: A Community Theatre Plan).

¹⁹⁸ Jeffery, "Jenkintown Alliance May Win PA. Grant" (accessed April 7, 2010) (hereafter cited as Jeffery); Jenkintown Community Alliance (JCA), "About Jenkintown Community Alliance" (accessed April 6, 2010) (hereafter cited as JCA).

¹⁹⁹ Cascerceri, "Film Lovers Come to Rescue of Movie Theater."

²⁰⁰ David B. Rowland Letter to Brian N. O'Leary, April 4, 2003, Hiway Theatre Folio, Old York Road Historical Society (hereafter cited as Rowland Letter); Gammage, "Gem Survive Changes" (hereafter cited as Gammage—GSC); Gammage, "Hiway on 611, Revisited" (hereafter cited as Gammage—H611); JCA.

²⁰¹ Hiway Theatre, Inc.: A Community Theatre Plan; Jeffery.

²⁰² Rowland Letter.

Theatre for \$415,000.²⁰³ Hiway Theatre, Inc. operates the theatre (again renamed the Hiway Theatre) as an art-house cinema.²⁰⁴

- **October 2004:** Pennsylvania Governor, Ed Rendell, pledges an \$810,000 matching grant from the state’s Redevelopment Assistance Program to Hiway Theatre, Inc. after months of lobbying by State Representatives Larry Curry, and Allyson Schwartz.²⁰⁵ Rendell also later offers a \$250,000 “Anchor Building Grant.”²⁰⁶
- **August 2006:** The Hiway Theatre closes down for a \$1.6 million renovation.²⁰⁷
- **February 2007:** The Hiway Theatre opens with “[new] auditorium seating, floor, and finishes; new projection, ticketing & sound systems, ADA seating, restroom & hearing devices; new concession and hearing area; expanded new lobby with new finishes, [and a] refurbished building façade & roof.”²⁰⁸ The theatre remains as a single-screen cinema.
- **March 2010:** The Hiway Theatre nonprofit plans to restore the façade back to its mid-century appearance by adding a vertical Art Deco fin above the extant marquee.²⁰⁹

Narberth Theatre Timeline

- **1927:** Owners Salasin and Freed open the Narberth Theatre.²¹⁰
- **1939:** Frankland Enterprises, Inc. purchases and operates the Narberth Theatre.²¹¹

²⁰³ Montgomery County PR—100005288003; Montgomery County RD—100005288003; Prichard, “Group Projects Big Things for Old Jenkintown Theater” (hereafter cited as Prichard—GPBTOJT).

²⁰⁴ Hiway Theatre, Inc.: A Community Theatre Plan.

²⁰⁵ *The Screenwriter*, Fall Edition 2004, Hiway Theatre Folio, Old York Road Historical Society (hereafter cited as Screenwriter—Fall Edition 2004); “Work Set to Begin at Historic Montgomery County Theater” (hereafter cited as Work Set to Begin).

²⁰⁶ Work Set to Begin.

²⁰⁷ Gammage—H611.

²⁰⁸ *The Screenwriter*, Spring Edition 2007, Hiway Theatre Folio, Old York Road Historical Society (hereafter cited as Screenwriter Spring 2007).

²⁰⁹ Gammage—H611; Hiway Theatre Staff, face-to-face conversation with author, March 20, 2010.

²¹⁰ Cinema Treasures, “Theater Search,” Narberth Theatre (accessed March 7, 2010) (hereafter cited as Cinema Treasures—NT).

²¹¹ *Ibid.*; Montgomery County Property Records, “Parcel Id: 120002734008” (accessed March 17, 2010) (hereafter cited as Montgomery County PR—120002734008); Montgomery County Recorder of Deeds Online Services, “Parcel Id: 120002734008 (accessed March 17, 2010) (hereafter cited as Montgomery County RD— 120002734008).

- **1972:** David and Barbara Wax purchase the Narberth Theatre for \$80,000.²¹²
- **1998:** David Wax dies.²¹³
- **2001:** Barbara Wax dies.²¹⁴
- **2004:** Narberth Theatre Investors, LLC purchases the Narberth Theatre for \$725,000.²¹⁵ The new owner leases the Narberth Theatre to Greg Wax.²¹⁶ The Narberth Theatre is subsequently renovated with stadium seating and twinned for first run films.²¹⁷ *Philadelphia Weekly* considers the Narberth Theatre renovations the “worst remodeling job” in the region.²¹⁸
- **March 2010:** No major renovations or transfers of ownership occurred since 2004. The Narberth Theatre remains as a popular entertainment anchor in the Narberth commercial district.

Discussion

As suggested by the chronologies, there are two recurring patterns among the four operational Main Line theatres associated with William Harold Lee, and the recently converted Ardmore Theatre, which he did not design. First, these theatres were vulnerable to interior alterations and to conversion during transfers of ownership and changes in tenancy. Second, the most substantial renovations, as well as the transitions to nonprofits, occurred between 1995 and 2004, roughly the same period when regional 10+ screen theatres such as the AMC Marple 10 (1990), the Plymouth Meeting 12 (1998), the AMC Neshaminy 24 (1998), and the United Artists King of Prussia Stadium 16 (2001) became firmly entrenched in the suburban exhibition market.²¹⁹ Consider the following examples:

²¹² Montgomery County PR—120002734008 ; Montgomery County RD— 120002734008.

²¹³ Klimkiewicz, “Barbara Wax, Theater Owner.”

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ Montgomery County PR—120002734008; Montgomery County RD—120002734008.

²¹⁶ CT—Narberth Theatre.

²¹⁷ McElhinney and others, “Suburban Legend: A Guide to Moviegoing Outside the City” (hereafter cited as McElhinney).

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ Cinema Treasures, “Theater Search,” AMC Marple 10 & UA King of Prussia Stadium 16 and IMAX, (accessed March 22, 2010); Klein, “Coming Attractions: 5 New Theaters, 62 Screens” (hereafter cited as

- The Bryn Mawr Theatre operated as a single-screen theatre for fifty-two years, until it was twinned six years after Budco's 1972 takeover of William Goldman Theatres.²²⁰ Then in 2000, when the bankrupt United Artists Theatre Circuit pulled out of the Bryn Mawr Theatre and the Ardmore Theatre during the same week in an attempt "to trim weaker operations," Town Sports International immediately negotiated to convert both theatres into sports clubs.²²¹ Shortly thereafter, the Ardmore Theatre was converted into a Philadelphia Sports Club in 2002, and the Bryn Mawr Theatre was purchased by the Bryn Mawr Film Institute in 2004 and later renovated into a film institute/art-house cinema.²²²

- The Anthony Wayne Theatre operated as a single-screen theatre for fifty-five years, until the Anthony Wayne Theatre Partnership purchased and twinned the theatre in 1983.²²³ Then in 1995, the Anthony Wayne theatre faced possible conversion when AMC did not renew its lease, citing a shifting corporate focus on megaplex theatres.²²⁴ 100 W Partners eventually purchased the Anthony Wayne Theatre in 1997, and Clearview Cinemas converted the interior into a five-plex the following year.²²⁵

- The Narberth Theatre operated as a relatively intact single-screen theatre for seventy-seven years prior to its purchase and immediate conversion into a modern twin by Narberth Theatre Investors, LLC in 2004.²²⁶

Klein); Rozansky—AFM.

²²⁰ Cinema Treasures—AWT; Cinema Treasures—BMT.

²²¹ (quote) Blakinger—TSDB; Blakinger—BMTFMGRCP; Dale; Kerkstra—STLA; Metropolitan Area News; Schogol—OMLFBBU.

²²² Allison—Bryn Mawr; Dale; Montgomery County PR—4000297800060; Montgomery County RD—4000297800060.

²²³ Cinema Treasures—AWT; Delaware County RETR—36010030700; Delaware County RD—36010030700.

²²⁴ Rozansky—AFM; Vigoda and Rickey.

²²⁵ Blakinger—Movie House; Clearview Cinema Group; Delaware County RETR—36010030700; Delaware County RD—36010030700.

²²⁶ CT—Narberth Theatre; McElhinney; Montgomery County PR—120002734008; Montgomery County RD—120002734008.

- The Hiway Theatre still operates as a single-screen theatre, even though it was renovated by many owners throughout the century. However, between 1985 and 2003, the theatre changed ownership five different times after forty-five years of continuous ownership under Hiway Theatre, Inc.²²⁷ These repeated changes in ownership mobilized the Jenkintown community to preserve the Hiway Theatre as an independent nonprofit theatre in 2003.²²⁸

Despite the unpredictability and apparent inevitability of events such as the death of a longtime theatre owner, the untimely exit of a lease, the bankruptcy/takeover of a national theatre chain, the competition from a regional mall/multiplex/megaplex, or the legal sale of a property, the author noticed that Main Line residents repeatedly demonstrated their ability to influence if not shape how their neighborhood theatres were redeveloped, through direct or indirect interventions. In particular, direct interventions are the scenarios in which community nonprofits purchase and operate their respective neighborhood theatres, such as in the case with the Bryn Mawr Film Institute. Conversely, indirect interventions are the scenarios in which community interest groups and nonprofits prevent a theatre from being redeveloped into an alternative use without becoming property owners or tenants, such as the case with the Anthony Wayne Theatre. Finally, the continued operation of the Hiway Theatre was rather a result of both indirect and direct interventions, while that of the Narberth Theatre did not result from any known community pressure.

Bryn Mawr Film Institute

A) Events Leading to Continued Use

There are five primary reasons why the Bryn Mawr Theatre was directly

²²⁷ Montgomery County PR—100005288003; Montgomery County RD— 100005288003.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*; Hiway Theatre, Inc.: A Community Theatre Plan.

preserved as a community nonprofit: the viable threat of an aggressive corporation, restrictive zoning, concerted advocacy, compatible governmental priorities, and luck. In particular, Town Sports International knew that there were not enough gym facilities to support the affluent Main Line market, so the corporation actively pursued the Ardmore and Bryn Mawr theatres after the abrupt departure of the United Artists Theatre Circuit.²²⁹ However, the Bryn Mawr Theatre site was not zoned for high occupancy uses, making it impossible to convert the theatre into a two-story gym without a zoning variance and public scrutiny.²³⁰ This provided Juliet Goodfriend, owner of a marketing firm and an influential trustee of Bryn Mawr College, enough time to use her institutional contacts to leverage considerable public and charitable support by connecting the rehabilitation of the Bryn Mawr Theatre with governmental as well as institutional priorities to transform Lancaster Avenue into a competitive and vibrant Main Street corridor.²³¹ As a result, the nonprofit created partnerships with many nearby colleges, schools, and religious organizations, and it later obtained a \$500,000 Pennsylvania Anchor Building Grant, a \$90,000 Keystone Historic Preservation Grant, and a \$2.5 million matching grant from Governor Ed Rendell.²³² Luck probably also played a role in that the Bryn Mawr Theatre property had recently become an asset of an estate, preventing Town Sports International from negotiating a quick sale.²³³

The Bryn Mawr Film Institute thus had sufficient financing, political clout, and time to engage in protracted negotiations with the estate administrators. And even despite the proven ability of Greg Wax — the second-generation general

²²⁹ Blakinger—BMTFMGRCP; Dale; Kerkstra—BMTFWOG; Schogol—OMLFBBU.

²³⁰ Dale; Kerkstra—BMTFWOG.

²³¹ Allison—Bryn Mawr; Blanchard; Carey—BBBW; Janco; McCaffrey—BMTGH; McCaffrey—BMTGNLLOL.

²³² *Ibid.*; Allison—RABG; Bryn Mawr Film Institute, “About Bryn Mawr Film Institute” (accessed March 21, 2010) (hereafter cited as BMFI); Price; Raymond.

²³³ Blakinger—BMTFMGRCP; Kerkstra—BMTFWOG; Montgomery County PR—4000297800060; Montgomery County RD—400029780060; Schogol—OMLFBBU.

manager of the Narberth Theatre—to operate the Bryn Mawr Theatre as a profitable first-run movie theatre during these uncertain years, the Bryn Mawr Film Institute raised enough money to purchase the theatre outright.²³⁴ Conversely, the Ardmore Theatre was not so fortunate, even though it was a more aesthetically striking building, because Town Sports International could legally convert the interior into a gym without a zoning variance.²³⁵ Given that Town Sports International approached the theatre owner far in advance of the sale, newspapers were only able to report about the intended conversion when the corporation was essentially guaranteed a building permit.²³⁶

B) *Current State of Preservation* (Figures 3-4)

Among William Harold Lee’s operational theatres, the Bryn Mawr Theatre has been the most effectively preserved. In particular, although the theatre has been modified numerous times throughout the century, most of its historic elements are still intact, such as the original terrazzo flooring, ticket booth, façade, vaulted atrium skylight, lobby ceiling, and auditorium walls/ceiling—though the latter is both in poor condition due to ongoing roof leaks and mostly hidden from view behind wall fabric and red ceiling panels.²³⁷ Notable renovations that occurred during the first six years of the BMFI’s tenure include the unearthing and restoration of the atrium skylight, which was previously compartmentalized by an acoustic tile drop-ceiling; the installation of a compatible replica of the 1926 marquee; the introduction of second floor classroom/office space and a new café; and the modernization of the HVAC, electrical, and film/sound systems.²³⁸ These

²³⁴ Blanchard; McCaffrey—Metropolitan.

²³⁵ Kerkstra—BMTFWOG.

²³⁶ Dale.

²³⁷ National Register—ST.

²³⁸ Allison—RABG; Consult Mallowe, “Hollywood Comes to Lancaster Pike” (accessed March 21, 2010); National Register—ST; Weilbacher.

renovations, which cost over \$4 million, earned the BMFI the 2009 Grand Jury Award from the Preservation Alliance of Philadelphia.²³⁹

Additional renovations are forthcoming, as the BMFI intends to construct a third theatre on the vacant land behind the twinned auditorium to increase seating capacity and to exhibit more experimental films. When this third theatre is complete, the BMFI then plans to alternate the closure of the twinned auditorium so that architects can restore the two screening rooms, upgrade the 70s era seating, and possibly conserve the decorative plaster walls/beamed ceilings. However, there are rumors that the BMFI may not be able to acquire one of the necessary parcels—a subdivided grass lot—from Main Line Health Realty.²⁴⁰ If such a scenario does occur, the BMFI may instead reconfigure the extant auditorium into a modern tri-plex.

C) *The Impact of Preservation Ordinances on Current State of Preservation*

Historic preservation ordinances did not protect the interiors of the Bryn Mawr Theatre or the nearby Ardmore Theatre. Historic preservation ordinances did, however, mandate that the façades of the both theatres conformed to the *Secretary of Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*.²⁴¹ More specifically, on 15 March 2000, the Lower Merion Board of Commissioners adopted Ordinance No. 3560, otherwise known as the Historic Resource Overlay District, to regulate properties that fell into two categories:²⁴²

- Class I) National Historic Landmarks, National Register of Historic Places, “certified historic structures” by the Secretary of Interior, “contributing resources”

²³⁹ Weilbacher.

²⁴⁰ Montgomery County Property Records, “Parcel Id: 400009964004” (accessed April 12, 2010) (hereafter cited as Montgomery County PR—400009964004).

²⁴¹ Lower Merion Township, “Township of Lower Merion Municipal eCode 360 Online” (accessed March 22, 2010) (hereafter cited as Lower Merion Code).

²⁴² Lower Merion Code.

in any National Register Historic District, or “contributing resources” in any local historic district certified by the PHMC.²⁴³

- Class II) Historic resources individually listed in the Lower Merion Township Historic Resource Inventory or “contributing resources” in an historic neighborhood with a “Determination of Eligibility from the PHMC.”²⁴⁴

The Bryn Mawr Theatre, a Class II historic resource, was individually listed in the Lower Merion Township Historic Resource Inventory.²⁴⁵ The Ardmore Theatre, a Class I historic resource, was a “contributing resource” in the Ardmore Business District, a PHMC certified historic district.²⁴⁶ Both classifications have comparable levels of protection. The common outcome of these classifications is that both theatres currently have intact façades. However, the interior of the Ardmore Theatre was gutted and converted into a gym, while that of the Bryn Mawr Theatre was preserved for education/art-house cinema. One can thus conclude that other factors, unrelated to historic ordinances, contributed to the preservation of the historic fabric *within* the Bryn Mawr Theatre. These other factors were commercial use requirements, and most importantly, the BMFI’s organizational objectives.

The author has previously mentioned the impact of commercial use requirements on the continued cinematic use of the Bryn Mawr Theatre, as the Lower Merion Hearing Board rejected Philadelphia Sports Club’s petition for a variance, “[...] citing parking problems and incompatibility with the neighborhood.”²⁴⁷ Such a rejection prevented the Philadelphia Sports Club from converting the Bryn Mawr Theatre into a two-story gym. But why did the BMFI decide to preserve the interior of the theatre? The answer is that it was the founding mission of the

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Kerkstra—BMTFWOG.

BMFI to preserve the theatre's architecture, as well as to promote independent cinema. This is why, within the first year of operations for the nonprofit, the BMFI hired Voith & Mctavish Architects, LLP to nominate the Bryn Mawr Theatre to the National Register of Historic Places and to develop a "three-phased restoration and modernization strategy."²⁴⁸ In this respect, the decision to preserve the interior of the Bryn Mawr Theatre ultimately made economic sense as 1) the Nationally Registered property became eligible for numerous state grants, and 2) Juliet Goodfriend, herself an accomplished marketing executive, was able to elicit local donations and media coverage to support a concrete, measurable, and incremental vision for the Bryn Mawr Theatre.

Anthony Wayne Theatre

A) Events Leading to Continued Use

Concerning the indirect preservation of the Anthony Wayne Theatre, the Friends of the Anthony Wayne Theatre ended up influencing the type of owner and tenant, as opposed to directly purchasing and operating the theatre themselves.²⁴⁹ But why did the theatre fail to become a community center? The author believes there are five reasons. First, unlike the widely publicized attempt by the Philadelphia Sports Club to transform the Bryn Mawr Theatre into a gym facility, the proposals to convert the Anthony Wayne Theatre into alternative uses were not sufficiently imminent to engender a sustained fundraising campaign. Second, the Wayne central business district was already a vibrant commercial corridor with numerous restaurants, bars, and cafes.²⁵⁰ Thus, it would have been difficult to market the preservation of the Anthony Wayne Theatre as a downtown

²⁴⁸ BMFI; National Register—ST.

²⁴⁹ Blakinger—MHCLW; Naedele—INLPS.

²⁵⁰ Schogol—WTOLHS; Tarlecki, "Slice of Suburbia: Wayne" (accessed March 8, 2010).

revitalization strategy worthy of governmental support. Third, prospective developers would have faced opposition from restaurant, cafe, and bar owners if there were any drastic changes in use, since the Anthony Wayne Theatre was an iconic anchor for evening traffic.²⁵¹ Fourth, the Anthony Wayne Theatre had a favorable market for cinematic exhibition. In particular, AMC recorded “its best year in five years” during the final year of its lease with the Anthony Wayne Theatre (the theatre chain only moved because its corporate mission prioritized 20+ screen megaplex theatres).²⁵² The future owner could therefore rely on the theatre’s established revenue stream. Fifth, related to the fourth reason, there was enough developable space to convert the two-screen Anthony Wayne Theatre into an even more competitive and profitable five-plex.²⁵³

The Friends of the Anthony Wayne Theatre thus did not really need to purchase and to operate the Anthony Wayne Theatre. They instead generated enough public support to influence the sale of the theatre to a sympathetic developer. Stephen Bajus proved to be the ideal candidate, according to Harry Hurst, former president of the Friends of the Anthony Wayne Theatre, because the developer was “[willing to put up the money and wait for the appropriate tenant].”²⁵⁴ This tenant turned out to be Clearview Cinemas, a smaller theatre chain eager to enter the market of “community-based theatres in suburban Philadelphia” and willing to invest \$1 million for interior renovations—\$150,000 more than the 1997 purchase price of the theatre.²⁵⁵

²⁵¹ Marquee 1995.

²⁵² Vigoda and Rickey.

²⁵³ Blakinger—MHCLW.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ (quote) Clearview Cinema Group; Blakinger—MHCLW; Delaware County RETR—36010030700; Delaware County RD—36010030700.

B) *Current State of Preservation* (Figures 1-2)

Except for a different marquee and a missing ticket booth, the iconic façade of the Anthony Wayne Theatre is in exemplary condition and has not been significantly altered from its original appearance. Regarding the interior, Clearview Cinemas modernized HVAC, electrical, fire protection, and film/sound systems; painted all the interior walls in shades of red and yellow, emblematic of the Clearview brand; added new carpeting, bathrooms, stadium seating, drywall, a modern concession stand, fixed-48 inch advertisement cases, and retro lighting; unearthed and restored the plaster ceilings, as well as some of the walls, within the entrance hallway and the concession lobby; crammed in two more auditoriums into what should really be a one or two screen theatre; and covered over the ornament in the auditoriums with battened wall fabric and drop-ceilings.²⁵⁶ The combined exterior/interior atmosphere of the Anthony Wayne Theatre is thus roughly equivalent to Plato's Cave analogy in *The Republic*, but in reverse—everything is authentic on the outside, only to become more and more ersatz as one proceeds from the restored hallway to the modern concession area with an ornamental plaster ceiling to finally the generic, compartmentalized auditoriums. But criticisms aside, Clearview Cinemas has been a better tenant than most (namely, AMC, Budco, and United Artists), as it spent the time, money, and effort to unearth the ornamental plaster ceilings that were long buried beneath decades of incompatible renovations. The author just would have preferred if Clearview Cinemas had better distinguished between what was original and what was restored.

²⁵⁶ Blakinger—MHCLW; Clearview Cinema Group.

C) *The Impact of Preservation Ordinances on Current State of Preservation*²⁵⁷

The Anthony Wayne Theatre is not located within any of Radnor Township's three protected historic districts. However, the Radnor Township Board of Commissioners adopted Ordinance No. 2007-27 on 16 July 2007 to create the Wayne Business Overlay District—an area that does include the Anthony Wayne Theatre. Property owners within this overlay have to adhere to strict mixed-use zoning requirements that mandate ground floor retail and second story office or residential space for redeveloped buildings. The ground retail uses are limited to the following:

Department store, variety store, clothing shop, bakery, ice cream shop, specialty shop, or similar use providing sales or services to customers; personal service shop, including a barber shop, beautician, shoe or watch repair, clothes cleaning and pressing pickup agency, pickup and dropoff dry-cleaning, but not including a laundry establishment; restaurant or catering establishment, including outdoor dining; bank or similar financial institution; indoor amusement arcade when accessory to retail use.

These alternative ground floor retail uses are so restrictive that, combined with the already favorable market for cinematic exhibition in Wayne's CBD, the Anthony Wayne Theatre would most likely remain as a neighborhood theatre if the property were ever to change hands.

Hiway Theatre

A) *Events Leading to Continued Use*

The Hiway theatre is an example of indirect and direct community pressure because residents first attempted to find an appropriate private developer, but later decided to take over the theatre themselves after the property had exchanged

²⁵⁷ (citation applies to whole section) Radnor Township, "Township of Radnor Municipal eCode 360 Online" (accessed March 22, 2010).

ownership four times between 1985 and 1999.²⁵⁸ In comparison, from 1914 to 1984, the Hiway Theatre had only five owners.²⁵⁹ Why did the Hiway Theatre go through so many owners? One explanation mentioned in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* was that the nearby Willow Grove Mall cannibalized most of the retail traffic headed for the Jenkintown commercial corridor.²⁶⁰ Another explanation offered by Irvin Merlin, who purchased the Hiway Theatre in 1985, was that the previous owners left the theatre in such a state of disrepair that it would require what he estimated to be \$160,000 of interior renovations to become presentable.²⁶¹ This figure turned out to be a gross underestimate. Construction delays and negotiations with prospective exhibitors sowed concerns over the fate of the vacant theatre; and the Main Street manager of Jenkintown, Darrell Painter, advised Merlin either to sell the property or to complete the renovations as soon as possible.²⁶² Merlin eventually renovated the theatre, but financial problems forced him to sell the property to Joseph J. Galanti Jr. for only \$100,000, \$70,000 below the 1985 purchase price.²⁶³ Thereafter in 1998, the property was auctioned off at a sheriff's sale to Joseph D. Galanti Sr. for only \$1,379.90.²⁶⁴ Joseph D. Galanti Sr. then flipped the property to Charles Peruto Jr. for \$200,000 one year later in 1999.²⁶⁵

Residents by this time concluded that commercial owners could not operate the single-screen theatre for a profit.²⁶⁶ Thus, when Peruto mentioned selling the property in 2002, David Rowland, President of the Jenkintown Business and Professional Association, was able to organize an already active body of local

²⁵⁸ Montgomery County PR—100005288003; Montgomery County RD—100005288003.

²⁵⁹ Harper, 17-30.

²⁶⁰ Prichard—RDR.

²⁶¹ Giles—CSOTGNL; Giles—HTRG; Giles—NARHT; Giles—RUSGHT.

²⁶² Giles—NARHT; Giles—RUSGHT.

²⁶³ Montgomery County PR—100005288003; Montgomery County RD—100005288003; Giles—HTJPS; Giles—RUSGHT.

²⁶⁴ Montgomery County PR—100005288003; Montgomery County RD—100005288003.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ Hiway Theatre, Inc.: A Community Theatre Plan; Prichard—GPBTOJT.

residents, merchants, theatre activists, and prominent businessmen into the Hiway Theatre nonprofit.²⁶⁷ Compatible governmental/nonprofit priorities then played a critical role in the transformation of the Hiway Theatre in that the Jenkintown Borough Council and the Jenkintown Community Alliance (an incipient community development nonprofit applying to the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development for recognition as a state sponsored Main Street Program) were jointly seeking ways to revitalize Jenkintown's flagging Main Street corridor during the time the property went up for sale.²⁶⁸ Consequently, since Michael Golden, Jenkintown Borough Council Member, Chair of the Building & Zoning Committee, and founder/Vice President of the Jenkintown Community Alliance joined the nonprofit's board of directors, the Hiway Theatre nonprofit was in a favorable position to lobby for governmental funding and support.²⁶⁹

Peruto thus ended up selling the Chas III Theatre to the Hiway Theatre nonprofit for \$415,000, while Goldman and the Jenkintown Community Alliance publicly branded the Hiway Theatre as a necessary anchor institution for the redevelopment of Jenkintown's Main Street corridor.²⁷⁰ To cover the costs of purchase and initial operations, the Hiway Theatre nonprofit obtained a \$75,000 grant from the Jenkintown Borough and took out two short-term loans from Peruto (\$62,800), and Republic First Bank (\$375,000), respectively.²⁷¹ However, State Representatives Larry Curry and Allyson Schwartz, soon became involved, and Governor Ed Rendell later provided an \$810,000 matching grant from the state's Redevelopment Assistance Program and a \$250,000 "Anchor Building

²⁶⁷ Ibid.; Gammage—H611; Gammage—GSC; JCA; Jeffery; Prichard—GPBTOJT.

²⁶⁸ JCA; Jeffery; Prichard—RDR.

²⁶⁹ Giles—NARHT; Hiway Theatre, Inc.: A Community Theatre Plan; Jeffery.

²⁷⁰ Hiway Theatre, Inc.: A Community Theatre Plan; JCA; Montgomery County PR—100005288003; Montgomery County RD—100005288003; Prichard—GPBTOJT.

²⁷¹ Montgomery County PR—100005288003; Montgomery County RD—100005288003; Prichard—GPBTOJT.

Grant” after the Jenkintown Community Alliance became a state-sponsored Main Street Program recognized by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development.²⁷² Through these considerable public subsidies, the Hiway Theatre nonprofit was able to consolidate/refinance its acquisition debt into a \$437,000 low-interest long-term loan, to implement a \$1.6 million renovation project between 2006 and 2007, and to retain the original single-screen function of the theatre.²⁷³ In this respect, it is important to stress that nonprofits often require substantial governmental subsidies to finance initial renovation and acquisition expenses, especially if their theatres had previously closed or faced conversion due to a weak exhibition market.

For example, the nearby Keswick Theatre, which functioned as a widescreen cinemascope between 1955 and 1980, actually went bankrupt in 1985 under the nonprofit stewardship of the Glenside Landmarks Society.²⁷⁴ Five major factors led to this outcome: 1) the obsolescent theatre required substantial renovation expenditures; 2) the nonprofit did not obtain considerable governmental subsidies as in the case with the Bryn Mawr Film Institute and the Hiway Theatre; 3) arguably, “the [nonprofit’s] board of directors didn’t raise money”; 4) the nonprofit speculatively transformed the poorly performing cinemascope into an untested performing arts venue; 5) there were “rancorous” internal disputes among the nonprofit’s board members and managerial staff over the vision and strategic

²⁷² Harper, 31-44; Screenwriter—Fall Edition 2004; Work Set to Begin.

²⁷³ Harper, 31-44; Hiway Theatre Folio, Old York Road Historical Society; Nonprofit Finance Fund, February 2, 2005, Hiway Theatre Folio, Old York Road Historical Society; Work Set to Begin.

²⁷⁴ Giles, “A Facelift Will Put Keswick in the Spotlight Once Again” (hereafter cited as Giles—FKSOA); Giles—CSOTGNL; Harper, 31-44; Keswick Theatre, “History & Preservation” (hereafter cited as Keswick Theatre); Montgomery County Property Records, “Parcel Id: 300036080007” (accessed April 12, 2010) (hereafter cited as Montgomery County PR—300036080007); Montgomery County Recorder of Deeds Online Services, “Parcel Id: 300036080007” (accessed April 12, 2010) (hereafter cited as Montgomery County RD—300036080007); Rosenberg, “On Comeback Trail Prizefight to Herald Return of Keswick Theater” (hereafter cited as Rosenberg—CTPHRKT); Rozansky, “Revived Keswick Theater Going Strong Once Again” (hereafter cited as Rozansky—RKTGSOA); Wiegand, “‘Lady Keswick,’: New Life or a Final Curtain” (hereafter cited as Wiegand).

direction of the theater.²⁷⁵ The inexperienced/poorly managed nonprofit was therefore too dependent on a few monthly concerts and stage performances to cover its expenses, and the Cheltenham Bank, the mortgager, eventually repossessed the property at a sheriff's sale.²⁷⁶ Ironically, however, these very mistakes led to the stable operation of the theatre: two of the former nonprofit board members in conjunction with outside investors purchased the boarded-up performing arts center back from the Cheltenham Bank for \$182,000 in 1987 and subsequently implemented over \$200,000 of initial repairs to ensure that the property was safe for use.²⁷⁷ By concentrating management and oversight under a few owners, by increasing public exposure, and by developing a diversified program of daily shows, conventions, and events, the more experienced private investors were then able to generate enough income to secure a series of capital improvement loans from the Cheltenham Bank and later the First Union National Bank for major renovation projects.²⁷⁸

B) *Current State of Preservation* (Figures 5-6)

The Hiway Theatre had been altered by Irvin Merlin, as well as by numerous other owners, to such an extent that very little of the original interior remained by the time the Hiway Theatre nonprofit purchased the property on November 2003.²⁷⁹ As a consequence, after closing the theatre down for a six-month, \$1.6 million restoration campaign on August 2004, the nonprofit decided

²⁷⁵ (quotes) Wiegand; Giles—CSOTGNL; Giles—FKSOA; Harper, 31-44; Keswick Theatre; Rosenberg, “One Comeback Spawns Another” (hereafter cited as Rosenberg—OCSA); Rosenberg—CTPHRKT.

²⁷⁶ Giles—FKSOA; Harper, 31-44; Keswick Theatre; Montgomery County PR—30003608007; Montgomery County RD—30003608007; Rosenberg—CTPHRKT; Rosenberg—OCSA; Wiegand.

²⁷⁷ Giles—CSOTGNL; Giles—FKSOA; Harper, 31-44; Keswick Theatre; Montgomery County PR—30003608007; Montgomery County RD—30003608007; Rosenberg—CTPHRKT; Rosenberg—OCSA; Rozansky—RKTGSOA; Wiegand.

²⁷⁸ Keswick Theatre; Harper, 31-44; Montgomery County PR—30003608007; Montgomery County RD—30003608007; Wiegand.

²⁷⁹ Giles—HTRG; Harper, 17-30; Hiway Theatre Staff, face-to-face conversation with author, March 20, 2010.

that the only realistic option was to modernize the interior—except for some remaining plasterwork (possibly restored) and two unearthed reliefs—and to retain the relatively intact façade (Merlin only changed the entrance doors and altered the ground floor cladding).²⁸⁰ These renovations consisted of “[...] new auditorium seating, floor, and finishes; new projection, ticketing & sound systems, ADA seating, restroom & hearing devises; new concession and gathering area; expanded, level lobby with new finishes; [and a] refurbished building façade & roof.”²⁸¹ The nonprofit also rebuilt the arches within the auditorium, added an external ADA access ramp, improved the ground floor cladding, retained Merlin’s entrance door replacements, and preserved the original single-screen function of the theatre.²⁸² Regarding future renovations, the nonprofit plans to restore the façade back to its mid-century appearance by adding a vertical Art Deco fin above the extant marquee.²⁸³

C) *The Impact of Preservation Ordinances on Current State of Preservation*²⁸⁴

The Jenkintown Borough does not have a formal preservation ordinance. The commercial zoning prior to tenure of the Hiway Theatre nonprofit also would have done little to prevent speculative developers from changing the use and façade of the theatre. However, as of 15 December 2003, the Borough Council adopted Ordinance No. 2003-1 to create the D-1 Uptown Commercial District—an area within which the Hiway Theatre is located. The ordinance restricts ground floor use to the following: standard retail, theater, restaurant/cafe/food service, bank/financial institution, and professional office. The ordinance also has two

²⁸⁰ Gammage—H611.

²⁸¹ Screenwriter Spring 2007.

²⁸² Gammage—H611.

²⁸³ Gammage—H611; Hiway Theatre Staff, face-to-face conversation with author, March 20, 2010.

²⁸⁴ (citation applies to whole section) Jenkintown Borough, “Borough of Jenkintown eCode 360 Online,” (accessed March 22, 2010).

“special regulations” relevant to historic buildings:

- “Any building constructed or altered within the D-1 Uptown Commercial District shall be designed to integrate architectural features of existing buildings in the district so as to maintain and enhance the character of the district.”

- “No permit for the demolition of any portion of the exterior of a building within the D-1 District shall be issued without the express approval of the Borough Council. Council may deny any such demolition if the subject building is architecturally significant to the Borough [...]”

Taking these mixed-use and quasi historic preservation provisions together, the Hiway Theatre has numerous regulatory protections, making it extremely unlikely that future property owners will ever alter the façade or change the cinematic use of the theatre. But stated again, these protections were not around early enough to have served a role in administratively protecting the Hiway Theatre.

Narberth Theatre

A) Events Leading to Continued Use

The Narberth Theatre never encountered any significant direct or indirect community pressure because Greg Wax, whose family had managed the intact single-screen theatre for thirty-two years, continued cinematic operations after the estate of Barbara Wax sold the theatre to Narberth Theatre Investors, LLC in 2004.²⁸⁵ However, there was a brief period of uncertainty and speculation as to the theatre’s future during the change of ownership.²⁸⁶ Since local zoning prohibited prospective

²⁸⁵ Cinema Treasures—NT; Montgomery County PR—120002734008 ; Montgomery County RD—120002734008.

²⁸⁶ Ilgenfritz, “Narberth Theater Fate Hinges on Sale,” (hereafter cited as Ilgenfritz—NTFHS); Ilgenfritz, “The Last Picture Show in Narberth” (hereafter cited as Ilgenfritz—LPSN).

developers from changing the theatre's use without a variance, residents were confident that they had enough time to become involved if the future owner were to approach zoning authorities.²⁸⁷ Narberth Theatre Investors later obviated this concern by operating the aging theatre as a first-run movie house, and the theatre was subsequently twinned and modernized to increase revenues.²⁸⁸ Only a lone 2006 article by *Philadelphia Weekly* criticized the renovations:

Once one of the few remaining golden age of Hollywood single-screen theaters, the Narberth met a fate worse than the wrecking ball when the owner twinned the house and "improved" the setting but charmlessly destroyed, removed or covered up all the original ornate decoration. Now called the Narberth Stadium 2, the theater gives local residents of the sleepy village of Narberth the awful megaplex experience without the drive.²⁸⁹

But one question still remains: how did the Narberth Theatre manage to survive as a small commercial theatre with only one and later two auditoriums? The answer is again location. Of William Harold Lee's four operational Main Line theatres, the Narberth Theatre, which is sited within an affluent residential main street district at the southwestern edge of Montgomery County, is by far the most insulated from mainstream competition. Local cinema patrons must therefore drive twenty or more minutes down either City Line Avenue or Lancaster Avenue, both congested roads with constant stops for red lights, to watch the latest feature films at the Marple 10 Theatre and the Anthony Wayne Theatre, respectively. The only other nearby competition is the Clearview Cinema's Bala 3—another insulated residential theatre that instead offers a more independent selection of movies. Consequently, the Narberth Theatre and the Bala Theatre share a relative monopoly on local patrons, particularly parents and the elderly, who do not want to drive over forty minutes during an evening to see a first-run movie.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ McElhinney.

B) *Current State of Preservation (Figures 7-9)*

The author agrees with the harsh criticisms levied by the *Philadelphia Weekly* article, as the interior of the Narberth Theatre really does have the atmosphere of a generic megaplex. That is, most of the interior ornament and historic elements were removed, covered over, or disguised by rubber floors, generic carpets, drop ceilings, drywall, stadium seating, incompatible “fast food restaurant” color schemes, and kitsch lighting. Such alterations are unfortunate because, prior to 2004, the Narberth Theatre was one of the most well preserved neighborhood movie houses in the Main Line, if not the Philadelphia-metropolitan region, and the developer could have twinned and modernized the auditorium without compromising seventy-seven years of accumulated history. Moreover, although the exterior masonry of the Narberth Theatre has not been altered, the developer also removed the original ticket booth, walled over four of the entrance doors, and retained the disproportionately thick marquee, which the Wax family previously installed, that partially shields the ornate second story windows from view.²⁹⁰ Fortunately, the thick marquee is reversible, as it is capped over the original, and thus future owners have the potential to partially restore the visual balance of the façade. Future owners may also be able to reverse many of the interior improvements to the auditorium by removing the outer shell of dry walls and drop ceilings—assuming that the developer did not gut the now hidden ornament.

C) *The Impact of Preservation Ordinances on Current State of Preservation*

The Narberth Borough does not have a preservation ordinance, although late 2009, the Borough’s Commissioners began discussing the possible adoption of such a regulatory mechanism.²⁹¹ The Borough instead relies on strict commercial

²⁹⁰ Gallagher, “Independent Theaters Can Take Movie Buffs Back to the Past.”

²⁹¹ Minutes of the Borough of Narberth Council Caucus Meeting, September 14, 2009 (accessed March 22,

zoning controls that force property owners to apply for variances whenever they propose substantial changes of use — .e.g. converting a theatre into a gym facility or an office building.²⁹² However, these zoning controls are now the subject of intense debate as the Borough Council considers a controversial “Station Area Overlay” to maintain the small town, walkable character of the Narberth downtown shopping district.²⁹³ This Station Area District Overlay has even stricter controls in that it prohibits “formula businesses” and relegates non-retail outfits to either the rear entrances or second floors of buildings.²⁹⁴ The “formula business” provision is particularly relevant to the Narberth Theatre because national or regional chains such as AMC, Clearview Cinemas, etc. might not be able to take over the Narberth Theatre if the property were ever sold.²⁹⁵ Consequently, if there were no interested local exhibitors in such a scenario, the theatre could either remain vacant or be converted into another use.²⁹⁶

Philadelphia County

In Philadelphia County, the formal administrative boundary for the City of Philadelphia, William Harold Lee designed or renovated the majority of his neighborhood theatres. However, in sharp contrast to the fate of his Main Line theatres, most of his theatres in Philadelphia have been demolished or irrevocably converted. Although there are numerous reasons for such a citywide extinction of historic theatres, the broader postwar “flight” of urban middle-class residents to suburban enclaves probably had the most significant impact: Philadelphia lost

2010); Minutes of the Borough of Narberth Council Caucus Meeting, October 7, 2009 (accessed March 22, 2010); Narberth Borough, telephone communication, March 19, 2010.

²⁹² Ilgenfritz—LPSN; Ilgenfritz—NTFHS; Narberth Borough Code Online (Unofficial Edition), “Narberth Zoning Code” (accessed March 22, 2010).

²⁹³ Allison, “Narberth Retail District Ordinance Tweaked for Borough Council Vote” (hereafter cited as Allison—NRDOTBCV); Narberth Borough, telephone communication, March 19, 2010.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ Allison—NRDOTBCV.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

an estimated 622,694 residents between 1950 (2,071,605) and 2008 (1,448,911), or 30% of its peak 1950 population.²⁹⁷ Accordingly, many of the city's neighborhoods suffered from economic disinvestment as their core middle-class residents, the staple of the neighborhood theatre, either relocated to the surrounding suburbs, or, if they had sufficient wealth, concentrated within or near the city's central business district.

William Harold Lee's theatres, as well as many other historic theaters within the city, thus faced two inhospitable urban markets: 1) disinvested neighborhoods with higher crimes rates and lower mean/median household incomes, and 2) an isolated and increasingly transient central business district lacking an adequate supply of proximate middle-class households. All of his theatres in the disinvested neighborhood market were demolished or irrevocably converted. The Walnut Street Theater, the only operational theater associated with William Harold Lee in the city, is an example of a theatre surviving in the center business district. How was this lone inner city theatre able to succeed while the others have failed? The following timeline and the discussion section provide commentary on how the Walnut Street Theatre adapted to these contemporary development pressures.

²⁹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, "2006-2008 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates" (accessed March 22, 2010); U.S. Census Bureau, "Age, Marital Status, and Economic Characteristics, By Sex, By Census Tracts: 1950" (accessed March 22, 2010).

Walnut Street Theatre Timeline²⁹⁸

- **1809:** The New Circus, the original name for the Walnut Street Theatre, opens as a venue for equestrian acts.²⁹⁹ “An eighty-foot dome [is] later added, [which remains] on the building until commencement of the remodeling in 1827.”³⁰⁰
- **1811:** “[The New Circus (later renamed the Olympic Theatre) is enlarged, renovated, and retrofitted with a stage for theatrical performances].”³⁰¹
- **1820:** “[The New Circus (later renamed the Walnut Street Theatre) is converted into a legitimate theatre].”³⁰²
- **1822:** “[The] Interior [of the Walnut Street Theatre] is restored to that of a circus, and the name is changed back to the Olympic.”³⁰³
- **1827-1828:** The Olympic Theatre (again renamed the Walnut Street Theatre) is converted into a stage theatre.³⁰⁴ John Haviland is responsible for the interior renovations and for the design of exterior façade.³⁰⁵
- **Circa 1863/1865:** “[...] Edwin Booth and his brother-in-law John S. Clarke, [purchase the Walnut Street Theatre, and carry] out an extensive remodeling program on the interior and the exterior.”³⁰⁶

²⁹⁸ Due to the eventful 200-year history of the Walnut Street Theatre, and to the focus of this thesis on the contemporary redevelopment of the neighborhood theatre, the author limits discussion of the dates and events that occurred prior to William Harold Lee’s 1920 renovations.

²⁹⁹ Harvard and Sylvester, *Images of America: Walnut Street Theatre*, 2 (hereafter cited as Harvard and Sylvester); Glazer, *Philadelphia Theatres, A-Z: A Comprehensive, Descriptive Record of 813 Theatres Constructed Since 1724*, 235 (hereafter cited as Glazer); Weil, “The Exterior Restoration of the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia” (hereafter cited as Weil).

³⁰⁰ Glazer, 235.

³⁰¹ (quote) Frank Brookhouser, “16 Full Decades—And the Walnut Still Gets Applause,” Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Folio (hereafter cited as Brookhouser); Glazer, 235; Weil, 51-64.

³⁰² (quote) Walnut Street Theatre Corporation, “Theatre & History” (accessed March 12, 2010) (hereafter cited as Walnut Street Theatre Corporation); Brookhouser; Glazer, 235.

³⁰³ (quote) Glazer, 235; Brookhouser.

³⁰⁴ Brookhouser; Glazer, 235; Weil, 51-64.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*; *Bulletin of the Philadelphia Old Town Historical Society* 1, no. 2 (October 1971): 27-32, Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Folio (hereafter cited as Bulletin of the Philadelphia Old Town Historical Society).

³⁰⁶ There is disagreement among the available documentation over whether the Booth purchased the theater in 1863 or 1865. Refer to the following sources: (quote) Weil, 51-64; Brookhouser; William B. Collins, “Group Offers to Buy Walnut Street Theater,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, The Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Folio (hereafter cited as Collins—GOBWST); Walnut St. Theatre, Philadelphia Department of Records, Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Folio (hereafter cited as Philadelphia Department of Records); Gerald Weales, “Sesquicentennial:

- **1871:** John S. Clarke purchases the Walnut Street Theatre from Edwin Booth.³⁰⁷
- **1903:** The Walnut Street Theatre is possibly remodeled according to the designs of Willis Hale.³⁰⁸
- **1920:** James P. Beury purchases the Walnut Street Theatre from “[Wilfred Clarke, Adrienne Clarke, and Adelaide Clarke, heirs of John. S. Clarke].”³⁰⁹
- **1920-1921:** Based on the designs of William Harold Lee, the interior is both retrofitted with structural steel and remodeled in the Federal Style, and the façade is “extensively modified.”³¹⁰ Consequently, most of the original designs and previous renovations are removed, covered up, or irrevocably converted.³¹¹
- **1941:** The Shubert Organization, a theatre chain specializing in Broadway performances, purchases the Walnut Street Theatre.³¹²
- **1964:** The Walnut Street Theatre is publically designated as a National Historic Landmark.³¹³ Dorothy Haas, philanthropist and wife of F. Otto Haas (President and Chief Executive Officer of Rohm and Haas Chemical), and Lawrence Shubert, head of the Shubert Organization, attend the inaugural plaque ceremony.³¹⁴
- **1965-1966 season:** The Walnut Street Theatre operates for only 14.5 weeks.³¹⁵

Philadelphia’s Famous Theatre Will Celebrate a Birthday Tomorrow,” *The New York Times*, February 1, 1959, Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Folio (hereafter cited as Weales); Harold J. Weigand, “Phil Klein Plans ‘New’ Old Walnut,” March 3, 1971, Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Folio (hereafter cited as Weigand).

³⁰⁷ Philadelphia Department of Records.

³⁰⁸ Bulletin of the Philadelphia Old Town Historical Society, 26-32; *National Register of Historic Places Information System Database*, “Walnut Street Theatre” (accessed November 4, 2009) (hereafter cited as National Register—WT); Weil, 51-64.

³⁰⁹ (quote) Philadelphia Department of Records; Brookhouser; Weigand; Weil, 51-64.

³¹⁰ Bulletin of the Philadelphia Old Town Historical Society, 27-32; Glazer, 235; Weil, 51-64.

³¹¹ (quote) Weil, 51-64; Brookhouser; Glazer 235; Weales—SPFTCBT.

³¹² Brookhouser; Weales; “Wider Scope Planned for Walnut St. Theater,” *The Evening Bulletin*, June 10, 1969, Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Folio (hereafter cited as Wider Scope Planned for Walnut St. Theater).

³¹³ Harvard and Sylvester, 88.

³¹⁴ Binzen, “Haases are Honored for Good Works” (hereafter cited as Binzen); Harvard and Sylvester, 88; Jaffe and others, “F. Otto Haas, Industrialist, Philanthropist, Dead at 78” (hereafter cited as Jaffe); Watson, “Fritz Otto Haas” (hereafter cited as Watson).

³¹⁵ William B. Collins, “Group Offers to Buy Walnut Street Theater,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*; The Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Folio (hereafter cited as Collins—GOBWT).

- **1966-1967 season:** The Walnut Street Theatre operates for only 7.5 weeks.³¹⁶ The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission also lists the Walnut Street Theatre on the National Register of Historic Places.³¹⁷
- **1967-1968 season:** The Walnut Street Theatre operates for only 16 weeks.³¹⁸
- **Circa late 1960s:** Influential businessmen and theatre advocates form the Walnut Street Theatre Corporation, a community nonprofit.³¹⁹ Notable members of the nonprofit include Philip Klein, advertising executive and board member of Philadelphia Council for the Performing Arts, Robert K. Greenfield, Attorney and Vice President/board member of the Philadelphia Council for the Performing Arts, and Dorothy Haas.³²⁰
- **1969:** “[...] [The] Walnut Street Theatre [is] slated for demolition and replacement by a parking lot.”³²¹ However, with funds provided by Haas Community Funds (later known as the William Penn Foundation), the Walnut Street Theatre Corporation purchases the Walnut Street Theatre outright for \$300,000.³²² The theatre subsequently closes down for major renovations as architect F. Bryan Loving, and the architectural engineering firm of Dickey, Weissman, Chandler and Holt convert the interior into a modern performing arts facility and restore the exterior according to Haviland’s 1828 designs, respectively.³²³ William Harold Lee’s renovations, except for his structural steel additions, are reversed in the process.³²⁴
- **1971:** After an estimated \$4 million in renovations—again subsidized by the Haas Community Funds—“the Walnut Street Theatre re-opens as a

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ National Register—WT.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Collins—GOBWS; Ernest Schier, “TLA Is Not Involved in Walnut Sale,” *The Evening Bulletin*, June 3, 1969, The Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Folio (hereafter cited as Schier); “Walnut St. Theater Sold as Museum,” June 9, 1969, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Folio (hereafter cited as Walnut St. Theater Sold as Museum).

³²⁰ Collins—GOBWS; Schier; Walnut St. Theater Sold as Museum.

³²¹ (quote) Watson; DeLeon, “The Scene—in Philadelphia and Its Suburbs” (hereafter cited as DeLeon); Jaffe.

³²² Binzen; William B. Collins, “1,000 Participate in ‘Walkthrough’ To See Reborn Walnut Street Theater,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Walnut Street Theatre Folio (hereafter cited as Collins—1000); William B. Collins, “Theater is Deeded to Walnut St. Unit,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 10, 1969, Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Folio (hereafter cited as Collins—TDWSU); DeLeon; Jaffe; Walnut St. Theater Sold as Museum; Watson; Wider Scope Planned for Walnut Street Theater.

³²³ Bulletin of the Philadelphia Old Town Historical Society, 26-32; Collins, “At Walnut: The Birth of a New Era” (hereafter cited as Collins—WBNE); Weil, 51-64.

³²⁴ Bulletin of the Philadelphia Old Town Historical Society, 26-32; Collins—1000; Glazer 235; Harvard and Sylvester, 104; Weil, 51-64.

performing arts center, presenting theatre, opera, dance, music, and film.”³²⁵ Thereafter, the Philadelphia Drama Guild becomes the principal tenant, and Haas Community Funds covers initial operating deficits.³²⁶

- **1976:** Due to “sizable deficits,” the Board of Trustees removes Alfred Stites, the Executive Director of the Walnut Street Theatre.³²⁷ His position remains vacant until 1982.³²⁸
- **1980:** Escalating rental fees and the effects of the 1980-1982 recession force the Philadelphia Drama Guild to relocate to the Annenberg Center.³²⁹ To compensate for this major loss, the Walnut Street Theatre implements a subscription service; but revenues plummet, and the subscription service is subsequently cancelled in 1981.³³⁰
- **1981:** “[The Walnut Street Theatre remains available for theatrical bookings and continues to present attraction in music and dance].”³³¹ However, the substantial rental fees leave the theatre without a primary tenant.³³² Unfounded rumors emerge that the theatre is for sale.³³³
- **1982:** After a nationwide talent search for a new executive director, the Board of Trustees hires Bernard Harvard, Managing Director of the Alliance Theatre Company, to reorganize the daily production and business operations of the Walnut Street Theatre.³³⁴
- **1983:** Bernard Harvard, with the approval of the board of trustees, forms the Walnut Street Theatre Company nonprofit so that the Walnut Street

³²⁵ (quote) Walnut Street Theatre Corporation; Walter F. Naedele, “Growing-Up Pains at the Walnut,” *Philadelphia Magazine*, December 1972, Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Folio; Walter F. Naedele, “The Walnut Celebrates Its Reincarnation,” *The Evening Bulletin*, October 16, 1972, Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Folio (hereafter cited as Naedele—WCR); Weigand.

³²⁶ “Drama Guild Reopens Walnut,” *Metrolines*, September 30-October 13, 1971, Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Archives Files (hereafter cited as Drama Guild Reopens Walnut); Glazer, 236; Naedele—WCR; Weigand.

³²⁷ Collins, “On Theater—the Moribund Walnut Finally Comes to Life” (hereafter cited as Collins—MWFCL); Collins, “Walnut Will Undertake a New Role” (hereafter cited as Collins—WUNR).

³²⁸ (quote) Collins—WUNR; Collins—MWFCL.

³²⁹ Collins, “How Nonprofit Theater has Adjusted to Reagan” (hereafter cited as Collins—HNTAR); Collins—MWFCL; Collins, “The Drama Guild: Too Late for Pills” (hereafter cited as Collins—DGTLP); Collins, “The Walnut in a Fitting New Start” (hereafter cited as Collins—WFNS); Collins—WBNE; Collins—WUNR; Scher, “Walnut Welcomes All Performing Arts” (hereafter cited as Scher).

³³⁰ Collins, “Walnut Theater Ends Subscriptions” (hereafter cited as Collins—WTES); Collins—WUNR.

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² Collins—MWFCL; Collins—WFNS.

³³³ Collins—WTES.

³³⁴ Collins—MWFCL; Collins—WBNE; Collins—WUNR; Scher.

Theatre can produce/license its own shows with local Philadelphia talent.³³⁵ Bernard Harvard also sets up a “shared-risk partnership” with visiting performances and Broadway shows (as opposed to only renting out theatre space at a fixed price), extends the theatre season to 365 days, fires all the ushers, diversifies funding sources, and renegotiates a more favorable agreement with the stage and box-office unions.³³⁶

- **2010:** Twenty-seven years after its transformation into a regional producing theatre, the Walnut Street Theatre is arguably “the most subscribed theatre company in the world.”³³⁷ Bernard Harvard continues his role as President and Producing Artistic Director.³³⁸

Discussion

A) *Events Leading to Continued Use*

The Walnut Street Theatre has two unique advantages over all the other theatres associated with William Harold Lee in Philadelphia. 1) It is arguably the oldest, continually operational theatre in the United States, if not in the English-speaking world; 2) it is located in a vibrant center city commercial district in proximity to Independence National Historical Park.³³⁹ More specifically, emblematic of the declining Philadelphia theatre market during the 1960s, the Walnut Street Theatre operated for less than four months per year between 1965 and 1968; and “[...] by 1969 it was slated for demolition and replacement by a parking lot” after 160 years of continuous use.³⁴⁰ But even so, the Walnut Street Theatre was such a venerated center city landmark that influential businessmen and theatre advocates, who discussed saving the theatre throughout the 1960s,

³³⁵ Harvard and Sylvester, 113; Scher.

³³⁶ (quote) Scher; Collins—WFNS.

³³⁷ Walnut Street Theatre Corporation.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

³³⁹ Bulletin of the Philadelphia Old Town Historical Society, 5-6; Drama Guild Reopens Walnut; “Weekend Waxes Nostalgic at the Walnut,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 3, 1971, Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Walnut Street Theatre Folio; Weil, 51-64; Wider Scope Planned for Walnut St. Theater.

³⁴⁰ (quote) Watson, 435-438; Collins—GOBWST; DeLeon; Jaffe.

formed the Walnut Street nonprofit.³⁴¹ Of the nonprofit's board of directors, Dorothy Haas, proved to be the major catalyst—her husband, Dr. F. Otto Haas was Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Haas Chemicals, and more importantly, executive board member of Haas Community Funds (later known as the William Penn Foundation).³⁴² As noted in an American Philosophical Society proceeding,

[...] Dr. Haas decided early in his tenure to participate in plans for the redevelopment of the historic area around Independence Hall. When the company's growth mandated more space for its headquarters, he chose not to move to the suburbs but to construct a handsome new building adjacent to the Liberty Bell. The decision was critical to the revitalization of that part of Philadelphia.³⁴³

The historic Walnut Street Theatre, located within a short walk from the company's headquarters and Independence Hall, was thus the ideal building to reflect the charitable legacy of the Haas family. With funds directly subsidized by Haas Community Funds, the Walnut Street nonprofit purchased the theatre outright for \$300,000, implemented a \$4 million restoration project, and covered numerous operating deficits throughout the 1970s.³⁴⁴

But even with the financial backing of Haas Community Funds, the renovated Walnut Street Theatre encountered a problem similar to that which had plagued the Keswick nonprofit—inexperience transitioning a floundering commercial theatre into a nonprofit performing arts center. That is, performing arts centers typically survive by renting out space, sometimes months in advance, to visiting shows. These daily logistics require experienced management and constant coordination/negotiation with theatre groups and box office/stage unions; and there is always the possibility that a weak market can scare off those who are unable to afford the rental fees. The performing arts business model is therefore inelastic—if a theatre

³⁴¹ Collins—GOBWS; Schier; Walnut St. Theater Sold as Museum.

³⁴² Binzen; Jaffe; Watson.

³⁴³ Watson.

³⁴⁴ Collins—1000; Collins—TDWSU; Naedele—WCR; Weignad; Weil, 51-64.

group backs out of a show, or if there is a dearth of quality Broadway shows, the nonprofit may not be able to procure another marketable performance to fill in the vacant time slot, and the theatre can go bankrupt within a single season.

Such scenarios almost led to the second demise of the Walnut Street Theatre: escalating rental fees and the effects of the 1980-1982 recession forced the Philadelphia Drama Guild, the principal tenant and the only remaining resident theatre company in Philadelphia, to relocate to the Annenberg Center in 1980.³⁴⁵ Thereafter, the Walnut Street Theatre nonprofit enacted a yearly subscription service; but since there was no in-house theatre company, theatre patrons were hesitant to enter into a long-term agreement to view performances of unknown quality, and the subscription service was repealed within a year.³⁴⁶ It was at this time that the nonprofit's board of directors started to worry about the future viability of the Walnut Street Theatre.³⁴⁷ Rumors even circulated that the theatre was up for sale.³⁴⁸

The situation changed in 1982 soon after the board of directors hired Bernard Harvard, Managing Director of the Alliance Theatre Company, as the new Executive Director of the Walnut Street Theatre—a position that had remained vacant since 1976.³⁴⁹ As noted in the timeline, Bernard Harvard, with the approval of the board of directors, established the Walnut Street Theatre Company, an in-house performing arts nonprofit, so that the Walnut Street Theatre could instead produce its own shows with local Philadelphia talent.³⁵⁰ Bernard Harvard also set up a “shared-risk partnership” (as opposed to renting out space) with visiting performances and Broadway shows, extended the theatre season to 365

³⁴⁵ Collins—DGTLF; Collins—MWFCL; Collins—WUNR.

³⁴⁶ Collins—WTES; Collins—WUNR.

³⁴⁷ Collins—WUNR; Scher.

³⁴⁸ Collins—WTES.

³⁴⁹ Collins—MWFCL; Collins—WBNE; Harvard and Sylvester, 113; Scher.

³⁵⁰ Collins—WFNS; Scher.

days, replaced paid ushers with volunteers, diversified funding sources, and renegotiated a more favorable wage agreement with the stage/box-office unions.³⁵¹ Due to these shrewd programmatic/managerial adjustments, the Walnut Street Theatre emerged from likely bankruptcy to become what many claim as the most subscribed producing theatre in the world. However, such an outcome would not have been possible without the William Penn Foundation's willingness to subsidize the creation and initial operating deficits of the Walnut Street Theatre Company.³⁵²

B) Current State of Preservation (Figures 32-34)

Given that architect F. Bryan Loving and the architectural engineering firm of Dickey, Weissman, Chandler and Holt reversed most of William Harold Lee's 1920 improvements, and that William Harold Lee substantially altered most of previous improvements of the Walnut Street Theatre, the author argues that the Walnut Street Theatre is technically a 40-year old structure. More specifically, both John M. Dickey and F. Bryan Loving concluded that the only feasible options were to restore the façade back to its 1828 appearance, and to gut and to modernize the interior for contemporary user needs.³⁵³ Their reasoning was based on two assumptions and two facts, respectively: 1) William Harold Lee's improvements were not architecturally or historically significant; 2) Haviland's original designs were both architecturally and historically significant; 3) there was almost no documentary evidence of Haviland's interior designs; 4) there was abundant documentary evidence of Haviland's exterior designs.³⁵⁴

The author does not disagree with the two facts. However, the author argues that the two assumptions led to a problematic preservation outcome. By

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Collins—HNTAR; Collins—WFNS.

³⁵³ Bulletin of the Philadelphia Old Town Historical Society, 26-32; Weil, 51-63.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

reversing most of William Harold Lee's 1920 improvements, which then comprised the physical identity of the Walnut Street Theatre, architect F. Bryan Loving and the architectural engineering firm of Dickey, Weissman, Chandler and Holt created an imperfect simulacrum [...] "based primarily on Haviland's notebooks that contained copies of letters, estimates, notes, sketches, specifications, and a description of the theatre."³⁵⁵ Such a re-creation was the opposite of preservation—comparable to gutting and stripping down a historic building, restoring it to its original appearance with different materials, installing a modern interior, and then calling the building historic.³⁵⁶

In this regard, the author argues that it would have been more historically authentic if the architects had instead conserved William Harold Lee's 1920 exterior improvements because "[...] there was little left of the façade designed by Haviland except for the six marble columns and two marble pilasters, the marble plinths, and the marble architrave. All of the other details had been removed, extensively modified or covered over."³⁵⁷ Similarly, regarding the interior, the author believes that architect F. Bryan Loving was so preoccupied with finding evidence of Haviland's original designs that the ornate interior of the theatre was also unnecessarily gutted. Loving even concedes the following:

For all the fascinating discoveries that accompanied the slow dismantling of the century of accretions to the original design of John Haviland, little if any information truly served to alleviate the confusion engendered by the contradictions of past and present theatrical requirements. In consideration of the many reconciliations that were necessary between the remaining elements of the original structure and the essentials of the modern theater, it seemed best to proceed with an almost totally new interior design that would preserve the *spirit* of the "Greek Revival" rather than the letter of

³⁵⁵ Weil, 58.

³⁵⁶ Bulletin of the Philadelphia Old Town Historical Society, 26-32; Weil, 51-63.

³⁵⁷ Weil, 56.

Haviland's work for which the evidence was so scanty.³⁵⁸

In other words, Loving might have preserved the interior of the theatre if there had been enough remaining elements of Haviland's 1828 improvements. But why not preserve what was already there? Loving's reasoning illustrates how superlative historical narratives can lead to the irrevocable alteration of more recent, and perhaps equally noteworthy, improvements. That is, the Walnut Street Theatre was arguably the "oldest" continually operational theatre in the English speaking world. Thus, only Haviland's 1828 designs could satisfy the age-value expectations for the Walnut Street Theatre, even though these designs were mostly reversed after 150 years of continuous use. Consequently, Loving substituted William Harold Lee's "modified Federal designs" for a more modern and generic interior that ironically works against the age-value and "*spirit*" of the Walnut Street Theatre.³⁵⁹

C) *The Impact of Preservation Ordinances on Current State of Preservation*

Although the Walnut Street Theatre was considered the oldest continually operational theatre in the English speaking world at the time of the 1969-1971 renovations, the final outcome of the theatre was not shaped by any preservation ordinances. In particular, the theatre only came under the formal protection of the Philadelphia Historical Commission in 1974, as documented by a letter from F. Otto Haas to the Walnut Street Theatre Corp. stating, "As Chairman of the Historical Commission, it is my pleasure to inform you that your property at 825 Walnut Street has been designated as being worthy of preservation."³⁶⁰ Moreover, since F. Otto Haas, whose foundation was the primary financial backer of the nonprofit,

³⁵⁸ Bulletin of the Philadelphia Old Town Historical Society, 31-32.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 26-32; Weil, 51-63.

³⁶⁰ F. Otto Haas Letter to Walnut Street Theatre Corp., June 28, 1974, Philadelphia Historical Commission Walnut Street Theatre Walnut Street Theatre Folio.

was so politically connected as to become Chair of the Philadelphia Historical Commission between 1972-1984, the author argues that the Historical Commission probably would not have challenged the renovations. Preservationists at the time did not seem to worry either.³⁶¹ In fact, presidents, directors, and spokespersons of the following organizations—the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, the National Park Service, the Philadelphia Planning Commission, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Society of Architectural Historians, and the Victorian Society of America—even wrote formal letters to the Old Town Historical Society expressing approval for the renovations.³⁶²

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed numerous situational variables that contributed to the continued operation of the neighborhood theatres associated with William Harold Lee, from which the author draws the following observations:

- All of the operational Main Line theatres associated with William Harold Lee were insulated from competition for the greater part of the twentieth century—until the emergence of regional shopping malls, multiplexes, and megaplexes.
- The Walnut Street Theatre, the only operational theatre associated with William Harold Lee in Philadelphia, survived because of its convenient center city location, inimitable historic status, and generous support from the Haas Charitable Trust/William Penn Foundation.
- All the neighborhood theatres discussed in this chapter were vulnerable to alterations and to irrevocable conversion during changes in ownership and tenancy. Theatre proponents can greatly reduce the severity of these threats by

³⁶¹ “Grace Gary Pays Tribute to Otto Haas, Bids Farewell to PA” (accessed March 22, 2010).

³⁶² Bulletin of the Philadelphia Old Town Historical Society, 5-10.

publically discussing a theatre's fate *before* there are any transfers of ownership and/or tenancy, since rapid transfers of ownership and/or tenancy favor the speculative developer.

- All the operational nonprofit theatres discussed in this chapter only survived with millions of dollars of subsidies from public agencies, private foundations, or educational/religious institutions often due to the concerted advocacy of a few particularly influential board members or executive directors. However, these nonprofits only obtained these subsidies by connecting a given theatre's rehabilitation with governmental, foundational, or institutional priorities.

- Community involvement contributed to the preservation of the Anthony Wayne, Bryn Mawr, and Hiway theatres. Moreover, the Jenkintown Community Alliance, an official Main Street Program recognized by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, even went so far as to create the Hiway Theatre nonprofit before there was a direct threat to the Hiway Theatre.

- Both attempts to convert floundering commercial theatres into performing arts centers initially failed—that is, the Keswick Theatre went bankrupt, and the Walnut Street Theatre had to be rescued by the William Penn Foundation. These inexperienced performing arts centers only later succeeded after substantial improvements in management and programming.

- Theatre activists do not necessarily have to take over a theatre if the local exhibition market is favorable. They just have to influence the sale of the theatre to a sympathetic developer who is interested in cinematic/theatrical venues.

- Lower Merion Township only adopted a formal historic preservation ordinance within the last ten years. But even so, the ordinance served a role in

administratively protecting the façade of the Ardmore Theatre.

- Commercial use restrictions were effective in preventing the conversion of the Bryn Mawr Theatre into a gym facility. In this respect, the Anthony Wayne, Bryn Mawr, Hiway, and Narberth theatres are located in townships or boroughs that either recently passed or will soon pass mixed-use/downtown overlays that have even greater commercial use restrictions than the one which originally protected the Bryn Mawr Theatre.

- Commercial use restrictions, most likely from a mixed-use/downtown district overlay, in combination with preservation ordinances, have the greatest potential to administratively protect neighborhood theatres from sudden changes in use and from exterior alterations. Only the Bryn Mawr Theatre is located within a downtown district with these two protections; though, Jenkintown's CBD, where the Hiway Theatre is located, has a mixed-use overlay that also functions as a quasi preservation ordinance.

CHAPTER 5: CONVERTED THEATRES

Introduction

Chapter Five takes a closer look at William Harold Lee's seventeen converted theatres to evaluate the ways in which property owners have adaptively reused their theatres for uses other than cinematic/theatrical exhibition. As discussed in Chapters Three and Four, fifteen of these converted theatres are located in Philadelphia, and of these urban theatres, the overwhelming majority are located in disinvested areas with households earning well below the citywide average of \$50,673 per year, given that the median household income of the city is only \$36,222.³⁶³ Most of these theatres have been altered, gutted, and retrofitted to serve such uses as laundromats, day care centers, garages, shoe/clothing/dollar stores, apartments, and fast food restaurants. Due to these irreversible adaptations as well as to the depressed inner city exhibition market, the likelihood of returning these neighborhood theatres to their previous cinematic/theatrical use is extremely limited.

What then are the remaining options for preservationists who want to preserve obsolescent neighborhood theatres that can no longer operate under a cinematic/theatrical venue? To answer this question, Chapter Five first establishes that one can only preserve converted theatres by retaining both their tangible historic fabric and their intangible social/entertainment use. Chapter Five then focuses on the adaptive reuse of the Sedgwick Theatre and the Jefferson Theatre—the only intact theatres that were adapted for alternative social/entertainment uses (performing arts center and a community church, respectively). Chapter Five concludes that, however preferable, it is extremely difficult to adapt obsolescent

³⁶³ U.S. Census Bureau, "2006-2008 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates" (accessed April 12, 2010).

neighborhood theatres for alternative social/entertainment uses in Philadelphia's inner city market.

What are the Necessary Components of Historic Neighborhood Theatres?

There are two answers to this question—the tangible historic fabric and the intangible cinematic/theatrical use. The tangible historic fabric, which by definition is inimitable, constitutes the physical identity of a neighborhood theatre. Consequently, as one alters a neighborhood theatre with modern materials and forms, the neighborhood theatre loses its historic properties, until at some point it is no longer an historic building—analogueous to a book losing its original meaning with the replacement of too many incompatible words and phrases.³⁶⁴ Regarding the intangible cinematic/theatrical use, neighborhood theatres have long been valued as anchors for communal gathering, street-side activity, nightlife, and popular entertainment. The intangible cinematic/theatrical function is therefore also tied to the very identity of the neighborhood theatre. It is for this latter reason that neighborhood theatres are one of the hardest historic buildings to preserve because the tradition of cinematic/theatrical exhibition is valued as much as, if not more than, the tangible historic fabric. For example, preservationists decried the “loss” of the Ardmore Theatre after its interior was converted into a high-end fitness center, even though the Philadelphia Sports Club retained the Neo-Classical façade. Few other historic building typologies—e.g. schools, mills, factories, etc – are subject to such a strict standard of original use.

Perhaps this standard to preserve the original cinematic/theatrical use is too strict, however, especially for theatres in disinvested inner city markets. Without considerable financial support from a private foundation or a governmental agency,

³⁶⁴ Philippot, “Historic Preservation: Philosophy, Criteria, Guidelines, II,” 358-363.

it is highly unlikely that a new owner can continue cinematic/theatrical operations, let alone afford millions for extensive renovations. As an alternative, the author suggests that preservationists should instead consider alternative social/entertainment uses—e.g. community centers, schools, libraries, houses of worship, boxing gyms, etc.—that better match the needs of those living in inner city markets, and yet still serve as neighborhood anchor institutions that invigorate the streetscape and foster communal interaction. In this regard, the following two sections discuss the adaptive reuse of the Sedgwick Theatre and the Jefferson Theatre—the only intact theatres that were adapted for social/entertainment uses. All the other converted theatres associated with William Harold Lee were excessively altered or mostly converted into low-end commercial uses.

Sedgwick Theatre

*A) Events Leading to Present State of Use*³⁶⁵

The Sedgwick Theatre, arguably one of William Harold Lee's finest Moderne designs, emerged from relative obscurity to become a well-known neighborhood destination.³⁶⁶ After closing in 1965, the theatre primarily served as a moving/storage garage for naval equipment, until the closure of the Philadelphia Naval Yard forced the company to move to an alternate location.³⁶⁷ Thereafter, David and Betty Ann Fellner, two Mount Airy neighborhood activists intent on revitalizing Germantown Avenue, purchased the vacant property in 1994 with funds raised through the sale of their house as banks deemed the area too risky for a long-

³⁶⁵ (citation applies to whole section) Betty Ann Fellner, face-to-face conversation with author, February 25, 2010 (hereafter cited as Mrs. Fellner).

³⁶⁶ Glazer, *Philadelphia Theatres, A-Z: A Comprehensive, Descriptive Record of 813 Theatres Constructed Since 1724*, 206-207 (hereafter cited as Glazer).

³⁶⁷ Ibid.; McCrystal, "Sedgwick Theater Façade Makes Way for Sedgwick Cultural Center" (accessed March 27, 2010) (hereafter cited as McCrystal).

term mortgage.³⁶⁸ The Fellners then moved into the second floor of the theatre and founded the Sedgwick Cultural Center, a local visual/performing arts nonprofit that operated out of the former lobbies of the theatre (the auditorium, separated from the lobbies by a concrete wall, later became a private artist studio).³⁶⁹ Over the next ten years under the direction of Mrs. Fellner, the nonprofit subsequently became a popular anchor for the local music and art scene, particularly for weekly jazz performances; and the Fellners went on to redevelop most of the remaining properties in the immediate area.³⁷⁰

Nevertheless, the nonprofit encountered major financial problems soon after 1) Mrs. Fellner, who worked without a salary, retired as Executive Director of the Sedgwick Cultural Center, and 2) the City of Philadelphia greatly reduced funding for cultural programs.³⁷¹ As noted by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 2005,

[...] the project that Betty Ann Fellner has poured her heart into, the Sedgwick Cultural Center, hasn't benefitted as much as she hoped. [...] The community's enthusiasm for art space has not been matched by financial support, says Fellner.³⁷²

Not long after the 2005 article, the Sedgwick Cultural Center ceased operations within the theatre, and the Fellners instead rented out the lobbies to artists and various groups for special events on an as-needed basis.³⁷³ These functions continue to the present day. In this respect, it is important to reiterate that visual/performing arts venues are difficult to sustain for more than a few years without considerable financial support from a private foundation or a governmental

³⁶⁸ McCrystal; Von Bergen, "Mount Airy Finds It's Now a Hot Spot."

³⁶⁹ Greenspan, "Interest in Mount Airy is on the Rise" (accessed March 27, 2010) (hereafter cited as Greenspan); McCrystal; Regan, "Germantown Avenue: The Story of America is 8.5 Miles" (accessed March 27, 2010).

³⁷⁰ All About Jazz, "Sedgwick Cultural Center" (accessed March 27, 2010); Greenspan; McCrystal; Mezzacappa, "A Flourishing Arts Community."

³⁷¹ Dribben, "A Moving Force Behind Mt. Airy's Takeover" (hereafter cited as Dribben); McCrystal; Sozanski, "Budget Anxiety Rising for City Arts Groups."

³⁷² Dribben.

³⁷³ Cinema Treasures, "Sedgwick Cultural Center" (accessed March 27, 2010); McCrystal.

agency, especially when there are turnovers in leadership, since revenues are often too episodic and unpredictable for property owners or nonprofits to cover operating expenses. For example, in the case of the Sedgwick Cultural Center, Mrs. Fellner mentioned to the author that, following her departure and the citywide reductions in funding, the nonprofit collapsed for three primary reasons: 1) the remaining members were not as dedicated as Mrs. Fellner; 2) the new executive director did not get along with the board of directors; 3) there was not enough money to market the weekly music venues to a more regional audience (that is, very few people from outside of Germantown knew about the Sedgwick Cultural Center). Consequently, the nonprofit was in such a poor financial state that it could not even afford to rent the lobbies from the Fellners.

*B) Current State of Preservation (Figures 36-37)*³⁷⁴

The Sedgwick Theatre is remarkably intact for a theatre that was partially converted into a moving/storage garage. Although the original marquee and the ticket booth have been removed and much of the ground-floor entryway was rebuilt, the iconic façade appears the same as in historical photos.³⁷⁵ The ground floor entryway is deceptive because, as one enters the building through generic glass doors, it is easy to conclude that what was once an ornate interior is now an empty dry-wall box. This is not the case. The Fellners decided to isolate a small portion of the lobby to serve as art exhibition space, as well as to reduce the enormous heating and air-conditioning expenses associated with the open volumes of the theatre. Behind the artificial lobby are two inner lobbies. These lobbies are mostly intact, as neither owner removed or covered over the terrazzo floors, plaster ornament, gilded detailing, decorative chandeliers, and finished woodwork. The

³⁷⁴ (citation applies to whole section) Mrs. Fellner.

³⁷⁵ *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*, “Sedgwick Theatre” (accessed March 27, 2010).

only exceptions are that the former moving-storage company cordoned off the single-screen auditorium with a cinderblock wall, and that the Fellners added a temporary stage for musical/performing arts productions. Ongoing roofing leaks are also compromising the integrity of the ornate ceiling.

These leaks are even more prominent in the former single-screen auditorium, as moisture pops out the plaster ceiling tiles in a checkerboard pattern. To access this auditorium, one must cut through an alley leading to the loading docks at the rear of the building. After passing through a security door at the rearmost loading dock, one enters into a small, makeshift workspace that is boxed in (again to reduce heating and air-conditioning expenses) with sheet metal. This area is used as an artist workshop. One must then pass through the workspace to get an open view of the auditorium that is now used as a warehouse for artist supplies. However, despite its unsympathetic conversion, the auditorium has an intact “cloister-vaulted” ceiling that is comprised of intricate plaster ornament and capped with a “modernistic” medallion grille.³⁷⁶ These elements have the potential to be restored, but Mrs. Fellner estimates, based on the opinions of visiting architects, that it would cost *at least* \$8 million to resurrect the theatre to a semblance of its former grandeur. Such funding, unfortunately, is not forthcoming, nor is there a viable market for cinematic/theatrical exhibition. As a more realistic compromise, the Fellners have instead installed an independent film screening room in the movie rental store next to the Sedgwick Theatre.

C) *Impact of Preservation Ordinances on Current State of Preservation*

Preservation ordinances did not have any effect on the current state of preservation because the Sedgwick Theatre is neither located in a protected historic

³⁷⁶ Glazer, 206-207.

district nor is it listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.³⁷⁷ Similarly, since most of the theatre was converted into a warehouse, one can conclude that the permissive “C-2” Commercial District use requirements also had little impact.³⁷⁸ The only reason that the theatre is so well preserved is that the Fellners, as well as the previous owner, did not alter or cover over many of the historic elements.³⁷⁹ Future property owners may not be as understanding.

Jefferson Theatre

A) Events Leading to Present State of Use

The Jefferson Theatre, now known as the “Garden of Prayer World’s Prayer Center,” is one of the more historically enigmatic neighborhood theatres associated with William Harold Lee, because the former silent screen theatre ceased operations in 1930.³⁸⁰ Due to this eighty-year hiatus in cinematic/theatrical operations as well as to the theatre’s location in a disinvested section of North Philadelphia, the theatre has not received much attention from the mainstream preservation community. As far as the author could determine, the only publicly available sources that attest to the theatre’s history include seven photographs at the Athenaeum of Philadelphia, a brief description by Irvin Glazer in *Philadelphia Theatres, A-Z*, and a 1987 National Register “eligibility” nomination by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.³⁸¹

After meeting with Deacon Jackson of the Garden of Prayer World’s Prayer

³⁷⁷ The Sedgwick Theatre is located less than a mile outside of the Colonial Germantown Historic District; *National Register of Historic Places Information System Database*, “Colonial Germantown Historic District” (accessed April 11, 2009).

³⁷⁸ Philadelphia County, “Philadelphia Zoning Overlay” (hereafter cited as Philadelphia County—PZO) (accessed March 27, 2010); Philadelphia County, “The Official Philadelphia Code” (Philadelphia County—OPC) (accessed March 26, 2010).

³⁷⁹ Mrs. Fellner.

³⁸⁰ Glazer, 140.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*; *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*, “Jefferson Theatre” (hereafter cited as PAB—JT).

Center to obtain more information, the author discovered that local residents led by Mother Elizabeth Juanita Dabney (birth unknown - 1967) saved the Jefferson Theatre sometime in the mid-1960s when their resident church burnt down a few blocks away.³⁸² In particular, with assistance from local businessmen, the residents of the congregation collectively put up their houses as collateral to finance the acquisition of the theatre.³⁸³ The residents then converted the aging theatre into a community church—a use that persists to this day—though the congregation cannot afford to hold services in the auditorium during the warmest and coldest months of the year.³⁸⁴ Services instead are conducted in the inner lobby during those times.³⁸⁵

B) *Current State of Preservation (Figures 26-27)*

Such limited knowledge of the theatre is unfortunate because the ornamental façade has been barely altered since the 1940s, making the church a worthy candidate for exterior conservation if funding should ever arise.³⁸⁶ Notable interior vestiges that remained after the renovations include the terrazzo flooring, two chandeliers (most likely installed by William Harold Lee), the open volume of the original auditorium, and a framed picture of Mother Dabney in the inner lobby. All the other historic elements within the interior were removed, covered-over, or altered.

C) *Impact of Preservation Ordinances on Current State of Preservation*

Preservation ordinances did not have any effect on the current state of

³⁸² Deacon Jackson, face-to-face conversation with author, February 14 & 28, 2010 (hereafter cited as Deacon Jackson); Morgan, “The Flame Still Burns,” *Charisma Magazine* (accessed March 27, 2010) (hereafter cited as Morgan).

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁵ Deacon Jackson.

³⁸⁶ PAB—Jefferson Theatre.

preservation because the Jefferson Theatre is neither located in a protected historic district nor is it listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. However, the “R10A” Residential District use requirements may have had an impact (assuming that the property had residential zoning between 1930 and the mid 1960s), because the theatre could only be converted into the following uses without a “certificate” from the Zoning Board of Adjustments: single-family housing, horticulture plots, offices for doctors/lawyers/architects/psychologists, houses of worship, municipal art galleries, railroad passenger stations, and utility buildings.³⁸⁷ With a certificate from the Zoning Board of Adjustments and “provided that they are conducted in completely enclosed detached buildings,” the following non-residential uses are also permitted: art galleries, museums, charitable institutions, clubs houses, fire stations, certain home occupations, medical offices, police stations, rest homes, and pumping stations.³⁸⁸ Consequently, such limitations in use explain why the theatre remained vacant after the closure of the Jefferson Theatre in 1930—until local residents purchased the property and converted it into a community church in the mid 1960s.³⁸⁹

The Remaining Theatres

Except for their distinct two-story outlines, the City Line Center, Lindy, Grand (Bristol), Grand (Philadelphia), Green Hill, Model, Eric’s Place/Trans-Lux, Forum/Ellis/Xtasy, Holme/Pennypak, Lawndale, Century, Suburban, and Northeastern theatres have been altered to such an extent that most observers would be unable to immediately identify these buildings as former theatres. More specifically, among these theatres, property owners gutted the interiors; removed/altered the marquees, ticket booths, exterior ornament, ground floor

³⁸⁷ Philadelphia County—OPC; Philadelphia County—PZO.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁹ Deacon Jackson.

entranceways; or covered-up/replaced the historic façades with one or more of the following: large signs, glass panes, wood, fake stone, stucco, aluminum siding, prefabricated cladding, and sliding garage doors. Given that there are not enough historic elements to justify the expenses for major conservation interventions, and that most of the theatres were already converted into functioning businesses that generate local economic activity, the author argues that these buildings should be left to market forces. The only exception is the vacant and relatively intact Holiday/Ace/Windsor Theatre, which operated as an adult cinema until closing within the past few years. Preservationists could in theory preserve this theatre, but the inconvenient location (literally, underneath the Frankfort elevated line) in one of the roughest sections of North Philadelphia poses too many constraints for adaptive reuse.

Conclusion

Based on a review of the converted theatres associated with William Harold Lee, the author concludes that, however preferable, it is extremely difficult to adapt obsolescent neighborhood theatres for alternative social/entertainment uses in inner city markets. More specifically, of the fifteen converted theatres associated with William Harold Lee in Philadelphia County, the Sedgwick and Jefferson theatres were the only relatively intact theatres adapted for social/entertainment uses; and in both instances, sympathetic investors had to either sell or leverage their houses to finance the acquisition of these theatres.³⁹⁰ Moreover, since the Sedgwick Cultural Center discontinued operations as a visual/performing arts nonprofit, the Jefferson Theatre now remains as the sole example of a relatively intact theatre adapted for social/entertainment uses—namely, a community church. Though

³⁹⁰ The former Green Hill and Rialto theatres are also community churches. However, as previously suggested, the author believes that there are not enough historic elements to justify further preservation efforts—though it is worth noting the original marquee of the former Green Hill Theatre is still intact.

the case study of the Jefferson Theatre is a promising example, further research, including a much larger sample size, is needed to determine whether religious use is a financially sustainable alternative for obsolescent neighborhood theatres in inner city markets.

CHAPTER 6: POTENTIALLY OPERATIONAL THEATRES

Introduction

This final case study takes a closer look at the Lansdowne Theatre—one of William Harold Lee’s two remaining potentially operational theatres.³⁹¹ As mentioned in Chapter Three, potentially operational theatres differ from converted theatres for two primary reasons. First, they remained vacant since their last operation as neighborhood theatres. Thus, subsequent owners have not modified the interior and exterior historic fabric of these theatres. Second, they are located near or within central business districts that are amenable to the rehabilitation of an historic theatre. In this regard, Chapter Six provides a brief introduction to the central business district where the Lansdowne Theatre is located, outlines the pertinent stages of property acquisition and redevelopment leading to the long-term vacancy of the Lansdowne Theatre, and concludes by discussing the potential for the Lansdowne Theatre to once again become a financially sustainable venue for cinematic/theatrical exhibition. Information used to document the renovation of the Lansdowne Theatre primarily derives from county property data, the Lansdowne Theatre National Register form, archived news sources, site visits, blog discussions on the *Cinema Treasures* website regarding observed theatre alterations, and the following websites: the Borough of Lansdowne, the Lansdowne Economic Development Corporation, the Greater Lansdowne Civic Association, and the Historic Lansdowne Theatre Corporation.

³⁹¹ The author focuses on the Lansdowne Theatre because there are concrete plans to convert the Lansdowne Theatre into a performing arts center.

Lansdowne Central Business District

Like that of the Main Line suburbs, the Borough of Lansdowne owes much of its present identity to the Pennsylvania Railroad.³⁹² Located roughly two miles west of Philadelphia along SEPTA's R3 commuter train route, Lansdowne is an older, inner ring suburb caught between urban Philadelphia and the suburban Main Line.³⁹³ Such a geographic crossroad has enabled the borough to retain its architectural heritage (most of its buildings predate 1950), resident middle-class population, and small town character for two primary reasons: 1) the borough's land was "built out" before the post-war years of speculative single-family construction; 2) the borough was just far enough from Philadelphia to avoid many of the problems associated with urban decline.³⁹⁴ But there was also one related downside: Lansdowne was still close enough to Philadelphia to encounter *some* of the problems associated with urban decline, namely limited market potential and population loss.

As an example of limited market potential, the 2000 US Census median household incomes of the residents of the Borough of Lansdowne and the surrounding townships/boroughs of Upper Darby, Clifton, and Yeadon were \$47,017, \$41,489, \$39,291, and \$45,450; while those of the residents living in the closest Main Line townships of Lower Merion and Radnor were \$86,373 and \$74,272, respectively.³⁹⁵ Furthermore, between 1970 and 2000, the population of Lansdowne fell from a peak of 14,090 residents to 11,044 residents; and "[the Delaware Valley

³⁹² Lansdowne Economic Development Corporation (LEDC), "Lansdowne and East Lansdowne's Comprehensive Plans (2003)" (accessed April 6, 2010) (hereafter cited as LEDC—LELCP2003); Schultz, *Views of Lansdowne*, 7-8 (hereafter cited as Schultz); The Borough of Lansdowne, "Lansdowne Borough Zoning Ordinance (2008)" (accessed April 6, 2010) (hereafter cited as Lansdowne Borough Zoning Ordinance).

³⁹³ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.* (quote from LEDC—LELCP2003).

³⁹⁵ The author used 2000 Census data because the more recent American Community Survey projections were not available for the "borough" geographies; LEDC—LELCP2003; U.S. Census Bureau, "2000 Census" (accessed April 12, 2010).

Regional Planning Association] forecasts suggest that populations will continue to decline over the next twenty-five years.”³⁹⁶ Consequently, by the latter part of the twentieth-century, Lansdowne’s insulated CBD suffered from increasing levels of vacancy due to a reduced demand for local services and to competition from encroaching retail sprawl along the undervalued commercial strips of Baltimore Avenue/Pike.³⁹⁷ However, as the timelines and discussion sections that follow will demonstrate, these development pressures ironically contributed to the current plans to preserve the Lansdowne Theatre.

Lansdowne Theatre

- **1927:** Owner Stanley Warner Equity opens the Lansdowne Theatre.³⁹⁸
- **Circa late 1920s/early 1930s:** The Harrison Brothers Construction Company, the original builder, purchases the Lansdowne Theatre from Stanley Warner Equity.³⁹⁹
- **1979:** Sara Gail, former manager, purchases the Lansdowne Theatre from the Harrison family for \$125,000.⁴⁰⁰
- **1983:** Lansdowne residents establish the Greater Lansdowne Civic Association (GLCA) nonprofit to preserve the historic, aesthetic, and environmental qualities of the borough.⁴⁰¹
- **1986:** Lansdowne Theatre Associates, Inc. purchases the Lansdowne Theatre

³⁹⁶ Ibid. (quote from LEDC—LELCP2003).

³⁹⁷ Lansdowne Economic Development Corporation (LEDC), “The Market for Commercial Development in Lansdowne (2003)” (accessed April 6, 2010) (hereafter cited as LEDC—MCDL2003); Lansdowne Economic Development Corporation (LEDC), “The Market for Commercial Development in Lansdowne (2003)” (accessed April 6, 2010) (hereafter cited as LEDC—MCDL2003); Rose, “Looking to the East” (hereafter cited as Rose).

³⁹⁸ Historic Lansdowne Theater Corporation (HLTC), “History” (accessed March 30, 2010) (hereafter cited as HLTC—History); *National Register of Historic Places Information System Database*, “Lansdowne Theatre” (accessed November 4, 2009) (hereafter cited as National Register—LT).

³⁹⁹ HLTC—History.

⁴⁰⁰ Delaware County Public Access Inquiry System: Real Estate and Tax Records, “Folio Number: 23-00-01748-00” (hereafter cited as Delaware County TR—23000174800); Delaware County Public Access Inquiry System: Recorder of Deeds, “Folio Number: 23-00-01748-00” (hereafter cited as Delaware County RD—23000174800); HLTC—History.

⁴⁰¹ Greater Lansdowne Civic Association (GLCA), “About Us” (hereafter cited as GLCA).

from Sara Gail for \$450,000.⁴⁰²

- **January 1987:** The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission lists the Lansdowne Theatre on the National Register of Historic Places.⁴⁰³
- **July 1987:** “[An electrical fire in the basement of one of the building’s retail stores significantly damages the electrical systems in the auditorium].”⁴⁰⁴ The theatre closes after sixty years of cinematic/theatrical exhibition.⁴⁰⁵
- **1989:** Bell Savings and Loan purchases the foreclosed Lansdowne Theatre from Lansdowne Theatre Associates, Inc. for \$1.⁴⁰⁶ “There [is] a proposal to turn the closed Moorish-style theater into an electrical supply house” [...] but local residents protest the possible sale during a Fourth of July parade.⁴⁰⁷
- **1991:** A group of sympathetic investors known as “29-37 N. Lansdowne, Inc.” purchases the vacant theatre for \$150,000 through an auction held by the Resolution Trust Corporation—a government-owned asset liquidation entity (created after the S&L scare) that recently acquired Bell Savings and Loan.⁴⁰⁸ These investors later spend approximately \$600,000 to renovate the retail/office spaces.⁴⁰⁹
- **1995:** The Lansdowne Performing Arts Center nonprofit leases the theater from 29-27 N. Lansdowne, Inc. “[...] for \$1 a month for five years.”⁴¹⁰ The nonprofit has a three phase plan to 1) convert the second floor screening room into a performing arts school, 2) to modernize mechanical systems (heating, plumbing, ventilation, and electric), and to 3) restore the theater. These plans never materialize, and the auditorium remains vacant.⁴¹¹
- **1998:** Lansdowne residents and business owners establish the Lansdowne Economic Development Corporation nonprofit (LEDC) to help the ailing borough address problems with vacancy and commercial decline in the

⁴⁰² Delaware County TR—23000174800; Delaware County RD—23000174800; HLTC—History.

⁴⁰³ *National Register of Historic Places Information System Database*, “Lansdowne Theatre” (accessed November 4, 2009) (hereafter cited as National Register—LT).

⁴⁰⁴ HLTC—History.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁶ Delaware County TR—23000174800; Delaware County RD—23000174800; HLTC—History.

⁴⁰⁷ Heavens, “A Place Where a Person Can Thrive in This Diverse Borough Near West Philadelphia” (hereafter cited as Heavens).

⁴⁰⁸ Delaware County TR—23000174800; Delaware County RD—23000174800; HLTC—History; Miles and others, *Real Estate Development: Principles and Practice*, 138 (hereafter cited as Miles).

⁴⁰⁹ HLTC—History; Jeter, “In Spring, a Makeover in Lansdowne” (hereafter cited as Jeter).

⁴¹⁰ Edwards, “Group Eyes Establishment of a Performing Arts Center” (hereafter cited as Edwards—GEEPAC).

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*; HLTC—History.

central business district.⁴¹²

- **1999:** 29-37 N. Lansdowne, Inc., unable to find a user for the auditorium, puts the property up for sale at \$850,000.⁴¹³ Meanwhile, the LEDC also attempts to become a formal Main Street Program by applying to the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED).⁴¹⁴ The DCED later rejects the application.⁴¹⁵
- **2002:** The LEDC commissions S. Huffman and Associates to conduct a market study to “[...] outline the town’s assets and shortfalls.”⁴¹⁶ S. Huffman and Associates concludes that the borough should emphasize its “historic architecture” and “active civic life” and “[...] recommends that the LEDC begin pursuing sit-down restaurants to develop business in the town.”⁴¹⁷
- **2003:** The borough commissions Urban Partners to develop a pedestrian friendly, mixed-use development plan for the central business district.⁴¹⁸ The resulting plan specifically targets the Lansdowne Theatre for redevelopment.⁴¹⁹
- **2005:** “In a bi-partisan effort, with support from the Lansdowne Borough Council and State Representative Nicholas Micozzie, the LEDC re-[submits] its application and [is] accepted into the Main Street Program July 2005.”⁴²⁰ The DCED subsequently designates the LEDC as an official Main Street Program, thus enabling the nonprofit to secure \$1.5 million in state grants, \$900,000 of which is appropriated for the acquisition and renovation of the Lansdowne Theatre.⁴²¹ Thereafter, “[...] the Greater Lansdowne Civic Association and the Lansdowne Economic Development Corporation [establish] the non-profit Historic Lansdowne Theatre Corporation to purchase, stabilize, and restore the theater in pursuit of the dream of reopening The Lansdowne.”⁴²² Mathew Schultz,

⁴¹² Lansdowne Economic Development Corporation (LEDC), “History” (accessed March 30, 2010) (hereafter cited as LEDC—History); Lansdowne Farmers Market (LFM), “About” (accessed March 30, 2010) (hereafter cited as LFM); Rose.

⁴¹³ Jeter.

⁴¹⁴ LEDC—History.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ LEDC—MCDL2003; Rose.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Edwards, “Recreating Downtown” (hereafter cited as Edwards—RD).

⁴¹⁹ Sanfilippo, “Declo Pitches Plan to Redevelop Eastern Towns” (hereafter cited as Sanfilippo); The Borough of Lansdowne, “Downtown District Redevelopment Plan (2004)” (accessed April 6, 2010) (hereafter cited as Lansdowne Borough Downtown District Redevelopment Plan).

⁴²⁰ LEDC—History.

⁴²¹ Bearden, “It’s Makeover Time in Lansdowne” (hereafter cited as Bearden); LEDC—History; LFM.

⁴²² HLTC—History.

Board Member of the GLCA and longtime resident of Lansdowne, becomes the president and only paid staff member of the nonprofit.⁴²³

- **May 2007:** The Lansdowne Farmers Market, a project financed by the LEDC, starts to operate in the municipal parking lot across from the Lansdowne Theatre every Saturday.⁴²⁴
- **October 2007:** The Historic Lansdowne Corporation (HLTC) purchases the Lansdowne Theatre outright for \$535,000.⁴²⁵ “[The nonprofit subsequently uses] the rest of the \$900,000 [to hire John Milner Architects to do a feasibility study], to seal a leak in the theater roof, to reconstruct the broken storm sewer line, to provide temporary lighting in the auditorium, [to install] smoke and fire detection [systems], and to bring the retail and office spaces in compliance with building codes.”⁴²⁶
- **October 2009:** The HLTC formally announces its plans to convert the Lansdowne Theatre into a performing arts center via a photo-op in front of the theatre and a press conference inside of Cinema 16:9 (an adjacent movie store with a small screening room). State Representative Micozzie attends the ceremony.
- **April 17 2010:** The HLTC holds an *a cappella* fundraising concert in the auditorium of the Lansdowne Theatre.⁴²⁷ This is the first entertainment venue since the theatre last closed from the electrical fire in 1987.⁴²⁸

Discussion

A) *Events Leading to Present State of Use*

The Lansdowne Theatre mostly remained under the ownership of the Harrison Family (the same long-time owner of the Bryn Mawr Theatre) for its first fifty-two years of cinematic operations, until Sarah Gail, a former manager for

⁴²³ GLCA; HLTC—History; Winnemore, “Straight No Chaser to Perform at Lansdowne Theater” (accessed March 30, 2010) (hereafter cited as Winnemore).

⁴²⁴ Carey, “In the Market for Growth” (hereafter cited as Carey); LFM.

⁴²⁵ Delaware County TR—23000174800; Delaware County RD—23000174800; HLTC—History.

⁴²⁶ (quote) Bjorkgren, “Bringing Life to an Historic Treasure” (accessed March 30, 2010) (hereafter cited as Bjorkgren); HLTC—History; LEDC—History.

⁴²⁷ Historic Lansdowne Theater Corporation (HLTC), “Lansdowne Theater News” (accessed April 6, 2010) (hereafter cited as HLTC—LTN); Winnemore.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*

the Harrison family, purchased the property in 1979 for \$125,000.⁴²⁹ Ms. Gail then sold the property only seven years later to Jerry Raff—local resident, lawyer, and owner of Lansdowne Theatre Associates, Inc.—for \$425,000.⁴³⁰ Shortly thereafter, an electrical fire in the basement of one of the retail stores damaged the electrical systems in the auditorium, forcing the theatre to close for cinematic exhibition.⁴³¹ Unable to recover from mounting debts caused by the fire, Lansdowne Theatre Associates, Inc. sold the foreclosed theatre to Bell Savings and Loan for only \$1 in 1989.⁴³² Afterward, “[there] was a proposal to turn the closed Moorish-style theater into an electrical supply house [...]” but local residents protested the possible sale during a Fourth of July parade.⁴³³

A brief aside is now necessary to explain the influence of local residents on the preservation of the Lansdowne Theatre. In particular, unlike the systemic exodus of middle-class residents from the Philadelphia fringe, the middle-class residents in Lansdowne largely remained.⁴³⁴ As a consequence, there were many multi-generational stakeholders who had a vested interest in preserving the architectural history of the borough.⁴³⁵ This interest led to the creation of the Greater Lansdowne Civic Association (GLCA) in 1983.⁴³⁶ Although not very powerful at that the time, the GLCA would later wield considerable political influence with the enrollment of maturing Generation X stakeholders who decided to purchase property and raise families in the borough. Their growing influence was evident with the aforementioned Fourth of July demonstration to prevent the Lansdowne Theatre from being converted into an electrical supply house.

⁴²⁹ Delaware County RD—23000174800; Delaware County TR—23000174800; HLTC—History.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴³¹ HLTC—History.

⁴³² Delaware County RD—23000174800; Delaware County TR—23000174800; HLTC—History.

⁴³³ Heavens.

⁴³⁴ LEDC—MCDL2003.

⁴³⁵ GLCA.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*

In 1991, almost two years after the demonstration, a group of sympathetic investors known as “29-37 N. Lansdowne, Inc.” purchased the vacant theatre for \$150,000 through an auction held by the Resolution Trust Company (RTC)—a government-owned asset liquidation entity (created after the S&L crisis) that had recently acquired Bell Savings and Loan.⁴³⁷ The theatre was long overdue for renovations by this time; and though the new owners invested roughly \$600,000 to upgrade the retail/office spaces, and even signed an agreement in 1995 with the local Lansdowne Performing Arts Center nonprofit to lease the theatre “[...] for \$1 a month for five years,” neither the investors nor the ephemeral nonprofit could obtain financing to convert the auditorium into a performing arts center.⁴³⁸ Unable to find an economic use for the auditorium, Lansdowne, Inc. subsequently put the property up for sale in 1999 for \$850,000.⁴³⁹

Such problems in obtaining a permanent user for the Lansdowne Theatre, as well as for many other central business district (CBD) properties, motivated business owners, civic leaders, and local preservationists to establish the Lansdowne Economic Development Corporation nonprofit (LEDC) in 1998.⁴⁴⁰ Modeled after the National Trust’s Main Street Program, the LEDC sought ways to leverage the historic assets of Lansdowne’s CBD against the detrimental effects of encroaching retail sprawl along nearby Baltimore Avenue/Pike. To obtain state funding, the LEDC applied to the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) for recognition as an official Main Street Program in 1999.⁴⁴¹ The DCED rejected the application, recommending that the borough or

⁴³⁷ Delaware County RD—23000174800; Delaware County TR—23000174800; HLTC—History; Miles, 138.

⁴³⁸ (quote) Jeter; HLTC—History.

⁴³⁹ Jeter.

⁴⁴⁰ LEDC—History; LFM; Rose.

⁴⁴¹ LEDC—History; LEDC—MCDL2003.

the LEDC conduct a formal market study before reapplying.⁴⁴²

The rejection marked a turning point for the vacant Lansdowne Theatre. From 2002 to 2003, the LEDC and the Borough of Lansdowne commissioned two planning firms—S. Huffman and Associates; and Urban Partners, respectively—to evaluate the economic potential of Lansdowne’s CBD.⁴⁴³ The consensus among the studies was that the vacant Lansdowne Theatre should be rehabilitated and converted into a performing arts center to draw restaurateurs, cultural tourists, and small local businesses into the CBD.⁴⁴⁴ Based on the findings of these studies, and with assistance from State Representative Nicholas Micozzie, the LEDC resubmitted its application to become an official Main Street Program in 2005.⁴⁴⁵ The DCED approved the application, and the LEDC received \$1.5 million, \$900,000 of which was appropriated for the acquisition and renovation of the Lansdowne Theatre.⁴⁴⁶ Thereafter, “[...] the [GLCA] and the [LEDC] [established] the non-profit Historic Lansdowne Theater Corporation to purchase, stabilize, and restore the theater [...].”⁴⁴⁷ Mathew Schultz, Board Member of the GLCA, longtime resident of Lansdowne, and influential advocate for preservation causes, was hired as the president and only paid staff member of the nonprofit.⁴⁴⁸

The Historic Lansdowne Theatre Corporation (HLTC) eventually purchased the Lansdowne Theatre outright for \$535,000 in 2007.⁴⁴⁹ “[The nonprofit used] the rest of the \$900,000 [to hire John Milner Architects to do a feasibility study], to seal a leak in the theater roof, to reconstruct the broken storm sewer line, to

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Edwards—RD; Lansdowne Borough Downtown District Redevelopment Plan; LEDC—MCDL2003; Rose; Sanfilippo.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Bearden; LEDC—History; LFM.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ HLTC—History.

⁴⁴⁸ GLCA; HLTC—History; Winnemore.

⁴⁴⁹ Delaware County RD—23000174800; Delaware County TR—23000174800; HLTC—History.

provide temporary lighting in the auditorium, [to install] smoke and fire detection [systems], and to bring the retail and office spaces in compliance with building codes.”⁴⁵⁰ Due to these improvements, the property, except for the auditorium, is now fully occupied with small but mutually compatible local businesses, such as Cinema 16:9 (an independent movie store with a small screening room) and the Regency Café & Bake Shop. However, given the current economic crisis and the impending cutbacks to balance the state budget, the nonprofit is currently reliant on volunteer assistance, private donations, revenues from its office/retail tenants, and rental fees for licensing the roof/airspace to cell phone carriers. Additional revenues are forthcoming as the nonprofit, which publically announced its plans to convert the auditorium into a performing arts center/independent stage theatre on 3 October 2009, held an *a cappella* fundraising concert on 17 April 2010.⁴⁵¹ The concert was the first time the auditorium has served as a venue for cinematic/theatrical exhibition in twenty-two years.⁴⁵²

B) *Current State of Preservation (Figures 40-44)*

The Lansdowne Theatre is the most well preserved theatre associated with William Harold Lee in the Philadelphia-metropolitan region. Except for the renovated office/retail space, the theatre’s historic fabric has not been significantly altered.⁴⁵³ However, years of moisture infiltration from a broken storm sewer line and an open roof caused considerable damage to the interior.⁴⁵⁴ The HLTC repaired these leaks with volunteer assistance, but the physical damage to the ceiling and the stage remain to this day. Future renovations are contingent on additional funding and well as on the proposed use for the interior. Although

⁴⁵⁰ (quote) Bjorkgren; HLTC—History; LEDC—History.

⁴⁵¹ HLTC—Lansdowne Theater News.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*

⁴⁵³ National Register—LT.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Mathew Schultz anticipates a performing arts venue with stage acts akin to that of the Keswick Theatre, he was careful not to divulge too many details during the press conference on 3 October 2009 or in subsequent media interviews.⁴⁵⁵ In particular, he mentioned that previous owners promised Lansdowne residents many unrealized dreams during the past thirty years, and he does not want to repeat those mistakes.⁴⁵⁶ Instead he plans to wait until John Milner Architects and outside theatre consultants carefully assess the possibilities for the theatre, before he will be ready to announce his vision. During the meantime, he will continue to hold periodic benefit concerts like the recent *a cappella* performance to raise revenues for incremental rehabilitation projects, such as the restoration of the marquee.

C) *Impact of Preservation Ordinances on Current State of Preservation*⁴⁵⁷

It was only within the past four years that the Borough passed a formal preservation ordinance for the CBD. More specifically, the Borough Council of the Borough of Lansdowne adopted Ordinance No. 1220 on 18 October 2006. The ordinance mandates that downtown historic properties with frontages along designated portions of Lansdowne, Owen, and Maple avenues must adhere to the *Secretary of Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*. These standards are enforced by the Historic Architectural Review Board, meaning that,

No person shall commence or cause to be commenced any work involving the erection, alteration, restoration, reconstruction, demolition or razing of any building or structure within the Historic District without first applying for and obtaining a certificate of

⁴⁵⁵ Bjorkgren.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ (citations apply to whole section) The Borough of Lansdowne, "Lansdowne Code" (accessed April 6, 2010) (hereafter cited as Lansdowne Code); The Borough of Lansdowne, "The Lansdowne Borough Zoning Ordinance (2008)" (accessed April 6, 2010) (hereafter cited as Lansdowne Zoning Ordinance).

appropriateness from the Borough Council [...].⁴⁵⁸

Moreover, the Borough of Lansdowne also revised its zoning ordinance in 2008 to create an official CBD. This overlay imposes a combination of design, height, bulk, preservation, and use regulations on all properties within the CBD. Although the preservation guidelines are weaker than those mandated in the preservation ordinance, the use requirements are far stricter than those mandated in the previous zoning ordinance. In particular, the following uses are permitted by right:

Retail store; personal services; sit-down restaurants; banks or financial institutions; movie, performing arts, and play theaters; offices, excluding client based social service providers; and general offices; libraries; artist studios or dance studios; art galleries; U.S. Postal Service retail offices; municipal buildings; and mixed-use development incorporating the above uses.⁴⁵⁹

Conversely, the following uses are prohibited:

Automobile related uses; adult entertainment uses; fortune telling establishments; pawnshops; tattoo parlors; parking lots and garages, when not as accessory uses; institutional uses, including hospitals and churches, synagogues and mosques and other places of worship; fast food restaurants; massage parlors; arcades; community centers; hotels/motels; family homes or daycare centers; and check cashing establishments.⁴⁶⁰

The combined effect of these two recent ordinances is that the Lansdowne Theatre has numerous regulatory protections, making it extremely unlikely that, if the nonprofit were to fail, future property owners would ever alter the façade or change the cinematic use of the theatre. But as a corollary, one can only hope that the nonprofit succeeds, because the theatre would otherwise remain vacant with such robust restrictions.

⁴⁵⁸ Lansdowne Code.

⁴⁵⁹ Lansdowne Zoning Ordinance.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

Conclusion

There are three interdependent factors that make it highly likely that the Historic Lansdowne Theatre Corporation (HLTC) will become a sustainable nonprofit: community support, governmental support, and comprehensive development initiatives. Two additional factors—the future venue, and additional state funding—have not yet been established, but will play an increasing role in the redevelopment process.

- *Community Support*—Without the direct support of sympathetic investors, the Greater Lansdowne Civic Association (GLCA), and the Lansdowne Economic Development Corporation (LEDC), the Lansdowne Theatre probably would have been converted into another use. In particular, ever since the Harrison family sold the theater in 1979, three different investors and one nonprofit tenant attempted to retain the cinematic/theatrical use of the theatre. The only exception is the failed attempt by Bell Savings and Loan to convert the theatre into an electrical supply house that was prevented by a grassroots Fourth of July demonstration organized by the GLCA. Since the demonstration, the GLCA has grown in influence as it lobbied for the reuse of the Lansdowne Theatre, as well as for the preservation of many other historic buildings in Lansdowne, thus explaining why one of its members eventually became the president of the HLTC.⁴⁶¹ Today the GLCA has the support of 600 households—a sizable interest group given that many of the households have two or more adults and that the 2008 population estimate for Lansdowne is only 10,368.⁴⁶² Related to the GLCA is the LEDC. Composed of merchants, civic leaders, as well as members from the GLCA; the LEDC was one of the reasons why the HLTC received the \$900,000 community development

⁴⁶¹ GLCA.

⁴⁶² U.S. Census Bureau, “2006-2008 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates,” U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov> (accessed March 22, 2010); GLCA—“About Us.”

grant.⁴⁶³ The LEDC also commissioned or advocated for numerous downtown economic development studies, successfully lobbied alongside the GLCA for the adoption of the 2006 preservation ordinance and the 2008 zoning code revisions, and organized the weekly farmers market that draws a more regional audience to Lansdowne.⁴⁶⁴

- *Governmental Support*—The HLTC has the backing of State Representative Nicholas Micozzie, who helped the LEDC obtain Main Street status and the \$1,500,000 community development grant; as well as of Lansdowne Mayor Jayne Young and the Borough Council, who both helped implement the latest preservation/zoning ordinances and publically supported the redevelopment of the Lansdowne Theatre.⁴⁶⁵ Consequently, both politicians and the Borough Council are too politically invested in the redevelopment plans to let the nonprofit fail, especially since so many residents are members of the GLCA.

- *Comprehensive Development Initiatives*—The HLTC is the product of a well thought out downtown redevelopment plan involving outside market research consultants, planning officials, local politicians, the GLCA, the LEDC, and the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED). Such a plan is important because, even with community and governmental support, the success of a theatre is heavily dependent on the quality, composition, and future direction of the surrounding urban environment, as well as on the blend of local businesses. In this regard, Lansdowne’s central business district (CBD) looks promising, because all the stakeholders, ranging from politicians to local merchants, are in agreement that Lansdowne can only compete with suburban

⁴⁶³ LEDC—“History”; HLTC—History.

⁴⁶⁴ LEDC—“History.”

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.; “Congressman Sestak Congratulates Lansdowne on its Designation as a Preserve America Community” (accessed April 6, 2010); HLTC—History.

sprawl by becoming a mixed-use hub for dining and the arts.

- *Future Venue*—The HLTC hopes that the Lansdowne Theatre will turn out like the comparatively sized Keswick Theatre; but it is important to note that the Glenside Landmarks Society, which operated the Keswick Theatre as a performing arts center between 1981 and 1985, went bankrupt.⁴⁶⁶ Will the HLTC follow such a fate? The author does not think so as there are three key differences: 1) The HLTC obtained \$900,000 in community development grants to acquire the property outright, to stabilize the building, and to find suitable tenants for the second floor office space and the adjacent retail stores; while the underfunded Glenside Landmarks Society was saddled in mortgage debt from the very beginning.⁴⁶⁷ 2) It was only after two market studies and years of discussion and planning that two nonprofits, the Borough of Lansdowne, and the DCED cooperated to form the HLTC. Conversely, concerned neighbors, without much advance planning, formed the Glenside Landmarks Society to prevent the demolition of the Keswick Theatre after the death of the former owner.⁴⁶⁸ 3) The Borough of Lansdowne already has an operating stage group—Celebration Theater—performing out of the historic 20th Century Club.⁴⁶⁹ One might think that two performance theatres would be redundant, but theatre managers could easily diversify the mix of shows—e.g. classics versus contemporary, etc. Furthermore, two theatre companies would most likely have an agglomerative effect by drawing more patrons into the CBD, which is why the LEDC is supporting the renovation of the Lansdowne Theatre and the 20th Century Club (the latter received \$500,000 in community development grants).⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁶ Refer to chapter 3.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.; Bjorkgren; HLTC—History; LEDC—History.

⁴⁶⁸ Refer to chapter 3.

⁴⁶⁹ Celebration Theater, “About Us” (accessed April 6, 2010).

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid. LEDC—History.

- *Availability of Funding*—This is the only unknown due to the impending state budget cuts and the current economic climate. The HLTC is currently writing letters to State Representative Micozzie, State Representative Sestak, and State Senator Specter requesting additional funding.⁴⁷¹ The outcome will have a significant impact on the redevelopment plans because Mathew Schultz intends to retain the interior ornament within the theatre. Given the extent of the water damage, the acoustical requirements for stage theatre, the obsolescent mechanical systems, and the speculative construction period needed to close the theatre down for renovations; the project will need millions in financial support. However, since the HLTC owns the property outright and its tenants occupy all of the office/retail spaces, the nonprofit could survive for the next few years without funding by holding periodic fundraising concerts in the auditorium.⁴⁷² If these concerts prove successful, the nonprofit might be able to translate the media exposure into larger private donations/governmental grants.

⁴⁷¹ Historic Lansdowne Theater Corporation (HLTC), “Get Involved” (accessed April 6, 2010).

⁴⁷² HLTC—Lansdowne Theater News; Winnemore.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Summary

Although numerous situational, financial, and geographical variables, often beyond a community's control, have ultimately contributed to the preservation and continued use of the neighborhood theatres associated with William Harold Lee in the Philadelphia-metropolitan region, this thesis has found that initial community support, either direct or indirect, was a necessary condition common to all of the more successful theatre interventions. However, preservationists must also connect such community support to broader governmental, institutional, or commercial redevelopment objectives, given the considerable financial resources needed to acquire, to rehabilitate, and to operate obsolescent neighborhood theatres. Consider again the following examples:

- *Bryn Mawr Theatre*—After commercial use restrictions prevented the Philadelphia Sports Club from converting the Bryn Mawr Theatre into a high-end fitness facility, Juliet Goodfriend, a former marketing executive and influential trustee of Bryn Mawr College, established the Bryn Mawr Film Institute nonprofit (BMFI). The BMFI then later obtained millions of dollars in institutional donations and governmental subsidies by arguing that a rehabilitated Bryn Mawr Theatre could catalyze café/restaurant/retail activity along a flagging section of Lancaster Avenue. Thereafter, Lower Merion Township passed the far stricter Bryn Mawr Village overlay in 2008 to encourage mixed-use, pedestrian oriented development and to preserve the traditional Main Street character of Bryn Mawr's central business district (CBD).

- *Anthony Wayne Theatre*—The Friends of the Anthony Wayne, unable to

raise enough money to acquire or to lease the Anthony Wayne Theatre following the departure of AMC, urged prospective developers to retain the cinematic function of the theatre, until the nonprofit encountered Stephen Bajus, a sympathetic developer who was “[willing to put up the money and wait for the appropriate tenant]” —Clearview Cinemas.⁴⁷³ Thereafter, Radnor Township adopted the Wayne Business Overlay District in 2005 to preserve the vitality and traditional Main Street character of Wayne’s CBD.

- *Hiway Theatre*—Jenkintown residents and business leaders, worried about the future direction of Jenkintown’s ailing CBD, established the Jenkintown Community Alliance (JCA)—a nonprofit Main Street Program later recognized by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED)—with the support of the Jenkintown Borough Council. The JCA then established the Hiway Theatre nonprofit (HTC) to acquire and to rehabilitate the obsolescent Hiway Theatre. Thereafter, by arguing that the Hiway Theatre could serve as a necessary anchor for the redevelopment of Jenkintown’s Main Street corridor, the HTC, with the support of the Jenkintown Borough Council and the JCA, obtained an \$850,000 community development grant and a \$250,000 “Anchor Building Grant.” Moreover, during the same period that the HTC acquired and rehabilitated the Hiway Theatre, the Jenkintown Borough Council adopted the Uptown Commercial District and the Jenkintown Business Improvement District in 2003 and 2006, respectively, to encourage pedestrian oriented development and to preserve the traditional Main Street character of Jenkintown’s CBD.

- *Lansdowne Theatre*—Lansdowne residents, intent on preserving the borough’s historic architecture and small town character, established the Greater Lansdowne Civic Association (GLCA) in 1983. Although a small nonprofit at the

⁴⁷³ Blakinger—MHCLW.

time, the GLCA subsequently wielded considerable influence, as encroaching commercial sprawl along Baltimore Pike/Avenue began to threaten the commercial viability of the CBD. Such influence encouraged merchants, civic leaders, members of the GLCA, and concerned residents to establish the Lansdowne Economic Development Corporation (LEDC)—a nonprofit Main Street Program later recognized by the DCED—in 1998. In particular, after the borough and the LEDC commissioned two economic development studies, the LEDC became a state sponsored Main Street Program and received \$1,500,000—\$900,000 of which was appropriated for the acquisition and rehabilitation of the Lansdowne Theatre—in community development grants from the DCED in 2005. With the \$900,000, the LEDC then established the Historic Lansdowne Theatre Corporation (HLTC) and nominated Mathew Schultz, a longtime member of the GLCA, as the President and only paid staff member of the HLTC. Finally, following the acquisition of the Lansdowne Theatre, the Lansdowne Borough Council adopted an historic districts ordinance and a downtown overlay in 2006 and 2008, respectively, to foster a “dining and the arts” economy and to preserve the traditional Main Street character of Lansdowne’s CBD.

The common outcome among these four examples is that the acquisition and rehabilitation of a neighborhood theatre contributed to, or at least preceded or coincided with, the creation of more stringent regulatory protections, as local political units (boroughs or townships) attempted to establish or to preserve a mixed-use “dining and the arts” economy.

Recommendations

Except in the few cases in which a wealthy benefactor provides direct subsidies, such as what happened with the Walnut Street Theatre, preservationists

must connect the preservation of their respective neighborhood theatres to broader and more comprehensive development initiatives. In this regard, the Lansdowne Theatre case study is a representative example of how a middle-class suburban community with limited financial resources can preserve an obsolescent neighborhood theatre. The author summarizes the lessons from this case study, as well as those from the Bryn Mawr Theatre, the Hiway Theatre, and the Anthony Wayne Theatre case studies, under the following bullet points. Readers should be aware, however, that these bullet points are a “kit of parts” as opposed to being a step by step roadmap, which is why there is no numerical progression. Stakeholders should fulfill as many of these variables as possible to increase the probability of preserving a neighborhood theatre.

- *Establish a grassroots preservation nonprofit*—Neighborhood theatres need a vocal watchdog, akin to the Greater Lansdowne Civic Association or the Lower Merion Conservancy, to ensure that speculative developers cannot convert an obsolescent neighborhood theatre into an incompatible use without public scrutiny. Additionally, grassroots preservation nonprofits often attract a diverse constituency of stakeholders. These stakeholders may one day become the future members of or donors to a nonprofit theatre corporation. Local politicians are also more sympathetic to the rehabilitation of historic theatres if there is a sizable interest group.

- *Establish a state recognized Main Street Program*—Where they exist, state sponsored Main Street Programs have the potential to obtain sizable community development grants, especially if participating communities—e.g. Jenkintown and Lansdowne—market their respective neighborhood theatres as potential catalysts or anchors for a mixed-use “dining and the arts economy.” However, the author must caution that these programs are very competitive, as there are many Main

Street Programs and only a finite amount of state funding.

- *Commission a market study*—Related to the previous point, Main Street nonprofits or local political units (townships, boroughs, etc.) need third party verification that a neighborhood theatre can catalyze retail/cafe/restaurant activity. Such evidence is often a prerequisite for state funding, such as the DCED community development grant. Furthermore, politicians and business/institutional leaders are more willing to support a project that can be reasonably predicted to have a measurable economic outcome.

- *Create a downtown redevelopment plan*—Building on the market study, the business community, local politicians, area residents, and planning officials should collaborate on a downtown redevelopment plan that offers a realistic vision for the CBD. However, there needs to be broader stakeholder support within a given community for such a plan to be implemented. Zoning and preservation ordinances are also more effective and far easier to justify when guided towards specific development objectives, such as preserving the character of a traditional Main Street District or fostering a “dining and the arts” economy centered around a neighborhood theatre, outdoor cafes, restaurants, etc.

- *Obtain a political or institutional sponsor*—Political and institutional sponsors were integral to the preservation and continued use of the Bryn Mawr, Hiway, and Lansdowne theatres. For example, the BMFI created “community partnerships” with and received considerable financial support from numerous religious and academic institutions such as Bryn Mawr College, Cabrini College, the Baldwin School, the Shipley School, the Haverford School, the Beth David Reform Congregation, and the Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy.⁴⁷⁴ Similarly, the HTC and the HLTC both received political backing from Borough Council

⁴⁷⁴ Bryn Mawr Film Institute, “BMFI Community Sponsors” (accessed March 21, 2010).

members and from local Representatives (i.e. Larry Curry, Nicholas Micozzie, and Allyson Schwartz).

- *Proactively establish a nonprofit theatre corporation*—Community groups should establish a tax-exempt nonprofit *before* there is a direct threat to a neighborhood theatre, given the time it takes for nonprofits to raise awareness, to recruit members, and to amass a sufficient amount of charitable donations. But how can one predict when a property will go up for sale? Based on the author’s observations, unless there is an untimely death of the property owner, usually the departure of a longtime cinematic/theatrical tenant precedes most changes in ownership. Moreover, Main Street managers, community preservation organizations, and the local news media are often very good at anticipating future sales.

- *Hire a theatre/cinema consultant and a preservation architect*—Neighborhood theatres are one of the most expensive buildings to preserve, especially since previous owners often delayed major maintenance projects (e.g. a leaky roof, a broken water line, outdated mechanical systems, etc.) and covered over historic elements with dry wall and drop ceilings to reduce costs. In this respect, an initial assessment from a preservation architect can help nonprofits estimate rehabilitation expenses and determine which historic elements are worthy of preservation. A theatre consultant should also conduct a pre-design needs assessment/market study so that the nonprofit can develop an economic use for its theatre.

- *Lobby for a downtown preservation ordinance and a mixed-use zoning overlay*—Commercial use restrictions, most likely from a mixed-use zoning overlay, in combination with a downtown preservation ordinance, have the greatest potential to administratively protect neighborhood theatres from sudden changes in use and from exterior alterations. The Bryn Mawr and Lansdowne theatres are located

in areas with these two protections. Jenkintown's CBD, where the Hiway Theatre is located, also has a mixed-use overlay that functions as a quasi preservation ordinance.

Future Research

As suggested by the aforementioned recommendations, preservationists must connect the preservation of their respective neighborhood theatres to broader and more comprehensive development initiatives. However, very few studies, except for the oft-cited Americans for the Arts economic impact study and its regional variants, evaluate whether the rehabilitation of neighborhood theatres actually catalyzes downtown redevelopment or spurs a thriving "dining and the arts" economy.⁴⁷⁵ Rather, the author noticed that there is the tacit assumption among preservation nonprofits, township/borough officials, and local politicians that "if we rehabilitate a theatre, then the investment, restaurants, cafes, etc. will follow." Such an assumption may or may not be true. But perhaps this is a necessary assumption to justify and to generate support for a project that would otherwise require millions in taxpayer dollars.

There is another alternative. Future research should evaluate a large sample of CBD redevelopment projects centered around the rehabilitation of a historic theatre to determine whether the catalytic benefits reaped from publically subsidizing the renovation of historic theatres outweigh the costs for doing nothing or for investing the public money in other downtown redevelopment projects. The author hopes that such studies will reveal that the rehabilitation of historic theatres is well worth the initial public investment. If true, then preservationists could objectively claim that theatre renovation projects, more often than not, catalyze

⁴⁷⁵ Americans for the Arts, "Arts & Economic Prosperity III: The Economic Impact of Nonprofit Arts and Culture Organizations and Their Audiences" (accessed April 12, 2010).

downtown development; and as a result, state agencies would probably be more willing to subsidize theatre rehabilitation projects and may even increase the cap for such subsidies.

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FIGURES

- Figures 1-2.** Anthony Wayne Theatre
- Figures 3-4.** Bryn Mawr Theatre
- Figures 5-6.** Hiway Theatre
- Figures 7-9.** Narberth Theatre
- Figures 10-13.** Walnut Street Theatre
- Figure 14.** Century Theatre
- Figure 15.** City Line Center Theatre
- Figure 16.** Eric's Place/Trans-Lux Theatre
- Figures 17-18.** Forum/Ellis/Xtasy Theatre
- Figures 19-20.** Grand Theatre (Bristol)
- Figure 21.** Grand Theatre (Philadelphia)
- Figure 22.** Green Hill Theatre
- Figures 23-24.** Holiday/Ace/Windsor Theatre
- Figure 25.** Holme/Penypack Theatre
- Figures 26-27.** Jefferson Theatre
- Figures 28-29.** Lawndale Theatre
- Figures 30-31.** Lindy Theatre
- Figures 32-33.** Model Theatre
- Figure 34.** Northeastern Theatre
- Figure 35.** Rialto Theatre
- Figures 36-37.** Sedgwick Theatre
- Figure 38.** Suburban Theatre
- Figure 39.** Royal Theatre
- Figures 40-44.** Lansdowne Theatre



Figure 1. Anthony Wayne Theatre
William Harold Lee Original Architect (1927-1928)
Source: PAB
109 W. Lancaster Avenue, Wayne
Photo by Author



Figure 2. Anthony Wayne Theatre
Photo Courtesy of the Radnor Historical Society



Figure 3. Bryn Mawr Film Institute/Seville Theatre
William Harold Lee Original Architect (1926)
Source: National Register—ST
824 W. Lancaster Avenue, Bryn Mawr
Photo by Author



Figure 4. Bryn Mawr Film Institute/Seville Theatre (circa 1927)
Photo Courtesy of BMFI



Figure 5. Hiway Theatre
William Harold Lee—Additions/Alterations (1925)
Source: PAB
212 York Road, Jenkintown
Photo by Author



Figure 6. Hiway Theatre (1965)
Photo Courtesy of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia



Figure 7. Narberth Theatre (After 2004 Renovations)
Possible Original Architects: Jacob Ethan Fieldstein/William Harold Lee (1927)
Source: Cinema Treasures—NT
129 N. Narberth Avenue, Narberth
Photo by Author



Figure 8. Narberth Theatre (Prior to 2004 Renovations)
Photo Courtesy of Rob Bender—www.RobBender.com



Figure 9. Narberth Theatre Auditorium (Prior to 2004 Renovations)
Photo Courtesy of Rob Bender—www.RobBender.com



Figure 10. Walnut Street Theatre
William Harold Lee—Restoration/Renovation (1920-1921)
Source: Bulletin of the Philadelphia Old Town Historical Society, 26-32; Weil. 51-63
827-833 Walnut Street, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 11. Walnut Street Theatre (1952)
Source: Harvard and Sylvester, 87

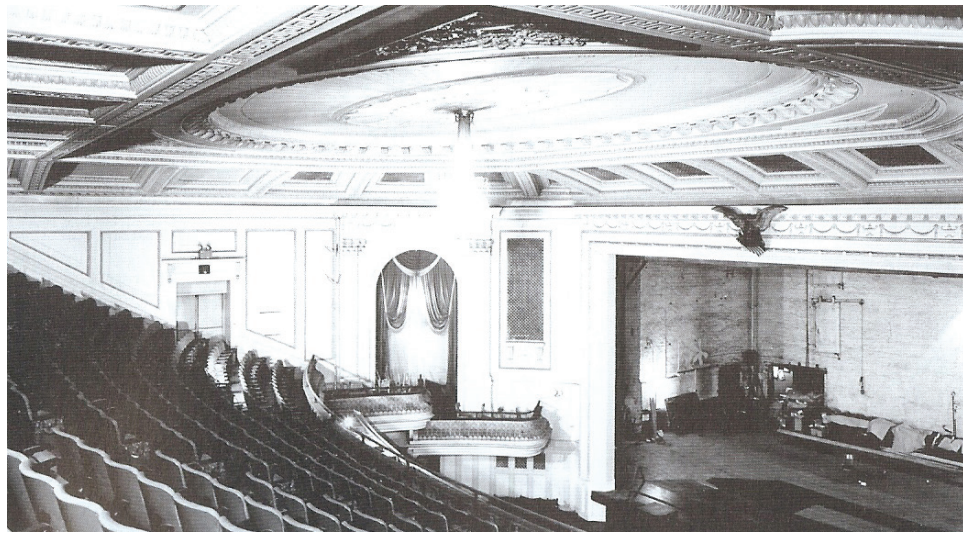


Figure 12. Walnut Street Theatre Auditorium (1952)
Source: Harvard and Sylvester, 87

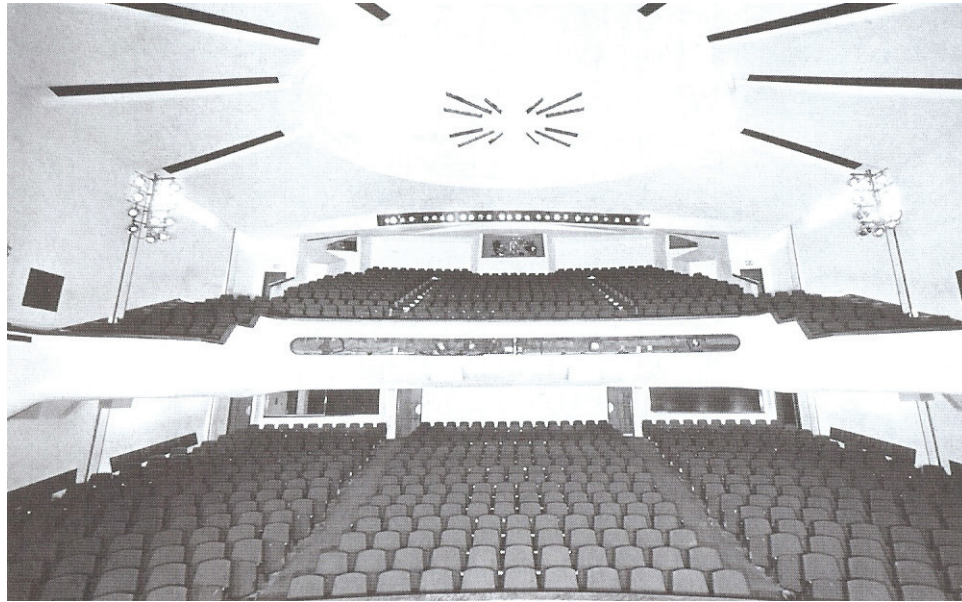


Figure 13. Modernized Walnut Street Theatre Auditorium
Source: Harvard and Sylvester, 104



Figure 14. Century Theatre
William Harold Lee—Restoration/Renovation (1927); Additions/Alternations (1938)
Source: Glazer, 80; PAB
Erie Avenue and Marshall Street, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 15. City Line Center Theatre
William Harold Lee Original Architect (circa 1930s)
Source: Glazer, 86.
7600 City Avenue, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 16. Eric's Place/Trans-Lux Theatre
William Harold Lee William Harold Lee—Additions/Alterations (1970)
Source: Glazer, 227; PAB
1519 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 17. Forum/Ellis/Xtasy Theatre
William Harold Lee Original Architect (1928)
Source: Glazer, 116-117; PAB
5231 Frankford Avenue, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 18. Forum/Ellis/Xtasy Theatre (circa 1945)
Photo Courtesy of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia



Figure 19. Grand Theatre
William Harold Lee Original Architect (circa 1928)
Source: Cinema Treasures; Longstreth
422 Mill Street, Bristol
Photo by Author



Figure 20. Grand Theatre
Auditorium Converted into Housing
Photo by Author



Figure 21. Grand Theatre
William Harold Lee—Additions/Alterations (1937)
Source: Glazer, 131; PAB
S. 7th Street and Snyder Avenue, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 22. Green Hill Theatre
Author Could Not Confirm William Harold Lee's Involvement
Source: Longstreth
6217-6219 Lancaster Avenue, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 23. Holiday/Ace/Windsor Theatre
William Harold Lee—Additions/Alterations (1938); Interior Redecorating (circa 1970)
Source: Glazer, 54; PAB
4204-4212 Kensington Avenue, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 24. Holiday/Ace/Windsor Theatre (circa 1970s)
Photo Courtesy of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia



Figure 25. Holme/Penypak Theatre
William Harold Lee Original Architect (1929)
Source: Glazer, 136; PAB
8049 Frankford Avenue, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 26. Jefferson Theatre
William Harold Lee—Additions/Alternations (1926)
Source: Glazer, 140; PAB
2217-2223 N. 29th Street, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 27. Jefferson Theatre
Photo Courtesy of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia



Figure 28. Lawndale Theatre
William Harold Lee—Additions/Alternations (1937)
Source: Glazer, 149; PAB
Rising Sun Avenue and Fanshawe Street, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 29. Lawndale Theatre
Photo Courtesy of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia



Figure 30. Lindy Theatre
William Harold Lee Original Architect (1927-1928)
Source: Glazer, 153-154; PAB
6900 Elmwood Avenue, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 31. Lindy Theatre (circa 1945)
Photo Courtesy of the Athenaeum



Figure 32. Model Theatre
William Harold Lee—Additions/Alternations (1930)
Source: Glazer, 171; PAB
425 South Street, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 33. Model Theatre
Photo Courtesy of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia



Figure 34. Northeastern Theatre
William Harold Lee Original Architect (1923)
Source: Glazer, 177; PAB
6031-6039 Torresdale Avenue, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 35. Rialto Theatre
William Harold Lee—Additions/Alternations (1931)
Source: Glazer, 197; PAB
6153 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 36. Sedgwick Theatre
William Harold Lee Original Architect (1928)
Source: Glazer, 206-207; PAB
7133-7141 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 37. Sedgwick Theatre
Photo Courtesy of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia



Figure 38. Suburban Theatre
William Harold Lee Architect (1937)
Source: Cinema Treasures—ST
Saint James Place and Montgomery Avenue, Ardmore
Photo by Author



Figure 39. Royal Theatre
William Harold Lee—Additions/Alterations (1925)
Source: Glazer, 203-204; PAB
1524-1534 South Street, Philadelphia
Photo by Author



Figure 40. Lansdowne Theatre
William Harold Lee Original Architect (circa 1927)
Source: National Register—LT
29-33 N. Lansdowne Avenue, Lansdowne
Photo by Author



Figure 41. Lansdowne Theatre Close-Up
Photo by Author



Figure 42. Lansdowne Theatre (1962)
Photo Courtesy of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia



Figure 43. Lansdowne Theatre Auditorium
Photo by Author



Figure 44. Lansdowne Theatre Auditorium
Photo Courtesy of the Athenaeum of Philadelphia

INDEX

A

AMC—37-38, 41-42, 46-47, 54-55, 65, 108
Americans for the Arts—10, 12, 113
Anchor—viii, 3, 8, 11, 40, 42, 45-46, 49, 54, 58, 81-83, 108, 110
Anchor Building Grant—45, 49, 58, 108

B

Baby Boomer—2, 6
Bajus, Stephen—42, 54, 108
Board of Commissioners—51, 56
Board of Directors—44, 58-59, 72-73, 84
Board of Trustees—70
Borough
 Jenkintown—44, 58, 61, 108
 Lansdowne—95, 109
 Narberth—64
 Yeadon—92
Borough Council—44, 58, 61-62, 65, 101-102, 104, 108-109, 111
Bryn Mawr College—39, 49, 107, 111
Budco Theatres—38, 41, 47, 55
Building Code—15, 96, 100

C

Carroll, Armand D.—29
Central Business District (CBD)—8-9, 34, 53, 56, 66, 79, 91-93, 95, 98-99, 101-102
 104-105, 107-109, 111, 113
Certificate of Occupancy—21
Church—6, 13, 18, 21, 33, 80, 87-89, 102
Clearview Cinemas—42, 47, 54-55, 65, 108
County
 Bucks—ix, 25, 31-32

Chester—ix, 25, 31-32
Delaware—ix, 25, 31-32
Montgomery—ix, 25, 31-32, 34
Philadelphia—ix, 1, 32, 36-37, 65, 89
Curry, State Representative—45, 58, 112

D

Dabney, Mother Elizabeth Juanita—87
Debt-Service-Coverage-Ratio—16, 21
Developer—3, 37, 42, 44, 54, 56, 61, 63-64, 78, 108, 110
Dickey, Weissman, Chandler and Holt—69, 74, 75
Dining and the Arts—105, 109-111, 113
Downtown—2, 8-9, 11, 15, 27, 34, 53, 65, 79, 101, 104, 109, 111-114
Drive-In Theatre—2, 31

E

Economic Impact Study—10, 113
Estate—39, 49, 62

F

Feasibility—12, 16-18, 20-21, 96, 99
Fellner, Betty Ann—iii, 82-86
Foundational—8, 78
Friends of the Anthony Wayne Theatre—41-42, 53-54, 107
Furness & Evans Co.—viii, 26

G

Galanti, Joseph D. & Joseph J.—44, 57
Garden of Prayer World's Prayer Center—iii, 86
Glenside Landmarks Society—59, 105
Golden, Michael—44, 58
Goodfriend, Juliet—39-40, 49, 53, 107
Governmental—6, 8, 14-15, 49, 54, 58-59, 78, 81, 83, 103-104, 106-107
Greater Lansdowne Civic Association (GLCA)—57, 91, 93, 95-97, 99, 103-104,

H

- Haas Community Funds/William Penn Foundation—69, 70, 72, 74, 77-78
Haas, Dorothy—68-69, 72
Haas, Dr. F. Otto—72, 76
Harvard, Bernard—70-71, 73
Haviland, John—67, 69, 74-76
Historic District—52, 54, 56, 85-88, 101, 109
Historic Lansdowne Theatre Corporation (HLTC)—iii, 91, 95-96, 99-100, 103-106,
109, 111
Historic Tax-Credit—18, 20, 23
Hiway Theatre, Inc.—44-45, 48
Household Income—37, 66, 80, 92
Hurst, Harry—42, 54

I

- Institutional—6, 8, 12-14, 21, 49, 78, 102, 107, 117

J

- Jackson, Deacon—86
Jenkintown Business & Professional Association—44, 57
Jenkintown Community Alliance (JCA)—44, 58-59, 78, 108

K

- Kahn, Louis—viii, 43
Keystone Historic Preservation Grant—49

L

- Lansdowne Economic Development Corporation (LEDC) —91, 94-96, 98-99,
100, 103-105, 108
Lansdowne Farmers Market—96
League of Historic American Theatres (LHAT)—5-6

Lee, William Harold—25-31
Loan—17, 21, 58-60, 94, 97-98, 103
Loan-to Value-Ratio—16-17, 21
Loving, F. Bryan—69, 74-76
Lower Merion Conservancy—110

M

Main Line—36-37, 39, 46, 48-49, 51, 63-65, 77, 92
Main Line Health Realty—39, 51
Main Street Program—44, 58-59, 78, 95, 98-99, 108-111
Market Studies/Development Plans—18, 95, 99, 104, 106, 111-112
Megaplex—viii, ix, 1, 3-4, 6-7, 37-38, 42, 47-48, 54, 63-64, 77
Merlin, Irvin—43-44, 57, 60-61
Micozzie, State Representative—95-96, 99, 104, 106, 112
Mortgage—21-22, 60, 83, 105

N

National Historic Landmark—51, 68
National Park Service—15, 77
National Register of Historic Places—15, 40, 51-53, 69, 86, 91, 94
National Trust for Historic Preservation—viii, 12, 17, 20, 23, 98

O

Ordinance—17, 51-52, 56, 61, 64-65, 76, 78-79, 85, 87, 92, 101-102, 104, 109, 111-113
Ornament—29, 42, 55, 64, 84-85, 87-88, 106

P

Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED)—
44, 58-59, 78, 95, 98-99, 104-105, 108-109, 111
Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC)—40, 52, 69, 94
Peruto, Charles—44, 57-58
Philadelphia Drama Guild—70, 73
Philadelphia Historical Commission—36, 76-77

Philadelphia-Metropolitan Region—ix, 24-26, 31-32, 34, 36, 64, 100, 107
Philadelphia Register of Historic Places—86, 88
Philadelphia Sports Club—38-39, 47, 52-53, 81, 107
Playhouse Square—10, 12
Preservation Alliance of Philadelphia—40, 51

R

Rendell, Governor—40, 45, 49, 58
Rowland, David—44, 57

S

Schultz, Mathew—95, 99, 101, 106, 109
Schwartz, State Representative—45, 48, 58, 112
Secretary of Interior's Standards—15-16, 51, 101
Sedgwick Cultural Center—83-84, 89
Sestak, State Representative—106
Shamokin—25-26
Specter, State Senator—106

T

Theatre

Ambler—40
AMC Neshaminy (24)—46
Anthony Wayne—32, 36, 41-42, 47-48, 53-56, 63, 78-79, 107-108,
110
Ardmore—38-39, 46-47, 49-52, 79, 81
Bala—63
Bryn Mawr—32, 36, 38-42, 47-53, 59, 78-79, 81, 96, 107, 110-112
Century—33, 88
City Line Center—33
County—40-41
Eric's Place/Trans-Lux—31, 33, 88
Forum/Ellis/Xtasy—33, 88

Grand (Bristol)—33, 88
Grand (Philadelphia) —33
Green Hill—33, 88, 89
Hiway—32, 36, 42-45, 48, 56-62, 78-79, 108, 110-111, 113
Holiday/Ace/Windsor—33, 89
Holme/Penypack/Jefferson—33, 88
Jefferson—33, 80, 82, 86-90
Keswick—59, 72, 78, 101, 105
Lansdowne—34-35, 91, 93, 95-103, 108-112
Lawndale—33, 88
Lindy—33, 88
Marple 10—46, 63
Model—33, 88
Narberth—32, 39, 45-48, 50, 62-65, 79
Northeastern—33, 88
Plymouth Meeting (12)—46
Rialto—33, 88
Royal—34
Sedgwick—33, 80, 82-86, 89
Suburban—33, 88
United Artists King of Prussia (Stadium 16)—46
Walnut—1, 26, 33, 66-77, 109

Township

Abington—37
Cheltenham—37, 60
Clifton—92
Lower Merion—37, 39, 51-52, 78, 92, 107
Radnor—36-37, 56, 92, 100
Upper Darby—92

U

United Artists Theatre Circuit—37-38, 47, 49, 55
Urban Land Institute—12, 16-17

V

Variance—38-39, 49-50, 52, 63, 65

W

Wax, Greg—39-40, 46, 49, 62

Z

Zoning—15, 17, 31, 39, 44, 49-50, 58-59, 61-63, 65, 102, 104, 111-112