

# Deco Bookshelf: Detroit Theaters

By **Jim Sweeney**

Detroit's economic collapse in the decades after World War II helped preserve many of its movie theaters, according to *Motor City Marquees* by Stuart Galbraith (McFarland & Co. Inc., \$20, paperback). There wasn't a lot of new construction creating pressure to demolish them.

It's an interesting argument--a positive side to Detroit's troubles. Many theaters survived to be converted to concert halls or clubs, or even reopen as movie theaters. Others could still be saved.

Galbraith's tour of Detroit's theaters is a thorough investigation of movie-going in one metropolitan area. You don't have to be from Detroit to learn something from it. It's a sometimes quirky, personalized tour; Galbraith inserts his opinions loudly at times. He says of the Abbey in Madison Heights that "It is a nice theater, despite what is probably the worst parking lot of any theater in this book." He refers to another theater's operations as "pathetic."

Not that theaters were immune to Detroit's problems. Many did close or deteriorate (Galbraith notes that Woodward Avenue is lined with shuttered theaters). Several closed after shootings or arson. Several had metal detectors while they were still in operation. The 2,500-seat Eastown, a neighborhood theater in Detroit, closed in the mid-1980s. Galbraith says "its bad location will probably prevent it from becoming a successful venue again."

Others suffered the usual fates: neglect, collapse, demolition, abandonment, conversion to other uses. The 4,000-seat Michigan Theater, a 1928 French Baroque palace by Rapp and Rapp, closed in 1967. It briefly reopened as a movie theater, became a night club, then a concert hall, then became a parking garage in the 1970s.

The lobby, upper balcony, projection booth and stage area are intact. Galbraith suspects the contractor feared that gutting the building completely would make it structurally unsound. The book includes a photo of people touring the Michigan's interior, with cars parked behind them.

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Detroit's Alhambra became a recording studio in the 1970s. Many theaters became churches or stores. Dearborn's Carmen, a stripped-down 1941 deco building, had a round lobby with a gearlike structure on top, perhaps a reference to nearby Ford Motor Co. It's now an auto parts store. The last incarnation of Walled Lake's now-vacant Lake Theater was as a live bait shop.

The author talks about how hard it is to verify information about old buildings. Current owners often knew nothing about their theaters. When theaters opened their owners often exaggerated seat counts to make them sound more impressive. Seat counts often changed, usually down. The addition of wider screens and renovations often reduced the number of seats, as did the fact that seats got wider as Americans got wider.

Galbraith often had to discount marketing hype. The original owners of the now-closed 1963 Mai Kai in Livonia claimed the parking lot held 3,000 cars. Galbraith estimates the 8.5-acre site could have held 500 cars. "I encountered (sometimes within a single publication) seating counts for some theaters that varied in the thousands, opening dates by decades, and building costs by millions of dollars," Galbraith notes. There's often lots of documentation for the movie palaces, but small neighborhood theaters are nearly invisible in the records, he found.

Similar or duplicate names, plus name changes, also make tracking theaters difficult. The listing for Detroit's 1919 Ferndale says "Not to be confused with the other Ferndale, which was actually located in Ferndale. This Ferndale was renamed the Capitol (not to be confused with the Capitol downtown, which was called the Paramount by then anyway) in 1932."

Even equipment moved. Galbraith found that the Fisher Theater's Wurlitzer organ was moved to the Iris by the Detroit Theater Organ Club in 1957. It is now in the Senate Theater. Organ concerts are held at the Senate, but no films are shown during the concerts; the projection equipment is long gone.

The descriptions of some of the theaters make you want to visit them. The 1922 Italian Renaissance Capitol Theater in downtown Detroit was the city's first real movie palace, Galbraith says. It was claimed to be the world's fifth largest movie theater when it was built, and "remains one of the largest standing film houses in the world." Current seating capacity is 3,367. It became an opera house in the 1990s.

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The 1928 Fisher in Detroit, a 2,711-seat palace, is described as a "wonderfully tacky Mayan design."

The 1928 Fox, in a "Siamese-Byzantine" style, now hosts live events and films. It cost \$3.8 million in 1928, and had a staff of 400. With over 5,000 seats, it is the world's largest operating original movie theater. (Galbraith points out that Radio City Music Hall is bigger, but it began as a music hall, although films were quickly added to the bill.) Waves of theater closings are not unique to our time, nor were they always due to Detroit's economy. In the 1940s, lack of air conditioning often caused theaters to close. Television caused many theaters to close in the 1950s. When the Terrace opened in Livonia in 1962, it was the first new theater in metro Detroit in 14 years.

Theaters often had several lives. The book notes that the 1911 Vendome in Detroit closed in 1932. It ran as the Sun from 1935 to 1937, then as the Seville from 1941 to 1958. Then it was an auto parts warehouse, and was razed. For many other theaters, in Detroit and elsewhere, the last attempt to stay open was showing adult films.

The book offers lots of interesting trivia. Pontiac had one of the nation's few 70-mm drive-ins. Ann Arbor's worst riot occurred when a dispute between an usher at the Star Theater and two University of Michigan students ended with the usher beating the students unconscious. Several thousand rioting students left the theater "a pile of rubble." This didn't happen in the 1960s but in 1908.

One of the most poignant factoids is Detroit's longest-running theater. The Adams was open from 1917 to 1988. The building still stands, vacant.