



Restoration and Modernization, Theatre Regeneration

*Article Courtesy of the Globe and Mail
March 18, 2009*

During the restoration boom years, a number of 19th- and early 20th-century entertainment showplaces -- ornate, even opulent, by today's multiplex standards -- were restored and reinvented as high-tech theatres for live performances and movies.

The total cost was at least \$100-million, according to Janis Barlow, a Toronto-based theatre consultant who managed the \$30-million resurrection of the Elgin and Winter Garden Theatres in downtown Toronto. It costs, on average, \$5-million to \$10-million to bring houses with 600 to 1,600 seats back to modern, artistic life, she adds.

It's a worthy investment. Tourism Toronto estimates half the city's six million annual theatregoers are visitors, and that cultural tourism is a \$1-billion industry in Southern Ontario.

But investors won't step into the financial breach alone. And most communities these days are too busy lobbying governments for better roads, sewers, hospitals and schools to also seek funding for the restoration of old theatres. That leaves many

facing demolition or conversion into bowling alleys, stores or pornographic movie houses.

Winnipeg's downtown development agency is looking for a developer to save the 1919-vintage Metropolitan Theatre, but the neighbouring Capitol Theatre was torn down for a parking lot that is now set to become the site of a \$15-million office building. And the Palace Theatre in Calgary, dating from 1921, closed recently after housing a night club for the past six years.

There are, however, textbook cases of how to do it. Janet MacKinnon, president of the national Historic Theatres' Trust, based in Montreal, cites the Capitol Arts Centre in Port Hope, Ont.

This small, community-minded town, 100 kilometres east of Toronto, raised \$4.4-million in government grants and local donations for the renovation and expansion of a main street movie house.



They turned it into a 380-seat theatre and 110-seat studio theatre, at the same time saving a rare “atmospheric” theatrical setting -- images of clouds and constellations on the ceiling and a faux medieval courtyard painted on the walls.

The audience at a gala, fundraising performance next month will see exactly what the audience saw when the property opened as a cinema in 1930, except for mostly unobtrusive new mechanical, acoustical, lighting and other systems.

Uwe Meyer, the centre’s managing director, says the theatre had been stripped bare and mothballed for several years. The community secured federal and provincial grants of \$400,000, raised \$1-million locally, and borrowed \$200,000. That allowed the theatre to reopen in 1994 in a limited way. The second \$2.8-million phase was enough to finish the initial restoration and expand into an adjoining building, completed in February.

Another of Canada’s few surviving “atmospheric” theatres is the nearly 1,000-seat, city-owned Columbia Theatre in New Westminster, B.C. Opened in 1927, it featured auditorium walls painted with images of a garden wall, Moorish-style grilled windows, wrought-iron lanterns, and an evening-sky ceiling illuminated with stars.

It will take another two years to restore the wall murals, allowing time to raise what Ellie King, managing artistic director of the Burr Performing Arts Society, estimates will be about \$10-million for a full-scale restoration and renovation.

It will reopen as the Raymond Burr Performing Arts Centre, after the late native son who played TV prosecutor Perry Mason.

Janice Barlow likens Port Hope’s theatre project to the Savoy Theatre in Glace Bay, N.S., which was restored and reopened in 1993. Despite a 19-per-cent unemployment rate at the time, residents pitched in to close the government funding gap because “they understood the theatre was the heart and soul of their

community and the importance of having a platform for Cape Breton music,” she says.

That love of old theatres is shared in Quebec, Ms. MacKinnon says. The province had a larger original stock -- 30 theatres in Montreal alone -- and all but a handful are now in operation.

She says the Palais Montcalm theatre in Quebec City is undergoing a handsome renovation and will reopen next spring as a concert hall. It is across the street from the former Auditorium de Québec, an elegant concert hall that opened in 1903 and later became a Capitol movie theatre before closing its doors. Restored in the early 1990s, it now houses the Théâtre Capitole, a boutique hotel and restaurants.

Not all restored theatres are a hit. Ms. MacKinnon points to the multimillion-dollar restoration and redevelopment of the 2,600-seat Lowes theatre in downtown Montreal, converted a few years ago into a Club Med World entertainment venue. It closed last year because of financial losses and is for sale.

Ms. Barlow says that, apart from historic theatres, every municipality in Canada has at least a town hall left, many worthy of preservation. Paul Sapounzi, partner in charge of the Cambridge, Ont., office of Ventin Group Architects of Toronto, agrees.

In Meaford, Ont., the firm has designed a \$4-million restoration and modernization that will turn a 380-seat heritage theatre into a barrier-free, multipurpose performance venue and art gallery above a main floor courtroom. It will be under construction later this year.

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