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## Movie Tradition Fading to Black

*Seventy years after its neon heyday, downtown Los Angeles is struggling to keep its last cinematic venue afloat.*

February 17, 2006 | Cara Mia DiMassa | Times Staff Writer

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There was a time, long ago, when the streets of downtown Los Angeles were awash in neon -- thanks to a confluence of movie theaters the world had never seen before. Dozens of theaters screened Hollywood's latest fare, played host to star-studded premieres and were filled nightly with thousands of moviegoers.

In those days, before World War II, downtown L.A. was the movie capital of the world.

Seventy years later, the area is struggling to keep its last movie venue afloat: the Laemmle Grande, which is barely breaking even.

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Movie Theaters

And the developers behind the \$1.8-billion Grand Avenue Project -- along Grand Avenue near the Music Center and Walt Disney Concert Hall -- have quietly dropped plans to include an art house in its first phase, saying they were unable to persuade movie theaters to take a chance on the project.

Even as downtown enjoys a revival of sorts, with a sizable population jump projected as scores of housing developments open in the next few years, the area has had difficulty attracting certain amenities, including movie theaters.

It's a far cry from the days when downtown's ornate movie palaces -- with names such as Million Dollar Theatre, Roxie and Orpheum -- seated as many as 2,000 people a screening. Broadway alone had 12 theaters, in half as many blocks.

The steep decline of downtown's theaters came in the years after World War II, alongside the rise of the suburbs -- and the shopping malls that came with them. Movie theaters sprang up elsewhere, and people had few reasons to drive downtown.

Some of downtown's movie palaces were destroyed in the ensuing years, often to make way for the burgeoning car culture. The Metropolitan Theatre -- opened by Sid Grauman in 1923 on 6th Street and later called the Paramount Theatre -- was demolished in 1962, replaced with a parking lot and, later, the International Jewelry Center. The RKO Hill Street Theatre, at 8th and Hill, was razed six years later, also for a parking lot.

For a while, the remaining movie palaces tried to keep up with the demographic change, as Broadway became a shopping mecca for Latino immigrants.

Through the early 1990s, many showed second-run movies or films in Spanish, said Ken Bernstein, director of preservation issues for the Los Angeles Conservancy, which is backing an initiative to restore and reinvigorate the Broadway corridor. But eventually those closed too, the last nearly five years ago, Bernstein said.

Some of the theaters have since been refurbished or found new lives as retail complexes, with some of their neon signs restored. But few show films anymore, and when they do it's usually a one-time occasion like a summer revival series.

Some theater owners and downtown backers say they hope to create a theater district along Broadway and open their spaces to movies or live performances, but are frustrated by the lack of parking and loading areas along the street.

Cyrous Davoodian, general manager of Belson Investments, which owns the Palace, State and Los Angeles theaters, said his company has been trying to see "if there is any help from the city to build parking for the theaters so we can open all of them for shows and entertainment." What parking there is in the area, he said, is either committed to residents of new lofts or being used for construction.

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The subterranean Laemmle Grande, which opened in 1984 as part of a hotel complex along Figueroa, continues to show first-run movies at night and on weekends. Still, the theater is operating on a month-to-month tenancy, said President Greg Laemmle.

"Why do we continue to stay there?" he asked. "There's some sense of obligation to the community ... and it's a job for our staff."

The Grande opened with much fanfare, hoping to serve the burgeoning residential high-rise district around Bunker Hill. But theater operators found it hard to lure regular moviegoers after work, and those who did buy tickets were far from impressed by the spartan facility. Operators tried changing the programming -- from art-house fare to Hollywood mainstream -- with little effect.

Laemmle acknowledged that if downtown does get a new movie theater, the fate of his company's venue may be sealed.

"It would be very difficult for [the Laemmle Grande] to survive when something else opens up, as a theater that plays first-run Hollywood films," he said.

The developers of the massive L.A. Live, a \$1.7-billion tourist-oriented "sports-entertainment" hub near Staples Center, say they've signed a deal with Regal Theaters to build such a place.

Ted Tanner, vice president of Anschutz Entertainment Group, said the company would build a flagship 15-

screen multiplex in the project's second phase. (Both companies are owned by Phil Anschutz, although AEG executives said Regal went through a rigorous bidding process to secure the contract.)

AEG's plans for the multiplex include using some of the theaters as meeting space for the new convention center hotel that is also part of the project

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