

= Princess Theatre (Edmonton) =

The Princess Theatre is a two @-@ screen art @-@ house cinema located at 10337 Whyte Avenue in Edmonton ? s historic Old Strathcona neighbourhood . The building was designed by prominent Edmonton architects Wilson and Herrald , a firm responsible for the design of many other Edmonton heritage sites . It became Edmonton 's oldest surviving theatre after the demolition of the Gem Theatre in 2006 . The building currently houses the main 400 @-@ seat theatre as well as the 100 @-@ seat Princess II , located in the basement .

It was originally known as the McKernan Block , after John W. McKernan , the building 's original financier , owner , and manager . McKernan was already a recognized theatre operator having previously run two other south side theatres before the Princess : the south side Gem and the South Side Bijou . Only the Princess was to survive the collapse of Strathcona ? s building boom in 1913 .

The building and the theatre within has changed ownership several times , and its fortunes have largely depended on the current state of the Canadian theatre industry . It spent a dozen years as a retail space from 1958 ? 1970 , and six years from 1970 @-@ 1976 mainly exhibiting mainstream pornographic films . The Princess was operated successfully as a repertory theatre from 1978 to late 1996 , after which it became a first run theatre . Until 2016 , the Princess was operated as a first run theatre by Edmonton ? s native Magic Lantern Theatres . From January of 2016 the Cinema is being operated by Plaza Entertainment .

= = Silent era = =

= = = Early years under J.W. McKernan = = =

The Princess Block , was designed by Edmonton architects Wilson and Herrald , who also designed Whyte Avenue ? s Douglas Block , the Strathcona Fire Hall , the Strathcona Public Library , and the University of Alberta ? s Rutherford House . From the beginning , the building was designed to combine commercial and residential space , and featured a full basement , small multi @-@ use second floor apartments , and a full third floor in addition to the theatre space .

The building was originally known as the McKernan Block , after John W. McKernan , the Princess ? s owner and manager until 1919 . The McKernans were a family of property developers in boomtown Strathcona ; John ? s father developed and ran the historically important Dominion Hotel , also on Whyte Avenue . For his part , J.W. McKernan is considered an important trailblazer in Edmonton entertainment . He opened two other south side theatres before the Princess , the South Side Gem and the South Side Bijou , both of which failed during the collapse of Strathcona 's building boom in 1913 .

The Princess Theatre opened as a single @-@ screen cinema on March 8 , 1915 to rave reviews . It had cost McKernan CDN \$ 75 @, @ 000 and had taken 10 months to build , longer than expected . The theatre opened with 660 seats and the largest live performance stage in a cinema west of Winnipeg . It was at the time the only cinema on Edmonton ? s south side , and would keep that title until the opening of the Garneau Theatre in 1940 . Opening night was a benefit concert for The Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire , associated with the 19th Alberta Dragoons , B Squad . The program proudly included newsreels ? featuring actual war scenes ? . In audience were the Lt. Governor and Mayor W.T. Henry . The house ? s first feature film , The Eagle ? s Mate starring Mary Pickford , was screened the following night .

At the time , the Princess was considered a showpiece of elegance and modernity . It was the first building west of Winnipeg to be faced with marble . The Edmonton Journal remarked on the quality of the ? photoplay house ? s ? finishings , remarking on the solid marble facade , frescoes , brass mirrors and the abundance of gold leaf decoration . On the technical side , two modern projectors were housed in their own fireproof machine room . The Princess was serviced by a freight elevator , which was an unusual feature for a building of its size , and the theatre lighting was indirect and gentle on theatregoers ? eyes . The Journal was also impressed by three novel firsts for a movie

theatre in Edmonton : an electric ticketing machine , an ? electric time @-@ projecting clock ? , and a refrigerated drinking fountain . Perhaps most importantly , the forced air ventilation system was capable of filtering , heating , and cooling air and featured dedicated intake and output fans making the Princess by far the most comfortable theatre in Edmonton .

By 1916 , the Princess had stopped booking live acts and was focusing exclusively on the more profitable cinema side of the business . Revenues from the rental spaces in the basement and upper floors had also begun to flow in . Notably , Hugh Morrow , a beat cop , had leased apartment 205 . His granddaughter Susan Morrow would manage the Princess from 1981 to 1994 .

Wartime proved hard on the film business . On September 23 , 1915 , Famous Players informed McKernan that ? On account of the boat Hesperian having been torpedoed by a German submarine , it will be necessary to skip two Weeklies (short films) , these having come forward to ourselves from our London representative via this boat . Regretting this occurrence , and trusting you will appreciate our position on this ... ? . McKernan ? s supply of new films was decreased as the war dragged on , and McKernan advertised less and less frequently . Further complicating things , parts for the theatre ? s Edison and Simplex projectors were difficult to come by at the best of times , and the complex machines proved difficult to maintain . McKernan did not live to see business pick up . He contracted Spanish Influenza and pneumonia in rapid succession , and died on February 18 , 1919 .

= = = Alexander Entwisle = = =

The McKernan family leased the theatre to Alexander Entwisle sometime in 1919 . Entwisle managed a chain of Edmonton vaudeville houses and cinemas on Jasper Avenue including the Pantages , Empress and Dreamland Theatres .

Around 1919 the basement was first leased to a pool hall , ? Dad ? s Billiard Room ? . While this business was not present in 1920 , the basement would house a pool hall continuously from 1927 into the 1970s .

= = Arrival of the sound era = =

On January 7 , 1929 , The Capitol Theatre , a major Jasper Avenue competitor to the Princess , closed for renovations promising a change that ? will please every theatre @-@ goer in Edmonton ? . Almost three months later on March 27 , the theatre reopened with dual Movietone and Vitaphone sound systems . The availability of electronically indexed articles from the Edmonton Journal has caused the proliferation of a research error in several local histories . These histories claim that the first talkie screened in Edmonton was The Canary Murder Case , and that it was screened at the Princess . In fact , the first talkie in Edmonton was Mother Knows Best , screened at the Capitol .

The talkies were very well received and hugely successful . The Capitol 's business improved greatly in the weeks after re @-@ opening ; the size and volume of their advertising in the Journal and Bulletin increased in March , and by April 1929 was several times that of any of their competitors . Other theatres were pressured to modernize their equipment or close .

At the Princess , sound installation was completed by August 16 . An entire page of the Edmonton Bulletin was devoted to the reopening , including a congratulating ad from a local record store , an ad for the electrical contractors who installed the wiring , and a message congratulating the Princess placed by the managers of three other establishments already wired for sound : the Rialto , Empress and Capitol Theatres . The physical renovations necessary to accommodate the new wiring were carried out by S. H. Muttart , an important local builder and namesake of the Muttart Conservatory in Edmonton ? s River Valley . The first talkie screened at the Princess was Close Harmony starring Buddy Rogers and Nancy Carroll .

= = Theatre closes = =

The arrival of television was a disruptive force for Edmonton ? s cinemas . The theatre was forced

to close in 1958 , and the McKernan family sold the Princess Block soon after . The Princess ? s last advertisement ran on July 19 , 1958 advertising a double bill , Away All Boats and Day of Fury . There were no showtimes , articles or editorials printed in the following days .

The Princess Block disappeared from Henderson ? s Directory , a local city directory , in 1956 , implying that its researchers thought it was completely vacant . The building was re @-@ included in 1960 , but the theatre 's former address at 10337 Whyte Avenue remained vacant and unlisted for another six years . By 1966 , the exterior doors had been removed entirely to create storefronts (see photo) , and the theatre itself had been occupied by Quick Cash Exchange , a pawnshop . The third floor was split into several apartments , while the second floor was entirely occupied by Strathcona TV and Columbia Photo Studio . The basement was still a pool hall , Princess Billiards .

= = Klondike Theatre = =

Towne Cinema Limited bought the Princess outright sometime in 1970 . The chain owned several theatres in Alberta , including the Towne Cinema on 118 Avenue . The theatre reopened on Christmas Day 1971 as the Klondike Theatre after almost a year of renovations . Towne Cinema restored the original function of the interior of the building , rebuilt sections of the exterior , and installed a new marquee at a cost of \$ 270 @,@ 000 . Its first film was Man in the Wilderness , a family friendly feature starring Richard Harris .

But at some point in 1972 , family friendly programming began being interspersed with (and was eventually replaced by) ? blue movies ? , such as Swedish Fly Girls . The chain would come to be known for its generally risque material . In 1981 , prints of both Caligula and Dracula Sucks were confiscated from multiple Towne locations , and the company was sued by the Government of Alberta under obscenity laws .

The Klondike 's choice of programming earned it a negative reputation , and Towne Cinema was unable to run the Klondike profitably . The company sought buyers for the theatre as early as 1976 , asking \$ 600 @,@ 000 . But , despite all of the theatre 's problems under Towne Cinema , it is unlikely that it would have been returned to its original use without the money they poured into its renovation . Their efforts to restore the building are a significant reason why the Princess is a cinema today .

= = Old Strathcona Foundation = =

The Old Strathcona Foundation , at that time a publicly funded community development initiative , leased the struggling Klondike in 1977 and began searching for ways to use the space . A member of the general public , Frank Grisdale , answered the solicitation , writing a paper outlining how the building could be successfully operated as a repertory theatre under its original name . The foundation was apparently impressed by his proposal , and Grisdale was installed as the Princess Theatre 's director upon completion of renovations in 1978 .

The theatre was profitable by its second year , and earned the Old Strathcona Foundation \$ 1 million between 1979 and 1989 . This was in no small part due to Grisdale 's vision of a repertory film house dedicated to championing the independent film genre . During his tenure , Grisdale also introduced live performances , including touring acts such as Sneezy Water 's " Hank Williams - The Show He Never Gave " . After firmly establishing the Princess as a significant alternative arts establishment in Edmonton , Frank Grisdale resigned and Susan Morrow became the manager in 1981 . Morrow expanded the theatre ? s program to a glossy monthly magazine . The theatre was offering Saturday morning cartoons , student pricing , and yearly memberships which all contributed to its steadily increasing attendance .

By 1982 , the Old Strathcona Foundation was confident enough in the theatre ? s prospects to purchase the building outright from Towne Cinema . By this time , the asking price for the building had dropped to \$ 425 @,@ 000 , which was estimated to be \$ 8000 below its real market value . The Foundation began to make major upgrades and repairs to the interior of the building . A fundraising drive in 1987 allowed 422 modern sized plush seats to be installed , lowering the theatre

? s original seating capacity by almost 240 . In 1989 , a soundproofed cry room was installed with an independent sound system , allowing patrons with small children to come to films without worry .

1992 was the theatre ? s high @-@ water mark , with a record number of tickets and memberships sold . A state of the art video projection system was installed in June 1993 , but in that year revenue declined by \$ 65 @,@ 000 , at least partly because of the growth of home video . The Old Strathcona Foundation began to see the theatre as a liability , and their confidence in the theatre was shaken when Susan Morrow quit her position as manager after having worked at the Princess for fifteen years .

= = Theatre in crisis = =

Brian Paisley became the manager in early 1994 . Paisley had a history with the Princess ; he operated the small , independent Chinook Theatre out of the basement from 1980 to 1983 . This organization was the seed of Paisley ? s Fringe Theatre Event , which he founded while still working out of this space in 1982 . This event was the original Edmonton International Fringe Festival , now the largest event of its kind in North America .

Paisley quickly offered to buy the Princess , and reached an agreement with the Old Strathcona Foundation in October 1994 for an unspecified amount . The banks , however , refused to finance Paisley ? s plan and the deal fell through in December . The Old Strathcona Foundation quickly pivoted , and attempted in early 1995 to transfer control of the cinema to the Princess Theatre Society , ? a small board made up of film experts and business people ? including Paisley .

The Princess Theatre Society , while promising , failed to convince the Old Strathcona Foundation that it was capable of profitably managing the theatre , and negotiations broke down in April 1996 . Paisley immediately resigned as director and ended his relationship with the theatre two months short of his contract expiring . Malcolm Parker became the new manager .

The Old Strathcona Foundation was running a major deficit by 1996 , and in April Edmonton City Council declined to renew a \$ 100 @,@ 000 annual grant which the Foundation had received since 1985 . The Foundation needed cash , and quickly sold the theatre for \$ 450 @,@ 000 to Calgary ? s Brar family , owners of the Plaza Theatre in that city . The decision was not popular , and even Old Strathcona Foundation member Judy Berghofer called the sale hasty .

The entire theatre staff was laid off in December 1996 once it became clear that the Brars were seriously considering purchasing the theatre , and the theatre ? s projectionists began what would be a six @-@ month strike when it became clear the Brars would not respect a recently signed two @-@ year contract with the Old Strathcona Foundation .

Edmonton ? s native Magic Lantern Theatres unexpectedly tried to buy the Princess for \$ 500 @,@ 000 on Christmas Eve 1996 . A condition in the Brar 's contract stated that the sale could be voided if another party bid at least ten percent more for the building . However , the Brars exercised an option to match any higher bids , and the sale went through in early January 1997 .

The theatre reputedly fell into disrepair under the Brars . In 1998 , the Princess was called ? an absolutely lousy advertisement for late 20th century privatization ? by Magic Lantern Theatre ? s Rick Ostapchuk , who said that the current owners had allowed the theatre to sink ? with the velocity , if not the sanitized H2O , of a waterslide ? . By his count , 170 of the marquee ? s 330 lights were burnt out , and he did not believe the interior had been regularly washed or maintained .

= = Magic Lantern Theatres = =

The Brars handed over management of the theatre to Magic Lantern Theatres in June 1998 , merely 18 months after purchasing it . Rick Ostapchuk immediately took over double duty as the manager of the recently renovated Garneau Theatre , as well as the Princess .

Ostapchuk vowed to return the Princess to the stature it held under Susan Morrow . To that end , he hired a new film programmer , Leonard Schein of Vancouver ? s Fifth Avenue Cinemas . The first film exhibited under new management was Michael Moore ? s The Big One . Ostapchuk began major renovations to the theatre , and in 1999 unveiled The Princess II in Chinook Theatre ? s old

space . The basement theatre featured 100 seats , its own concession and washrooms , and a new 35mm projector . The renovations cost \$ 200 @, @ 000 .

= = Whyte Avenue multiplex debate = =

By 1999 , Leonard Schein had become president of Alliance Atlantis , and had decided to build a six @-@ screen art house cinema on Whyte Avenue . Many Edmontonians supported the plan , including former Princess manager Malcolm Parker , FAVA Executive Director Helen Folkmann , and Mayor Bill Smith .

Unsurprisingly , Ostapchuk was against Alliance Atlantis ? s plans for Whyte Avenue , believing that it would put both the Garneau and the Princess out of business . The Old Strathcona Foundation sided with Magic Lantern , and fought the plans . The argument went all the way to Edmonton City Council , which was asked to waive Old Strathcona ? s four @-@ story height limit for the six @-@ story multiplex . Council sided against Alliance Atlantis when Councillor Terry Cavanagh changed his vote at the last minute , defeating the motion 6 @-@ 5 .

= = Present day = =

The theatre was operated by Magic Lantern Theatres as a first run cinema until January , 2016 . At that point Plaza Entertainment , headed by Mike Brar , took it over again , ending Magic Lantern 's tenancy . In 2006 , after a lengthy dispute with a local developer , the City of Edmonton demolished the Gem Theatre (constructed 1913) on Jasper Avenue , making the Princess the city ? s oldest surviving cinema .