

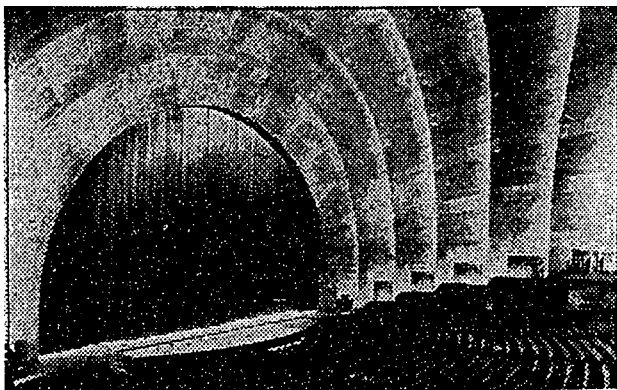
Hold That Sunset at Radio City

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Hold That Sunset at Radio City

If Radio City Music Hall really closes after the Easter show, it will be a little like closing New York. There are few places where everyone can touch the city's legendary glamour and feel its magic; Radio City has been that place for millions. In the 46 years since it opened as part of the Rockefeller Center complex, it has become a special symbol of New York.

Such symbols are not lost lightly. The Empire State Building, though topped by the World Trade Center, continues to be the city's best-selling souvenir. The ways



that a city is visualized, and the landmarks that create that vision, have an existence in mind and memory that is almost independent of reality. When those places go, it is more than a physical loss.

But a 6,200-seat theater can't be run on sentiment. Nostalgia will not meet Radio City's deficit, \$2 million and growing. Most of the great motion picture palaces of the Twenties and Thirties, with their rococo grandeur and more than 4,000 seats have been destroyed as cultural tastes, population and life styles have shifted. Some have been given new life in cities that needed performing arts centers; New York, with its many facilities, does not have that option. Salvation will not be easy.

But salvation is essential. Radio City is a place of superlatives: the theater's great concentric ceiling arches bathed in changing colored light, dramatically

warped from a semi-circle at the stage to a flat ellipse at the rear, cover a house that was built to be the largest of modern times. Nothing was spared to make its appointments elegant. Marble and marquetry, aluminum and gold leaf, bakelite and precious woods, special fabrics and furnishings were produced in the fashionable, decorative, French "moderne" style of the 1930's. There is work by distinguished painters, potters and muralists. The interior is an Art Deco masterpiece.

The architects, a consortium of the city's best, were the same who built Rockefeller Center: Hood and Foulhoux, Corbett, Harrison and McMurray, Reinhard and Hofmeister. The dramatic ceiling arches were designed by a young Edward Durrell Stone. When "Roxy" Rothafel, watching a sunset on shipboard after a tour of European theaters with the architects, announced "That's what I want!" the design theme was set.

But failure was built into those 6,200 seats. In an era of discothèques and adult films, family entertainment became an illusion and not even the appeal of returning to Forties' innocence could suffice. The most gorgeous dinosaur becomes extinct. And it won't do to play "Memories" on the mighty organ now. Radio City needs two things: a new kind of expert, contemporary entrepreneurial guidance and a new financial setup. Piecemeal attempts to tap the profitable mass entertainment market have been no answer; an aggressive managerial policy is required. Radio City needs "Star Wars" lines, not lines to wish the place farewell. To suggest tennis courts or shopping centers for the auditorium is to miss the point of that superb interior; it exists as a great theater or it does not exist at all.

Radio City Music Hall should be designated as a landmark interior immediately, and a way should be sought to separate it as a financial entity from Rockefeller Center, Inc., on a non-profit basis. As a resource of national importance, it would then be eligible for support from the National Endowment, the State Arts Council and other arts foundations. What is at stake is a great 20th-century architectural and cultural landmark that means New York City to much of the world. We must not let that last curtain fall.

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