Design: Play it sadly, on the violin: Theaters, recycled

By Ada Louise Huxtable

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The point of the following essay is about as subtle as a wrecking ball. It can be made with a single illustration. Anyone overcome with nostalgia for the Golden Horseshoe and assorted amenities of New York's Metropolitan Opera House—demolished in 1966—can find one of the Opera's original bars in Powell Symphony Hall in St. Louis.

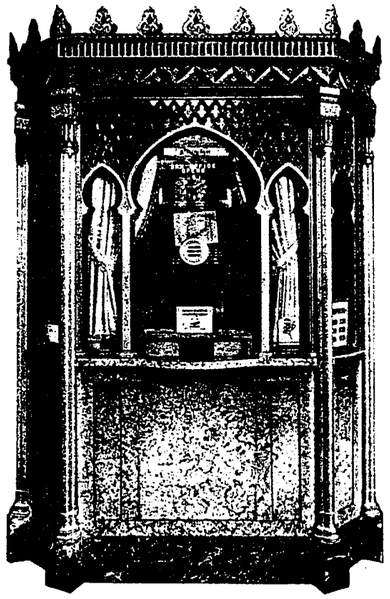
Powell Hall is a rehabilitated building, an old movie theater saved, restored and adapted for modern cultural uses, one of those palatial golden monuments of the silver screen which have gradually slipped from glory to squalor on the way to demolition in deteriorating downtowns. But this one was not demolished; instead, it was rescued and refurbished in cream, gilt and crimson splendor as the new home of the St. Louis Symphony. As lagniappe and moral, there is the old Met bar. Play it sadly, on the violin.

The further point of this story is that restoring old buildings to save money, energy and the national heritage—a process now popularly called recycling—is not exactly a new or untried idea being valiantly promoted by preservationists and environmentalists in 1975. Recycling has already chalked up some of its most resounding successes in theaters for the performing arts. (If any more unsubtle lessons are needed, a comparison of costs, esthetics and acoustics of some old examples and some of those new performing arts centers that proliferated across the country in the nineteen-sixties will provide them.)

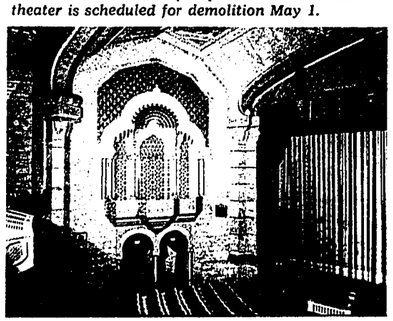
These recycled theaters fall into two categories. The first consists of older concert and performance halls skillfully updated (air-conditioning, lighting) and restored to their original period splendor rather than junked as expendable artifacts in favor of expensive replacements. The second deals with movie palaces—some of the richest and most extravagantly romantic architecture this country has ever produced—which have been converted to performing arts halls or cultural centers.

The updated halls range from charming 19th-century opera houses (Cohoes, Baltimore and others, with the outstanding exception of Nashville's Grand Old Opry, relentlessly scheduled for the bulldozer) to substantial late-Victorian examples, such as Cincinnati's Music Hall of 1880, the turn-of-the-century Brooklyn Academy of Music and the correctly classical Eastman Theater of 1922 in Rochester. Louis Sullivan's and Dankmar Adler's celebrated Auditorium of 1889 in Chicago, abandoned to leaks and decay after World War II, has been sensitively renovated and is now operating.

The second group almost, but not quite, defies description. Its heyday spanned the pre- and post-World War I years. Its stylistic range flowed from extravagantly free and wildly exuberant adaptations of late-French court architecture and palace ballrooms—complete with huge gilt and crystal chandeliers, overscaled marble stairs and colonnaded galleries—to superevocations of neo-Mideastern gardens, including snatches of minarets and Moorish courtyards with hanging lanterns and star-studded midnight-blue skies enhanced by projected, floating clouds.



The ornate ticket booth, above, in the Fox Theater in Atlanta, typifies the building's neo-Mideastern style. The Fox interior, below, freely inspired by the Alhambra, was designed as a courtyard with castellated walls and parapets and balconies. The theater is scheduled for demolition May 1.



The designers were specialists who functioned as psychologists as well as architects; among the most notable were Thomas W. Lamb of New York, the firm of Rapp and Rapp in Chicago and John Eberson, also of Chicago. Their aim was to create a never-never land for everyone, or, in the words of George Rapp, "part of a celestial city." He saw all this vicarious grandeur—solidly marbled and ormolued, boldly evocative or only the most magnificent sources—as "a shrine to democracy where there are no privileged patrons." It was a long way to the drive-in.

St. Louis's Powell Hall was built as the St. Louis Theater in 1926 by Rapp and Rapp, with a bow to the Royal Chapel at Versailles. Pittsburgh's Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts was the Penn Theater, also designed in similar barococo style in 1927 by Rapp and Rapp. The Oakland Paramount, now the Paramount Theater of the Arts, is an Art Deco masterpiece of 1931 by Timothy L. Pflueger, a work of the style second only to Radio City Music Hall.

All represent outstandingly successful conversions. Others are in Columbus, Youngstown and Miami. In Boston, currently, the Redevelopment Authority is proposing that the ornate, 1925 Metropolitan Theater, known now as the Music Hall, be used for performing arts groups.

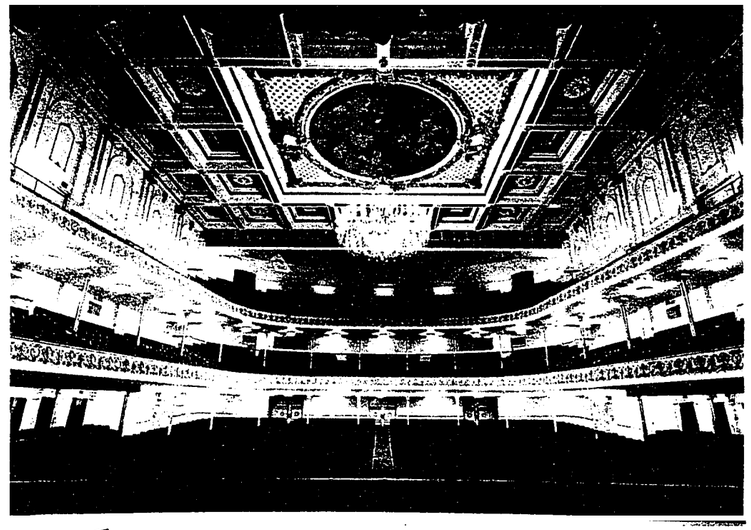
On the other hand, Cincinnati is trying desperately to save its Albee Theater, and Atlanta will begin demolition this week of its Fox Theater, a veritable Alhambra of 1927 by Marye, Alger and Vinour. Atlanta has a formidable and justified reputation as a builder of the new; a transformed downtown bristles with concrete megastructures, glass silos and ingenious and innovative buildings and spaces. But its know-how does not seem to extend to recycling the Fox, a sad commentary on failed environmental comprehension and resources.

To restore good old theaters that combine irreplaceable architectural and cultural history and esthetic ambience with proven acoustics is simply good sense. But not the least effective argument in favor of adaptive use is that it is a bargain—art and culture on the cheap. The cost of the Heinz Hall conversion was substantially less than the cost of a projected new concert hall. In Oakland a 1970 estimate for a new performing arts center came in at $13-million. In 1971 the Oakland Paramount was bought for $1-million. Renovation cost $1-million. Replacement value for the $2-million job is estimated at $30-million. The figures are incontrovertibly impressive.

But the results are most impressive of all. The conversion of the magnificently, gaudily overreaching movie palaces, with their superb spaces and materials and exotic references, their stylistic and societal illusions, their smashing esthetic overkill and their genuine quality and richness, is a spectacular and worthwhile achievement.

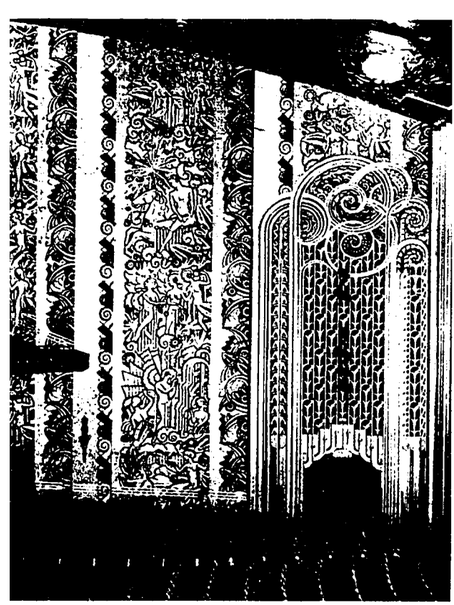
These unparalleled monuments are a unique American architectural resource, which, like the great railroad stations, had about joined the dodo. Several are listed on the National Register of Historic Places; among them are Oakland's Paramount, Cincinnati's Albee and Atlanta's Fox. The trip from gilded Hollywood temple to seedy porn palace to revitalized arts or community center is an exquisite triumph of American cultural sensibilities come of age.

In Atlanta the first of May is wrecking day for the "fabulous Fox." Perhaps someone in St. Louis will shed a tear in his champagne at the old Met bar. ■



The 95-year-old Cincinnati Music Hall has been fully restored to its original glory. The interior boasts a coffered, frescoed ceiling with gilded wreaths and a crystal chandelier, and excellent acoustics. Air-conditioning and electronic stage lighting have been added. The house is used by both the Cincinnati Symphony and Opera.

The Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts in Pittsburgh used to be a movie house called the Penn Theater. The building was modeled after French court architecture. The view above from the Grand Tier to the Grand Lobby shows paired, gilded Corinthian columns connected by bronze balustrades. The columns support an elaborate rococo ceiling.



The Paramount Theater of the Arts, formerly the Oakland (Calif.) Paramount, is an Art Deco masterpiece converted from a movie house to a performing arts center. The orchestra wall, above, is covered with gilded, sculptured panels of stylized figures suggesting mythology, the South Seas and chic French Style Moderne in an intricate jazz and jungle background. The exterior of the Paramount, left, glitters with a 110-foot-high mosaic of two puppeteers.