

Carolina Theatre: Charlotte's Hidden Movie Palace

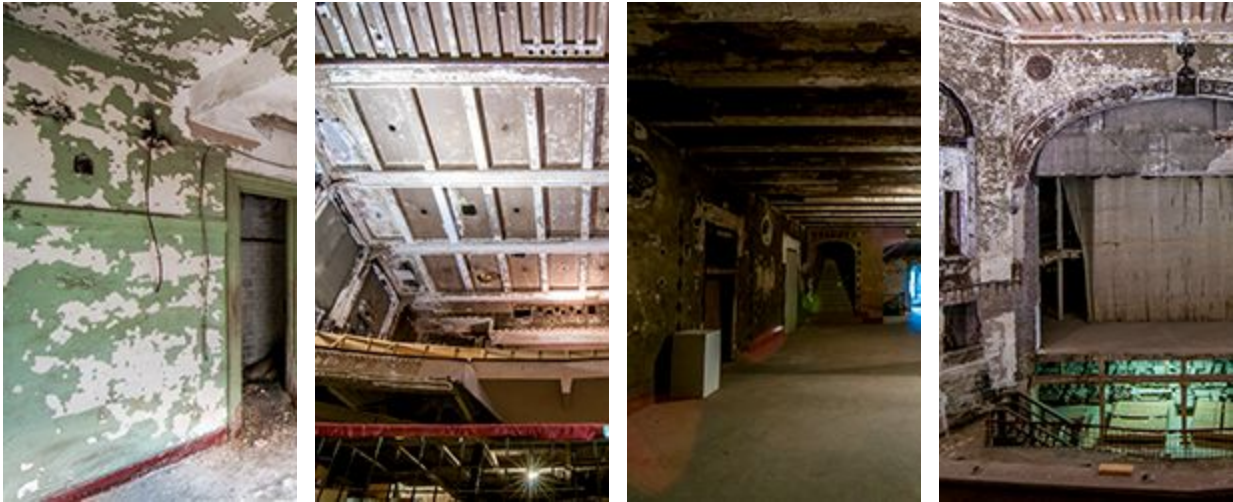
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At first glance, the corner of North Tryon and Sixth Street downtown may not look very impressive. In fact, until a public green-space and sculpture garden was constructed there by the city for the Democratic National Convention in September 2012, it was basically a vacant parking lot. What's actually there, and is still hidden behind this unassuming corner, is the ghost of the Carolina Theatre, Charlotte's grandest movie palace.



In the golden age of movies in the 1920's, baroque cinemas were constructed to provide escapist entertainment on a grand scale, an "opera house for the masses." Marcus Loew, head of the Loew's theater chain, famously said "We sell tickets to theaters, not movies." Paramount Pictures' Publix Theatres Corporation established some of the most extravagant theaters of the era, including the Rialto and the Paramount in New York City and the Chicago and Oriental Theaters in Chicago. Many of their palaces were outfitted with exaggerated ornamentation based on historical motifs and when they started building the 900-seat Carolina in 1926 they spared no expense. The lavish interior was created by New York theater designer R.E. Hall and was decorated to resemble a Spanish patio overlooking the Mediterranean complete with wrought-iron chandeliers, reproductions of priceless Cluny weavings, Moorish tiled floors and a Spanish cathedral window. The façade was designed by local architect C.C. Hook, who was also commissioned to build the Charlotte mansion of tobacco magnate James Buchanan Duke as well as many of the dormitories and the gymnasium at Duke University. In addition to all the bells and whistles, many Charlotteans were also happy that it was the first air-conditioned public building in the city.



The Carolina showed its first film on March 7th, 1927. Located in the center of the shopping and entertainment district of North Tryon, it quickly became a premier destination for people of all social classes and was the first racially integrated theater in the city. Earlier films from the silent era were accompanied by the Carolina's impressive 8-rank Wurlitzer Organ and in 1938 the theatre was overhauled to better accommodate audiences for the "talkies" that were exploding in popularity by the early 1930's. Larger seats were installed, new projectors and sound equipment were put in and new murals were painted on acoustic tiles designed to help moviegoers hear the sound with more clarity.

The theater was the only venue in the Carolinas to premiere "Gone with the Wind" in 1939 and it also became a focal point for live entertainment. The Charlotte Symphony's debut performance was there in 1932 and it also hosted vaudeville, variety shows, musicals and other events. On Friday, February 10th, 1956, twenty-one year old Elvis Presley made his first appearance in Charlotte with four shows at the Carolina. According to the Charlotte News some "6,000 persons, mostly teen-agers" were lined up around the block all day to see the new face of rock-n-roll. Other stars who graced the stage included Bob Hope, Tommy Dorsey, Jimmy Stewart, Katharine Hepburn and Frank Sinatra.

The Carolina continued to entertain Charlotte crowds through the 1950's, when the popularity of television had a dramatic impact on the attendance of the movie palaces. It underwent a major renovation to compete with the new medium in 1961 and became a Cinerama theater with three synchronized projectors and a curved screen. It scored one more huge success in 1965, when it had a record-breaking seventy nine week run of "the Sound of Music" that earned special recognition from 20th Century Fox for being the first theater to have attendance records higher than the population of its surrounding community. But like the rest of the nation, Charlotteans were increasingly moving away from the centralized downtown area to the suburbs. The opulent older theaters downsized to accommodate smaller audiences and new cinemas were often situated in or near shopping complexes outside of town. The struggling Carolina eventually became a discount theater for low-budget films and finally closed in November 1978, after showing "Fists of Bruce Lee."

The abandoned cinema soon became a home for vagrants and fire struck it on November 13th, 1980. The glittering marquee and the lobby area were demolished soon after and the Carolina became what many still see it as today: a vacant space no one has been able to fill. In 2004, the Arts & Science Council planned to use the theater as a museum and in 2007 there was a project in place to develop the site into boutique condominiums that would incorporate the theater's old marquee structure into its design. Lack of funding brought them all to a halt, but recent events have once again given hope to Charlotte's hidden treasure. The Foundation of the Carolinas has purchased the site for one dollar from the city and wants to add an office building in front and renovate the theater as a venue for major speakers, symposia, town hall meetings, debates, documentary films and civic meetings. They will also partner with CMP Carolina Theatre LLC to make the theater suitable for films, jazz and chamber music and other entertainment on the weekends as part of a "Civic Campus" on North Tryon Street that includes Discovery Place, the Main Library and Spirit Square.

If the theater is ultimately resurrected, Charlotteans will be amazed at what was right under their noses. The interior of what remains resembles an excavated ancient Roman theater, complete with decaying columns and muddy brown paint peeling from grimy murals that are still beautiful. The original wooden seats are long gone, the iron chandeliers have been removed and the ornate balconies that once protruded from either side of the stage are missing. It is a cavernous and somewhat creepy building now, but it still has amazing acoustics. One thing is certain; you can't walk around this ruined space now without feeling a sense of awe for the bygone era of the grand movie palaces and without hope that restoring the theater will bring that sense of wonder and over-the-top style back to downtown Charlotte.