Play it again: The rise, fall and revival of the iconic Paramount Theatre in Cedar Rapids

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Abstract
Less than a year after a beautiful new vaudeville theater opened in downtown Cedar Rapids, the Great Flood of 1929 saw the Cedar River crest to its highest recorded level at the time, bringing water a few feet away from the new venue's lobby. The building's famously decorated Hall of Mirrors and auditorium—with marezzo scagliola plaster finish, aluminum-leaf paints and glazes, crystal chandeliers, stained-glass light fixtures and a Wurlitzer organ—remained unharmed, preserving for future generations a majestic example of movie palace design found throughout the country in the 1920s and ’30s.

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The rise, fall and revival of the iconic Paramount Theatre in Cedar Rapids

Less than a year after a beautiful new vaudeville theater opened in downtown Cedar Rapids, the Great Flood of 1929 saw the Cedar River crest to its highest recorded level at the time, bringing water a few feet away from the new venue’s lobby. The building’s famously decorated Hall of Mirrors and auditorium—with marezzo scagliola plaster finish, aluminum-leaf paints and glazes, crystal chandeliers, stained-glass light fixtures and a Wurlitzer organ—remained unharmed, preserving for future generations a majestic example of movie palace design found throughout the country in the 1920s and ’30s.

Over the ensuing decades, other floods came and went. Like other movie palaces, the Paramount Theatre’s continued survival was threatened by changes in cultural interests in entertainment options. The Paramount needed to evolve, so it underwent two renovations (in 1975 and 2002) that allowed the building to be used for a wider variety of performances while preserving the unique architectural character of the spaces for future generations. For years, the theater business thrived, and visitors came to embrace this venue and its memorable architecture as an important part of the city’s cultural identity and historical legacy. This collection of spaces became more than just a structure, “it became a great source of community pride,” says Bradd Brown, AIA, principal at OPN Architects, Inc.

Yet the real value of a structure to a community is never really known until its very existence is jeopardized. For the Paramount, and for much of Cedar Rapids, this moment occurred in June 2008 when a catastrophic flood knocked out power to the city, threatened the potable water supply, decimated thousands of structures, closed businesses and forced municipal leadership...
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offices to be relocated. Remarkably, this flood crested 10 feet higher than the Great Flood of 1929, which meant that there was eight feet of standing water inside the lobby of the Paramount. The Wurlitzer organ was destroyed, the basement was decimated, and the plaster detail in the lobby and auditorium—from the floor to the balcony—was so damaged that it needed to be removed. A significant portion of the historical fabric that had been etched into the memories of its visitors had washed away. So what value was left?

In the following months, inspectors, design professionals, actuaries and myriad government entities set out to determine the value of the damaged buildings throughout Cedar Rapids, including the Paramount Theatre, in economic terms, in an attempt to prioritize the rebuilding process and authorize funding. It is in these moments—where buildings are reduced to basic, clinical and quantifiable terms—that the most interesting questions about the “real” value of a building arise. Was the Paramount valuable because of its location, its potential for revenue generation, its status on the National Register of Historic Places, the iconic qualities of its architectural space or its place in the memory of the community? The answer, it seemed, was “all of the above.” Brown says that although the Paramount isn’t technically a civic building, it enjoys a special status as a culturally important building to the public because “this facility is one that we all entered, used and enjoyed.”

And yet, much of the historical identity of the project had been destroyed, and the Paramount suffered from certain functional drawbacks, inherent in the original design, that needed fixing—seats that were too small, compressed stage and back-of-house areas that limited productions, dead acoustic spots in the hall, etc. As a result, even more interesting questions regarding the Paramount’s continued existence began to form:

**Updating a Classic (previous)** The colors, textures, patterns, and finishes that adorn the fully restored Hall of Mirrors was faithfully researched and meticulously restored to recall its original ambiance. (Right) The modern updates in the main performance space were carefully selected and arranged to compliment the original décor while enhancing the serviceability of the space.
The steepness of the balcony creates perfect sightlines for performances but it required several updates to the seating and railings to make it more user-friendly.

The arched openings between rooms and the various stairways and mezzanines found in the Paramount's lobby create a highly social space.
Should the rebuilding process replicate the exact pre-flood conditions or would new modifications also be welcome? If the building were to be changed, how would old and new aspects coexist in a manner that honored the qualities of the building that gave it its original value while increasing its future relevancy and worth? Brown describes the importance of creating a rebuilding strategy that looked to both the past and the future: “To bring back a cultural icon sends a strong message about the future success of the community ... the community was not only coming back, but coming back better than before.”

The City Council-appointed building committee, which was a collaborative design team of architects and consultants specializing in theater design and restoration was led by OPN Architects, Inc. and consisted of Orchestra Iowa (primary occupant), Venue Works (building manager) and Ryan Companies Inc. (construction manager). This diverse committee crafted an approach to the project that defined the work in four basic categories: restoration, renovation, mitigation and upgrades. According to OPN project manager Michael Thomas, AIA, it was also important that the Federal Emergency Management Agency and State Historic Preservation Office collaborated with the committee to define a scope of work that more likely ensured an optimal level of potential financial support.

The final scope of work installed bigger seats with more legroom; expanded the orchestra pit, stage house and support spaces to improve the range of performances that could be offered; improved the acoustics by using a thicker depth of plaster in areas where the original had been removed, integrating cheek walls into existing alcoves and creating a moveable forestage reflector that could be lowered into place; created elevator access to the upper area; and added hairpin rails on the steep balcony stairs to improve patron safety. New rigging, sound and projection systems were added and all concession areas were improved. Many of the most recognizable improvements involved the painstakingly researched and beautifully crafted restorations, which earned the design team and the Paramount Theatre a 2012 AIA Craft Award (described in “Encore,” Iowa Architect, Summer 2012.)

In the case of the Paramount Theatre, its value could be found—or refound—during times of hardship for the community. In an emotional re-opening ceremony in November 2012, the executive director of Orchestra Iowa, Robert Massey, who was named director just weeks before the flood, finally heard his orchestra perform in the Paramount Theatre. And the fantastical movie palace décor that was initially meant to transport visitors to faraway places now creates an atmosphere that takes people to another time, while still feeling right at home.

One of a Kind (top to bottom) The performance hall was updated to enhance orchestra performances, including the implementation of a moveable acoustical shell. The domed ceiling of the performance hall was updated to accommodate modern conveniences without altering the original aesthetics. Like many of the early American movie palaces, there are a variety of architectural styles in the décor—their unique combination gives it a style all its own.