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Boys Of A Feather



Marquee billing: The battle over the old Boyd Theater has gotten the attention of Mayor Street. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

There is good reason -- and lots of precedence -- for saving the Boyd Theater.

by Patrick Starr

Those of a certain age can recall that not long ago, west of Broad on Chestnut, Market and Walnut was the movie district. In those golden days you could chow at the Commissary or Eden, see a movie and stroll through Rittenhouse Square -- without the use of a car.

As recently as the '60s, a dozen movie palaces dotted Center City, including the Mastbaum, Stanley and Erlanger. They were behemoths; some sat 4,000 at a showing. Most were demolished and cleared for parking lots; the last came down for the '80s generation of office towers.

The Boyd, a.k.a. the Sameric, survived. Located in the 1900 block of Chestnut Street, the theater was kept open by United Artists until 2002. Due to years of disinvestments, though, the once-grand venue had become nasty. The last movie I saw there (on the big screen, of course) -- *Harry Potter* -- it was cold, dank and sticky, the restrooms were graffiti-covered and the lobby reeked of rancid popcorn.

Still it was a treat because of the big screen, 2,000-seat auditorium and art deco, pull-out-all-the-stops décor. Although the façade entryway is largely intact, it is the impressive design of the inside lobby, promenade and grand stairways and the main auditorium with proscenium stage that impress. I've always loved the attractively scalloped "screen" -- roughly 10 feet high -- that separates the promenade and auditorium. (Pictures and more about the architecture can be seen at the Friends of the Boyd website, www.savethesameric.org.)

Ironically, the Boyd had undergone an unobtrusive conversion to a multiplex in the mid-'80s with the erection of three small screening rooms. That same prescription restored the economic viability of several movie palaces operated by Renaissance Rialto, a high-end movie presenter in the Bay Area. For instance, the Grand Lake in Oakland, where the balcony level was walled off and two storefronts were converted to screening rooms, *still* shows first-run movies. The big difference is that Renaissance Rialto focuses on quality and uses the "movie palace" theme to distinguish itself in the marketplace. It appeals to an upscale moviegoer. They even lavished architectural detail on the added screening rooms, dressing up one as "Moorish" and the other as "Egyptian." It's a hoot, and I recommend going. (Check out their website at www.renaissancerialto.com.)

Bottom line is that in the right hands, movie palaces have value. In the Philly 'burbs, they get it. Palaces converted to performing arts venues contribute vitality to downtowns such as Media, Doylestown, Phoenixville and Ambler. Some have become truly regional destinations such as the Tower Theater in Upper Darby or the Keswick Theatre in Glenside. They draw patrons *out of* Center City. A couple of towns have actually purchased the buildings to save them, knowing



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and shops in the area -- mini Kimmel Centers as economic-

has thrived. I go there three times for every time I go to the Kimmel. cabaret, musical theater and special events. It is the *best* thing to happen just off Broad Street, by far. The crowd there is younger and way hipper than the Kimmel crowd. The folks filling up all the new apartments in Center City are largely young and they want hip.

Anybody listening? In fact, it appears that Mayor Street does get it, and recently announced a \$25,000 challenge grant to the Friends of the Boyd for an architectural/economic feasibility study. The balance of the cost needs to be raised. With a recent Fels Fund grant of \$7,500 and a successful fundraiser that drew more than 450 people, the group is on its way to meeting the challenge. (Donations are needed; donate online.)

We don't need to lose the Boyd. The anecdotal proof is all around. And Chestnut Street could sure use some life and lights at night. With loads of new apartments coming on line throughout Center City in restored/renovated former office buildings, entertainment venues for the young and hip are in great demand. With lots of new restaurants (and convention business looking sad), a revitalized Boyd could be just the ticket.

In my dreams, Ken Goldenberg, the developer who didn't give us the infamous DisneyQuest at Eighth and Market, would restore the Boyd and find a movie operator who would return first-run quality movies to Chestnut Street. Barring that, the Friends of the Boyd looks like the best bet to formulate a restoration plan and a multipurpose concept akin to some of the successful models cited above.

Sadly, Mr. Goldenberg has been silent for months. He and one of his staff failed to return my repeated calls. Naturally, he did renew his demolition permit -- keeping your options open, Mr. Goldenberg? Mayor Street, we need you to hold this line. Best of luck to the Friends of the Boyd. (p_starr@citypaper.net)

*Patrick Starr is the vice president of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council and a resident of Washington Square West. Through the urban studies program at University of Pennsylvania he teaches *Sprawl: American Dream or Nightmare?**



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