

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the study and its findings, and to suggest its potential contribution to the field. The chapter will review the focus of the study, the methodology used, and the results of the study. The chapter concludes with a discussion and recommendations for further research and recommendations for the Pulaski Theatre planners.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to discover the various meanings that the Pulaski Theatre held for the residents of Pulaski and the theatre's social importance to the town. The following research objectives directed this study: 1) to document the theatre's history from the time it was built in 1911 until the present day, 2) to uncover memories or feelings associated with the theatre, and 3) to determine if design features of the theatre building influenced the feelings/memories that were associated with the structure. In documenting the history of the theatre, design features of the original 1911 building were examined as well as changes to the design of the building over time. To determine if design features of the building influenced the feelings/memories that were associated with the structure, it was important first to discover which architectural and design features people remembered, if any, and then to determine if these design features reflected a meaningful association, i.e. sense of place to participants. Also of interest was whether this association or sense of place would be similar or different for all participants.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants during the months of June and July 2003. In addition, interviews were conducted with the following individuals having extensive knowledge of the theatre and the town: Mr. James Miller, whose family owned the theatre building for many years; Mr. Wilmer Ryan, who worked at the theatre for over fifty years; and Mr. Lloyd Mathews, a local journalist and historian.

Participants were also asked to draw a picture of the theatre that expressed their experience of the space. Since no instruction was given as to what to draw, the emphasis of the picture was left to each participant and thus reflected his or her remembrance and significant association with the space.

Archival information from local newspapers, the Town of Pulaski office files, and the Raymond Ratcliffe Museum, as well as architectural blueprints from the 1937 and 1948 renovations, was examined by the researcher. These parts and pieces of information were valuable in weaving a composite picture of the theatre building over the eighty years that it served the residents of Pulaski.

Six males and nine females participated in the study. Ages ranged from 43 to 82 with an average age of 60. Four participants were African-American and 11 were Caucasian. All had grown up in the Pulaski area with six living there their entire life and attending the theatre from childhood through adult years.

Themes

Three major themes evolved from the topics discovered through interviews and the drawing exercises. These themes are: (1) the theatre building was seen as an integral

part of the Pulaski community, (2) the building was in fact a representation of the community and a reflection of its social norms and roles, and (3) the interior space of the theatre contributed to the social atmosphere of the patrons' experiences. These themes are discussed below.

Theme No. 1: The theatre was an integral part of the community

The structure of the theatre was an integral part of the community used socially for adults as well as children, for dating, and as babysitting for parents during their weekly shopping trips to town. Pulaski was a very thriving town and the theatre was the center of entertainment in the town. The variety of shows presented at the theatre provided something for everyone and the theatre even hosted events such as local beauty contests. As one might expect as the town began to decline, the theatre building declined along with it.

Theme No. 2: The theatre reflected the social norms and roles of the community

The theatre was a reflection of the community and its social norms and roles. Architectural features and changes to the theatre over time offer clues to the social norms and roles of the community, with such things as different entrances to the theatre for African Americans and Caucasians during the days of segregation. Socializing, where people sat, dating, and the variety of shows at the theatre all speak to the social norms and roles of this community. Seating arrangements in the balcony for African Americans and non-upholstered seats for their section of the balcony are a direct reflection of the social norms and roles of this small town during the time of segregation, typical of small-towns in the south during this era. The importance of this pivotal building to the town

and the upkeep of the building during its many productive years demonstrate its significance and contribution to the community.

Theme No. 3: The interior of the theatre contributed to the social atmosphere

The social atmosphere of the theatre was enhanced by such things as the architectural features of the space and the formal production of the theatre experience. Opportunities to use the theatre lounge to meet friends or wait for a movie to begin permitted patrons a sense of familiarity with the theatre building and contributed socially to their evening. Such things as the activities of the ushers and the lowering of lights as the movie began lent an air of anticipation and formality to the movie going experience and gave patrons social clues on how to behave at various times.

Recommendations/Discussion

Recommendations for Future Research

The information garnered from these interviews speaks to the need to cherish our historical artifacts. These historic buildings speak to the past, anchor us in place, and provide a link to the future. The character of neighborhoods is enhanced when significant buildings, such as the theatre, stand the test of time and provide continuity in the townscape. Town planners may benefit from this study in establishing guidelines for socially responsible town planning. It may also benefit designers attempting to renovate historic properties within the context of their surroundings. Consideration of the users of the space and townspeople, who care deeply about their small towns and communities, will lead to a higher quality of life for the residents and add life to the environment, which is appreciated by visitors as well.

This study focused on one small town theatre in southwest Virginia and the findings related to this theatre are specific to it and the town of Pulaski. They are not generalizable to any other small town theater. Since small town theaters have not been studied as much as the grand movie palaces, similar studies could be conducted on other small town theaters in southwest Virginia, as well as in other geographic regions of the country. These could be compared and contrasted to determine similarities and differences. Studies comparing the architectural styles and layouts of small town theaters could be conducted, as well as studies documenting renovations to the theaters over time.

A study could be conducted to catalog historic theaters by architectural style for the use of preservationists in their efforts to save historic structures. Archival photographs and architectural drawings could be used to document the buildings including those that have been demolished as well as extant structures.

The environmental autobiography incorporated in this study could be expanded to include participants willing to draw a picture of the theatre and discuss the meaning of their pictures with the researcher. This could be explored with other studies on different theaters as well.

Additional interviews could be conducted with the participants of this study for further reflections that may have developed after the initial interview. Additional interviews could be conducted with different participants as well.

Recommendations for Pulaski Theatre Planners

The Friends of the Pulaski Theatre are working to raise funds to renovate the theatre in the hope of revitalizing and breathing life back into their downtown. This research will assist the theatre planners in the renovation of the space.

Suggestions for uses of the theatre space after renovation include the following:

- Preserve the history in place by restoring signs and artifacts that have been removed from the theatre, such as the “Colored Only” sign with explanations of that part of the theatre history. A few of the seats in the back of the balcony could be wooden seats with a plaque explaining that seats in this section of the balcony for the use of African American residents during segregation were non-upholstered. The large projection equipment could be displayed in the theatre with diagrams and an explanation of how this equipment functioned.
- The historical information in the theatre could be used to educate school children about segregation in the south. Groups could tour the theatre and a movie on segregation could be shown with discussions continuing in the classroom. African Americans that lived through segregation could be invited to the school as guest speakers.
- The children’s summer matinee movie series could be reinstated with area merchants sponsoring these, as they did in the 1950s. A history questionnaire could be developed with children answering questions based on information found on historical plaques in the theatre. If answered correctly, they would receive free tickets to the summer matinee series.
- The façade of the building should be restored to look as it originally did with the bracketed cornice, arched pediment, and head of Dionysus in place. Originally lamps were placed between each block of wood in the bracketed cornice and illuminated, adding drama to the theatre façade.

- The rounded marquee, a 1937 addition with Art Deco influence, is incompatible with the classical features of the building. Posters in the window displays, as well as advertisements in the newspapers, could announce features and up-coming events for the theatre.
- To revitalize downtown, Pulaski could reinstate events, such as the Halloween festivals that were held downtown. In the 1940s and '50s at Halloween, Main Street would be closed off, a live band played while people danced in the street, and costumes were judged on the courthouse lawn. An event such as this could be recreated with a scary movie shown at the theatre to cap off the evening.

Similar festivals could be held with appropriate movies shown, such as “It’s a Wonderful Life” at Christmas or a romantic late night movie after a Valentine’s Day Dance. Downtown restaurants, soda shops, or other businesses could provide tickets as an incentive for frequenting their establishments.

- A variety of events held in the theatre would create interest and attract people from a wide cross-section of the population. Live events such as musical concerts, dance, and plays provide a changing venue that would continually bring people back to the theatre.
- The theatre could be used for movies on a regular basis, when live shows were not scheduled.

Afterword

Pulaski Theatre has been standing in the middle of Main Street awaiting rebirth since its doors closed in 1991. Built in 1911, it served the people of Pulaski for those eighty years, as its use shifted from vaudeville house to dry goods store to movie house. Countless comedies, dramas, newsreels, cartoons, and love stories have played out on its screen. It has witnessed the crowning of beauty queens and hosted musicians and children's radio talk shows while serving up candies, soft drinks, and popcorn by the bushels.

As parts and pieces of the theatre were removed or stripped away over time, perhaps the mystery and magic of the place diminished as well. Restoring the theatre's richness and textural quality may help to regain the air of formality and substance that made it important and special to the residents of town.

The Friends of the Pulaski Theatre, a group of Pulaski citizens under the auspices of Jennifer White, Executive Director, is diligently working to make the renovation of the theatre a reality. As of March 2004 they have made repairs to the roof and other repairs needed to stabilize the building. The seats have been removed and stored. A decision will be made to refurbish or replace them. The necessary demolition work has been completed and a capital campaign is unfolding. The basic structure of the building is sound, the Friends group continues work, and Dionysus smiles as he patiently awaits the return to his rightful place at the apex of the theatre.