

# The Harper Theater



Photo: David Schalliol

## Overview:

The Harper Theater Buildings in Hyde Park are an important example of Chicago's traditional mixed-use commercial buildings. The complex is also one of three historic corner buildings still standing at Hyde Park's important commercial intersection of 53rd Street and Harper Avenue. This intersection is one of the last scraps of the neighborhood's once extensive commercial district that survive. Most of Hyde Park's historic commercial buildings were demolished as part of Hyde Park's infamous Urban Renewal project of the 1950's. The University of Chicago now owns the Harper Theater Buildings and has recently aborted its earlier redevelopment plan that would have adaptively reused the historic buildings. The buildings now stand empty and unprotected.

## Threat:

The Harper Theater Buildings have been owned by the University of Chicago since 2002. After purchase, the University conducted a lengthy and transparent "Request For Proposal" process with extensive community participation. In 2006 the U of C contracted with Baum Realty and Brinshore Development to redevelop the site. Rather than demolishing the buildings, Baum and Brinshore created a sophisticated preservation plan that would have adaptively reused the Harper Theater buildings as a mixed-use retail/restaurant/office complex. This approach would have taken advantage of federal historic tax credits and local preservation assistance programs to help finance the project. In May of 2008, the U of C abruptly terminated the contract with the developers. The commercial and theater buildings now stand vacant and surrounded by scaffolding. The U of C owns adjoining properties which could result in a large-scale demolition to create a single redevelopment site located in the 53rd Street Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District. Representatives of the

**The Harper Theater**  
*Harper Avenue and 53th Street*  
**Architect: Horatio Wilson**  
**Date: 1913**

## Chicago 7: Harper Theater Continued

University recently stated publicly that “the Harper Theater buildings probably wouldn’t make it through the winter.” This ambiguous and ominous statement stands in stark contrast to the University’s earlier approach to the buildings and to the community.

### History:

The Harper Theater buildings form a mixed-use corner commercial development with retail storefronts on the first floor and office spaces on the second floor of the south-facing 53rd Street wing, and a 3-story theater building facing east on Harper Avenue.

They were designed by Horatio Wilson (1857-1917) one of Chicago’s most popular and prolific architects who designed houses, factories, banks and apartment buildings -- as well as theaters -- throughout Chicago. The style is “prairie school / arts and crafts” with high-quality brick work and white terra cotta trim by Midland Terra Cotta Company. The theater portion was built as a 1,200-seat Vaudeville house and was converted to a movie theater in 1935. Its original and very small entrance was on 53rd Street with an elaborate terra cotta exit on Harper Avenue.

As part of the 1930’s conversion to a movie house and due to new fire regulations, the original entrance on 53rd Street was reconfigured as a small barber shop and the original exit on Harper was remodeled as a large open entrance with ticket window and lobby. The elaborate Midland terra cotta work of the original exit was replaced by blue and gold Art Deco terra cotta panels by Northwest Terra Cotta Company.

The Harper Theater buildings are included in the Hyde Park-Kenwood Historic District, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The theater portion of the complex is rated “ORANGE” in the Chicago Historic Resources Survey. In September of 2008 the buildings were placed on Landmarks Illinois’ 2008 “Chicagoland Watch List” of the most significant buildings in the Chicago area that are in danger of demolition. The Hyde Park Historical Society has formally requested that the Commission on Chicago Landmarks designate the Harper Theater Buildings an official Chicago Landmark.

### Recommendation:

Preservation Chicago recommends that the University of Chicago return to its own, earlier, adaptive reuse plan for the Harper Theater Buildings. This thoughtful, sophisticated approach would preserve and renew an historic building that has been a visible feature of the community’s commercial and cultural life for almost one hundred years. Demolition of historic buildings is not a sustainable development strategy.



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