Preservation Chicago Unveils the 2012 Chicago 7 Most Threatened...

Chicago’s Historic Movie Theaters

Overview:
Chicago was once home to hundreds of neighborhood movie palaces, a type of movie house that was pioneered in the city. More than just a place to see a movie, these structures were places to escape from everyday life for working class Chicagoans. Often ornately designed with whimsical details, today very few of these structures remain, and even fewer remain in their original configuration. Preservation Chicago has identified five neighborhood movie palaces that are endangered due to potential demolition by neglect or extensive alterations.

History:
Chicago was the birthplace of the movie industry in the early 1900s, so it makes perfect sense that it is also the birthplace of the movie palace. With the opening of the Central Park Theater on the west side in 1917, movie palace construction boomed. Theaters were constructed by legendary theater operators Balaban & Katz and others throughout the city. While big theaters were built downtown, equally large movie palaces were constructed in outlying neighborhoods from the late teens through the 1930s. They attracted neighborhood residents with air conditioning, fantastical and ornate architectural designs, and huge neon marquees. More than just a place to see a movie, they were important social centers and drivers of economic development in their respective neighborhoods. Each has a different story.
1) Avalon/New Regal (1645 E. 79th) – John Eberson, Architect - This 2500 seat theater originally opened as the Avalon in 1927. Eberson designed it in a unique Middle-Eastern style. Huge murals and Persian decorations fill the interior along with an Atmospheric auditorium. After closing as a movie house in the 1970s and briefly being used as a church, it became the New Regal, in honor of Chicago's legendary Regal Theater, which was demolished in 1973. In 1987, an arts venue catering to the African American community. Despite city landmark status (granted in 1992), the Regal closed in 2010 and is now owned by the FDIC. It appears to be in rapidly deteriorating condition.

2) Ramova (3518 S. Halsted) – Meyer O. Nathan, Architect – Known as the larger cousin of the well known Music Box Theater in Lake View, the Atmospheric Ramova opened in 1929 with a capacity of 1500. Situated in the heart of the Bridgeport business district, the Ramova's Spanish-styled courtyard interior has charmed patrons for many years, even after it became a second run house in the 1950s. It closed for good in the mid-1980s and has since sat vacant and deteriorating. Owned by the city, a group called Save the Ramova is working on resurrecting the theater, but it needs financial backing.

3) Central Park (3535 W. Roosevelt) – Rapp & Rapp, Architects – Arguably one of the most historically important movie houses in the United States is located on Chicago’s West Side. The first Balaban & Katz movie palace, the Central Park is by most accounts the first movie palace constructed in the nation, and was the model for those that came after it. With nearly 1800 seats, the Central Park opened in 1917 and remained a profitable theater for decades until becoming a church in 1971. While the church still operates in the Central Park, without funds for needed repairs the theater has been allowed to deteriorate. Despite being on the National Register of Historic Places, the Central Park's future is uncertain.

4) Lawndale (4015 W. Roosevelt) – William P. Whitney, Architect – Just down the street from the Indvidual History/Threat
Central Park, the Lawndale is in even more dire straits. Opened in 1927 with 2000 seats, the Lawndale (later known as the Rena) was a popular neighborhood theater for many years before becoming home to a church. The church has since left, and the theater sits exposed and open to the elements and scavengers.

5) Portage (4050 N. Milwaukee)
Kalischer & Newhouse, Architects – The Portage Park Theater opened in 1920 with nearly 2000 seats. The anchor of the surrounding Six Corners business district, the Portage was a popular theater for many years. Divided into two screens in the 1980s, it closed in 2001, but was restored shortly thereafter and reverted to a single screen. Since reopening in 2006, the Portage features concerts and movies, classic and modern, and has become a destination on the Northwest Side. However, the Portage is now under threat – a church wants to purchase the entire structure and convert it to a house of worship, which would take it off the tax rolls and could jeopardize the nascent economic revival currently occurring at Six Corners. Despite major community opposition, the Zoning Board of Appeals will soon be considering whether to grant the church a Special Use Permit to operate in the Portage Theater space.

Recommendations:
Each one of these five historic and architecturally significant theaters has its own issues and peculiarities, but all can be restored and become economic catalysts for their surrounding neighborhoods with the right plans and circumstances. The Avalon/New Regal needs a sympathetic owner to come forward and rescue it before it falls into complete disrepair. The Ramova already has a community group advocating for its reuse and crafting reuse plans – all that is currently missing is financing. The Central Park and Lawndale theaters are faced with both their condition and the socioeconomic conditions of their surrounding neighborhoods, but could easily be rescued if someone had the vision to see their potential. Finally, the Portage has clear community opposition to the proposed church plan, and simply needs the community to continue its advocacy against granting the church a Special Use Permit.