Can the Ontario Theatre be saved?

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Photo by Jim Lambie

The Ontario Theatre at 17th Street and Columbia Road NW has been neglected, abused over, for many years, and it hasn't functioned as a movie theater in 30 years. Its future is in doubt. Preservationists and neighbors are asking if the possibilities are, can this be a cinema-like theater (long-ordered legacy) that will be an asset for building, or demolition?

As I recently detailed for Curbed, the Ontario Theatre has been closed since 1985. It's been a church, a dance club, and a drug-infested, gang-ridden, crime-ridden eyesore. It's also a beloved landmark, and a beautiful piece of Art Deco.

It was one of only two movie theaters built in DC during the 1930s, and, according to Robert Brodsky's Movie Palaces of Addition in Washington, DC, it was the first neighborhood theater to show first-run movies. Classics like *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Ben Hur* played there, and it was a popular Washingtonian of the theaters, and produces film there very gala events.

By the 1960s, the neighborhood was changing, with the mass exodus of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968 and the ensuing riots, the theater's clientele were virtually gone. The following year, the theater switched to a Spanish-language format, the first theater in DC to cater to the burgeoning Latino community.

By the early 1970s, Sunday afternoons at the Ontario became the social center of Latino life in Washington. Families would come to the theater to see the latest Mexican imports, spending Sunday at the theater to experienced a chance to attend an enjoyable, affordable social event on the one day of the week by itself free.

This stability was threatened in 1977 when new owners took over and tried to convert the theater back to its former Art Deco ion Center, as the theater then was known. Community activists, led by Mary Treadwell, "Mama" to the community, "was the soul of the theater," one of the new owners, was quoted as saying. Its company, Latinos picketed the theater, issuing a statement saying, "Who says we don't care?" The theater's owner then cross-contracted to the of Congressional Sunday afternoons that ran.

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Throughout the rest of the week, the Ontario took on a new life as the venue for some of the leading rock and punk bands of the era, including The Clash, Blondie, Oz, and the Police. The theater was a popular venue for punk rock, and, in order to organize the enthusiastic crowd that showed up to the early rallies, at that time, the Ontario was sold per again, and the new owners decided to re-establish a film and rock venue for Latinos.

The attempt didn't work this time either, and the cinema closed for good in 1985. The building was used for various small businesses, including a drug store, discount store, and other things. The theater has been vacant for the last several years.

The Historic Preservation Review Board is scheduled to consider a landmark nomination for the Ontario at its November meeting. The current owners are reportedly considering redeveloping the property as condominiums.

It would certainly be a shame if nothing can be saved of the Ontario. Besides the historical significance, the Ontario is a beautiful, if neglected, example of early-20th century modern aesthetic as expressed by one the leading movie theater architects of the 20th century, John C. Zink, who also designed the Uptown Theater.

The Ontario, of course, isn't nearly as beloved as the Uptown, and it has several potential catches against it. Many people just don't care for the mid-century style, and it doesn't have the same "wow factor" as the Art Deco Uptown. Also, additionally its basic density, since it was actually in use as a theater, an entire generation hasn't had the chance to see a movie there. Furthermore, it's run-down and simply looks ratty.

There have been other occasions when historic buildings were destroyed because no one could see their value. Perhaps the most famous example is the Penn Station, one of the most historic buildings in the city, of the time, which was torn down in 1963 despite a citywide referendum endorsing the need to preserve it.

Both around ahead, the Zink succeeded at Zink and P Streets NW, had been one of the first meeting places of the young city's new government. Designated an historic landmark, it was torn down in 1962 despite a citywide referendum to save the building. Part of it had been torn down in the 1950s, and the remainder in short order. At place and over "ugly," "so many critics" show. So in the end it came down and was replaced by a large, corporate-looking office building.

Will the Ontario share this same fate? Should it? Can it have some way to develop this condemned property without completely obliterating the old theater?

Mentioned in this post: Hamilton Development Corp. (DC), Historic Preservation Review Board (DC), Mary Treadwell, Robert Brodsky, Uptown Theater, John C. Zink, Penn Station, Columbia Road NW, Ontario Theatre, Mary Treadwell, Robert Brodsky, Uptown Theater, John C. Zink, Penn Station, Columbia Road NW, Ontario Theatre

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