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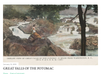
THE ONTARIO THEATRE'S MANY PAST LIVES

Located at 1700 Columbia Road, NW, in Adams Morgan, the former Ontario Theatre doesn't look like much these days. It's been a couple decades since it was a functioning theater. Most recently, there was a discount store in its old lobby, offering clothing, luggage, toys, you name it. The store went out of business in 2008. Just a few years earlier, the theater's sleek original stainless-steel letters, spelling O-N-T-A-R-I-O across the roofline, were taken down, making it all the harder to recognize the building for what it used to be—one of the city's classiest movie theaters.

The empty theater building in 2011. Photo by the author.

The theater's history spans elegant premieres of acclaimed motion pictures, concerts by notable bands of the Rock 'n Roll era, and groundbreaking screenings of Spanish-language films for a community that previously had little access to such entertainment. While the theater "reinvented" itself several times over, often struggling to find its identity, it managed in the process to serve as a vital and exceptional community resource, an entertainment venue that had few rivals in this part of town.

Completed in 1951 for the K-B theater chain, the Ontario was designed by accomplished theater architect John J. Zink (1886-1952) and his associate, Frederick L.W. Moehle (1903-1959). Zink was one of the most important theater architects in Washington, a man who developed a deep appreciation for the unique requirements of these highly specialized buildings. A native of Baltimore, Zink studied in New York with Thomas W. Lamb (1871-