

Restoring the Palace and Majestic Theaters: Bridgeport, Connecticut's Forgotten Gems

Among the vacant structures in the city of Bridgeport are the historic Palace and Majestic Theaters along with the adjoining Savoy Hotel, all entered into the National Register of Historic Places in 1978.¹ This unique complex, opened to the public in 1921 and 1922, consists of “the unusual combination of two theaters and a hotel in one building.”² Once filled with theatergoers who came to enjoy vaudeville shows, silent films, and eventually motion pictures with sound, the theaters today remain boarded up and wrapped in construction netting, the remnants of abandoned renovation projects.³ According to Richard Fosbrink, the Theatre Historical Society of America’s executive director, “we are at a tipping point...of the nearly 18,000 historic theatres documented by the Theatre Historical Society of America, only about 4,000 are still operating, with thousands of others sitting idle on the path to obsolescence.”⁴ Urgent action is therefore needed to save this rare theater complex from further deterioration.

Historic and Architectural Significance

Due to the continued neglect of the theater complex, its historic and architectural significance has been sadly forgotten in recent decades. These dual theaters were conceived by

¹ David F. Ransom, 1978, “Palace and Majestic Theaters,” National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, on file at National Park Service, National Register Database and Research, accessed December 3, 2023, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/132354005>.

² Ransom.

³ Ransom.

⁴ “Why We Need to Save Old Theatres: Richard Fosbrink to Speak at New Haven Museum,” *Hartford Courant*, May 3, 2016, <https://www.courant.com/2016/05/03/why-we-need-to-save-old-theatres-richard-fosbrink-to-speak-at-new-haven-museum/>.

Sylvester Z. Poli, an entrepreneur who became the “largest theater chain operator in the country,” operating twenty-eight theaters across New England alone.⁵ Notably, the Palace and Majestic were the “flagship” among his numerous Connecticut theaters.⁶ As an Italian immigrant living in an increasingly xenophobic nation, Poli was sympathetic to the working class, who made up a large portion of the audience at both the Palace and Majestic.⁷ Poli, “a self-described commoner who had come to America with virtually nothing,” hoped the vaudeville shows, and later films, could offer these “urban masses a brief respite from life’s daily toil.”⁸ He hired Thomas W. Lamb, “the foremost theater architect of the day,” to carry out this grand vision.⁹ Known for the second iteration of Madison Square Garden in New York City, Lamb designed the Bridgeport complex, consisting of two attached theaters with a hotel occupying the front of the building.¹⁰ The exterior of the five-story structure was “executed in a lush, Beaux-Arts classicism,” noted for its “grand, formal compositions with elaborate stone detailing,” symmetrical proportions, and

⁵ Susan Dunne, “CPTV Documentary Profiles Italian-Born, New Haven Theater Mogul S.Z. Poli,” *Hartford Courant*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.courant.com/2021/01/14/cptv-documentary-profiles-italian-born-new-haven-theater-mogul-sz-poli/>; Rafaele Fierro, “Sylvester Poli, Negotiating Cultural Politics in an Age of Immigration,” *CT Humanities*, August 31, 2020, <https://connecticuthistory.org/sylvester-poli-negotiating-cultural-politics-in-an-age-of-immigration/>.

⁶ Christopher Caruso (former Connecticut state representative), in discussion with the former state representative, December 14, 2023, Bridgeport, CT.

⁷ Fierro, “Sylvester Poli, Negotiating Cultural Politics in an Age of Immigration.”

⁸ Fierro.

⁹ Mary Witkowski, “Palace and Majestic Theaters,” accessed December 3, 2023, <https://bportlibrary.org/hc/entertainment/entertainment/>.

¹⁰ Ransom, “Palace and Majestic Theaters.”

use of marble inside.¹¹ The interior of both theaters “is romantic Italian Renaissance Revival heavy with red plush carpets, mirrored glass, gold leaf, wine-red brocade, crystal chandeliers, medallions, and panelling.”¹² Painted on the ceilings of both theaters are beautiful frescoes of “dream-like Italian formal gardens.”¹³ The connected Savoy Hotel, located at the front of the structure, once provided accommodations for the entertainers who performed at the Palace and Majestic.¹⁴ Since many of Poli’s theaters no longer exist, it is crucial that the Bridgeport theater complex is saved—both to preserve Lamb’s architectural designs, created at “the prime of his career,” and to continue Poli’s championing of access to the arts for all.¹⁵

Past Proposals as a Guide

In their waning days during the 1970s, encouraging proposals were made to revive the dilapidated theaters, recommendations that should be seriously considered in current proposals for the space. Funded by the Connecticut Commission on the Arts, a study on future uses for the theater complex was completed in 1974.¹⁶ With an operating cost estimated at \$400,000 as well as a \$3 million price tag to create an arts center and regional high school, this proposal was both

¹¹ Ransom.; Norman Tyler, Ilene R. Tyler, and Ted J. Ligibel, *Historic Preservation: An Introduction to Its History, Principles, and Practice* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), 173.

¹² Ransom.

¹³ Ransom.

¹⁴ Ransom.

¹⁵ Ransom.; Dunne, “CPTV Documentary Profiles Italian-Born, New Haven Theater Mogul S.Z. Poli.”

¹⁶ “\$4 Million Plus Price Tag is Placed on Theaters’ Purchase, Reconstruction,” *Bridgeport Post*, November 8, 1974.

promising and achievable with potential city and state funding, as well as grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.¹⁷ Architect Zane Yost estimated the total renovation would take four to five years.¹⁸ In 1978, another feasibility study was conducted using an additional grant from the Connecticut Commission on the Arts.¹⁹ Supported by the Bridgeport Center for the Arts, a newly formed nonprofit organization at the time, the proposed “arts center would anchor the north end of the downtown central business district,” contributing thousands of dollars in property taxes while drawing an estimated “primary market audience of 427,000 persons.”²⁰ Total estimated costs included \$500,000 for renovations and an additional \$5 to \$7 million for the construction of additional facilities.²¹ With this “favorable” feasibility report, Victor Muniec, president of the Bridgeport Center for the Arts, was hopeful they could acquire both public and private funding for the project.²² Disappointingly, progress was stalled after the death of the theaters’ owner Anthony Debek, which was followed by decades of legal battles over owed taxes on the property.²³ In 1992, the city of Bridgeport finally took control of the

¹⁷ “4 Million Plus Price Tag.”; “City Pressed on Buying Old Theaters to Turn into Performing Arts Center,” *Bridgeport Post*, April 10, 1975.

¹⁸ “City Pressed on Buying Old Theaters.”

¹⁹ “New Life as Art, Civic Center Seen for Old Theaters,” *Bridgeport Post*, July 16, 1978.

²⁰ “City Pressed on Buying Old Theaters.”; “New Life as Art, Civic Center Seen for Old Theaters.”

²¹ “New Life as Art, Civic Center Seen for Old Theaters.”

²² “New Life as Art, Civic Center Seen for Old Theaters.”

²³ Herbert F. Geller, “New Life Planned for Old Theaters,” *Bridgeport Sunday Post*, April 21, 1985.

theaters.²⁴ Sadly, this wasteful “legal wrangling” resulted in precious time lost in the preservation of the theaters, a powerful reminder today as the theaters linger in continued neglect.²⁵

The city of Bridgeport’s acquisition of the property was followed by a hopeful period of proposals in the 1990s, advocating many ideas that should be reviewed in future plans for the site. In their thorough report published in 1997, Hutton Associates recommended renovation of the Palace Theater, noting its size, at 2,800 seats, could “serve a unique market niche met by no other facilities between New York and Hartford.”²⁶ According to the consulting firm, restoration of the Palace could “generate over 280 primary and secondary construction jobs and add over \$7 million in resulting spending to the local economy.”²⁷ The former hotel space would be transformed into artist studios, galleries, and retail stores or restaurants.²⁸ Additionally, the team suggested construction of an arts school next to the theaters, allowing students access to the site for rehearsals and performances, as well as the creation of a nearby soundstage which would attract filmmakers to the city.²⁹ Collectively, the goal was to “take advantage of the synergy of the emerging arts environment” that this proposal would create.³⁰ In the end, despite this

²⁴ James G. Clark, “Palace, Majestic Not Living Up to Names,” *Bridgeport Life*, February 24, 1992.

²⁵ Michael J. Daly, “Report Due on Acquiring Two Theaters,” *Bridgeport Post*, December 30, 1986.

²⁶ Ernest Hutton, “The Southern Connecticut Center for the Arts and the Bridgeport Entertainment/Media Zone: An Action Strategy for the Palace/Majestic Theatres and Downtown North,” Hutton Associates, Inc., August 25, 1997.

²⁷ Hutton.

²⁸ Hutton.

²⁹ Hutton.

³⁰ Hutton.

promising and realistic vision, the city failed to find a developer, leaving the theaters vacant once again.

Potential Proposals Today

To prevent further deterioration after nearly five decades of neglect, the theater complex should be restored promptly, utilizing a plan that is an amalgamation of previous proposals with modifications to suit the city's current needs. To begin, the Palace, larger than the Majestic, should be restored as a theater—previously recommended in the 1997 action plan created by Hutton Associates.³¹ Although numerous entertainment venues exist in the city and throughout Connecticut, the Palace and Majestic are “the only theatres of their size...in the state.”³² In nearby Stamford, venues “are all in the 800 to 1,500 seat range,” while larger spaces in Hartford offer “7,000 plus seats for...blockbuster events.”³³ Thus, the 3,700 seat Palace theater offers “unique potential” with its ability to host midsize shows while providing a more intimate experience than larger venues.³⁴ Renovation of the theater would also align with the recent opening of the successful Hartford Healthcare Amphitheater in Bridgeport, built on a former ballpark, with a 5,700 seat capacity—helping to make Bridgeport a key destination for

³¹ Hutton, “The Southern Connecticut Center for the Arts and the Bridgeport Entertainment/Media Zone.”

³² Ernest Hutton, “Palace and Majestic Theatres: Conceptual Project Description and Cost Estimate,” Hutton Associates, Inc., March 3, 1995.

³³ Hutton.

³⁴ Hutton.

concertgoers.³⁵ Although “The Fillmore,” another concert site, is set to open in Bridgeport in 2025, it will function as a standing-room only facility, providing a vastly different experience from the extravagant interiors of Poli’s theaters—where mirrors were intentionally placed on the walls to make theatergoers feel larger than life.³⁶ Therefore, as emphasized in the 1997 proposal, the Palace and Majestic continue to serve a special role in Connecticut’s theater world.

In addition to drawing on past proposals as inspiration, vital developments in theater during the twenty-first century should be considered in current renovation plans. To maximize use of its theater space, the Palace should adopt the modular concept of the newly built Perelman Arts Center in New York City, located on the former site of the World Trade Center.³⁷ With stages that can be “configured in more than 60 different ways,” the three theaters within the Perelman are able to host a multitude of different types of shows, of varying size, including “theater, dance, music, opera, and film.”³⁸ While the Perelman cost a lofty \$500 million to construct, funds that are out of reach for the city of Bridgeport, modular plans may still be implemented at the Palace Theater on a reduced scale.³⁹ Through this initial investment, the theater’s flexibility will ensure its sustainability in the future.

³⁵ Andrew DaRosa, “Bridgeport’s Hartford Healthcare Amphitheater Gears Up for Second Season,” *Connecticut Post*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.ctpost.com/entertainment/article/Bridgeport-Hartford-Healthcare-Amp-2022-season-16974435.php>.

³⁶ Andrew DaRosa, “New Music Venue Coming to Bridgeport, Slated to Open in 2025,” *Connecticut Post*, September 6, 2023, <https://www.ctpost.com/news/article/new-bridgeport-music-venue-fillmore-18350941.php>; Caruso.

³⁷ “An Arts Revival at the World Trade Center Site,” *CBS Sunday Morning*, September 10, 2023, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8TytRjk5sI>.

³⁸ “An Arts Revival at the World Trade Center Site.”

³⁹ “An Arts Revival at the World Trade Center Site.”

The adaptations struggling theaters have made during the recent pandemic also offer helpful ideas. To regain lost revenue as a result of COVID, theaters began hosting “tech” residencies.⁴⁰ Before embarking on their tours, Broadway productions require suitable locations to prepare their shows.⁴¹ During this vital time, usually lasting several weeks, “stagehands and production designers take up residency in a theater, where they reconstruct the set, design lighting and sound, adjust costumes and work out staging before packing everything into trucks and hitting the road.”⁴² Along with the revenue made from hosting the production in their theaters, the show’s crew stimulates the local economy by residing in nearby hotels, dining in local restaurants, and shopping at neighborhood stores.⁴³ Following the lead of states such as Rhode Island and New York, Connecticut lawmakers are advocating for tax incentives for these pre-tour productions.⁴⁴ If passed, this tax credit would create an additional use for the Palace, whose strategic “proximity to New York” may attract Broadway productions.⁴⁵ Furthermore, once renovated, the former rooms of the adjoining Savoy Hotel will provide ample accommodation for these traveling productions, offering yet another source of revenue.

With the Palace restored as a working theater, the adjacent Majestic Theater should be transformed into a multipurpose cultural arts center to ensure its continual use, as suggested in

⁴⁰ Erica E. Phillips, “CT Theaters Want Tax Credit to Lure Broadway Pre-Tour Production,” *CT Mirror*, March 14, 2023, <https://ctmirror.org/2023/03/14/ct-theater-broadway-tax-credit-shubert-bushnell-warner-palace-theatre/>.

⁴¹ Phillips.

⁴² Phillips.

⁴³ Phillips.

⁴⁴ Phillips.

⁴⁵ Phillips.

previous proposals. In recommended plans for the space, dating to 1974, the idea for a cultural center was first put forth—a concept supported by the nonprofit Bridgeport Center for the Arts as well as feasibility studies conducted in both 1974 and 1978.⁴⁶ When proposals for the theaters gained momentum in the 1990s, after the city’s purchase of the property, the strategic plan created by Hutton Associates again recommended a multi-use site at the Majestic.⁴⁷ At the time, they proposed the creation of “a needed venue for local ethnic theatre [and] student productions from local colleges or universities,” as well as “spaces for receptions or outside meetings” with possibilities for retail stores and restaurants on the ground floor.⁴⁸

Revitalization of Downtown Bridgeport

These proposed plans for the Palace and Majestic Theaters, a combination of previous and new concepts, hold great promise but they must work in concert with revitalization efforts in the surrounding areas. As former State Representative Christopher Caruso, a Bridgeport native, states, the Palace and Majestic “will not live on their own.”⁴⁹ The revival of vacant theaters “located in the heart of a struggling downtown district means more than fixing up a building.”⁵⁰ They must coincide with partnerships with the greater community and local businesses, operating as a cohesive network.⁵¹ With the theaters acting as an anchor that initially draws

⁴⁶ “\$4 Million Plus Price Tag is Placed on Theaters’ Purchase, Reconstruction.”; “New Life as Art, Civic Center Seen for Old Theaters.”

⁴⁷ Hutton, “The Southern Connecticut Center for the Arts and the Bridgeport Entertainment/Media Zone.”

⁴⁸ Hutton.

⁴⁹ Caruso.

⁵⁰ Tyler, Tyler, and Ligibel, 272.

⁵¹ Tyler, Tyler, and Ligibel, 272.

visitors to the downtown area, Bridgeport must offer these theatergoers reasons to stay and return—by expanding options for dining, shopping, accommodations, and parking.⁵² Municipally owned lots and buildings next to the theaters, which remain vacant, offer great potential for these wider revitalization efforts. The city may also look to similar projects in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania as inspiration.⁵³ Here, the success of two restored theaters, similar in size to the Palace and Majestic, have resulted in a positive economic “multiplier effect on the community,” leading to the continued growth of local businesses.⁵⁴ In a study conducted by the Pennsylvania Economy League, audiences at the Pittsburgh theaters “spent an average of over \$19.00 per person on food, transportation, lodging and other services, above the price of a ticket,” thus adding “a substantial boost to the local economy.”⁵⁵ Likewise, the restoration of the Palace and Majestic will usher in “increased downtown vitality” through “accelerated nighttime and weekend activity,” resulting in “enhanced quality of life” for residents and “expanded tourism opportunities” to attract visitors.⁵⁶ These collective revitalization efforts will also help transform the “tarnished perception of Bridgeport,” noted for its “high taxes, crime, failing schools, and development promises that aren’t kept,” into a flourishing art destination, reminiscent of Poli’s era.⁵⁷

⁵² Caruso.

⁵³ Hutton, “Palace and Majestic Theatres.”

⁵⁴ Hutton.

⁵⁵ Hutton.

⁵⁶ Hutton.

⁵⁷ Amanda Cuda and Ethan Fry, “Bridgeport Can Learn from Springfield’s Revitalization,” *CT Mirror*, September 8, 2019, <https://ctmirror.org/2019/09/08/bridgeport-can-learn-from-springfields-revitalization/>.

By restoring the Palace as a theater and adapting the Majestic into a multipurpose arts center, Bridgeport residents will be reminded of the once thriving city and arts mecca, home to fifty-four theaters during the 1920s and 1930s, many of which remained open until the 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁸ After decades of neglect, it is time to actively preserve and revive the “city’s jewels.”⁵⁹ Still maintaining hope after thirty years of fierce advocacy to restore the theaters, Caruso reminds us “the lights on the stage are still brightly shining,” calling on us to resurrect them.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Caruso.

⁵⁹ Caruso.

⁶⁰ Caruso.

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