Focus On: The Virginia Theatre

The Virginia Theatre, 201 West Park Street, Champaign, has been a distinguished landmark since the curtain went up for the theatre's maiden performance on December 28, 1921. From the time she was conceived, the Virginia was intended to be just that: a landmark. Today the Virginia stands as a witness to the early twentieth century cultural heritage of central Illinois.

The Virginia was the brainchild of A.W. Stoolman. His firm built and operated the theatre originally. In keeping with his desire to create the most modern, luxurious, and technically advanced facility possible, Stoolman commissioned internationally known theatre architects C. Howard Crane and H. Kenneth Franzheim to design the Virginia.

Crane was an engineer from Detroit who would move to London in 1932. In his career, he designed over 200 theatres. Franzheim was a successful Chicago architect who was involved in planning many of Chicago’s great theatres. Together, they brought vast experience and influence to the planning of the Virginia.

The architect who supervised construction of the theatre was George Ramey. Ramey was a well known local architect who worked on many buildings including the Champaign City Building and the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity house.

The facility was planned to accommodate theatrical productions as well as motion pictures. It was hoped that Broadway productions traveling from New York would stop on their way west. Indeed, it was Wagenhal's and Kemper’s production of “The Bat” which appeared on stage for the Grand Opening performance. The same show ran for over a year in New York and Chicago. The opening motion picture double feature included “Tol’able David” and “The Boat.”

The name of the theatre was not released until one week before the Grand Opening. The name “Virginia” was chosen in order to avoid the common theatre names of the day (Bijou, Orpheum, etc.). It was hoped that the name Virginia would become instantly popular and would “always stand for high class, clean, moral entertainment.”

The Virginia is exceptional in that it has remained fairly unchanged since it was built in 1921. In fact, there was only one major remodeling done. In 1955, the front entrance was altered by adding a new ticket booth, entry doors, and marquee. James J. Jurno of New York was the architect for the remodeling. C.A. Petry and Sons was the contractor. The project cost in excess of $20,000. In 1968, the theatre was purchased by the Kerasotes theatre chain. It is currently being leased for office space and gospel concerts.

Description

The Virginia Theatre features many elements of Italian Renaissance design. The main facade along Park Street is executed in warm yellow stone-colored terra cotta that is intended to simulate rusticated stone blocks. The facade is split into three irregular bays. The central bay resembles a pavilion in the Italian palatial tradition and marks the entrance to the theatre. It houses the lobby on the ground floor and a lounge and balcony area on the second level. The second floor is accentuated by a triple arched window opening carried by engaged columns topped with capitals of the composite order. The tympanum panels that fill the arches are replete with Rococo ornamental motifs including cherubs carrying ribbons surrounded by organic patterns and fruit arrangements. These panels are executed in deep relief terra cotta and are brightly enameled.

On either side of the main entrance pavilion stretches a lower wing. These wings have always housed commercial tenants. Originally, the Virginia Confectionary occupied the east wing while the Pembroke Cadillac Company operated a sales showroom in the west wing.

Architecturally, the side wings are topped with an ornamental cornice and open balustrade. Decorative urns rest on blocks that interrupt the rhythm of the balustrade at regular intervals. The display windows in each wing are articulated by mottled green terra cotta frames of slender twisted columns that carry an
ornamental metal cornice. Patera roundels break the space between the windows and dentil border of the upper cornice.

The large volume of the main auditorium serves as a passive backdrop for the vibrant lower main facade. The auditorium block rises at least two full stories, to a height of about 35-40 feet. It is almost devoid of ornament so as not to detract from the street facade. The auditorium mass is executed in light yellow brick to harmonize with the terra cotta cladding of the lower wings and pavilion. Some brick patternwork simulating pilasters and a stone cap atop the parapet of the auditorium block are its only decorative features.

The architects further intended that bright awnings of bold red and yellow stripes be hung above the display windows on each wing. Also, vines, which would cover the entire wall and blossom in bright colors, were to be planted along the entire length of the facade. However, there is no evidence that either of these ever came to pass.

The 1955 remodeling of the entrance resulted in the loss of the original main doors which are known to have been painted dull cerulean blue; they were replaced by herculite doors of tempered plate glass. The original lobbies were also altered, but articles written on the occasion of the building's opening give detailed descriptions of what the original vestibules looked like.

Initially, the main lobby had a red tile floor, walls covered with white marble revetments, an ornamental plaster cornice, and a silver leaf ceiling. Ornate cast-iron work adorned the box office and poster boards. The doors and trim were a harmonious blend of blues, black, and gold leaf.

Today, an oppressive concession stand dominates the inner vestibule. But once, this vestibule marked a change from the Italian Renaissance style to that of the Spanish Renaissance. The walls and cornice were entirely of dark walnut, and the ceiling was silver leaf. The doors were painted in dusty blues, reds, and antique golds. To either side of the vestibule are six foot wide stairs which lead to the mezzanine promenade. These stairs still have the original wrought-iron balustrade.

The mezzanine promenade circles back along the stairs and widens into a lounge which retains much of the original character of the space. The lounge lies behind the three windows in the center of the facade. Opposite the windows is a large fireplace of travertine stone with wrought-iron detailing. The main portion of the lounge has a high, deep coffered, ornate ceiling. There are arched openings with enriched pedestals in each of the side walls of the lounge; one was used as a coat check room and the other is filled with small mirror squares, as it was originally. All of the openings were draped with rich red curtains.

In the auditorium, one is struck with the atmosphere of Old Spain. The walls under the balcony are wainscotted their full height. Deeply carved pilasters break the wall into a series of panels. Wrought-iron lanterns, originally with amber glass shades, hang from alternating panels. The underside of the balcony is lighted by five large, shallow fixtures; three round, two square. The fixtures have wrought-iron frames with leaded glass of amber, red, and blue. The seats of the theatre, originally dressed with red leather, now sport more modest upholstery; but the feeling of richness still remains. Not the minutest detail was overlooked right down to the leaded glass exit signs.

The long, low balcony sweeps out over half of the main floor. The lack of supports above or below the balcony testify as to Crane's engineering ability. The balcony rail is divided into a series of panels. Every other panel carries a plaque depicting busts of the Spanish explorers Cortez, Hernandez, and Alvarado. The alternating panels are ornamented in a heraldic crown and shield motif.

The main ceiling of the auditorium features a great dome encircled by a cornice band. This band also contains the coat of arms of Ferdinand and Isabella at the quarter points. The ceiling of the dome is recessed with lighting on the sides. Originally, this dome was painted sky blue with clouds floating across it in a scene reminiscent of the oculus at the Pantheon.

The orchestra pit and stage remain much the same. The opening for the stage is sixty feet wide and thirty feet high. Its proscenium is surrounded by a huge, ornate frame that is deeply carved and gilded. This frame carries up into the main cornice which ties the entire auditorium together. The stage opening is hung with a tremendous valance and curtains of deep red brocaded damask. Heavy gold ropes with tassels draw the curtains into place. Flanking the stage are boxes which feature large columns supporting a heavy, ornate crowning arch. The columns are entwined with dull gold ribbons. Heavy red curtains are hung from the arch. Semi-circular balconies to either side of the boxes have wrought-iron railings and are framed in blue to harmonize with the frames of the boxes.

The time spent and attention given to comfort and atmosphere become evident immediately. Not as obvious, yet equally as significant, was the time spent on the mechanical design of the Virginia Theatre. It was state-of-the-art when installed in 1921.

The lighting of the auditorium was designed by Victor S. Pearlman and Co. (one of the over eighty firms involved in the construction of the theatre), and was hailed as being among the best in the country at the time. Another piece of state-of-the-art equipment is the $50,000 Wurlitzer organ which is now undergoing restoration by a team of dedicated volunteers.

The original heating system was manufactured by the Warren Webster Company. It featured two low pressure Utica Smokeless Boilers. Each had a capacity of 14,700 ft. Two Nash electric vacuum pumps circulated the steam.

Multi-blade fans manufactured by the Massachusetts Blower Company provided fresh air at the rate of 45,500 cubic feet per minute (cfm). This fan was driven by a 15 hp electric motor. Two exhaust fans, each with a capacity of 22,750 cfm and driven by a 7.5 hp motor, removed the stale air.

Although the steam heating system used conventional components, the fact that Crane used distinct heating zones made it revolutionary for its day. The lobby was identified as a separate zone from the main auditorium and was given its own remote ventilation system.

A chilled water cooling system, independent of the heating network, cooled the theatre in warm weather months. Early advertisements boasted of the Virginia's central air conditioning system. Patrons were urged to view a movie in cool comfort rather than suffer in their own homes.

Beyond climatic controls, advanced vacuum cleaning and fire protection systems were also incorporated into the theatre facility. In short, no expense was too great to create a safe, clean, comfortable environment for the theatre-goers of Champaign.

*This article was derived from students papers by David Thompson and Werner Briske.*

*If we don't understand our past we won't understand our future.*
Despite continued lobbying of the UI Board of Trustees by PACA, the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Trustees voted at their February meeting to proceed with the planned construction of the Grainger Engineering Library and quadrangle.

The imminent demise of the Woodshop marks the beginning of the end of an era in University of Illinois history. As of this writing, preparations are under way to demolish the 1905 Woodshop. The Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, although finding that this action represented an adverse effect, "signed off" on the project when no feasible alternative could be found. The fates of other buildings on the north campus have also been sealed. Aero Lab B, designed by Nathan Ricker and listed on the National Register, is to be demolished next year together with four other buildings.

At one time the centrum of the fledgling U of I campus, these buildings are to be sacrificed to make way for an engineering quadrangle. It is important to note that all of these buildings were in active use until now. At considerable expense, programs housed in these buildings are being relocated in other buildings around campus or new facilities are being built. While our efforts to save these buildings have not met with success, PACA feels that significant progress has been made in raising the awareness of members of the Board of Trustees. For the latter, PACA has you, our members, to thank for sending in your postcards and letters and for participating in our protest. We also thank Trustees Calder and Boyle, two trustees who were willing to talk with us early in the process, and having done so, took up the cause to preserve the buildings.

PACA's next task is to continue to press for a campus preservation plan. The campus master plans, adopted by the University in the 1980s, pay little attention to preservation and would require demolition of a number of other important structures on campus. In the coming months, PACA will compile a list of endangered buildings and lobby the Board of Trustees to implement a plan to preserve these buildings.

Annual Spring Warehouse Clean-up and Sale
Saturday, April 11
9:00 - 3:00
65 E. University
Champaign

Come spend the day or an hour helping to organize PACA's best fund-raising program. PACA extends a special invitation to all new members and volunteers to come and see the warehouse and meet your fellow preservationists.

Membership Application P.A.C.A.

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY:

INDIVIDUAL

☐ Adult...........................................$10.00
☐ Student (½ time or more).........................$ 5.00
☐ Senior Citizen.................................$ 5.00
☐ Family (includes all members of a household with no more than two members being over age 21)..................$15.00

☐ Additional Contribution

CIVIC

☐ Over 100 members..............................$100.00
☐ 50-100 members...............................$ 75.00
☐ Up to 50 members.............................$ 50.00

CORPORATE

☐ RENEWAL.........................................$ 50.00

☐ NEW MEMBERSHIP

NAME

ADDRESS

Street

City

State

Zip

Make checks payable to: PACA, Box 2555, Station A, Champaign, Illinois 61825

Contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Dana-Thomas House Alert

Because the budget of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency has been severely cut, officials of the Agency have announced that the Dana-Thomas House in Springfield will be closed to the public from March until at least July. The possibility of reopening after July 1 is doubtful. Since the savings realized through this action are relatively small, the Dana-Thomas House Foundation Board believes that alternatives to closing the House are available to the Agency. In the first year the house was open after restoration, over 118,600 people toured the house. Over 30,000 visitors have toured the house since September, 1991 (including PACA's bus tri). A small six person staff is supported by a volunteer corps of 150 people. In 1991, volunteers contributed almost 25,000 hours to the Dana House. Between April and December, 1991, voluntary contributions to the house exceeded $18,750.

The Dana-Thomas Foundation Board is encouraging people to call and write Governor Edgar and legislators to urge them to assist the IHPA staff as they seek to continue public access to this important historic site.

Gov. Jim Edgar
State House
Springfield, IL 62706
217/782-6830

Susan Mogerman, Dir.
IHPA
Old State Capitol Bldg.
Springfield, IL 62701
217/782-4836

Note: At press time, it was announced that the house will be open two days per week. Your support is still needed, however.
Annual Membership Meeting

Over 50 people attended PACA's Annual Membership Meeting held February 23 at Precision Graphics. After a short business meeting, three members were elected to the Board of Directors to serve through 1994: Steven Roemmel, Mariana Murphy, and Tim LaTourrette. Currently serving are Alice Edwards (93), Art Zanderl (93), Susan Appel (93), Patricia Jensen (92), Perry Morris (92), and Carolyn Baxley (92). The following 1992 Heritage Awards were presented.

Landmark Heritage Award
Channing-Murray Foundation
1209 West Oregon, Urbana

Residential Heritage Award
José & Loretta Ortiz
311 South David, Sidney
Carolyn & Norman Baxley
510 West Main Street, Urbana

Commercial Heritage Award
Gregory School Apartments
Columbia and Randolph, Champaign

Institutional Heritage Award
House Recycle Program
City of Urbana
Community Development Dept.

Adaptive Use Heritage Award
The Inman
17 E. University, Champaign

Landscape Heritage Award
Flower Island Program
Champaign Park District

Neighborhood Heritage Award
Elm Blvd. Preservation Assoc.
Elm Boulevard, Champaign

Special Heritage Award
Mr. Jack Richmond
Donation of Land for Hazen Bridge, Champaign County

3/4C Option - Leal School
Publication of Two Architectural Books

New and Renewing Members
Sharon Slade
Dr. & Mrs. Kolodziej
Colleen Brodie
Dick Cannon
Dannel McCollum
Pius Weibel
Mr. & Mrs. M.G. Snyder
Mr. & Mrs. Chris Hill
Fred & Nancy Coombs
Harry & Marilyn Querry
Mary B. Altenbernd
Mr. & Mrs. Reid T. Milner
David Childress
Mr. & Mrs. John Replinger
Mr. & Mrs. Walter Myers
Mrs. William Youngerman
Dr. & Mrs. Victor Wojnar
Wendy Laraway
Clareta Walker
Fred & Nancy Delcomyn
Rose Geier-Wilson
Linda Bastyr
Frank Dinovo
Becky Adam
David Freedman & Susan Peirce
William Malcolm Grady
James C. Bradbury
Bruce C. Creamer
Helen Levin

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