

The Palace Theater: Luverne, Minnesota Case Study
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Fall 2009

1. Intro

a. Building Typology

The first twenty years of the 20th century saw a dramatic rise in the popularity of Vaudeville Theater, which many savvy businesspeople tapped into by opening local theaters that catered to the needs of vaudeville performances. These local theaters were designed with one proscenium styled stage that could accommodate live performances, including adjustable lighting and scenery through the use of a fly system. The seating area, the house, of vaudeville theaters was often made up of a main floor and a balcony area. Theaters built at this time also frequently had a projection booth built into the rear portion of the house – often built behind the center section of seats in the balcony. These projection booths were used to show silent movies as both parts of a Vaudeville performance and as stand alone features. Theaters with a projection booth often made the switch to talking pictures after Vaudeville’s popularity declined, other theaters continued to serve as a live performance venue. Like modern theaters, vaudeville theaters were designed with a lobby gathering space outside of the theater house. Many vaudeville theaters built in the early 20th century were designed to be community social centers, not only for theatrical entertainment, but also through the construction of a second story ballroom or dancehall above the lobby. The main façade of an early 20th century theater also typically features a canopy marquee displaying the current or upcoming events, and the name of the theater. Theaters built in the early 20th century were designed in a myriad of styles based on the owners taste – common styles include Beaux-Arts (traditional, European influenced designs with a visual weight), Art Deco (streamlined design, colorful and reflective materials, a celebration of modern technology), and Classical revivals. Some of the restored 20th century downtown theaters in Minnesota include: the Paradise Center for the Arts in Fairbault, the Fairmont Opera House in Fairmont, and the Paramount Theatre in St. Cloud. This case study will focus on the restoration of The Palace Theater in Luverne.

b. Specific Building Intro

The Palace Theater, located at 104 E Main Street in Luverne, Minnesota is an excellent example of how a main street vaudeville theater can embrace modern technology to continue functioning as a local performing arts venue. The brick Beaux-Arts style theater, designed by local architect W. E. E. Greene in 1915, was constructed as a vaudeville theater by Herman and Maude Jochims. Originally known as The New Palace Theater, the building was purchased in 1980 from Jim Herreid by the Blue Mound Area Theatre Corporation. In 2002, ownership of the property transferred to the City of Luverne,



Figure 1: Exterior of Palace Theater. Photo by Author

while day to day management of the property remained the responsibility of the Blue Mound Area Theatre Corporation. The theater was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Rock County Multiple Resource Area (MRA) in 1980.

2. History/Property Background

Construction of the theater began in 1915 when Herman and Maude Jochims hired architect W. E. E. Greene to design a vaudeville theater.¹ The Beaux-Arts style was selected for the theater as Herman and Maude Jochims wished for their theater, then referred to as an Opera House, to emulate the style and quality of those found in the Twin Cities during the early portion of the 20th century.² In addition to housing a main street theater, the building featured two storefronts along Main Street. These storefronts were designed, and still function, as commercial space that the owners could lease to various businesses. The primary materials used for the exterior of the theater were yellow Luverne pressed brick with Kasota Limestone accents and trim, both of which were available and produced locally.³ A local contracting company, Green & Jensen, was selected to be the contractor and builder for the theater, having beaten out two other bids. The total cost for the initial construction, which began on March 26, 1915 and was completed on September 29, 1915, was \$50,000.⁴

From its construction in 1915, The Palace Theater was owned and operated by Herman and Maude Jochims until her death in 1949. Herman later married Marion Wheatly, and together they operated the theater until his death in 1959. Marion Wheatly Jochims became the owner of The Palace Theater following Herman's death, and she continued to manage the theater until the late 1960s when she sold the property to Jim Herreid. According to *Herman's Palace*, by Bonnie Holmied Jordahl, Marion Wheatly Jochims sold the theater to Jim Herreid because the day to day operations of the property were becoming too much work for her to do alone.⁵

Despite changing hands numerous times, The Palace Theater never experienced a major shift in use, though it has seen a number of renovations. In 1926, the property underwent its first major renovation by Herman and Maude Jochims. The ballroom space was partitioned off to create a full Art Deco styled apartment for the Jochims towards the south end of the building, and two offices with a shared waiting room were created in the northern portion of the building. In addition to constructing walls, the Jochims covered the ballroom floor to suit the needs of the new space. A false ceiling was also installed at this time, lowering the ballroom ceiling from its original 16 feet to 8 feet. The lowered ceiling intended to improve the heating and cooling efficiency of the apartment and rental spaces. In 1926, Herman and Maude Jochims also installed



Figure 2: Former Second Floor Ballroom. Now in use as Theater Museum. Photo by Author

¹ Benjamin Vander Kooi, interview by author, Luverne, MN, July 23, 2009.

² Bonnie Holmied Jordahl, *Herman's Palace* (Luverne, Minn: B.H. Jordahl, 1995), 2.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "The New Palace Theater Opens," *Rock County Herald*, September 17, 1915, available on microfilm at the Minnesota Historical Society Library, Minnesota History Center, 345 West. Kellogg Blvd, St Paul, Minnesota.

⁵ Jordahl.

a Geneva console organ in the orchestra pit of the theater.⁶ The set of original box seats on the right side of the house were removed to accommodate the installation of the organ's pipes. The set of box seats on the left side of the house were also removed during the 1926 renovation to accommodate the air-conditioning equipment.⁷

The second major renovation occurred in 1945 when Herman and Maude updated the theater's décor to be more Art Deco in style. The Art Deco updates included installing carpeting over the original tiled floor in the entryway and lobby, updating the lower level public restrooms with Art Deco fixtures and furniture and installing glass blocks leading from the main lobby to the public restrooms. An Art Deco styled ticket booth was added to the recessed exterior vestibule as well as a slipcover on the recessed exterior vestibule with black reflective glass. Maude also installed a number of mirrors and other Art Deco finishes throughout the theater.⁸ To accommodate the changes in movie projection over the years, the original projectors were removed from the projection booth and replaced with modern technology.⁹

3. Disinvestment

Around 1977, under the ownership of Jim Herreid, The Palace Theater experienced financial difficulties which resulted in the foreclosure of the property by Minnwest Bank. Because Minnwest Bank's downtown Luverne location is within the same block as the theater, the bank was able to keep a watchful eye on the property during the foreclosure process. The effect of the foreclosure, and resulting closure of the theater, on the city of Luverne was very apparent. Residents Benjamin Vander Kooi and LaDonna Van Aartsen believe that the closure of the theater was a dark moment for Luverne, as the theater occupied a prime location on the corner of West Main Street and Freeman Avenue. The Theater's closure meant that residents had to travel to the surrounding cities, including Sioux Falls, South Dakota, for performing arts and movie entertainment.¹⁰

4. Advocacy / Fundraising

Having returned to Luverne after completing law school in 1978, Benjamin Vander Kooi saw the effects of The Palace Theater's closure on his hometown. At the same time, a local theater organization, the Blue Mound Area Theatre (BMAT), was in a position to reevaluate their direction. Benjamin saw this as an opportunity to bring the former Palace Theater and the BMAT together. He did so through meeting with the BMAT Board of Directors and encouraging them to consider purchasing the theater from Minnwest Bank and using it as their main performance facility. Minnwest Bank aided the Board of Directors in the purchase of the theater by providing them with a short term bridge loan in 1980. The Bank had no desire to carry the building for any major length of time and wished to facilitate the sale as much as possible. To further fund the purchase of the theater, the BMAT was awarded a U.S. Department of the Interior Historic Preservation Grant in 1980 for approximately \$80,000.¹¹

⁶ Ibid. The Geneva console organ located in The Palace Theater is one of possibly 5 Geneva organs left in the country, and the only one still in its original installation location.

⁷ Betty Mann, interview by author, Luverne, MN, July 23, 2009.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The original dual projectors for The Palace Theater are currently on display in the Palace Theater Museum, located on the second floor of the building.

¹⁰ LaDonna Van Aartsen, interview by author, Luverne, MN, July 23, 2009.

¹¹ Ibid.

After acquiring the building, the BMAT began soliciting for volunteers to aid in the cleanup and early restoration of the theater. Throughout the 1980s, various local organizations, including the Luverne Riverside 4-H and the Luverne Eagles Club, worked to clean the theater and raise funds for larger projects – including repainting various spaces in the Art Deco theme. The Luverne Riverside 4-H, in addition to raising \$1,000 towards the restoration of the 1926 Smith-Geneva organ, helped to wash and wax the former ballroom floor in preparation for the opening of The Palace Theater Museum in October, 1987.¹² The early restoration work completed at The Palace Theater was more in line with maintenance than complete restoration, as limited funds were available. Residents of Luverne felt that finding a way to reopen the Palace Theater was extremely important for the town's morale, especially in light of the Farming Crisis of the 1980s. The operating theater was a sign of life in a town affected by the crisis and at times local businesses asked the theater to keep the lights of the marquee on as a sign of hope and life on Main Street.

In the summer of 2001, the BMAT Board of Directors decided to sell the property to the Theater's former manager, Jeremy Esser for \$50,000 – far under market value of the property. Members of the public cried out against the sale, most citing a fear that Jeremy would not preserve the building in the manner they wished, as well as citing a fear of how the theater would be managed as a viable business into the future.¹³ Unfortunately, the public's fear of how the theater would be managed ended up being correct, as Jeremy was forced to close the theater on February 14, 2002 with \$10,000 in debt. During this time, Benjamin Vander Kooi conducted some background research on the sale, and the BMAT's bylaws concerning major decisions and disposing of the property. After researching the case, Benjamin contacted State Attorney General Mike Hatch to discuss the theater's sale. Attorney General Hatch determined that the Board of Directors did not operate in accordance to the BMAT bylaws by failing to inform members of the possible sale, and not providing an opportunity for members to comment on the potential sale. Attorney General Hatch chose not to punish the Board for their actions, but did issue a letter stating that the board must follow all of their bylaws. A meeting was called in March 2002 to discuss the future of the BMAT. This meeting resulted in the election of a new Board of Directors and the decision to buy back the theater for \$60,000. The repurchasing of the theater was made possible by a \$15,000 line of credit given by Minnwest Bank.¹⁴ The new Board was made up of younger community members who had the energy to operate the theater and undertake a full restoration of the property.

After reacquiring the theater, the BMAT began analyzing the various repairs that needed to be completed due to a prolonged lack of maintenance after the initial cleanup and reopening of the theater in the 1980s. Most pressing was the need for a new roof. To fund the needed new roof, the BMAT Board of Directors applied for a Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) State Capital Grants-in-Aid matching grant in 2002. In order to qualify for the available grants, the theater had to be owned by a government entity. In an effort satisfy the grant requirement, the BMAT Board of Directors, including then Board president Benjamin Vander Kooi, met with city officials to discuss a transfer of ownership from the BMAT to the City of Luverne. The BMAT board modeled the proposed transfer of the theater after the arrangement made between the City of Red Wing and the Sheldon Theatre – in which the city owns the property, but the Theater's

¹² Jordahl.

¹³ "Palace Theater," *Rock County Star Herald*, March 28, 2002, 1A, available on microfilm at the Minnesota Historical Society Library, Minnesota History Center, 345 West. Kellogg Blvd, St Paul, Minnesota.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Board manages the day-to-day operations of the property. The Board was able to convince the city to take on the responsibility of owning a theater by focusing on the importance of the potential MHS grant, creating a management contract between the city and the board, demonstrating that the Board was committed to the restoration and management of the property, and by having consultant George Sutton report that there was a sustainable market for a local theater in his analysis of Luverne. Additionally, the board sold the transfer idea to the city by continuing to pay real estate taxes on the property and using locally-owned utility services. By the end of 2002 The Palace Theater was owned by the City of Luverne, and day to day operations of the property were managed by the BMAT Board of Directors.

The ownership transfer of the theater paid off, as MHS awarded the theater a \$35,000 matching grant for the replacement of the roof in 2003. In the fall of 2002, a building assessment was written for the theater by Brown Architecture & Design Co., Morrissey Engineering, and Nielsen Baumert Engineering. The assessment evaluated all components of the building after dividing it into various categories including structure, envelope, interior, codes, mechanical, and electrical. Additionally, the assessment provided a priority list of necessary repairs and all of the findings were compiled into a booklet for future reference. After raising the required matching funds, the roof of the theater was replaced with a new rubber roof. With a now weather tight building and a full assessment completed, the BMAT board began analyzing the restoration options for the theater. Brown Architecture & Design Co. was initially hired on as the project architect to create a restoration plan, but due to the logistics of having an Omaha, Nebraska architect working on a historic property in Minnesota, the BMAT Board eventually hired Laura Faucher from Miller Dunwiddie Architecture in Minneapolis to serve as the project architect. A local contractor from Luverne looked over the complete project for the theater and estimated the total project to cost approximately \$5 million. In 2005-2006, the Board of Directors chose to reassess the restoration – as the restoration cost was estimated at \$5 million. Due to the project's massive size, the Board decided to phase the project. In order to get the biggest “bang for their buck” the Board chose to focus their initial restoration work in the lobby areas, the lower level of the auditorium house, installing a new rigging and lighting system for the stage, and creating handicap accessible restrooms in the lobby. This brought the total cost for “Phase 2” to approximately \$1 million.

Fundraising for “Phase 2” began soon after the decision to phase the entire restoration project. Once again, the BMAT applied for a MHS State Capital Grants-in-Aid matching grant, this time receiving a \$100,000 matching grant in 2006. Additional grants for the Theater were awarded, including a \$100,000 Small Cities Development Grant. The City of Luverne also committed \$100,000 to the project, paid to the Theater over a five-year period at a rate of \$20,000 per year. Fundraising for the theater took off after Ken Burns announced that Luverne, Minnesota would be included as one of four key cities in his new documentary The War. Ken had chosen to include Luverne as the representative small Midwest community for his documentary after meeting Quinton C. Aanenson at a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) dinner in Washington DC. Quinton spoke with Ken about growing up in Luverne as well as his own experiences as a fighter pilot in World War II. The War focused on 1930s and 1940s Luverne, including highlighting pictures of the city and Main Street. Central to Ken's story was The Palace Theater, as the theater was used to show news reels during the war. National attention on the city and The Palace Theater helped remind community members just how important the theater was as a social institution for local residents. When Burns decided to hold the world premier in Luverne, the Board realized they had a major marketing tool.

The timeline for raising the remaining funds, and completing the work for “Phase 2” was set by working backwards from the intended premier date of The War. A capital campaign entitled “The Legacy Campaign,” was created to aid in fundraising for the project. Print materials for The Legacy Campaign included information about the work to be completed, how raised funds would be spent, as well as information about The War and events at the theater leading up to the premier on September 5, 2007.¹⁵ In addition to The Legacy Campaign, BMAT sold seats in the theater. Each seat was sold for \$500, and donors were recognized with a brass plaque affixed onto the seat they “purchased.” Over the course of fundraising, BMAT was able to raise \$152,570.20 through the Legacy Campaign – paid to the theater through the Luverne Area Community Foundation - \$6,630 through selling seats, and an additional \$3,036.50 in other donations. A loan of \$576,195.18 was taken out, bringing the total available income for “Phase 2” to \$1,088,031.88.

5. Restoration

Restoration began in July 2007, and utilized many local contractors, subcontractors, and companies. Van Aartsen Construction of Luverne served as the general contractor for “Phase 2”. The decision was made to maintain the Art Deco styling of the theater, as it had become historic in its own right, rather than restore the theater to its original design. Maintaining the Art Deco style also reduced some of the restoration costs, as the exterior slipcover and ticket booth were kept in place. The exterior façade was tuck-pointed by Mid Continental Restoration Co out of South Dakota.

When the Jochims redecorated the theater in 1945, they installed new carpeting over the original tiled floor in the lobby. During the 2007 restoration, BMAT hired Tai Ping Carpet Limited to recreate the 1945 carpeting, as it was extremely worn and in need of replacement. The new, reproduction carpeting was installed on the ramp in the lobby, in the house, and on the stairs leading off of the lobby. At the top of the lobby ramp, BMAT created an expanded concession stand, an office, and a public handicap-accessible restroom. The floor of the lobby next to the concession stand was not carpeted, in order to show the original tiled floor – this decision was two-fold, it not only showed off the original floor, it also created a hard surface that is easy to clean, in case of spills. The floor of the concession stand was designed to mimic, but not be a direct copy, of the original tiled floor.

New seats from Haldeman and Homme, Inc, were installed on the ground floor of the theater’s house, as the original material was not restorable. The original light registers on the side of the aisle seats were cleaned, wired for LED lighting and reinstalled in the theater.¹⁶ The original asbestos curtain was still in hanging in the theater when restoration began in 2002.



Figure 3: Restored lobby. Reproduction carpet by Tai Ping Carpet Limited. Photo by Author

¹⁵ The Premier was pushed back to September 6, 2007.

¹⁶ A space for lighting was created in the original design of the aisle registers, but the registers were never wired once installed in the Theater.



Figure 4: Encapsulated asbestos fire curtain. Photo by Author

To accommodate modern hazardous materials regulations, this original, and arguably significant, item had to be addressed. Rather than remove the curtain, BMAT discussed their mitigation options. They settled on encapsulation – in which the curtain was effectively painted with a translucent asbestos rated encapsulation product, that encapsulated the asbestos fibers while allow the curtain’s original painting to be seen. A new rigging and lighting system was also installed on the stage by Secoa Inc, as the original rigging system was deemed unsafe and was difficult to operate.

Construction work of “Phase 2” was completed just in time for the world premiere of The War in September, 2007. Since the premier of The War, tourism to Luverne has increased. Many of these tourists are interested in visiting The Palace Theater, which provides tours by appointment and are led by members of BMAT. The Theater has once again become a social meeting point for the community, playing host to movie screenings (typically playing a major new release two weeks after it opens in multiplexes), live performances, organization meetings, and private event rentals. The BMAT continues to operate a museum about the theater on the second floor in the former ballroom. Included in the museum are portions of Herman and Maude Jochims’ Art Deco apartment, some of the theater’s original seats, a box seat box, dual projectors, and many movie and event promotional materials.

6. Conclusion

While very pleased with the restoration of the main floor of the theater, the BMAT Board of Directors has many dreams for future projects. Future work to be completed at The Palace Theater includes: upgrading the lower level lobby to create handicap accessible restrooms; replacing the outdated HVAC system; updating the electrical systems; installing an elevator to service all the floors of the theater; restoring the 1926 Smith-Geneva organ; and determining the exact use and look for the ballroom space. As of summer 2009, none of these projects have been set into motion, due to a current lack of funds to complete the work. While additional fundraising and campaigns may be used to generate the needed money for future work, such efforts are dependent upon the overall economic climate. Unfortunately, today’s economic situation is not very conducive to large scale capital campaigns.

The Palace Theater in Luverne, Minnesota is an excellent example of how non-profit organizations can partner with local governments to revitalize historic buildings in the city; particularly prominent resources of significant community value. The Palace Theater also serves as a reminder of how phasing projects can be extremely successful, especially when tailored to the current economic and social conditions.



Figure 5: Exterior of Palace Theater. Photo by Author

Appendix 1: Table of Rehabilitation/Restoration Key Players

| Company Name | Contact | Rehabilitation / Restoration Role |
|-------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| | George Sutton A: Ph: E: | Performing Arts Consultant |
| Miller Dunwiddie | Laura Faucher A: 123 North Third Street Suite 104 Minneapolis, MN 55401-1657 http://www.millerdunwiddie.com Ph: 612.337.0000 E: | Project Architect |
| Van Aartsen Construction | Darrel Van Aartsen A: 492 120 th Ave Luverne, MN 56156 Ph: 507.920.9499 E: dvanaart@dakotablue.net | General Contractor |
| Atlas Foundation LLC | A: Brockton Ln / Osseo, MN http://www.atlasfoundation.com Ph: 763.428.2261 E: info@atlasfoundation.com | Foundation |
| Country Cupboards of Luverne | A: 843 US Hwy 75 Luverne, MN 56156 Ph: 507.283.8176 | Concession Stand Cabinets |
| Diamond Vogel Paint | A: 1238 Oxford Street Worthington, MN 56187 http://www.diamondvogel.com Ph: 507.376.5727 | Abestos Curtain Encapsulation |
| Fulda Electric | A: 112 South Highway 59 PO Box 396 Fulda, MN 56131 Ph: 507.425.2931 | Electrical |
| H & R Roofing of South Dakota | A: 27491 471st Avenue, Harrisburg, SD 57032 Ph: 605.368.2148 | Roof |
| Haldeman and Homme, Inc | A: 430 Industrial Blvd Minneapolis, MN 55413 http://www.haldemanhomme.com Ph: 612.331.4880 E: info@haldemanhomme.com | Theater Seats |
| McClure Plumbing and Heating | A: 121 N Cedar St Luverne, MN 56156 Ph: 507.283.4716 | |

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|--------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------|
| Mid Continental Restoration Co, Inc. | A: 904 South Ben St Parkston, SD 57366 http://www.midcontinental.com Ph: 605.928.3533 E: craig_hauser@midcontinental.com | Tuck Pointing |
| Mid States Audio & Video | A: 4012 North Hainje Ave Sioux Falls, SD 57104 http://www.midstateaudio.com Ph: 605.331.4001 E: info@midstateaudio.com | Theater Audio |
| P. M. Steel | A: 4401 N Westport Ave Sioux Falls, SD 57107 Ph: 605.339.0141 | |
| Peter Hill Painting | A: Ph: E: | Painting |
| Premier Lighting | A: Ph: E: | Lighting |
| Secoa Inc | A: 8650 109 th Ave North Champlin, MN 55316 http://www.secoa.com Ph: 763.506.8800 E: secoaweb@secoa.com | Theater Rigging - fly & lights |
| T & L Construction | A: Ph: E: | |
| Tai Ping Carpet Limited | A: 222 Merchandise Mart Suite 635 / Chicago, IL 60654 http://www.taipingcarpets.com Ph: 312.644.0400 E: Chicago@taipingcarpets.com | Lobby Carpet |

Appendix 2: Table of Funding

| Funding Name and Contact | Type of Funding | Funding Amount | Year |
|--|---|---------------------|------|
| US Department of the Interior | Historic Preservation Grant <i>Grant has been discontinued</i> | \$70,000 - \$80,000 | 1978 |
| Minnesota Historical Society Mandy Skypala 345 W. Kellogg Blvd. St. Paul, MN 55102 Ph: 651-259-3458 E: mandy.skypala@mnhs.org | State Capital Projects Grant (Matching Grant) | \$35,000 | 2003 |
| City of Luverne 305 E. Luverne St. Luverne, MN 56156 Ph: 507.449.2388 E: bberghor@cityofluverne.org | Yearly Funding – \$20,000/year for 5 years | \$100,000 | 2005 |
| US Department of Housing and Urban Development | Small Cities Development Grant | \$100,000 | 2005 |
| | General Donations | \$3,036.50 | 2006 |
| Minnwest Bank 116 East Main Street PO Box 899 Luverne, MN 56156 Ph: 507.283.2366 | Loan | \$576,195.18 | 2006 |
| Minnesota Historical Society Mandy Skypala 345 W. Kellogg Blvd. St. Paul, MN 55102 Ph: 651-259-3458 E: mandy.skypala@mnhs.org | State Capital Projects Grant (Matching Grant) | \$100,000 | 2006 |
| The Palace Theatre Legacy Campaign Luverne Area Community Foundation P.O. Box 623 Luverne, Minnesota 56156 Ph: 507.220.2424 | Capital Campaign | \$152,570.20 | 2006 |
| | Seat Sales | \$8,480 | 2006 |

Appendix 3: Bibliography

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“The New Palace Theater Opens.” *Rock County Herald*, September 17, 1915.

Van Aartsen, LaDonna. Interview by author. Luverne, MN, July 23, 2009.

Vander Kooi, Benjamin. Interview by author. Luverne, MN, July 23, 2009.