

# A Petition to Save the Historic Uptown Theatre



Photo ©2000 Friends of the Uptown

Sponsored by  
Compass Rose Cultural Crossroads, Inc  
PO Box 409095  
Chicago, IL 60640-9095  
773-913-8047  
E-Mail [info@compassrose.org](mailto:info@compassrose.org)

## SAVE THE HISTORIC UPTOWN THEATRE!

We the undersigned wish to make known our concerns for the future of the historic Uptown Theatre at 4816 N. Broadway in Chicago. We believe that:

- The Uptown Theatre is a unique architectural and historic treasure that is worthy of preservation. Nationwide, few movie palaces and historic theatres of the Uptown's scale and grandeur have survived in their entirety as large auditorium venues. Most have been completely gutted in short-sighted commercial ventures, leaving only the facade. The Uptown Theatre is considered one of the last, best theatres not yet renovated, and has been declared a historic landmark both inside and out. Along with the Aragon Ballroom, the Riviera Theatre, the world famous Green Mill jazz club, and the many elaborate terra-cotta buildings that line Lawrence and Broadway Avenues, the Uptown Theatre forms the core of a recognized "historic district" and for that reason alone MUST be restored.
- The restoration of the Uptown Theatre is in fact the key to the revitalization of the entire Uptown neighborhood, one of the most culturally vibrant areas in Chicago. Uptown is favored by its enviable location near Lake Michigan; its diverse residents; its proximity to the well-established neighborhoods of Andersonville, Edgewater, and Wrigleyville; its excellent public transportation (only twenty minutes from the downtown by train); and its abundance of attractive housing to make it the next region of Chicago to experience regrowth and development. The time is right and the interest exists within the community to restore the Uptown Theatre as an important Chicago entertainment venue.
- Although the Uptown Theatre has remained closed for many years, studies indicate that it is structurally sound and a good candidate for restoration efforts. It deserves the best project that is possible. We hope to inspire civic leaders, urban planners, and other interested parties in selecting a project that will restore and preserve, at a bare minimum, the façade, the main lobby, and the grand auditorium. However, time is of the essence. A building can be mothballed for future restoration, but nothing lasts forever.
- The City of Chicago MUST take a proactive role in the restoration of the theatre. As part of a TIF (tax incremented finance) district the funds are available to see it done.
- The Uptown Theatre can be restored to its original glory and with only minor modification be reopened as an entertainment venue, cultural center, and convention hall of which the City of Chicago can be proud.

In 1925, the Uptown Theatre opened its doors to the movie going public under a marquee which proclaimed, "one of the great art buildings of the world – an acre of seats!" It was designed by architects Rapp & Rapp and was the ultimate movie palace and the crown jewel of the famed Balaban and Katz chain. Today, many theatre historians consider it to be the finest movie palace ever built. No expense had been spared in its creation. It covers 46,000

square feet of land, making it the largest freestanding theatre in the country – bigger, even than New York City’s Radio City. It once employed over 130 people, including two firemen, a nurse, and 34 orchestral musicians. Its front entrance façade is 104 feet high, and the main entrance rises six stories to a domed ceiling. The grand lobby can handle a flow of 9000 people between shows. It has 4381 seats in the auditorium, making it the largest theatre venue in Chicago, exceeding the capacity of the Auditorium Theatre, the Arie Crown, the Civic Opera House, and the Chicago Theatre. The Uptown has a 70 foot stage, an elevated platform for musicians, and was outfitted with a Wurlitzer organ that was the most expensive one ever built. The smallest of its pipes was the width of a pencil, the largest as wide as an ocean liner’s smokestack. There were tea rooms, rest rooms, smoking rooms, cosmetic rooms, and a children’s playroom. The ladies lounge had its own screen where, through the use of a series of mirrors, women could watch the movie. Perfect for when you needed to remove a crying baby from the auditorium! There was even a live radio broadcast room located behind the stage. The Uptown Theatre shared radio airwaves with the Edgewater Beach Hotel (a magnificent historic building which has already been lost) and operated under the call letters WEBH. Opulent details were everywhere – rich cloth draperies, stone carvings, murals, sculptures, and imported chandeliers. Its gorgeous Baroque design led newsmen to call it, “a castle worthy of Old Spain.”

But behind all the red velvet hangings, the rich wood trim and the stunning murals lies a secret. Behind the laughing cherubs and the sly griffins of the intricately decorated walls of the theatre lie the most ingenious developments of early 20<sup>th</sup> century technology. The Uptown Theatre was a showplace for all that was promising about American ingenuity. It has a very sophisticated lighting system with approximately 10,000 stage lights. Its climate control was state-of-the-art and could heat, cool, dehumidify, humidify, ozonize, and even perfume the air with the adjustment of a few switches and a turnaround time of two minutes. The theatre going patron never lacked for comfort.

And what is the current status of this worthy castle? The Uptown Theatre was forced to close its doors in 1981 as part of a general decline of the whole area. Yet the building’s interior and exterior are “protected” at the local, state, and federal levels. The Uptown is listed in the Illinois Historic Structures Survey. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1996 the National Trust for Historic Preservation placed it on its list of “Eleven Most Endangered Places.” The 11 sites chosen each year are those threatened by neglect, insufficient funds, inappropriate development or insensitive public policy. It was listed on the “Ten Most Endangered Historic Places” list compiled by the Landmark Preservation Council of Illinois. In 1991, it was even designated as a Chicago Landmark.

Despite all of these designations – despite the fact that many worthy organizations recognize the historic significance of this building and its prominent place in architectural and entertainment history -- little has been done to restore the theatre and its doors remain closed.

We feel there is hope. The Uptown neighborhood of Chicago is once again on the rise as new housing and retail development is transforming once blighted areas. The intersection of Broadway and Lawrence has been declared a historic landmark and includes other vintage entertainment venues such as the Aragon Ballroom, the Riviera Theatre, and the Green Mill jazz club.

The Urban Land Institute, a non-profit research and education organization, made a close examination of this area now referred to as the Uptown Square Historic District in order to make a recommendation for a development plan that would include retail, dining, and entertainment venues. A major conclusion they came to is that the Uptown Theatre MUST be restored. It is known by all that this will be an expensive and difficult process, but it is the lynchpin in the recreation of an entertainment district that would attract Chicagoans and tourists alike. The ULI concluded that “the theatre is truly significant historically and magnificent aesthetically.” A number of suggestions were made for how the restored theatre might be used, including flexible seating in the amphitheatre to allow for a variety of events and use of the entrance hall and other rooms for receptions, meetings, weddings, and corporate functions. The Uptown Theatre is, in short, the pivotal piece in the puzzle of the redevelopment of the Uptown Neighborhood.

Upon its opening, the press proclaimed that the Uptown Theatre was built “not for today but for all time.” Do not let this historic gem of Chicago history and architecture fade away. Its doors have been closed for too many years and time is of the essence to see it restored. As we approach the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this grand old theatre, we urge the City of Chicago to take a more active role in preserving the Uptown for the citizens of today and for all the future generations to come.

Sincerely,

Name	Address	Phone/E-Mail	Comments
<hr/>			
<hr/>			
<hr/>			
<hr/>			
<hr/>			
<hr/>			
<hr/>			
<hr/>			
<hr/>			
<hr/>			

