

Brady Judd

## **Raising the Wreck:**

### **The Salvation of the Admiral Theatre and the Dedication of Local Preservation**

On January 29, 1989, a group of protesters gathered outside a movie theater in West Seattle. The theater was certainly a peculiar one, with an exterior meant to look like a classic sailing ship. What was more peculiar was the fact that the people gathered were not there to protest anything happening inside the theater. Instead, they were protesting the fact that in a matter of hours, the Admiral Theatre<sup>1</sup> would play its final film, and West Seattle would lose its only remaining movie house.<sup>2</sup> “We just want it saved,” said local resident Clay Eals. “It’s a beautiful building. It’s one of the biggest, oldest, most unique private landmarks in West Seattle. It’s the kind of thing that people love.”<sup>3</sup>

The Admiral was unique from the beginning in terms of its design, but its story became especially unique because of what it took to keep the theater running. Multiple shifts in ownership and, crucially, a devoted community led by people like Eals made the difference in sparing the Admiral from the same fate as many Seattle movie houses.

The Admiral found itself on the verge of erasure when it was shut down by its owners, but the community responded in great numbers to secure a city landmark designation for the Admiral to keep the theater running. Their efforts paid off, and it is why the Admiral still stands today. No other theater in Seattle was rescued the way the Admiral was, and its story has much to say about local preservation. The Admiral demonstrates the power of local attractions to residents, and what is possible when these residents come together to maintain what is important to them.

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the spelling “theatre” in official names but will otherwise use the spelling “theater.”

<sup>2</sup> The City of Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board, “Admiral Theatre Designation,” June 19, 1989, 5.

<sup>3</sup> “‘Save the Admiral Theater’ Campaign,” KIRO-TV News Report, April 2, 1992, [Video](#).

The Admiral began as the Portola Theatre in 1919, but became the Admiral West Seattle knows and loves in 1942. The Admiral's design revolved around the sea, and the interior sported several sea-related murals, such as the landing of Captain Vancouver in Seattle in 1792. The building was notable not just for its nautical theme, but also for its cutting-edge technology at the time. This included reclining seats, such a novelty the mechanics of which had to be detailed by the press, as well as special headsets for the hard of hearing.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the Admiral's charm can be attributed to its designer, B. Marcus Priteca. Though born in Scotland, Priteca eventually settled in Seattle, where the majority of his work was carried out.<sup>5</sup> This work included numerous theaters in Seattle, as well as cities like Anchorage, Portland, Olympia, Yakima, Aberdeen, Vancouver, San Francisco, Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, Great Falls, Oakland, Minneapolis, New Orleans, Bend, Huntington Park, and Anaconda.<sup>6</sup> With such a prolific career, Priteca gained a reputation as one of the best theater architects in America.<sup>7</sup> The Admiral is unique in Priteca's catalogue as it is his only aquatic-themed design, and his reputation further motivated people in saving the Admiral as it meant saving one of his designs.<sup>8</sup>

While the Admiral's design helped it stand out, it was far from the only notable movie theater in Seattle. At its peak, Seattle was home to more than fifty theaters and had a long history with film. Seattle had one of the largest vaudeville circuits in the country from 1900 to 1930, and was the place to catch the biggest silent films of the day, including classics like *The Great Train*

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<sup>4</sup> Clay Eals, "Admiral Theater Retrospective Piece," May 2012, Personal correspondence with author.

<sup>5</sup> Eugene Normand, "A Tale of Two Cities' Jewish Architects: Emile Weil of New Orleans and B. Marcus Priteca of Seattle," *Southern Jewish History*, vol. 16 (2013): 3.

<sup>6</sup> Pacific Coast Architecture Database, "Barnet Marcus Priteca (Architect)," accessed May 28, 2025, [Article](#). Priteca's work continues to be relevant, as his Orpheum Theater in Vancouver was used as a filming location for Season 2 of HBO's hit series, *The Last of Us*, released in 2025. Emily Zemler, "All the Filming Locations in *The Last of Us* Season Two," *Condé Nest Traveler*, May 25, 2025, [Article](#).

<sup>7</sup> Debera Harrell, "Admiral's New Owner Wants Show to Go On," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, October 17, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> Landmarks Preservation Board, "Admiral Theatre Designation," 5. "Letter from Edward A. Day," April 4, 1989, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public (1/5), 1989, Box: 12, Folder: 1. Landmarks Preservation Board Subject Files, 5754-A2. Seattle Municipal Archives, hereafter SMA.

*Robbery* (1903).<sup>9</sup> When it opened, the Admiral stood out because of the way it looked.

Eventually, the Admiral stood out because it was still operational.

The Admiral had seen some upgrades in its time, such as the installation of a wide panoramic screen in 1953, but the first true renovation came in 1973. The theater was divided into two separate auditoriums, but new sound-softening curtains now covered the theater's distinctive but deteriorating nautical decorations along the walls.<sup>10</sup> In June 1986, theater owners Sterling Recreational Organization (SRO) announced an expansion that would turn the Admiral into a four-auditorium theater. This would add 762 seats and, crucially, increase potential for tickets sales. However, later that year SRO was bought by Cineplex Odeon, a theater conglomerate based in Toronto. As late as the spring of 1987, Cineplex insisted the expansion was still happening. Yet as time would prove, not only did the expansion not happen, but Cineplex took a completely different stance.<sup>11</sup>

Citing declining attendance and the need for expensive repairs, in 1989 Cineplex closed the Admiral Theatre.<sup>12</sup> A lawyer for Cineplex later commented, "The theater was losing money when Cineplex bought it and it continued to lose money. The Admiral is a money-losing location."<sup>13</sup> However, the community quickly demonstrated its disagreement. That is why on January 29, a group of West Seattleites picketed the closure, many holding signs labeled "SAVE THE ADMIRAL," "DON'T SINK THE SHIP," and "KEEP THE ADMIRAL AFLOAT." What is incredible about this moment is that despite having just forty-eight hours to organize after hearing of the theater's closure, fifty people came out to support the theater, including three state

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<sup>9</sup> M. Lynn Thrasher, *A Timeline History: Seattle Paramount Theatre From Birth—To Rebirth—And Beyond*, Seattle Theatre Group (2012), 10, 60.

<sup>10</sup> Landmarks Preservation Board, "Admiral Theatre Designation," 4.

<sup>11</sup> Clay Eals, "Admiral Theater Retrospective Piece," May 2012, Personal correspondence with author.

<sup>12</sup> *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, "The Admiral is Back in Business," March 24, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Harrell, "Admiral's New Owner Wants Show to Go On."

legislators and a county council member.<sup>14</sup> Before they went home, however, the protesters went into the theater to catch its final screening.<sup>15</sup> Such a fast and organized response to the Admiral's closure was just a taste of what the community would do to save a local landmark.

Just two weeks after the Admiral's closure, the Southwest Seattle Historical Society (SWSHS) formed the "Save the Admiral Task Force."<sup>16</sup> With the Admiral closed and Cineplex intent on selling the theater, the task force needed to work fast. One major step to save the Admiral was to have it designated by the city as a historical landmark, which would limit major alterations and deter several buyers wanting to completely demolish the Admiral. If the Admiral were to become a Seattle landmark, the owner would benefit from incentives like tax credits and grant eligibility. More importantly, if the owner wanted to make any changes to the Admiral, they would need approval from the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board.<sup>17</sup>

Just like their picketing efforts, the SWSHS was extremely well-organized when it began its crusade. One major effort was a letter-writing campaign to the Landmarks Preservation Board to demonstrate the community's support for the Admiral. Specifically, the SWSHS asked those participating to include one or more of the following arguments that corresponded with the city's landmarking criteria:

1. *The Admiral is a big part of the cultural and economic heritage of the community of West Seattle.*
2. *The Admiral is an easily identifiable visual feature of its neighborhood and contributes to the distinctive quality and identity of the neighborhood because of its siting, age and scale.*
3. *The Admiral's designer was Marcus Priteca, who designed the Coliseum Theater in downtown Seattle and the Pantages chain up and down the West Coast.*

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<sup>14</sup> "Letter from Clay Eals to Cineplex Odeon," February 3, 1989, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 1, SMA.

<sup>15</sup> "Save the Admiral Theater' Campaign," KOMO-TV News Report, January 29, 1989, [Video](#).

<sup>16</sup> Clay Eals, "Admiral Theater Retrospective Piece," May 2012, Personal correspondence with author.

<sup>17</sup> "Southwest Seattle Historical Society Memorandum," March 18, 1989, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 1, SMA.

4. *The Admiral is an example of the Moderne architectural style.*<sup>18</sup>

The community responded well, with several hundred letters finding their way to the Preservation Board. While many of the letters did indeed include the arguments suggested by the SWSHS, there were several other arguments the people felt worth sharing. For many, the Admiral was special because of the memories they shared with the building. One common treasured memory for residents was going to the Admiral on first dates with their eventual spouses.<sup>19</sup>

Many of the people writing in felt it was important for future generations to make their own memories. Said Mary and Greg Park: “Three generations of my immediate family have enjoyed the Admiral immensely throughout the years. Please[,] let’s save it for future generations!”<sup>20</sup> Michele P. Clements wrote, “As a single parent of 3 children, ages 10-8-6, how can I teach them about their Neighborhood Community- ‘Their Roots’ [-] without the landmarks such as the Admiral Theatre.”<sup>21</sup>

The people participating in the campaign also opposed the idea of turning the Admiral into a business like a mall, restaurant, or office building. For many, these were not the kind of buildings West Seattle needed. Said Sheryann Campbell and H. Michael Clark:

*Daily we watch parts of old Seattle torn down and replaced by slicker, larger, less friendly structures. We hope you will give serious consideration to preserving this one small theater for a community (and city) who obviously recognize its intrinsic value and grace to present and future citizens.*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “Southwest Seattle Historical Society Memorandum,” March 18, 1989, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 1, SMA.

<sup>19</sup> “‘Save the Admiral Theater’ Campaign,” KSTW-TV News Report, April 2, 1992, [Video](#).

<sup>20</sup> “Letter from Mary and Greg Park,” March 28, 1989, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public Folder 1, SMA.

<sup>21</sup> “Letter from Michele P. Clements,” April 26, 1990, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public (3/5), 1990, Box: 12, Folder: 3. Landmarks Preservation Board Subject Files, 5754-A2. Seattle Municipal Archives.

<sup>22</sup> “Letter from Sheryann Campbell and H. Michael Clark,” April 2, 1989, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 1, SMA.

In addition to the letter-writing campaign, in a time before social media and online petitions, more than 4,500 West Seattle residents signed a petition to designate the Admiral as a Seattle landmark.<sup>23</sup> And it was not just everyday citizens who were writing letters, but people of authority. Several state representatives wrote in, including State Senator Phil Talmadge, who remarked that,

*I will not be able to attend the nomination hearing on April 3 due to the legislative session, but I wanted to apprise the Board of my interest in the theatre. The West Seattle community is home to a significant historical and architectural landmark, the Admiral Theatre. As a life-long resident of West Seattle, I know the Admiral Theatre is of special significance to the West Seattle Theatre community. Several generations of West Seattle residents have enjoyed the amenities of this historic theatre. Historic theatres like the admiral should be preserved as integral features of community history.*<sup>24</sup>

In the end, these efforts paid off. Despite the wishes of Cineplex, on April 5, 1989 the Seattle Landmark Preservation Board unanimously voted to nominate the Admiral Theatre for landmark designation.<sup>25</sup> And on June 7, the board unanimously designated the Admiral as a city landmark.<sup>26</sup> The designation protected the Admiral's front-facing east façade, its expansive lobby and the interior auditorium surfaces of the exterior walls adorned with glow-in-the-dark underwater appliques.

However, while such a decision would greatly hinder any attempt by Cineplex to demolish the Admiral, Cineplex was still within its rights to sell the building or change the building's purpose, which city landmark status did not protect. The soul of the Admiral Theatre, the thing that made it special, was still on the line. Because any decision made by Cineplex

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<sup>23</sup> William Arnold, "The Admiral is Back in Business," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, March 24, 1992. "Southwest Seattle Historical Society Memorandum," Admiral Theater-Letters from Public (4/5), 1990, Box: 12, Folder: 4. Landmarks Preservation Board Subject Files, 5754-A2. Seattle Municipal Archives.

<sup>24</sup> "Letter from Phil Talmadge," March 21, 1989, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 1, SMA. Talmadge was also present for the picketing on January 29. "'Save the Admiral Theater' Campaign," KOMO-TV News Report, January 29, 1989, [Video](#).

<sup>25</sup> William Arnold, "New Life Looms for Historic Admiral Theatre," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, November 12, 1990.

<sup>26</sup> Don Fair, "Admiral Theatre Wins City's Nod as a 'Landmark,'" *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, June 8, 1989.

concerning the Admiral was now subject to the Landmark Board's approval, a plan for the Admiral took ten months to negotiate. However, this new plan would effectively destroy the Admiral as a movie theater. Cineplex's plan was to sell the Admiral to a developer who would convert it into a mall. This meant gutting the interior of the building and knocking down the front wall, also putting the famous murals inside at risk. Essentially, Cineplex sought to change all the parts of the theater its landmark designation did not protect.<sup>27</sup>

For many, the efforts made to designate the Admiral as a historic landmark would be for nothing if the Admiral were gutted and turned into a shopping center. Pamela Jarvis wrote,

*If the structure gets changed and altered by opening up the front and gutting the inside, what was the point of "saving" it? I strongly support the preservation of the existing architecture for the historical integrity of SAVING the Admiral Theater.<sup>28</sup>*

Once again, the SWSHS called on the people to voice their support for the Admiral. In many ways, the Admiral was in just as much danger as before, and the SWSHS encouraged residents to appeal for the Admiral's purpose to be kept intact.<sup>29</sup>

Just as before, many of the letters expressed concerns that the Admiral would become another example of a historic building replaced by a business the community did not want or need. Said Patty Owings:

*Originally from Los Angeles, California I've seen how a city can grow cold and impersonal. But there they call it progress. Seattle already has a growth problem. Are we [sic] for the sake of progress [going to] follow in other large cities['] mistakes and become impersonal as well[?] For if we keep tearing down old buildings that are a work of art of the times, then we are.<sup>30</sup>*

On the other hand, there was at least one person who sided with giving the Admiral a new purpose. Margrit E. Watts was in full support of a complete removal, writing,

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<sup>27</sup> "Southwest Seattle Historical Society Memorandum," Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 4, SMA.

<sup>28</sup> "Letter from Pamela Jarvis," April 25, 1990, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 4, SMA.

<sup>29</sup> "Southwest Seattle Historical Society Memorandum," Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 4, SMA.

<sup>30</sup> "Letter from Patty Owings," April 26, 1990, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 3, SMA.

*I remember I did sign the petition to save the Admiral Theater, but I have since changed my thinking. The more I look at the building the more I feel that there is nothing historical about the building to save. We have so many "EYE SORE" buildings in West Seattle, it would be refreshing to see something new and useful for a change.*

However, letters like these were far outweighed by letters from West Seattle residents who wanted the Admiral preserved just the way it was. Fortunately, the Preservation Board once again sided with the people, and the Admiral was awarded its control designation. The final step towards saving the Admiral was ownership. With Cineplex unwilling to invest in the Admiral as a movie theater, a new owner was needed. At first, the Admiral was meant to sell to a local company, Westlake Capital Corp., but this deal fell through.<sup>31</sup> Eventually, the Admiral Theatre was purchased by local father-and-son businessmen Cecil and Mike Gartin of C&R Electric, located just one block away, in 1991. The deal benefited Gartin because along with the Admiral, he also acquired a nearby parking lot that would help his existing electrical contracting business. On the other hand, in addition to the renovations needed to bring the Admiral back up to strength, there were limits on what the Admiral could screen. A "no-compete" clause in the sale meant the Admiral could not show first-run movies for ten years, meaning it could not show new films as soon as they released. For the time, the Admiral was limited to re-runs of classics and showing new films several months after their release.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, the Admiral was now in the hands of an owner who believed in its potential. On April 2, 1992, the Admiral Theatre held its grand reopening as it screened *Woman of the Year* (1942) and *The Maltese Falcon* (1941).<sup>33</sup> More than three years had passed since the Admiral was shut down, and after such a strong, coordinated effort, the Admiral was indeed

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<sup>31</sup> Arnold, "New Life Looms for Historic Admiral Theatre."

<sup>32</sup> Harrell, "Admiral's New Owner Wants Show to Go On."

<sup>33</sup> *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, "Ahoy, The Admiral is Filmworthy," March 27, 1992.

saved. The press was keen to highlight the significance of this victory, with the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* writing, “The episode represents a rare triumph of art and architecture over commercialism in the life of West Seattle and our city.”<sup>34</sup>

And this is precisely why the story of the Admiral is so impressive, because it is an isolated one. This is partly due to the sheer number of theaters in Seattle that met the fate so many feared the Admiral would face. The Coliseum Theatre downtown had a similar trajectory to the Admiral but did not have such a happy ending. The Coliseum was also a Priteca design and even received a landmark designation. Like the Admiral, this designation was limited to the exterior, which made the building’s purpose vulnerable. Unlike the Admiral, the Coliseum did not receive protections for any of its interior, and the Coliseum was closed in 1990, later becoming a Banana Republic store in 1994. That store closed in 2020, and the space currently serves as a temporary art gallery.<sup>35</sup>

The Granada Theatre in West Seattle was another great casualty. The Granada originally opened in 1926, and was reportedly turned down for a landmark designation.<sup>36</sup> The theater was demolished in 1977 and turned into a string of restaurants, including a Sambo’s, Denny’s, then an Eggs Cetera before it became the Granada condominium.<sup>37</sup> The reduction of a local theater to a chain restaurant resonated with the West Seattle community, and many lamented this loss in their letters to save the Admiral, which they hoped would be spared this fate.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, “The Admiral is Back in Business,” March 24, 1992.

<sup>35</sup> The City of Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board, “Coliseum Theatre Designation,” 1977. Eric L. Flom, “Coliseum Theater Opens in Seattle on January 8, 1916,” *HistoryLink.org*, July 12, 2000, [Article](#). Margo Vansyngel, “Seattle’s historic Coliseum Theater, old Banana Republic store to get new life,” *The Seattle Times*, March 21, 2023.

<sup>36</sup> “Letter from John Bailey Mraz,” April 26, 1990, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 3, SMA.

<sup>37</sup> William Gabel, “Granada Theatre,” *Cinema Treasures*, [Article](#).

<sup>38</sup> “Letter from Edward A. Day,” April 4, 1989, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 1, SMA. “Letter from David G. Todd,” March 29, 1989, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 1, SMA. “Letter from Kathleen Connell,” March 28, 1989, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 1, SMA. “Letter from Janene M. Siers,” March 28, 1989, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 1, SMA. “Letter from Pamela A. Martins,” April 27, 1990, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 3, SMA. “Letter from Pam Reside Leach,” April 25, 1990, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 4, SMA.

The repurposing or demolition of historic theaters proved to be a common trend. The Orpheum Theatre downtown, another Priteca design, was a theater mourned by the Seattle community after it was razed and made into a hotel in 1967 after fifty years of theatrical use.<sup>39</sup> There was also the Magnolia Theater, which opened in 1948 and was later demolished to become a bank in 1978.<sup>40</sup> The Guild 45<sup>th</sup> in Wallingford first opened in 1921 and was closed in 2017 before being demolished in 2022.<sup>41</sup> This came in spite of efforts by the community to designate it as a landmark. In the University District, the Seven Gables, which was closed around the same time as the Guild 45<sup>th</sup>, burned down in 2020, with many mournful community members observing the wreckage.<sup>42</sup> The Music Box Theatre downtown opened in 1928 and was demolished in 1987, while the Avalon reportedly became a fast food restaurant.<sup>43</sup> Finally, there was the Broadway Theatre on Capitol Hill, which began as the Society Theatre in 1911, but eventually became a Rite-Aid in 1990. The original marquee, however, still stands today.<sup>44</sup>

That is why several of the letters written in support of the Admiral mentioned moments like these, so the Admiral would not fall victim to this trend. Said Joseph Vinikow:

*It's too late for the magnificent Orpheum Theatre, replaced by the graceless corncob of a downtown hotel.*

*And every other movie house in every other neighborhood where the wrecking ball stopped the show*

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<sup>39</sup> Eric L. Form, "Orpheum Theatre (Seattle)," *History Link.org*, December 12, 2023, [Article](#). "Letter from Edward A. Day," April 4, 1989, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 1, SMA.

<sup>40</sup> Ken Roe, "Magnolia Theatre," *Cinema Treasures*, [Article](#). Clay Eals, "A House Move, the Magnolia Theatre, 1963, & New Book!," *Seattle Now and Then*, August 20, 2020, [Article](#).

<sup>41</sup> Qina Liu, "Demolition begins at Seattle's Guild 45th movie theater," *The Seattle Times*, September 15, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Moira Macdonald, "Guild 45th, Seven Gables movie theaters closed indefinitely," *The Seattle Times*, June 6, 2017. Michelle Baruchman, Elise Takahama and Benjamin Romano, "Seven Gables Theatre gutted by fire in Seattle's U District," *The Seattle Times*, December 24, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> The owner of the Music Box, in fact, sued the city of Seattle for the personal cost of the theater's destruction. "Save the Admiral Theater' Campaign," KIRO-TV News Report, April 2, 1992, [Video](#). Moira Macdonald, "Explore Seattle's romantic — and vanishing — historic moviehouses," *The Seattle Times*, November 22, 2017. "Letter from Jerry Saylor," April 24, 1990, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public (4/5), 1990, Box: 12, Folder: 4. Landmarks Preservation Board Subject Files, 5754-A2. Seattle Municipal Archives. Macdonald, "Explore Seattle's romantic — and vanishing — historic moviehouses."

<sup>44</sup> Katie Mac, "Broadway Theatre," *Cinema Treasures*, [Article](#).

*forever. It's a mistake we may amend in a small way by saving this movie palace in miniature. Let us not miss the opportunity.*<sup>45</sup>

Fortunately, this fate did not meet every historic theater in Seattle. The Admiral was not the only movie theater in Seattle to be saved, but it was the only one saved largely through community efforts. Other Seattle theaters that found themselves saved did so largely due to the generosity of people and groups with far deeper pockets. The Cinerama Theatre is a prime example. The theater opened in 1963 and seemed on the verge of closure when it found itself a new owner: Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, who added the Cinerama to his portfolio of Seattle real estate in 1998.<sup>46</sup>

The Seattle International Film Festival (SIFF) also played a strong role in preserving Seattle theaters. The Uptown, which opened in 1926 but closed down in 2010, was acquired by SIFF in 2011. In 2014, SIFF acquired the Egyptian Theatre, which first opened in 1980 and briefly closed in 2013 before its acquisition.<sup>47</sup> SIFF is also the current owner of the Cinerama, having acquired the theater from the Allen Estate in 2023, though the theater is now called SIFF Cinema Downtown.<sup>48</sup> Another local theater group, Far Away Entertainment, acquired the Varsity Theatre, which first opened in 1940, in 2015.<sup>49</sup> Far Away Entertainment is also the current leasing operator of the Admiral, and carried out an interior renovation in 2016 that expanded the theater to four auditoriums and unearthed the theater's famous auditorium murals.<sup>50</sup>

Sometimes, a theater's survival meant reinventing itself. The Paramount Theatre began as one of Seattle's premiere movie houses, and it suffered the same existential crisis as movies lost

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<sup>45</sup> "Letter from Joseph Vinikow," March 24, 1989, Admiral Theater-Letters from Public, Folder 1, SMA.

<sup>46</sup> Alex Hart, "Allen Buys Cinerama, Showcase," *The Seattle Times*, February 20, 1998.

<sup>47</sup> Rachel Eggers, "SIFF Secures Uptown and Egyptian Theatres," *siff.net*, May 15, 2014. [Article](#).

<sup>48</sup> SIFF Press, "SIFF Acquires Seattle Cinerama Theatre," *siff.net*, May 11, 2023. [Article](#).

<sup>49</sup> Don Lewis, "Varsity Theatre," *Cinema Treasures*, [Article](#).

<sup>50</sup> Ironically, the vision to expand the Admiral as a last-ditch effort to save it ended up coming true. Moira Macdonald, "Admiral Theater in West Seattle to undergo renovations," *The Seattle Times*, September 16, 2016.

audience members to television. The Paramount became a national historical landmark in 1974, but this did not save it as a theater. The building reinvented itself several times, first as a premiere rock venue in the 1970s. In the 1980s the Paramount sought to become a host for the grandest theater shows possible. Like several theaters in Seattle, salvation came from a generous buyer. After a deal to become the new home for the Seattle Symphony fell through, former Microsoft vice president Ida Cole led an investment group that purchased the Paramount in 1993.<sup>51</sup>

The Admiral was not bailed out by a Microsoft executive, yet it succeeded where other theaters had failed. An extended effort by the community meant the Admiral would remain a movie theater just as the people intended. The question is, what made the Admiral so special? One factor to consider is timing. By the time the Admiral was on the verge of closure, several theaters had already vanished. The Granada and Music Box Theatres were both shut down in the preceding years, and both the Coliseum and Broadway Theaters were closed a year after the Admiral. When the community was fighting to save the Admiral, it was the only remaining movie house in West Seattle.<sup>52</sup> Several people writing to save the Admiral appealed to this spirit because it was their last chance to save this type of building in their neighborhood.

For the community to pour three years of effort into the Admiral, there was certainly a strong pull by the Admiral that motivated them. For many, it was a matter of preserving a place that held important memories. Sometimes, this pull can be so strong it does not matter when you last visited. When the Seven Gables burned down, local resident Cal McCune was interviewed by *The Seattle Times*:

*Cal McCune, who grew up in Montlake and lives in Seattle's Wallingford neighborhood, watched the scene unfold from a nearby corner. He said he's probably seen more than 20 movies at Seven Gables over the*

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<sup>51</sup> Thrasher, *A Timeline History*, 60, 91-3, 95, 99, 110, 114.

<sup>52</sup> Landmarks Preservation Board, "Admiral Theatre Designation," 5.

*course of his life, but it had been a while. “The last movie I saw here was ‘Providence’ in 1980,” he said. “The most disturbing movie of my life.” McCune said he remembers the building as a “beautiful little theater,” but that it was bound to catch fire eventually.<sup>53</sup>*

Despite such a long absence from visiting the Seven Gables, people like McCune still held an emotional attachment to the theater, even if one of those memories was connected to a disturbing film. This can explain why the people familiar with the Admiral on a regular basis fought so hard to save it, because they were still making these memories. Thanks to their efforts, the fact that the Admiral still stands is a great point of pride. This is especially true because today, art critics commonly write about the way film viewing has become sanitized by multiplexes, and why arthouse theaters like the Admiral are a treasure.<sup>54</sup>

This instinct to preserve what is valuable is another factor that makes the Admiral’s story so unique. What happened with the Admiral is an expression of a preservation mindset that has always been in place. In the United States, preservation started with the Revolutionary War, preserving artifacts and important areas like Independence Hall. From there, the first preservation groups emerged, like the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, dedicated to preserving the home of George Washington. Preservation continued to grow on a larger scale with institutions like the National Parks Service, then with the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966. This expanded the National Register of Historic Places, allowing properties that were significant at both a state and local level. After this, there was a concurrent trend of historic buildings being repurposed while, by the 1980s, the responsibility for preservation was becoming more local.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Baruchman, Takahama, Romano, “Seven Gables Theatre gutted by fire in Seattle’s U District.”

<sup>54</sup> MacDonal, “Explore Seattle’s romantic — and vanishing — historic moviehouses.”

<sup>55</sup> Diane Lea, “America’s Preservation Ethos: A Tribute to Enduring Ideals,” in *A Richer Heritage*, edited by Robert E. Stipe (The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 1-2, 5, 11, 12, 14.

When the Admiral was on the verge of disaster, the official systems to save buildings like it were relatively new. The first step came in 1970, when an ordinance was passed in Seattle to create a Department of Community Development that would establish historical districts for the city. From there, the Landmarks Preservation Ordinance created a citywide preservation program in 1973 with a review board to evaluate and approve nominated structures, even if their owners objected to landmark status. That same year, an Office of Historic Preservation was established, one of very few in the nation. In many ways, Seattle was ahead of the national preservation trend, and one of the few cities that applied for preservation and restoration grants.<sup>56</sup> The Admiral benefited from this because unlike so many theaters before, there were official channels to truly save the theater.

Once again, the push to save the Admiral found itself at an interesting moment in time. While more corporations like Cineplex tried to repurpose older buildings, at the same time more local groups like the Southwest Seattle Historical Society emerged to preserve such buildings. What the Admiral demonstrated is the sheer power of these local groups when the stars aligned. Thanks to the SWSHS's organization and tenacity, the people of West Seattle became a force that stood up to much larger corporate entities.

On a larger scale, this trend of preservation goes beyond local or even national politics. This urge to preserve what is precious to us is something that goes further than local movie theaters, connecting to what makes us human. Archaeologist Michael Dawson summarized his field when he wrote,

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<sup>56</sup> Lawrence Kreisman, *Historic Preservation in Seattle* (Historic Seattle Preservation and Development Authority, 1985), 12-6.

*The sense of archaeology as a global profession stems from pleas to recognise archaeological deposits as the common heritage of humankind and hence deserving of appropriate treatment.*<sup>57</sup>

There are different ways to express such sentiment, but this is precisely what the people in West Seattle did by saving the Admiral. They appealed to a common heritage to save something not just for themselves, but for the community at large. This desire to maintain the movie house tradition is something that remains to this day. Many theaters faced a crisis when the COVID-19 pandemic cut off profits. According to the Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, the state of Washington responded by granting \$300,000 to begin a Historic Theater Grant. Even with generous grants like this, it has been estimated that historic theaters lost \$3.2 million due to the pandemic, or roughly \$240,000 per theater.<sup>58</sup> As the story of these Seattle theaters demonstrate, there is much need for passionate owners willing to invest in such venues.

Time has also proved that the people have certainly not lost their passion for preserving what is important to them. In 2018, Seattle faced another theater crisis when Omi Group, a developer based in Vancouver, BC, announced its intentions to purchase the famous Showbox music hall downtown to redevelop it into a high-rise apartment building.<sup>59</sup> For the city, this was a storied venue where so many acts passed through on their rise to the top. This happened across genres, whether it was jazz, grunge, or pop. By 2019, activists had succeeded in getting the Showbox designated as a city landmark.<sup>60</sup> Soon after, the Showbox became a part of the Pike

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<sup>57</sup> Michael Dawson, "Introduction: Profession, discourse, and agency," in *Heritage Under Pressure – Threats and Solution: Studies of Agency and Soft Power in the Historic Environment*, edited by Michael Dawson, Edward James, and Michael Nevell (Oxbow Books, 2019), 4.

<sup>58</sup> Kim Grant, "The Show Must Go On: Historic Theaters in WA," Washington State Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation, October 18, 2021, [Page](#).

<sup>59</sup> Mike Rosenburg, Michael Rietmulder, "Seattle's Showbox apparently to be demolished for apartment high-rise," *The Seattle Times*, July 25, 2018.

<sup>60</sup> Michael Rietmulder, "Seattle's Showbox music venue granted landmark status," *The Seattle Times*, July 17, 2019.

Place Market Historical District, which is restricted to developers,<sup>61</sup> and the theater is still operating today. Once again, Seattle demonstrated its passion for preserving the artistic venues to which they have such strong connections.

More than ever, the survival of these theaters depends on passionate communities like West Seattle willing to show up for their local theater. And yet, moments like these are a reminder of the reality buildings like the Admiral face. For preserving a historic movie theater, there is no finish line. There is only an uphill climb with many, many obstacles to clear. Stories like the Admiral's demonstrate just how effective a community can be when it is organized and dedicated to a cause. It is because of this passion that a movie theater once written off by its owners is still running today.

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