

The restored entrance lobby of the Pantages Theatre in Toronto.
Built in 1920, the theatre was first restored in 1972 and again in 1989.

MOVIE THEATRES

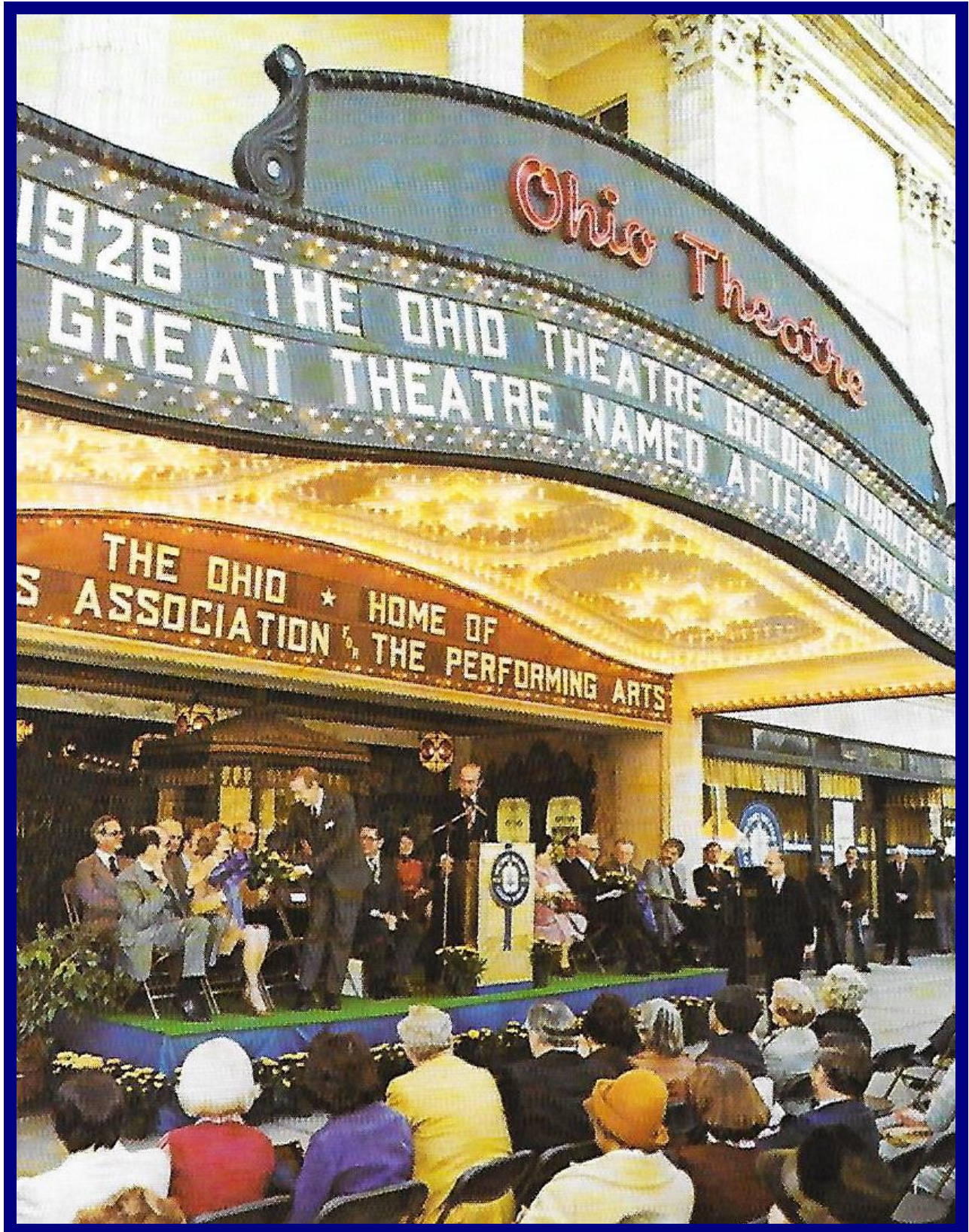
FROM THE NINETEEN-TWENTIES

RESTORED

WITH A FEW NOTES ON AIR CONDITIONING

BRIAN ROBERTS

OHIO THEATRE COLUMBUS OHIO



Celebration of the Theatre's Golden Jubilee in 1977 (strictly speaking a few months early).

TENNESSEE THEATRE KNOXVILLE



President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Motorcade passing the Tennessee Theatre.
The date: 2 September 1940. The theatre awning reads "Beautifully Cooled by Refrigeration."

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Built: 1920, Seating Capacity: 3626, Architect: Thomas Lamb

ORPHEUM THEATRE, WICHITA, KANSAS, USA

Built: 1922, Seating Capacity: 1700, Architect: John Eberson

OHIO THEATRE, COLUMBUS, OHIO, USA

Built: 1928, Seating Capacity: 3079, Architect: Thomas Lamb

TENNESSEE THEATRE, KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE, USA

Built: 1929, Seating Capacity: 1990, Architect: Graven & Mayger*

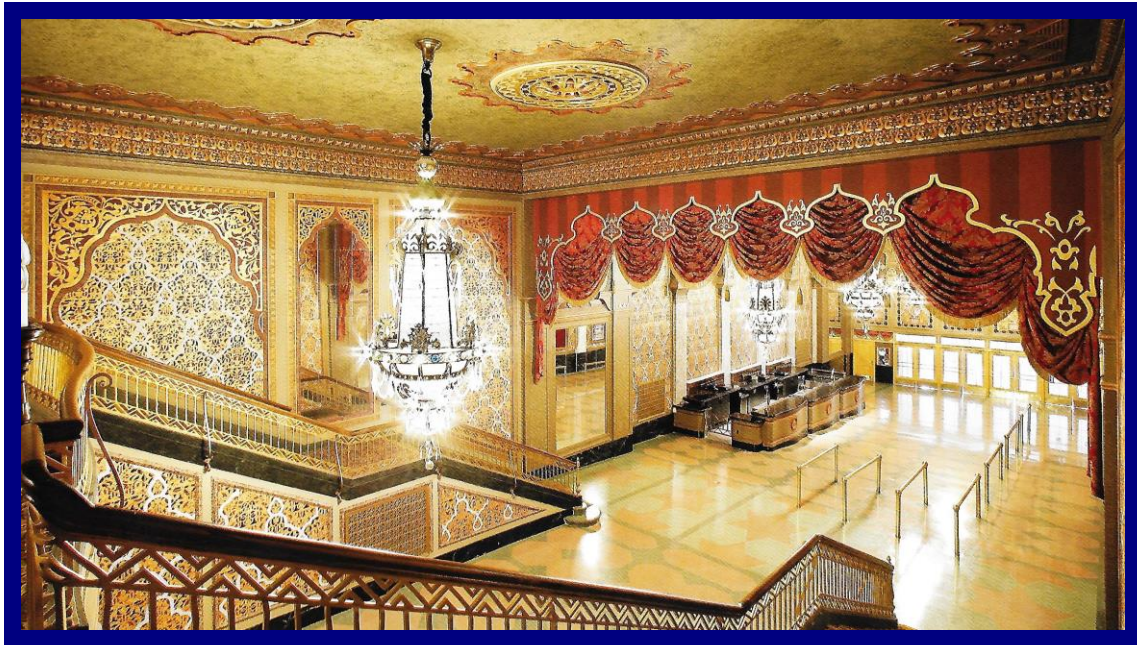
* Mayger previously worked for Rapp & Rapp

KINGS THEATRE, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK CITY, USA

Built: 1929, Seating Capacity: 3398, Architect: Edwin Bullock of Rapp & Rapp

Note the world-famous architects with three theatres having over 3000 seats.
BMR, Budleigh Salterton 2021.

TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE TENNESSEE



INTRODUCTION

In the USA, from the early 1900s, Nickelodeons were replaced by Movie Theatres. Growth was rapid with the introduction of air conditioning, starting just before 1920, pioneered by the Balaban & Katz chain in Chicago. Their systems by Kroeschell Brothers and their Chief Engineer, Fred Wittenmeier, used carbon dioxide, a safe refrigerant (unlike ammonia which is toxic and not considered safe in enclosed spaces occupied by people). Other safe systems for movie theatres soon became available from large manufacturers like York (also with CO₂) and Carrier with their high capacity centrifugal water chiller.

The growth of the movie theatre continued with the introduction of the "talkies" in 1927. By 1931, the USA had over 21,000 theatres with a combined capacity of over 21 million seats. Many theatres had over 3000 seats. New York's Radio City Music Hall in 1932, had over 6000. But by 2020, the number of USA theatres had dwindled to just over 5000. By comparison, also in 2020, the UK had nearly 850 cinemas (but some 4200 screens, due to the "Multiplex" arrangement). The most seats in an English cinema is 4004 at the 1931 Kilburn State in London.

Details of many hundreds of movie theatres are given in books and on specialist internet sites, but information on those not in major cities, dating from the 1920s and restored to use is less well-known. Five examples are given in this booklet. They have been saved from destruction by the efforts of local volunteers, businesses and historical societies.

NOTE. Information on the very early air conditioning and architecture of USA Movie Theatres may be found on the Heritage Group website and in the following publications.

- 2006 The Chicago Movie Palaces of Balaban & Katz, David Balaban, Images of America, Arcadia Publishing, Charleston, South Carolina.
- 2009 American Theatres of Today, R.W. Sexton & B.F. Betts. (A reprint originally published in 1927 and 1930 as two volumes), The Theatre Historical Society of America, Liber Apertus Press, Saratoga, California.
- 2014 Rapp & Rapp: Architects, Charles Ward Rapp, Viburnum Press.
- 2021 20th Century Air Conditioning, David Arnold, ASHRAE, 180 Technology Parkway, Peachtree Corners, Georgia.

PANTAGES TORONTO ONTARIO

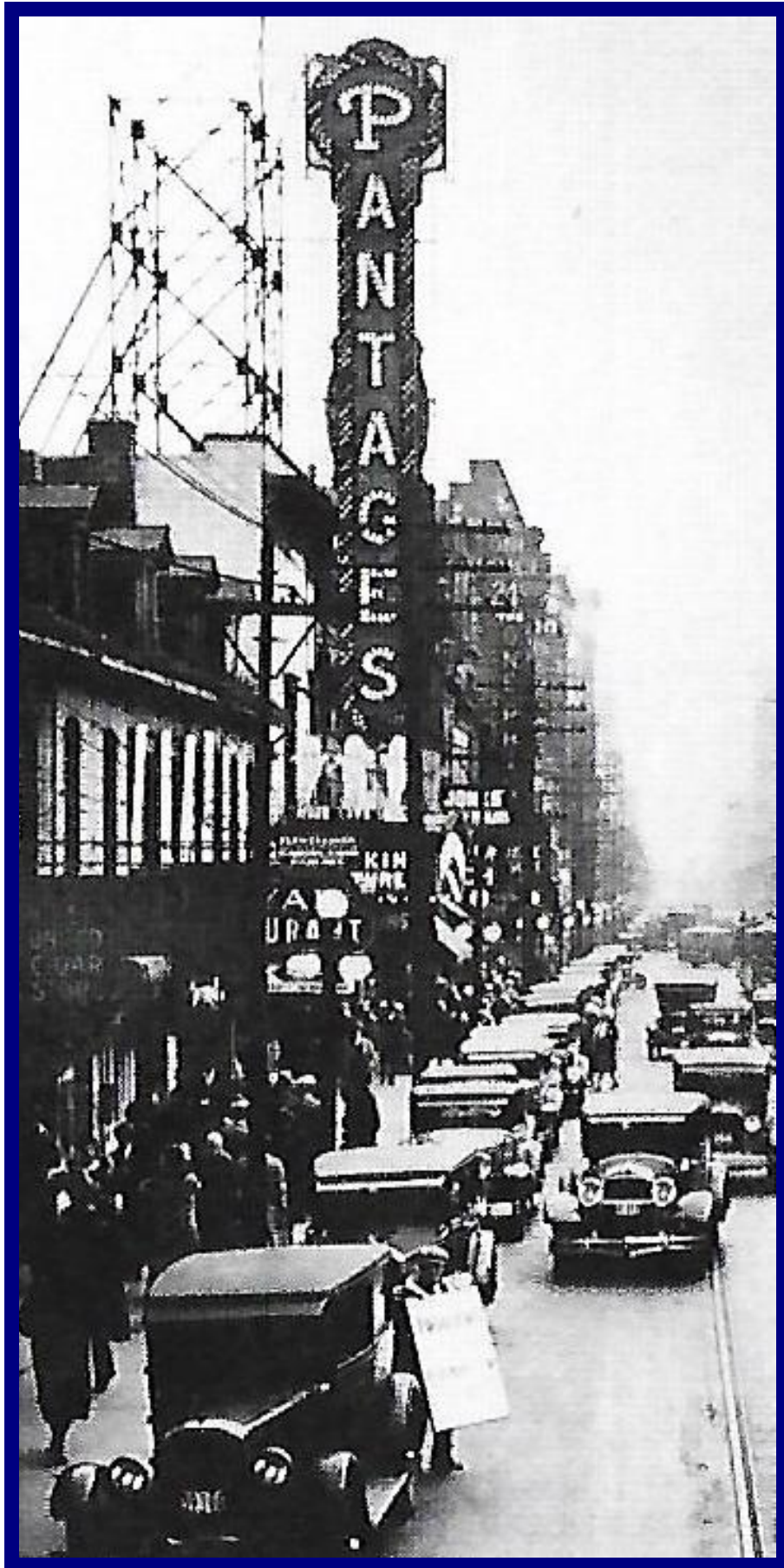


A 1922 Share Certificate for the Pantages.



The 1920s Victoria Street entrance for the few patrons who arrived by car.

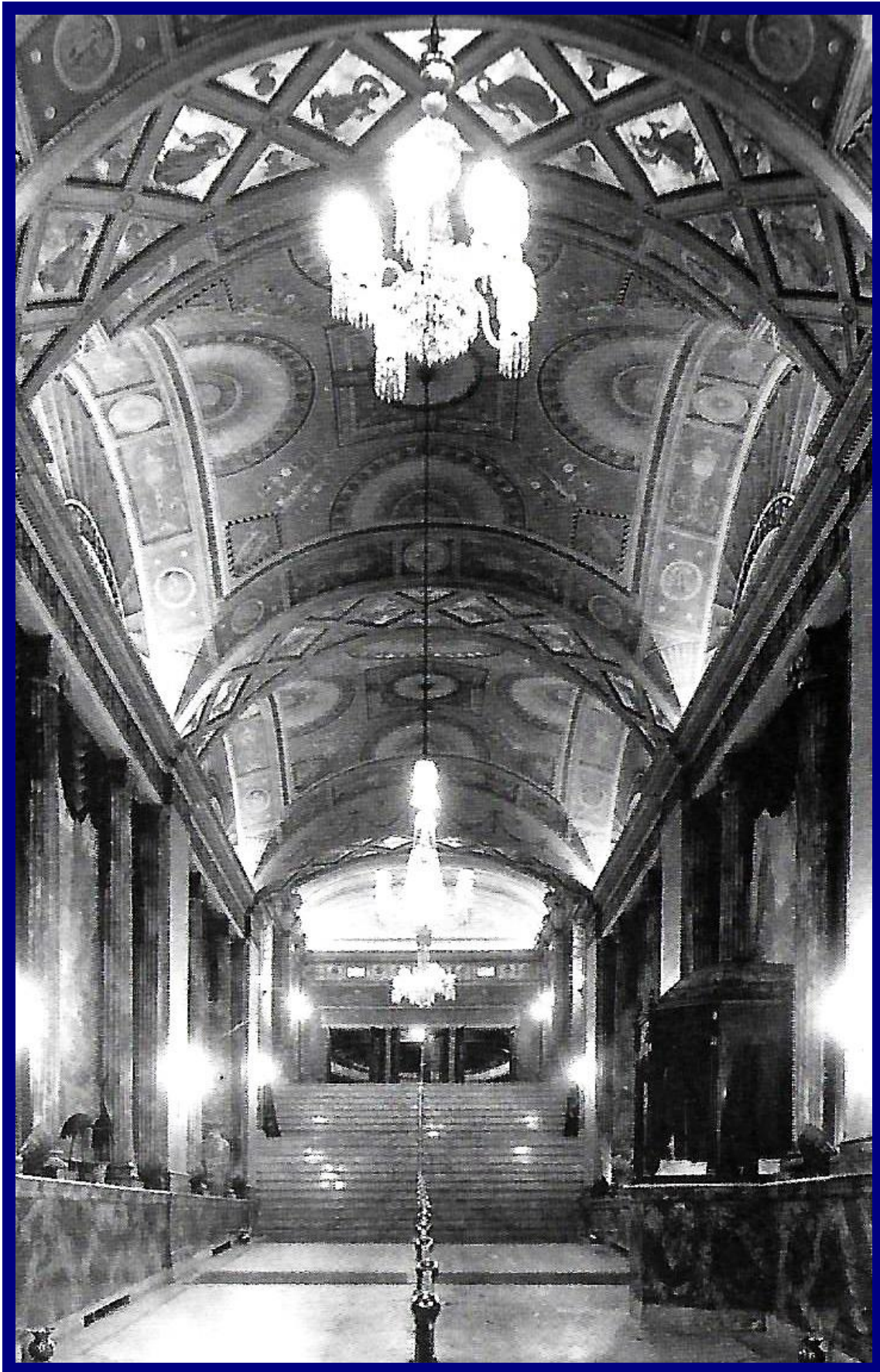
PANTAGES TORONTO ONTARIO



During the 1920s, the key-shaped Pantages sign dominated Toronto's Yonge Street.

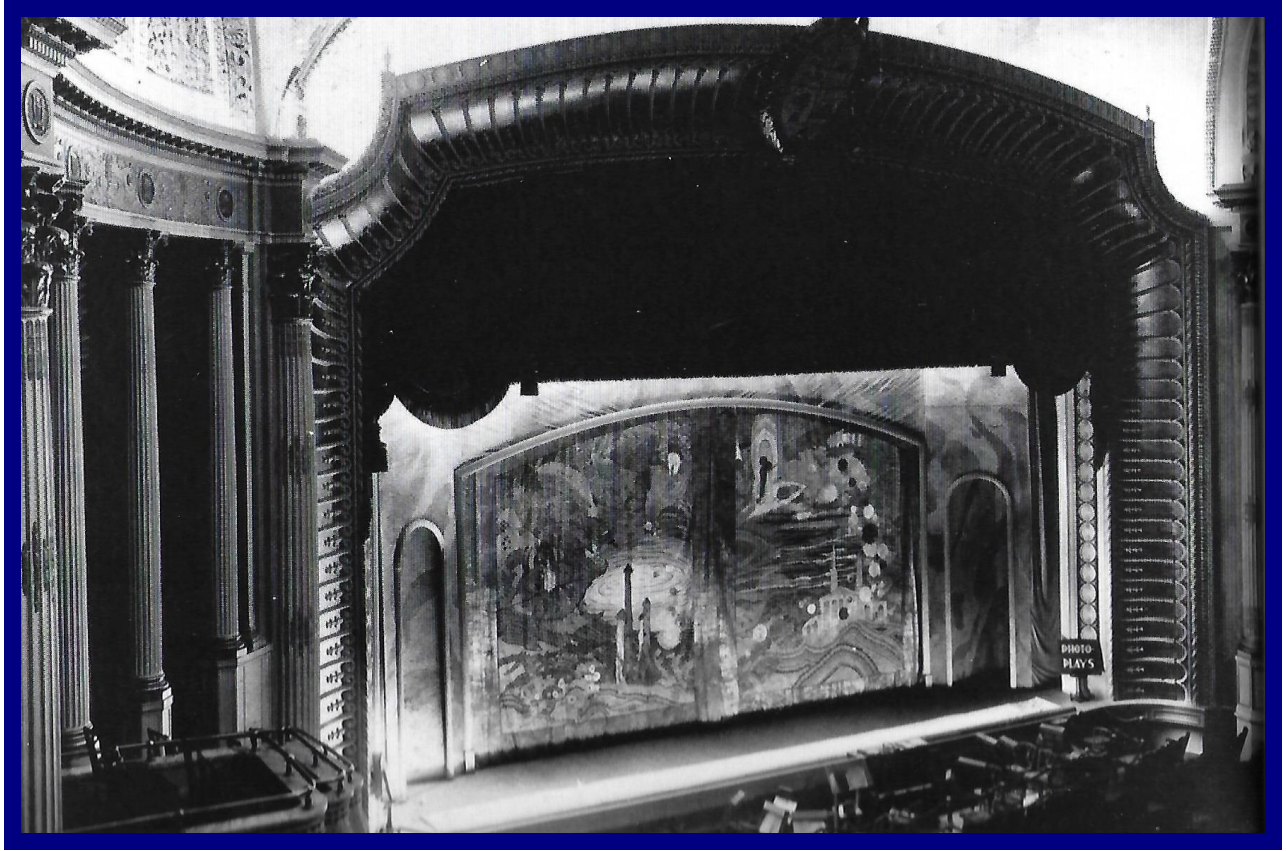
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PANTAGES TORONTO ONTARIO



Pantages entrance and lobby in the 1920s when it was both a vaudeville and movie theatre.

PANTAGES TORONTO ONTARIO

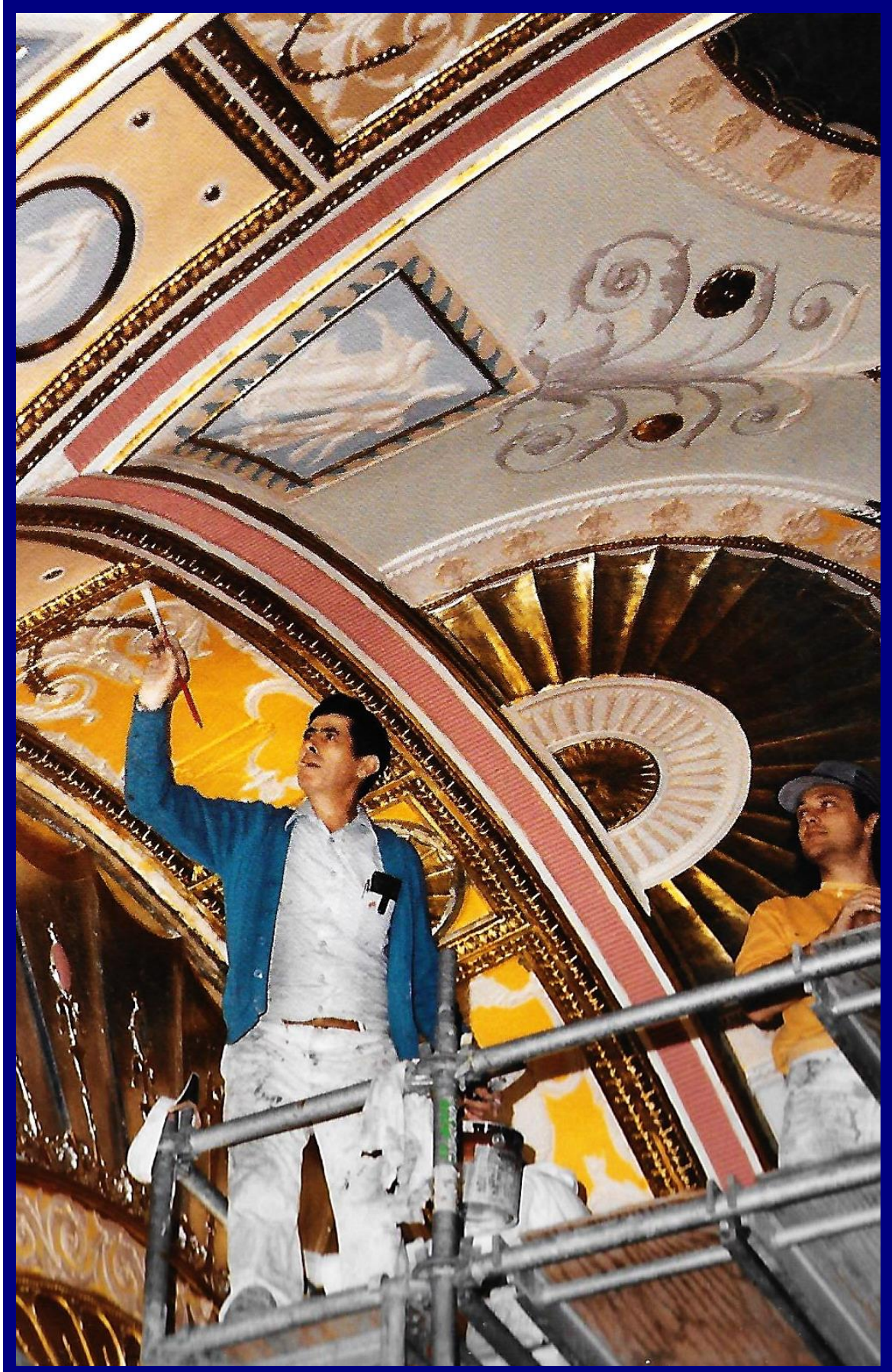


The auditorium and stage in the 1920s.



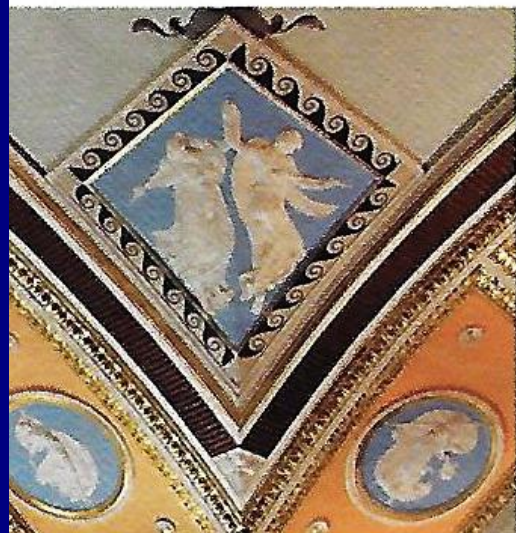
The sorry state of the auditorium as the 1970s restoration gets underway.

PANTAGES TORONTO ONTARIO



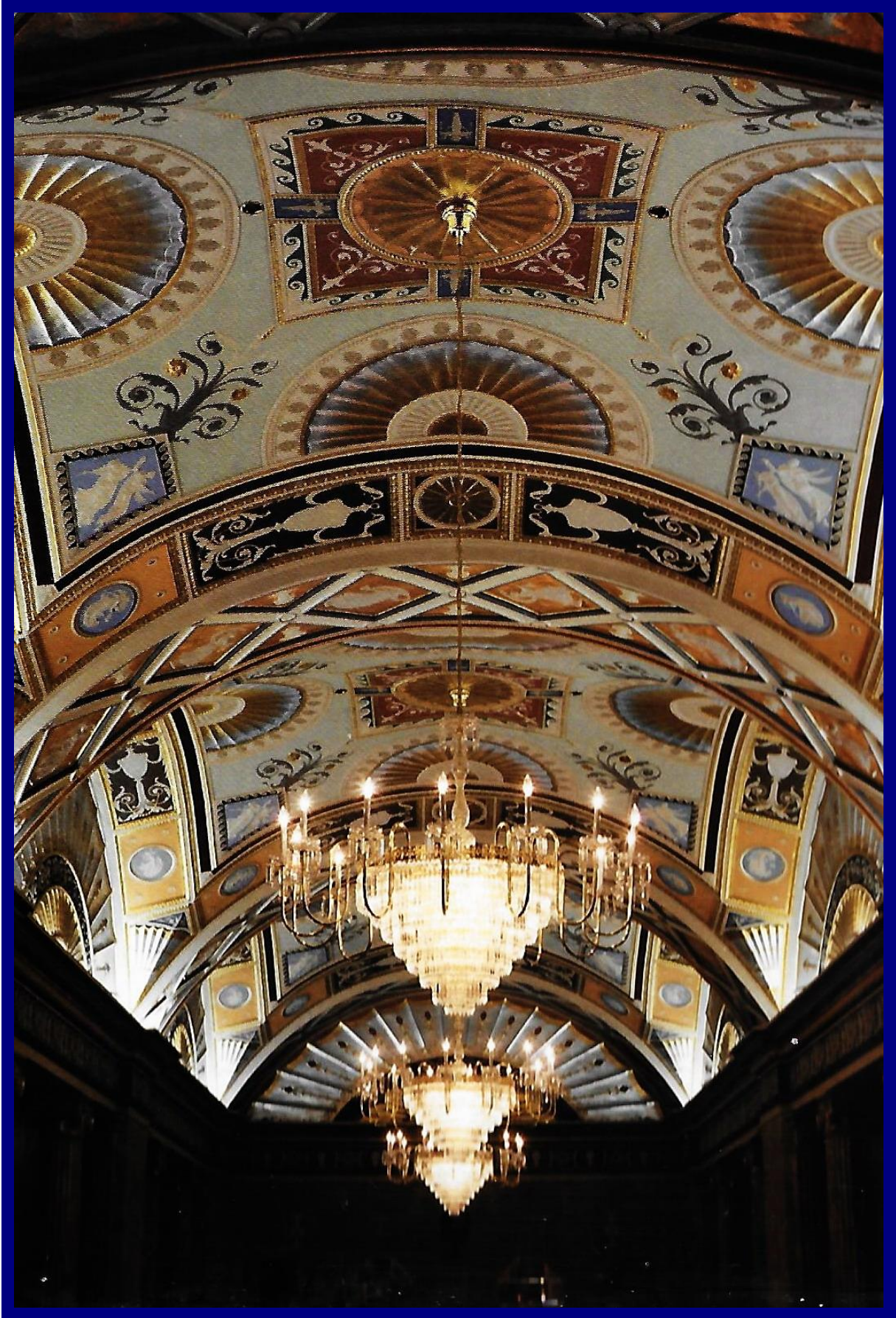
A craftsman working on the restoration.

PANTAGES TORONTO ONTARIO



The re-created colours and plaster mouldings of the ceilings and side walls.

PANTAGES TORONTO ONTARIO



The restored main entrance with chandeliers designed to look like the originals.

ORPHEUM WICHITA KANSAS

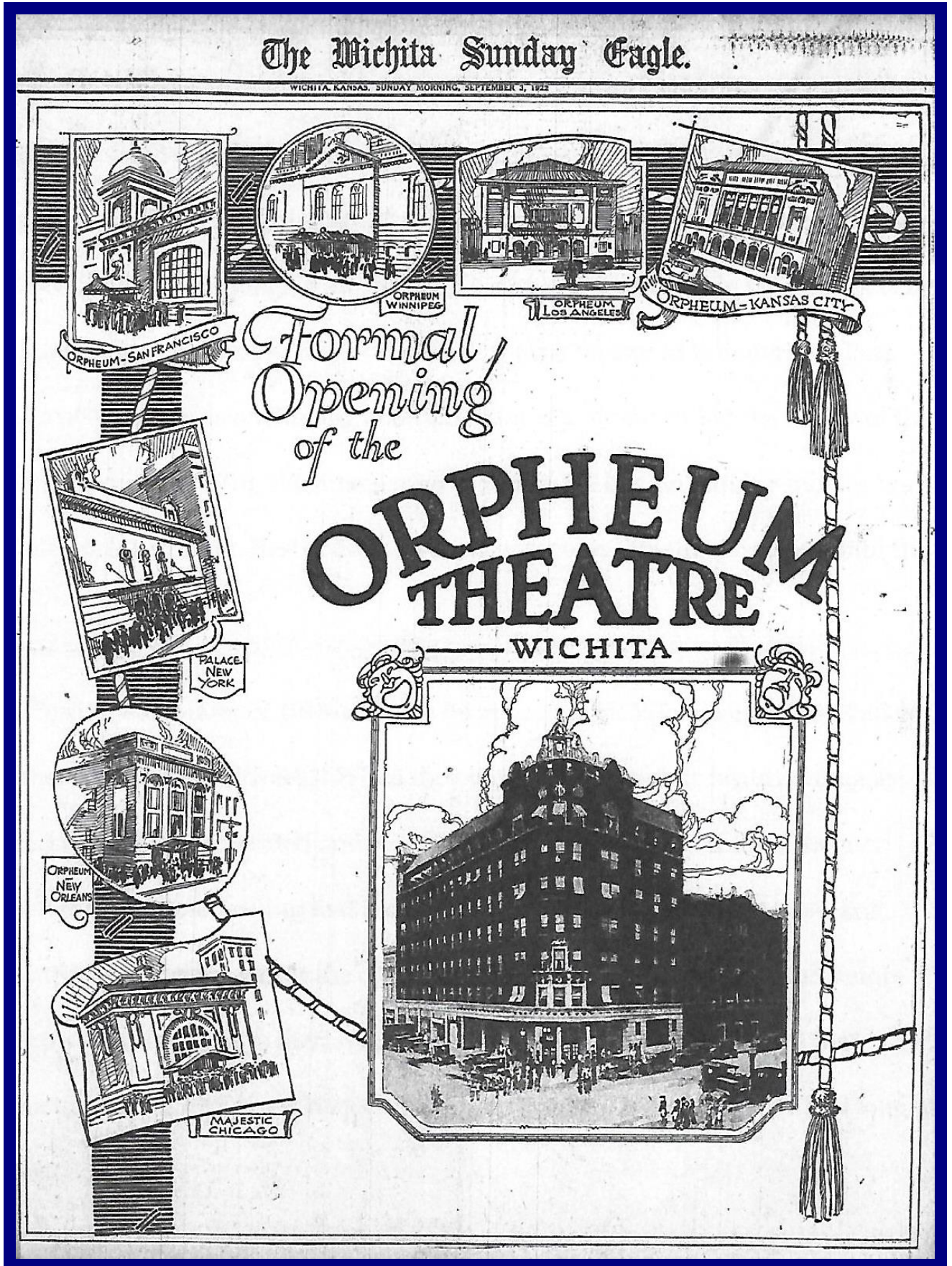


The Orpheum under construction in 1922. It opened the same year. The architect, John Eberson, pioneered "atmospheric" theatres, where the auditorium ceiling resembled the starlit night sky.



Vestibule and box office with medallion floor design, about 1922.

ORPHEUM WICHITA KANSAS



The formal opening in 1922, the poster depicting other theatres in the Orpheum Chain.

ORPHEUM WICHITA KANSAS



The Orpheum in 1927.

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ORPHEUM WICHITA KANSAS



The theatre was gradually restored, starting in 1984.

ORPHEUM WICHITA KANSAS



The Orpheum Theatre, Wichita, was famous for its lavish decoration, but the audience suffered in hot and humid weather. The "forced air ventilation system with water sprays, working with ceiling fans, did little to combat the heat" and "it was as hot in the theatre as it was outside." Restoration of the theatre took until to 2010 and eventually in 2000 this included air conditioning.



Delivery in 2000 of the new refrigeration unit for the air conditioning system.

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ORPHEUM WICHITA KANSAS



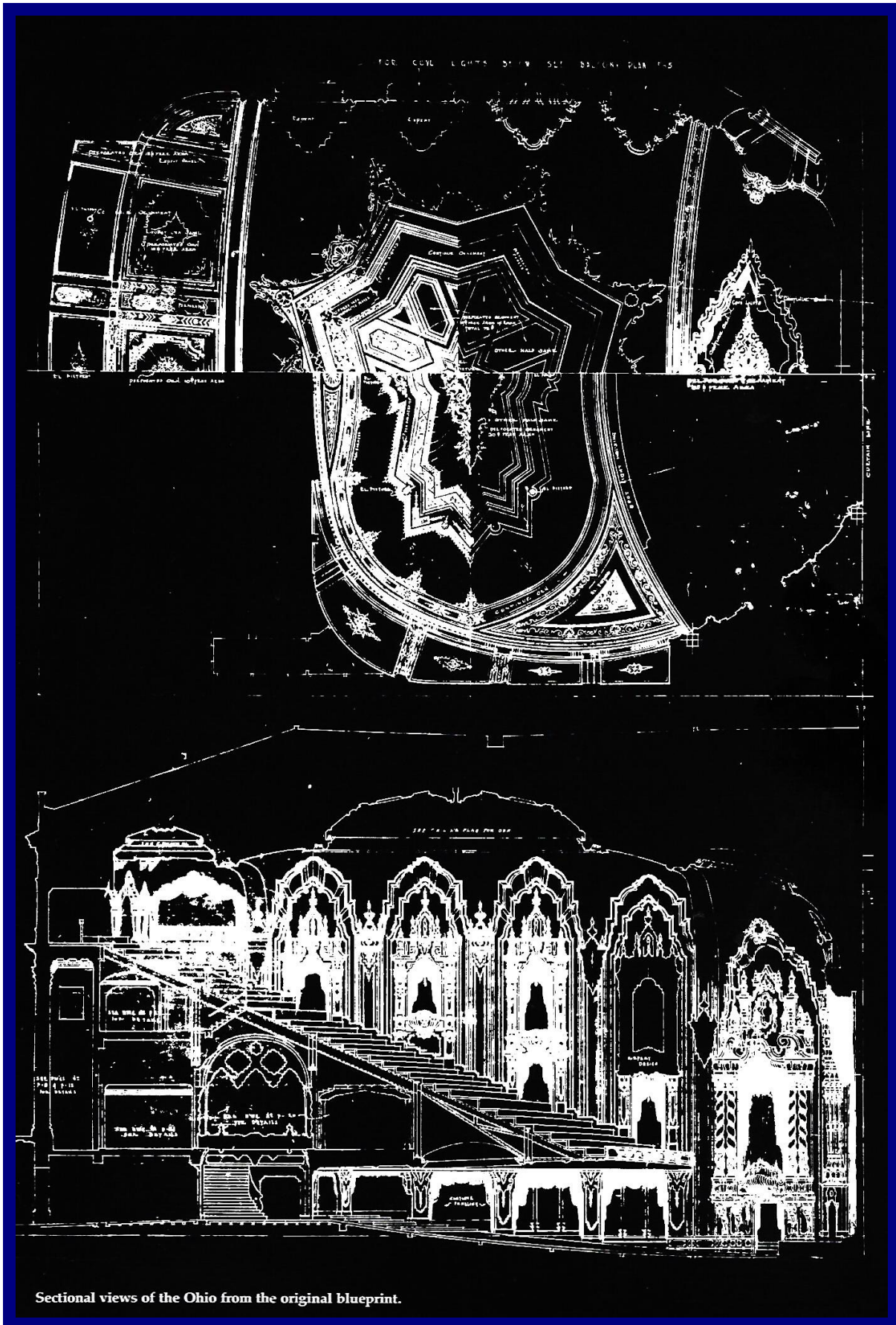
An air conditioning unit for the projection booth is hoisted to the roof in 2000.

OHIO COLUMBUS OHIO



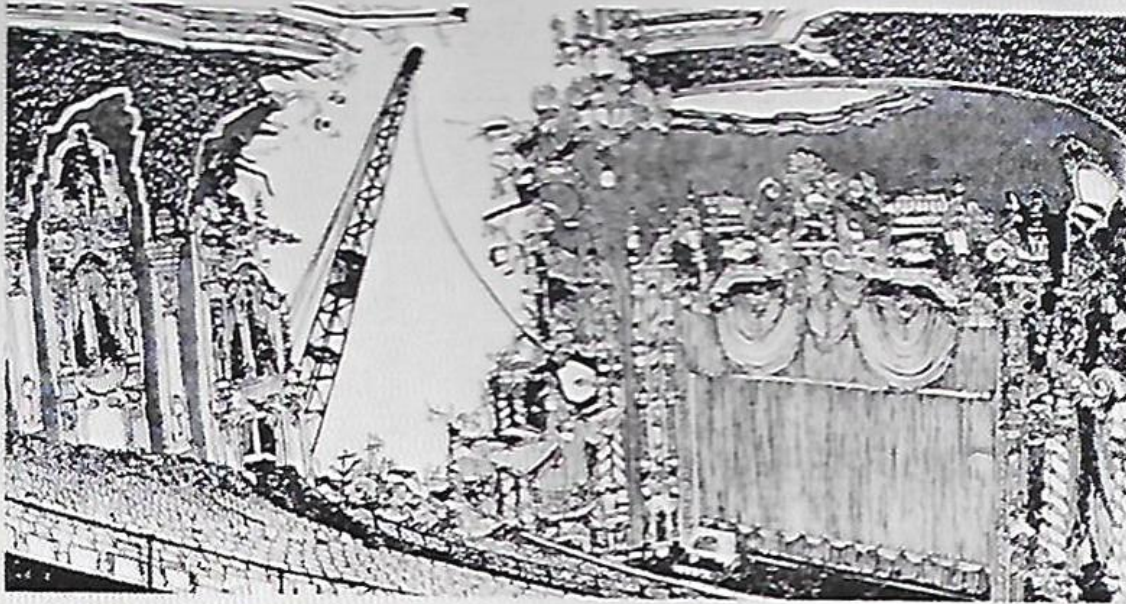
The theatre opened in 1928, served as Ohio's major movie theatre for 41 years, coming close to the wrecker's ball in 1969.

OHIO COLUMBUS OHIO



Sectional views of the Ohio from the original blueprint.

OHIO COLUMBUS OHIO



THIS CAN BE A WEEK OF SHAME FOR OUR CITY

This is the week when the chandeliers, seats, stage equipment, and a world famous theater organ are to be taken from the Ohio Theater. They are being removed to pave the way for demolition of this extraordinarily beautiful theater, so the site can be blacktopped and converted into a parking lot. This is the time when the conscience of our community must assert itself if this tragedy is to be prevented.

The Ohio Theater is much more than a magnificent theater for the performing arts—it is a symbol of an era when people congregated in our downtown areas for relaxation and entertainment. It was an era of vitality and excitement—a time when one did not need to be afraid to walk on our streets after dark. There are many reasons for saving the theater—cultural reasons—economic reasons—educational and esthetic reasons. But the question of prime importance is simply this: Is our community going to have a downtown area people can live in and be proud of, or are we going the route of the asphalt jungle? Too many other cities have learned a bitter lesson by abandoning their downtown areas. They are overcrowded and congested by day; dark and dangerous at night. Good restaurants and shops depart for the suburbs. There is not much left but office buildings, parking garages, and blacktop. Is this the kind of city we want to leave our children?

The Ohio Theater, therefore, is not just a magnificent theater—it is a magnet which will bring people into our downtown area and keep the center of the city alive and thriving—day and night. It has proven itself as an excellent potential home for the Columbus Symphony Orchestra, as well as many diverse types of entertainment. It could be used for live television shows, ballet, opera, musical comedy, and jazz and folk groups. In short, it would be an outstanding complement to our present downtown theaters, Veterans Memorial and the Hartman Theater.

What kind of music hall will the Ohio Theater make?

2500 people who recently thronged to the theater to hear the Columbus Symphony Orchestra play there, know the answer. And although detailed architectural studies and acoustics tests are not complete, there is no question about it being a fine theater. It could, in fact, take its place among a select handful of the very finest music halls in the nation.

Someday, if the Ohio Theater is demolished, Columbus will build a new music hall. Such a new facility, if it were built today, would cost at least \$16 million dollars. In ten years, because of escalating costs, this cost could easily double. Our question is simply this: Why spend all this money later on when we can have a splendid hall, right now, in an excellent location, for \$2 million or less?

The Ohio Theater is in excellent physical condition. It is also a building of extraordinary craftsmanship and beauty. How many of us have really seen its beautiful interior when the lights are on? The magnificent central chandelier? And the exquisite detailing? Can a community with a conscience really allow such a piece of architecture to be destroyed?

Many hundreds of people have been working diligently, behind the scenes and publicly, to try to find a solution. To our knowledge, none has been found. But that does not mean there is no answer. There must be one.

What is needed now, if the Ohio Theater is to be preserved from demolition, is swift, immediate and firm public response, from people in all walks of life, and most importantly from the young people of our community, because it is their community which is being planned (or demolished) and they certainly should have a great deal of interest in what is done.

There is a chance that the postage stamps required to mail your response to our city and county officials could save the Ohio Theater. It will also let our community leaders know that there are many thousands of people who are vitally interested in the planning, development and future of our city.

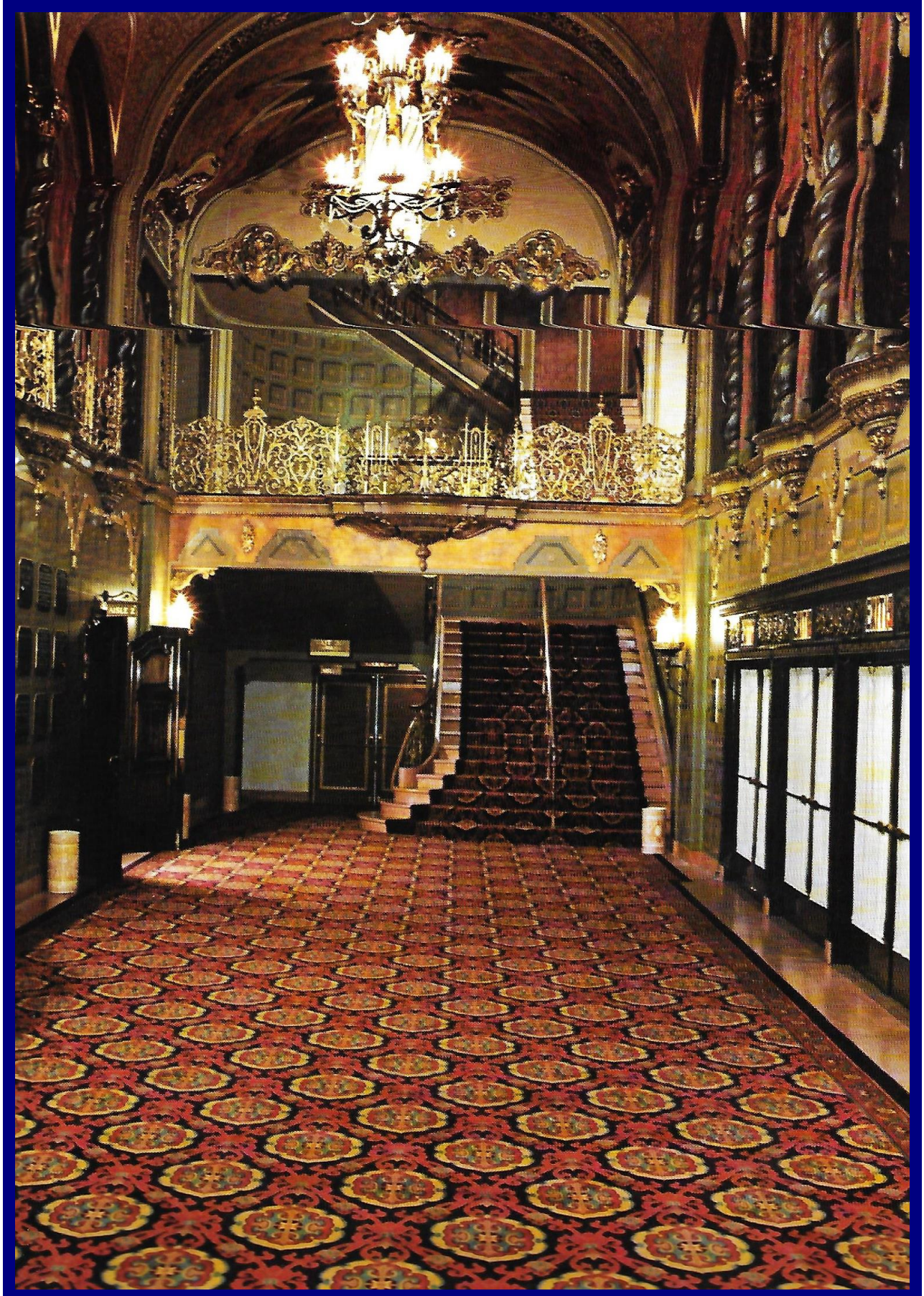
*Executive Committee
Columbus Chapter
AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS*

OHIO COLUMBUS OHIO



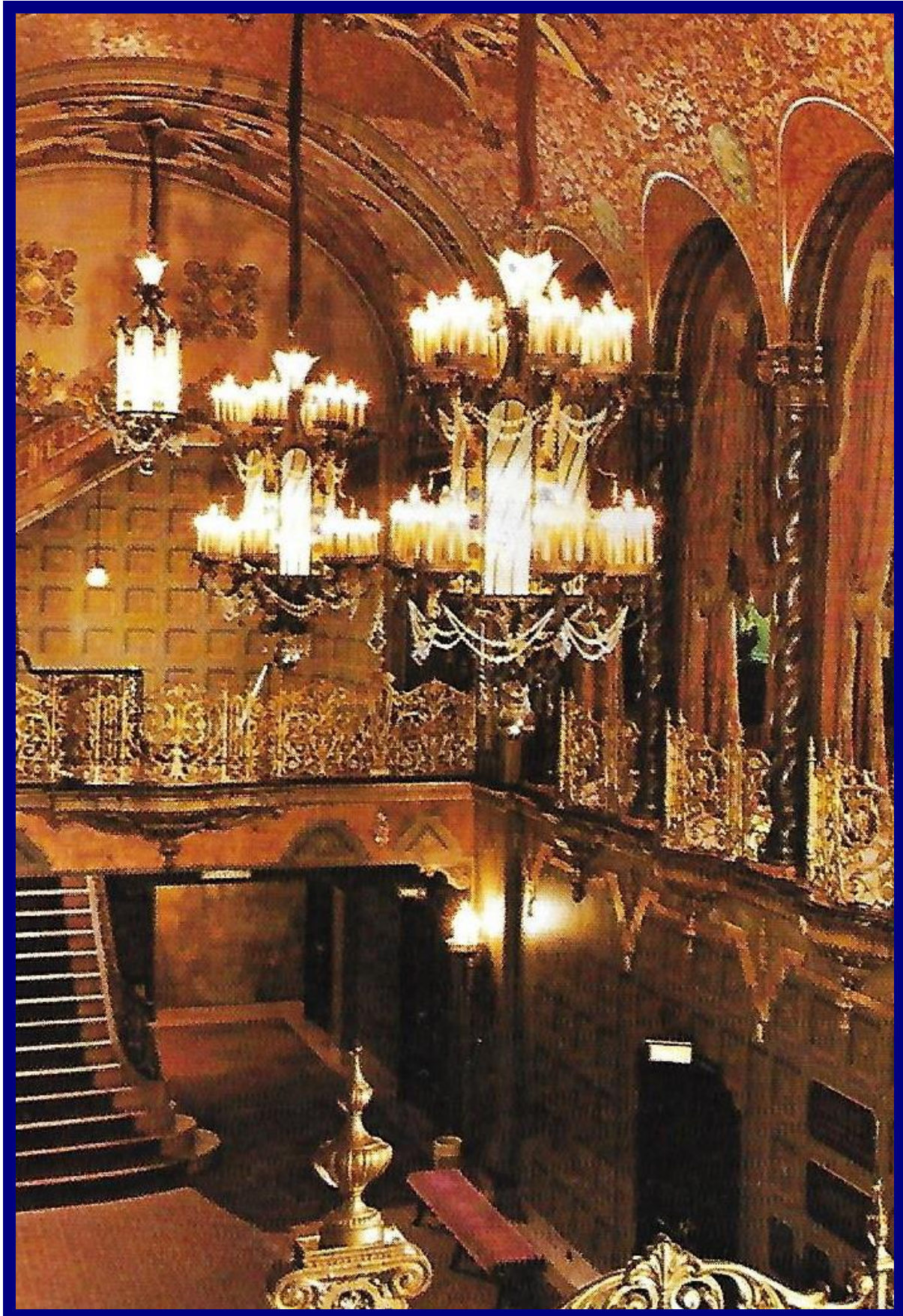
The film's title almost describes the desperate efforts of the community to save the theatre.

OHIO COLUMBUS OHIO



In the 1970s the Ohio was completely restored, the original appearance maintained.

OHIO COLUMBUS OHIO



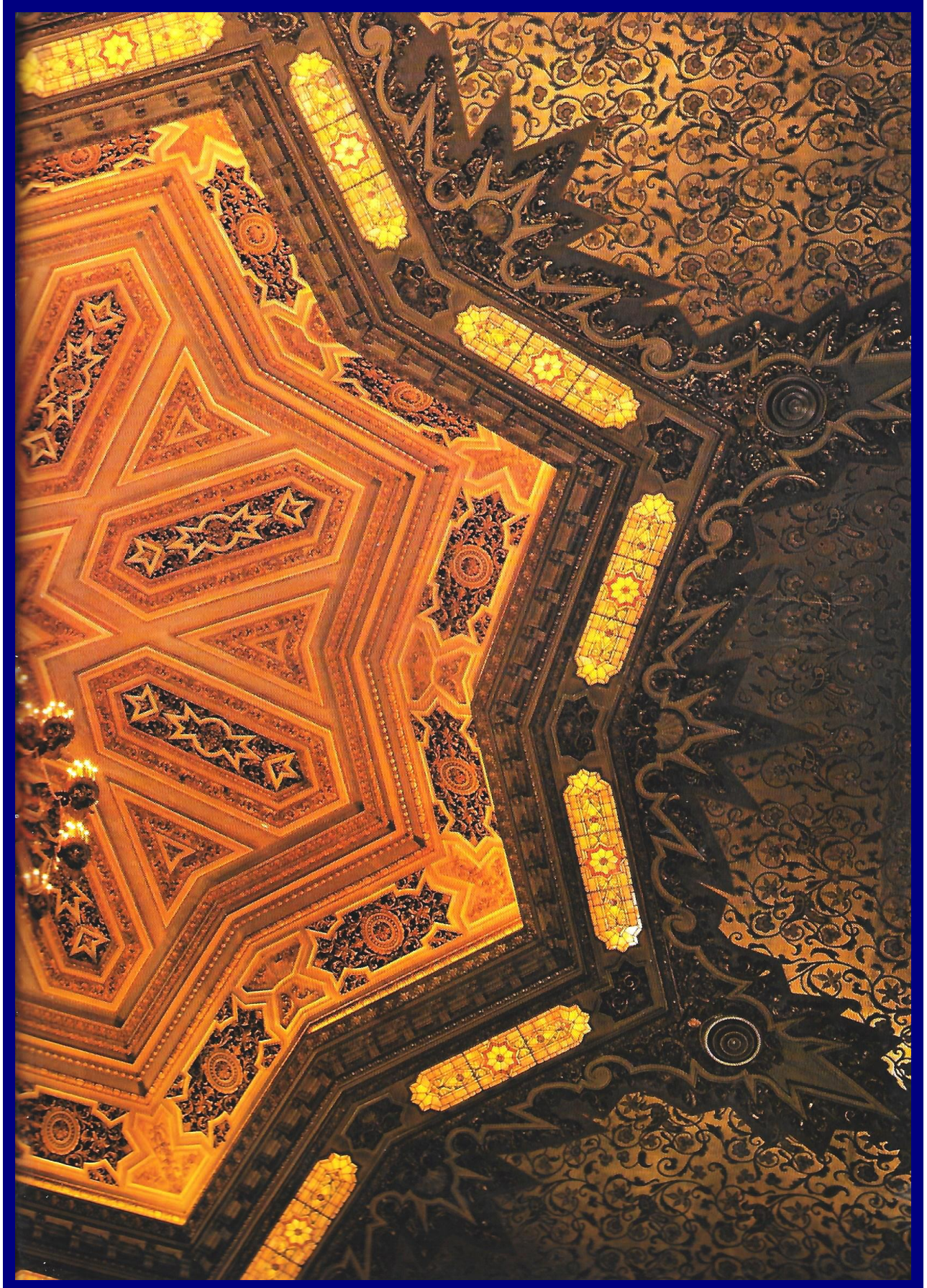
The Ohio's lighting chandeliers in the Grand Foyer.

OHIO COLUMBUS OHIO



The magnificent restored auditorium.

OHIO COLUMBUS OHIO

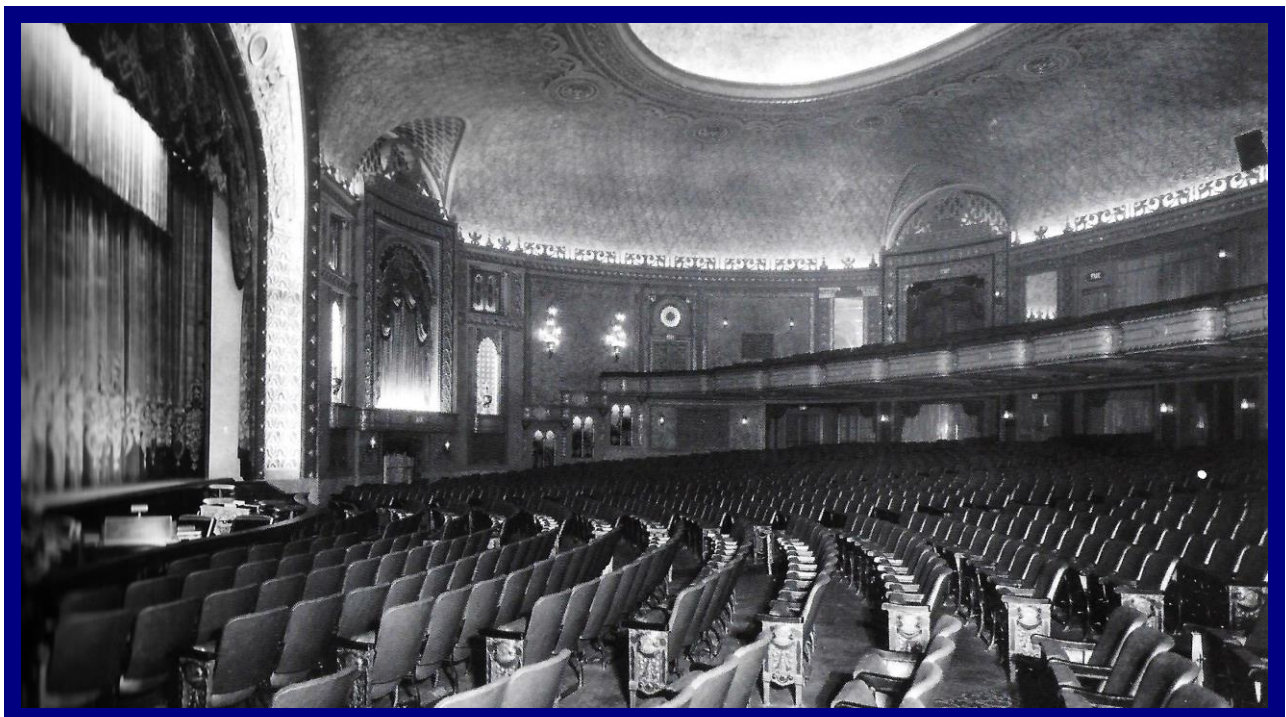


It is said that the architect, Thomas Lamb, regarded the Ohio as his most successful theatre.

TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE TENNESSEE



Construction underway in June 1928.



Opened in 1928, the auditorium with "an acre of seats."

TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE TENNESSEE



The 1st October 1928, Opening Day on Gay Street featuring Clara Bow.

TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE TENNESSEE



The chandelier-lit Entrance Lobby.



The Auditorium. Adult admission prices: Matinee 40 cents, Evening 60 cents.
Making it Knoxville's most expensive theatre.

TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE TENNESSEE



April 1931.



Summer 1949.

TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE TENNESSEE



April 1965.

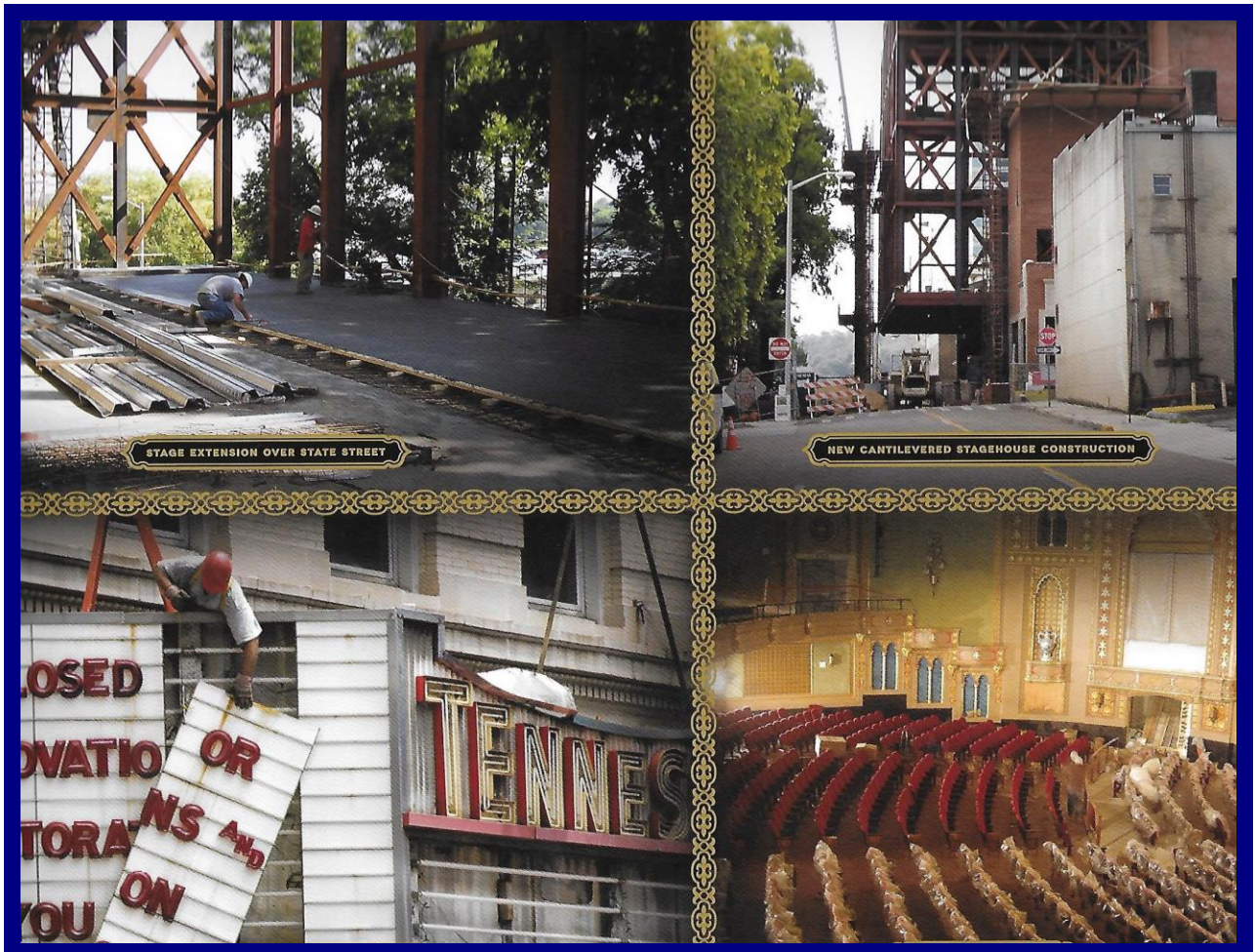


By 1981 the theatre was in poor shape, but was taken over by a Radio Station. Renovations started with a new air conditioning system and refurbishment of the crystal chandeliers.

TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE TENNESSEE



Support beams in the auditorium at the start of the 2003 renovations.

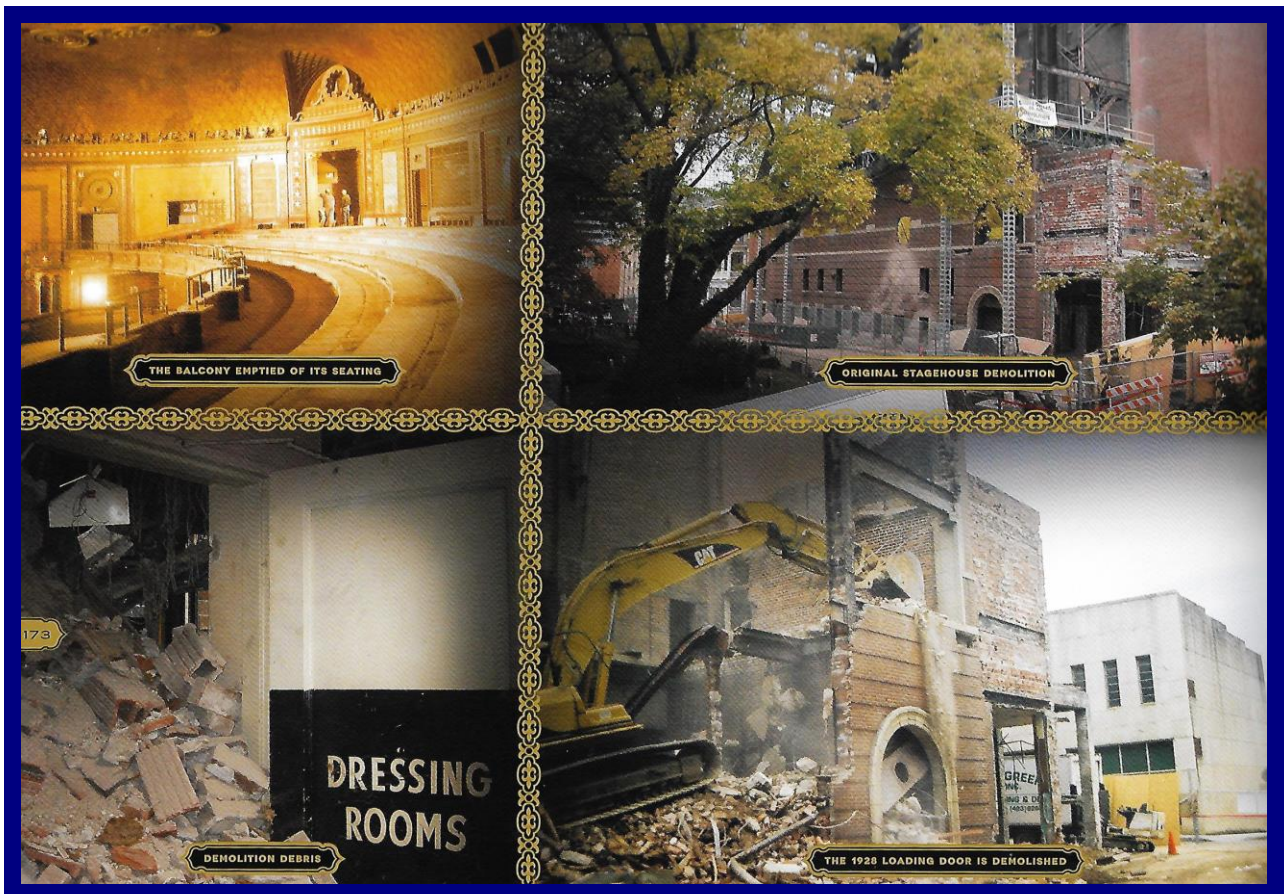


Major renovations and rebuilding in progress around 2004.

TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE TENNESSEE



Complex scaffolding in the auditorium.



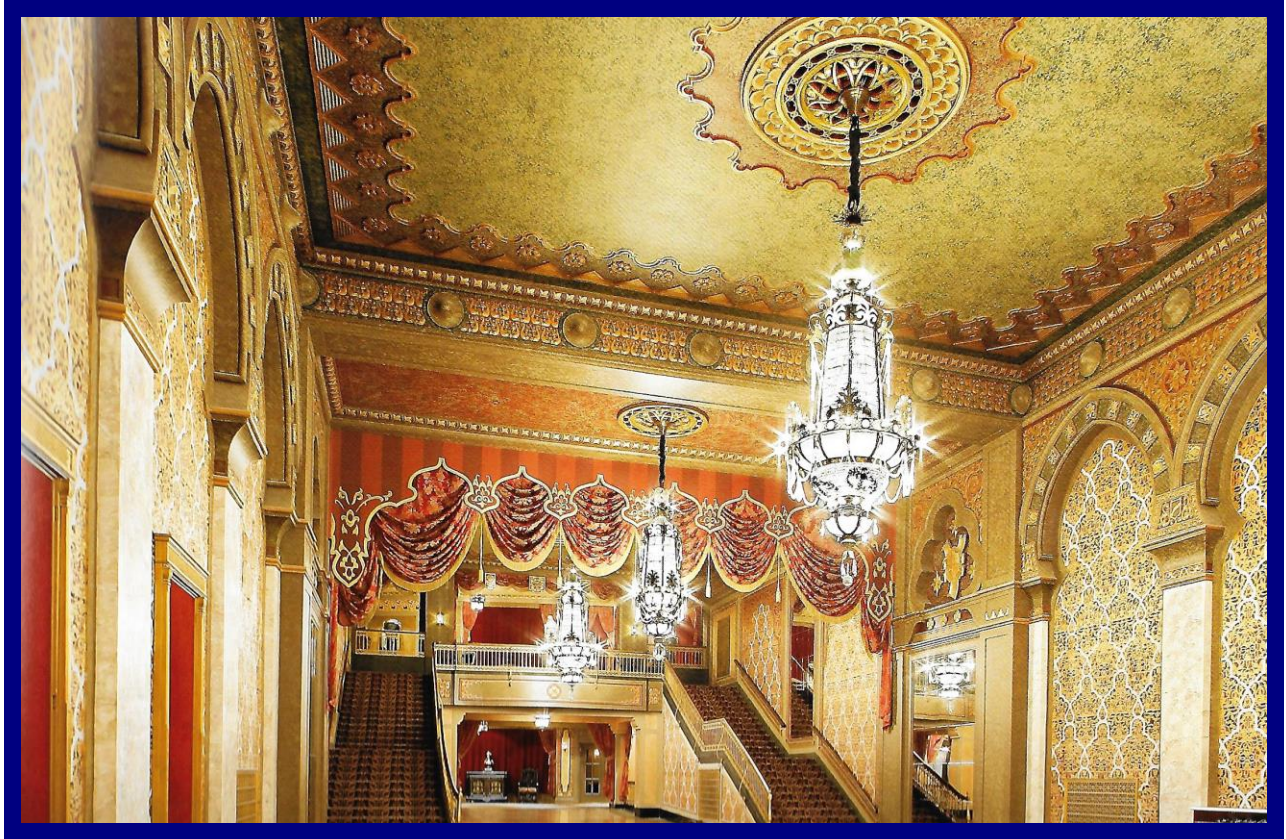
Demolition and rebuilding. New elevators were installed.

TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE TENNESSEE



A new vertical sign being installed in December 2004.

TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE TENNESSEE

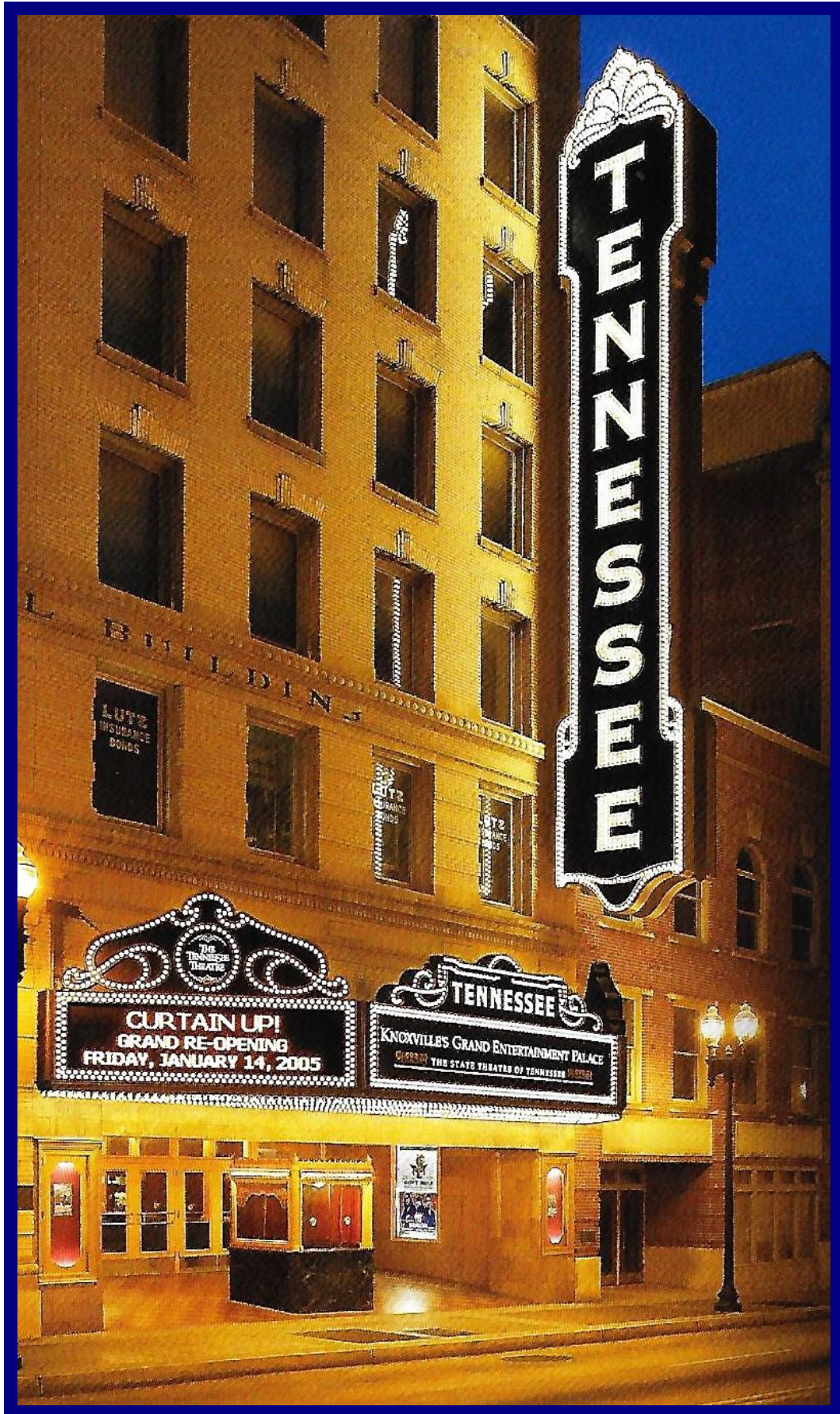


The Main Lobby restored to its original glory.



The restored main staircase and luxury carpet.

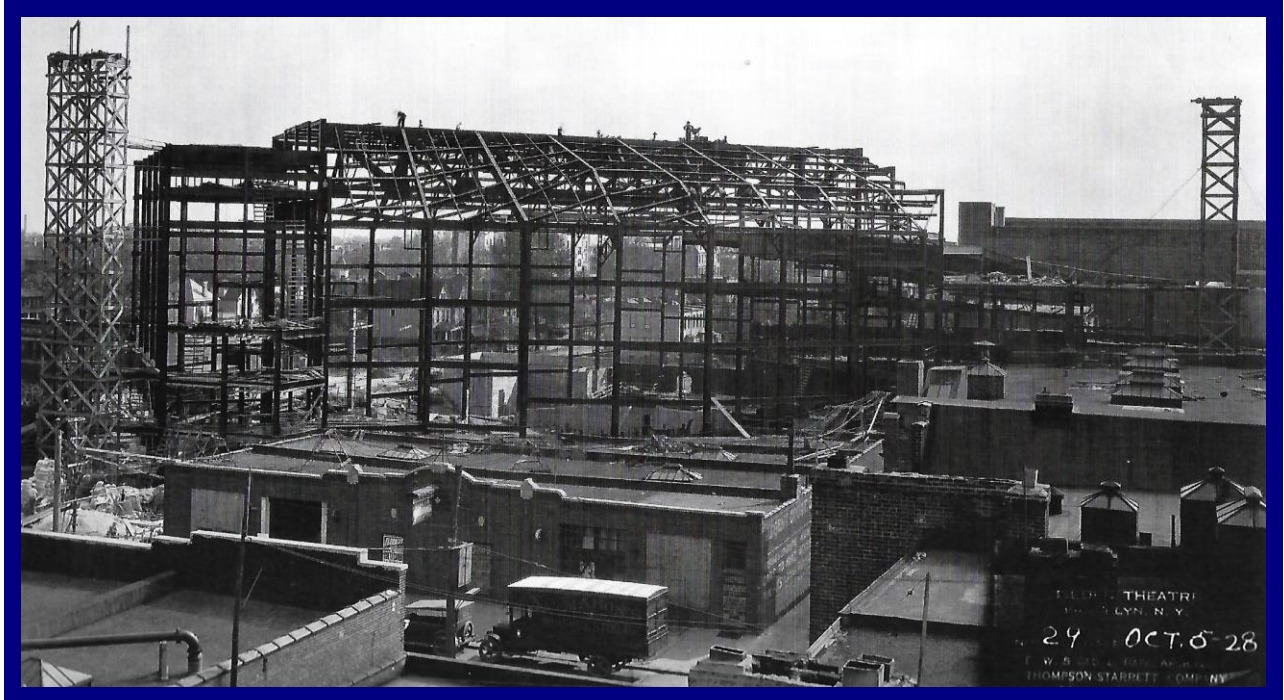
TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE TENNESSEE



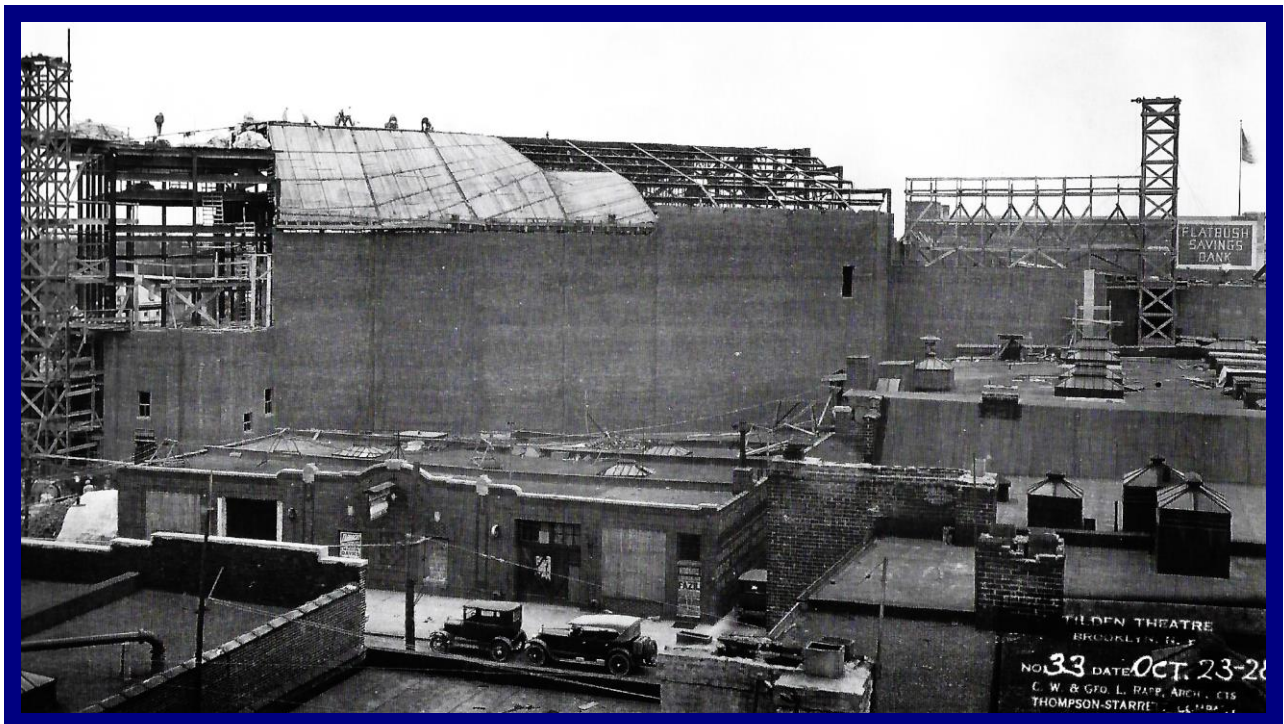
The Tennessee ready for the Grand Re-Opening of 14th January, 2005.

KINGS BROOKLYN NEW YORK CITY

The theatre was planned for Paramount/Famous Players, but was passed to Loew's Inc. (MGM) in a agreement to show Paramount films.



Construction of the theatre in Flatbush at the 8th October 1928.



By 23rd October construction was continuing at a rapid pace.

The contractor was Thompson-Starrett, pioneers in skyscraper construction, having built the Woolworth Tower in New York in 1913, which was the world's tallest building until 1930.

KINGS BROOKLYN NEW YORK CITY

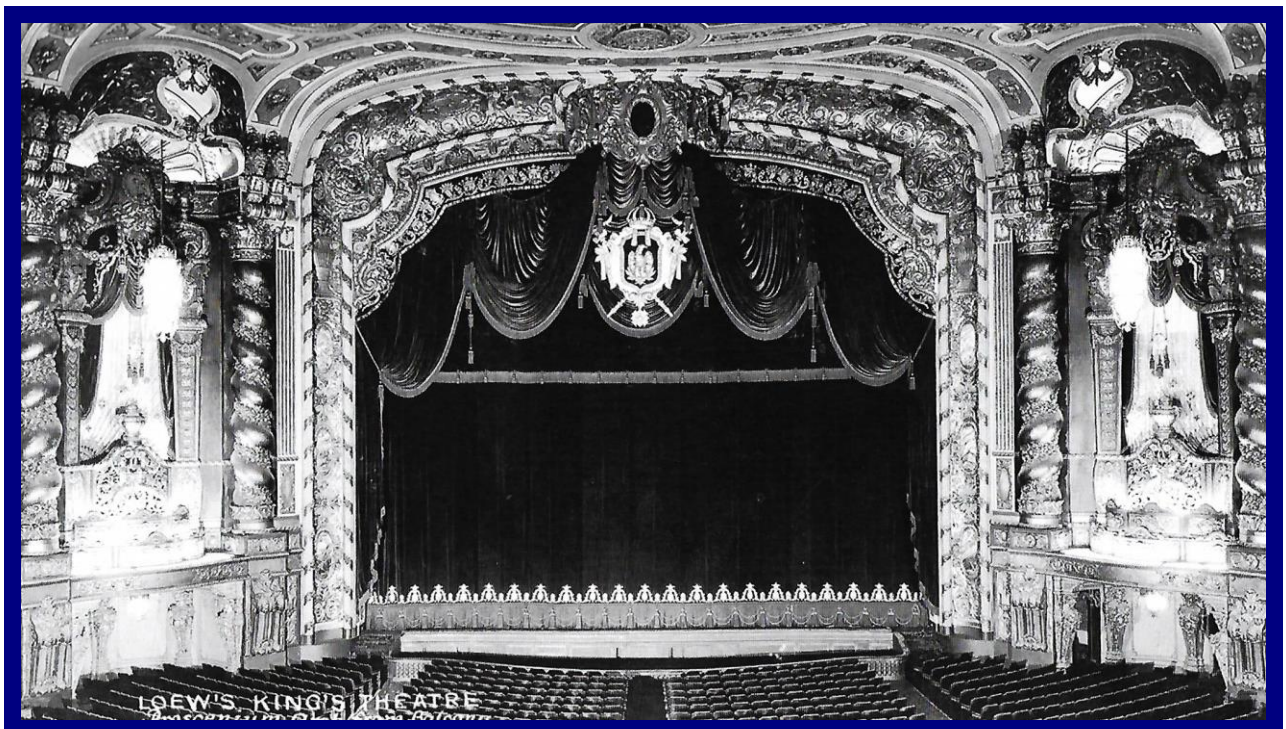


Loew's Kings Theatre 30th March, 1930.

KINGS BROOKLYN NEW YORK CITY

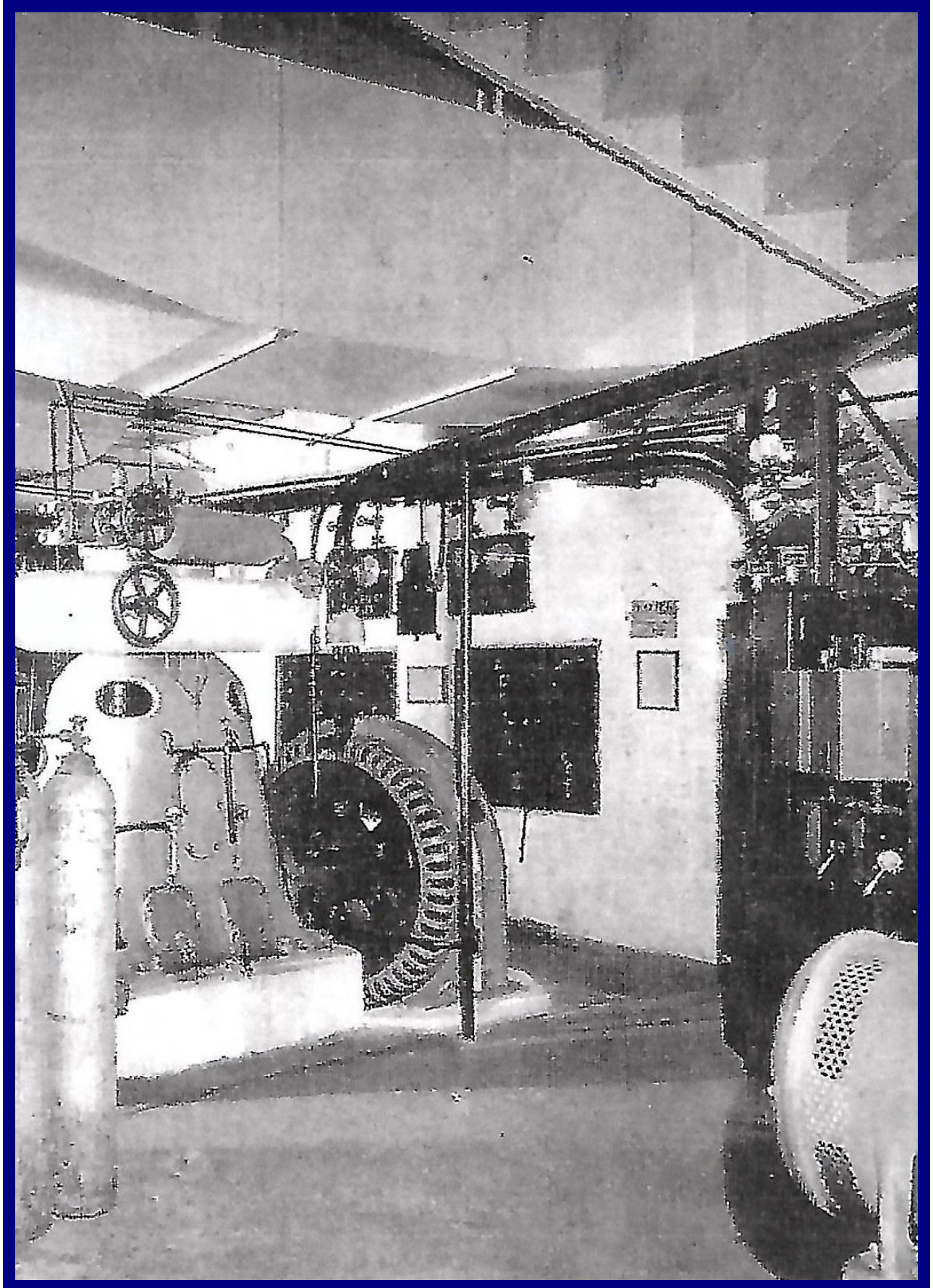


View of the inner lobby from the mezzanine level. (Note the ornate chairs).



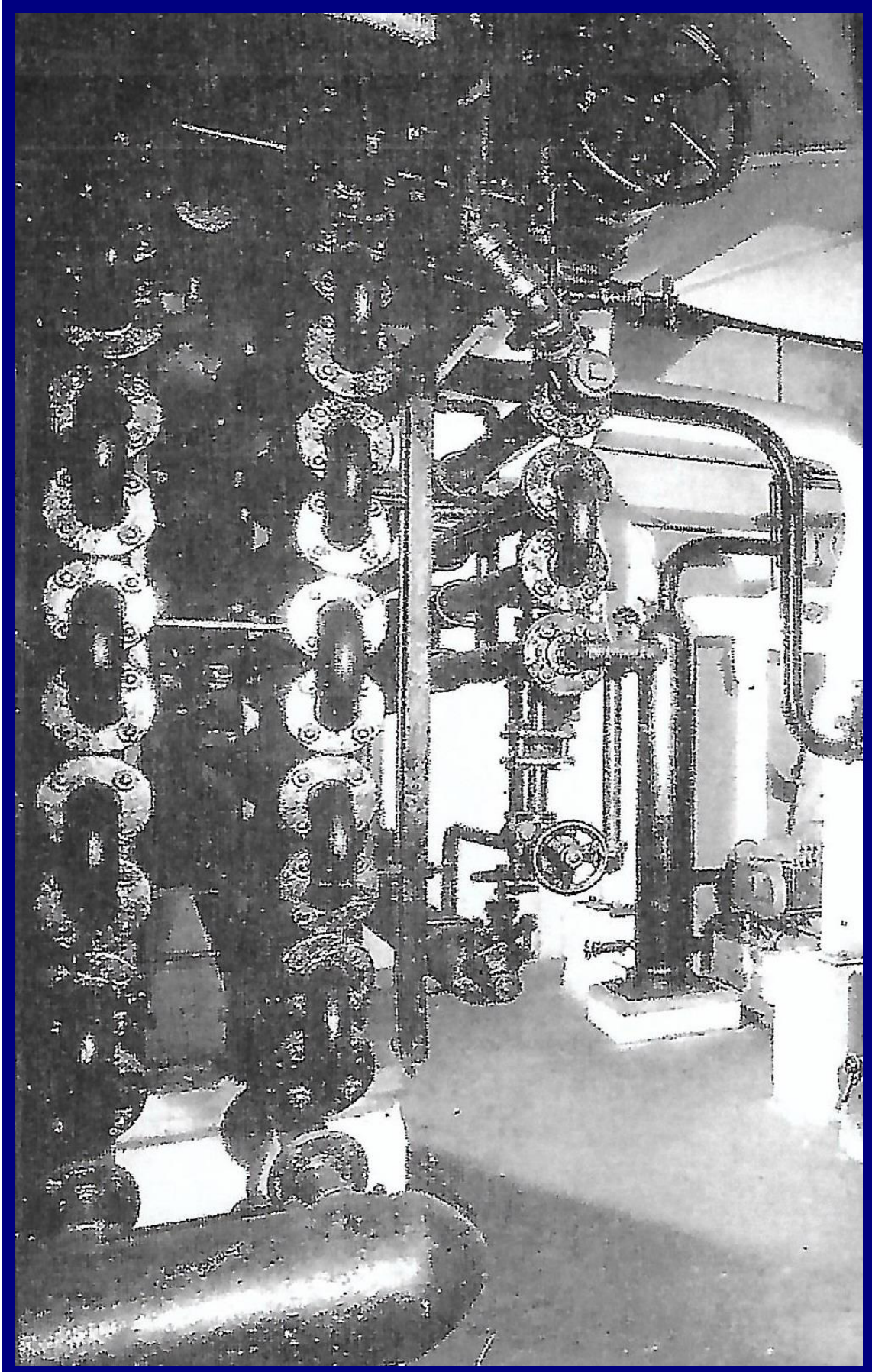
View of the proscenium arch and organ chambers.

KINGS BROOKLYN NEW YORK CITY



The 1928 York (carbon dioxide) refrigeration plant for the air conditioning system.

KINGS BROOKLYN NEW YORK CITY

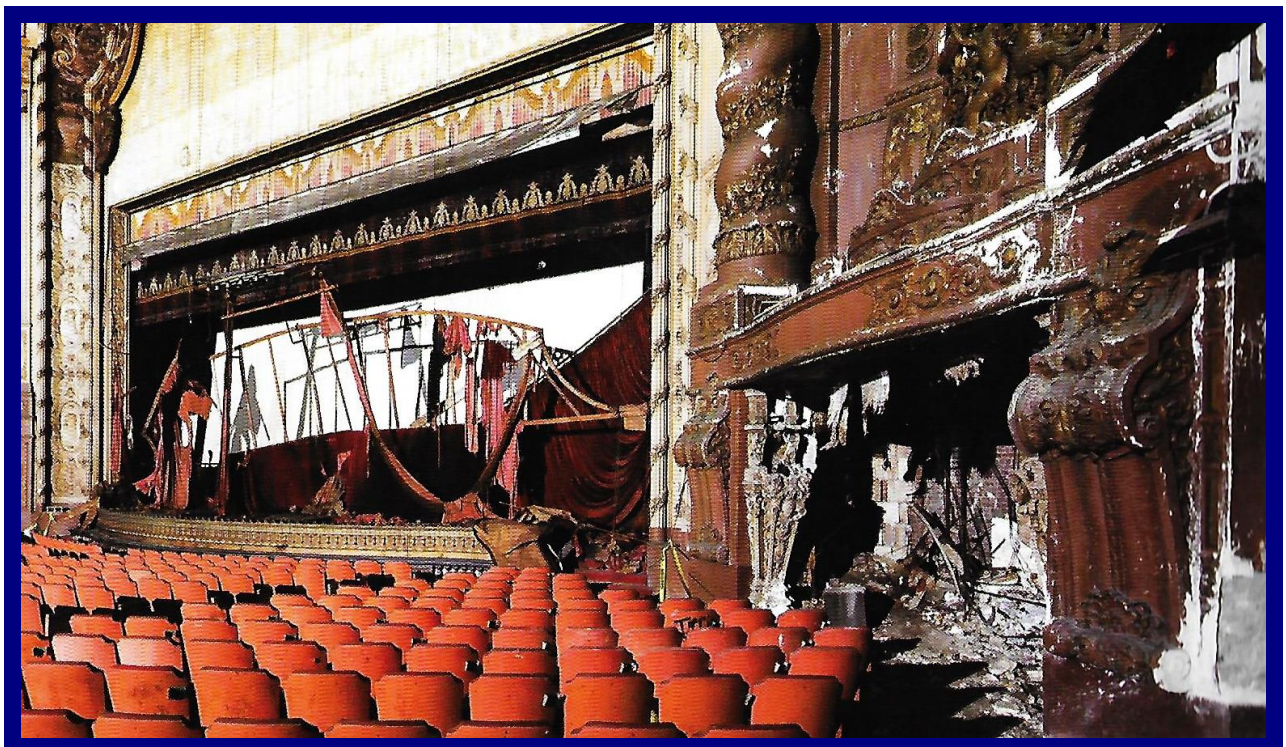


Another view of the 1928 York refrigeration plant.

KINGS BROOKLYN NEW YORK CITY



The collapsed balcony plasterwork in about 2009.

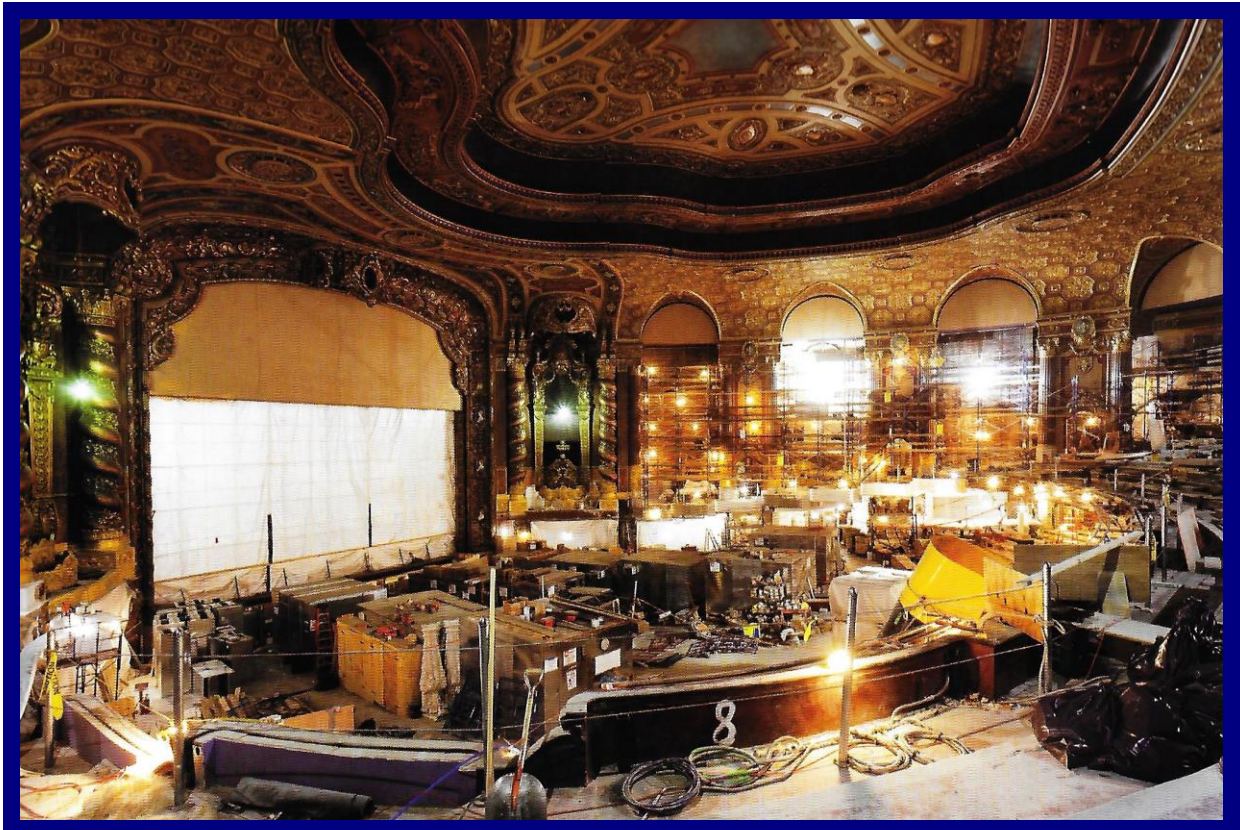


The grand valence (the short, horizontal stage curtain) can be seen on the stage, having collapsed, probably around 2009.

KINGS BROOKLYN NEW YORK CITY



"Rebirth of the Kings": the complicated scaffolding in the auditorium.

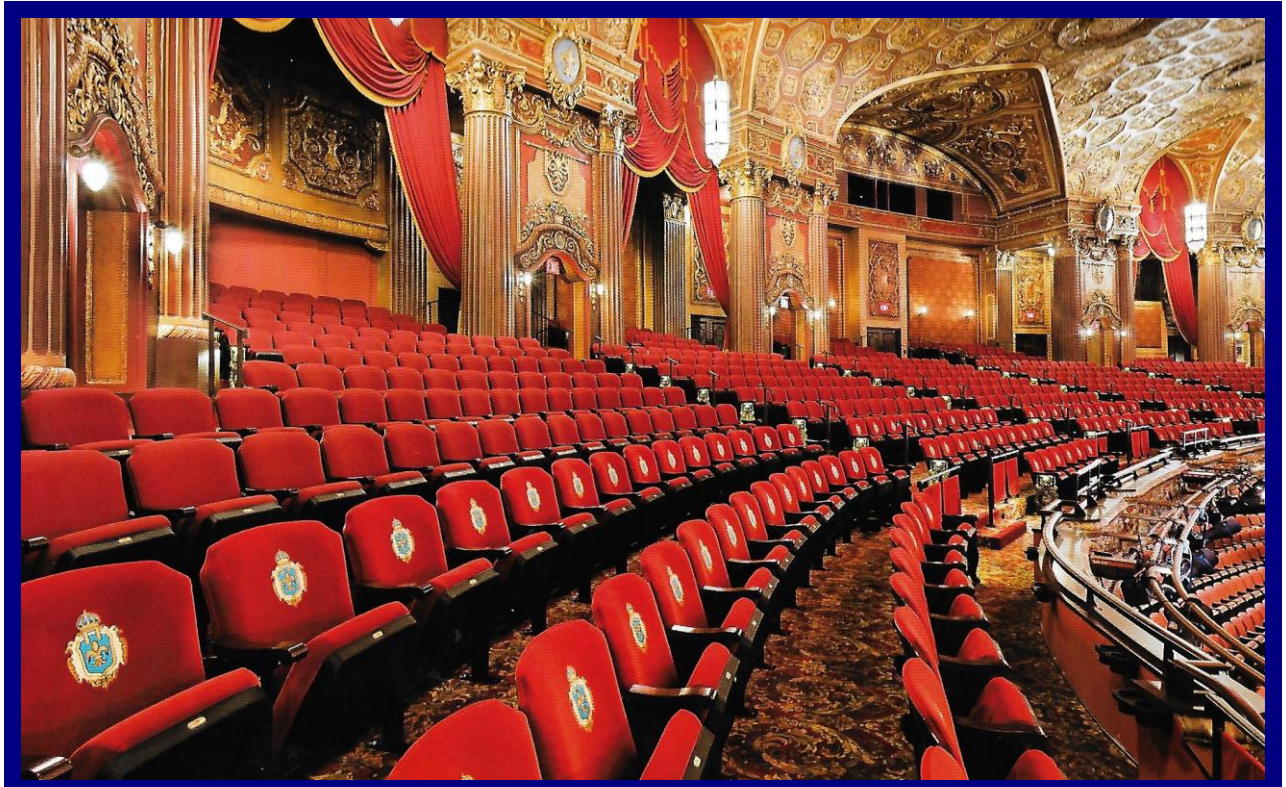


During restoration. A makeshift curtain separates stage and auditorium.

KINGS BROOKLYN NEW YORK CITY



The restored stage and auditorium where the first show took place on 3rd February, 1915.



View of the restored auditorium from the side of the balcony.

KINGS BROOKLYN NEW YORK CITY



REFERENCES

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1989 Pantages Theatre: Rebirth of a Landmark, Constance Olsheski, Key Porter, Toronto.

----- From the Land of Andalusia to the Wheat Fields of Kansas: A History of Wichita's Historic Orpheum Theatre, Keith Wondra (Wichita State University), Privately Published.

2015 The Tennessee Theatre: A Grand Entertainment Palace, Jack Neely, Historic Tennessee Theatre Foundation, Knoxville.

2016 Kings Theatre, The Rise, Fall and Rebirth of Brooklyn's Wonder Theatre, Matt Lambros, Theatre Historical Society of America, Pittsburgh.

Information also taken from the Heritage Group Archive and Website.