

PRESERVATION

THE RIVER OAKS THEATER: SAVED FROM THE WRECKING BALL?



The stunning auditorium of the River Oaks Theater features “Land” and “Sea” reliefs flanking the screen. The “Sea” detail is shown at left.

Photo courtesy of Preservation Houston.

By Ramona L. Hopkins

For over seventy years the River Oaks Theater has operated at 2009 West Gray in Houston’s affluent River Oaks community. Although the theater has changed over the years, it remains an integral part of Houston, the city’s culture and history, and of the movie industry in the second half of the twentieth century. The River Oaks Theater was the tenth Interstate Theater to open in a seven-year period and one of the last Art Deco buildings constructed in the city. Other historic theaters have been closed and demolished. Like them, the River Oaks Theater has also found its existence threatened.

Ever since a group of women fought to save President George Washington’s home in the mid-nineteenth century, groups have fought to preserve homes, churches, parks, and commercial buildings. In the 1960s and 1970s, organizations formed to protect the old movie theaters that were a central feature of most cities and towns. Communications professor Janna Jones argues, “Old movie theaters produce powerful feelings of nostalgia.”¹ The building itself, for many, serves as a real connection with the past. Everybody has memories of going to the theater with family and friends, the food they ate, the sights and sounds, and the film’s ability to transport them into another world. “To see a unit etched in our cultural memory reduced to rubble is a disturbing experience, one that severs tangible connections to our individual and collective heritage,” architect Joseph M. Valerio and Daniel Friedman explained.²



In July 2006, the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance (now Preservation Houston) publicized news it received that property owner Weingarten Realty Investors planned on demolishing the Art-Deco-style River Oaks Community Shopping Center and the River Oaks Theater, which sat across the street from each other. With plans to build a Barnes and Noble Booksellers on the property, the existence of the nearby Alabama Theater, which housed a bookstore, was also in danger. Public outcry led to a movement to save all three properties. Despite the efforts of concerned Houstonians, part of the River Oaks Community Shopping Center was torn down in September 2007, and in 2008, construction began on a parking garage. Weingarten planned on tearing down the theater when its lease ended in 2010, but that never occurred. Instead, Houstonians have been left to wonder what the fate of their beloved theater will be. Should the River Oaks Theater be saved? People on both sides of the issue feel very strongly, and they seem to be unable to find common ground.

1900-1939

Following the devastating 1900 hurricane in Galveston and the discovery of oil at Spindletop, Houston grew rapidly as people moved here to find work in the refineries, oil fields, and factories. Estimates of the projected growth prompted Mike and Will Hogg and Hugh Potter to create a well-

Looking east toward downtown on West Gray, this 1940 aerial view of the River Oaks Shopping Center shows the gates to the River Oaks neighborhood across South Shepherd Drive in the foreground. The River Oaks Theater sits alone just above the shopping center. A section of the shopping center on the left was torn down in 2007 to make room for a Barnes and Noble and parking garage.

Photo courtesy of Preservation Houston.

planned, restricted community in River Oaks. In 1924, they bought over 200 acres of land west of Montrose Boulevard on the outskirts of Houston's city limits that was platted into individual lots and included a large golf course.³ They began buying land to the west, south, and east and formed the River Oaks Corporation.

The goal was to create a complete community that would sustain the needs of its residents. In addition to home sites, the plan included an elementary school, two shopping centers, and landscaped esplanades. The Hoggs and Potter hired Herbert Kipp, a civil engineer, to oversee the development and J. C. Nichols to create a shopping center similar to one he had worked on in the Country Club District of Kansas City that was the first of its kind. In 1937, the River Oaks Shopping Center opened on West Gray, "as a model of suburban convenience shopping that would enhance [River Oaks]."⁴ Nichols also acted as the landscape artist, and landscape architects Hare & Hare worked to protect the integrity of the area's environment. The corporation hired an official corporate architect, Charles W. Oliver, to insure that homeowners built beautiful homes appropriate for the neighborhood. To maintain River Oaks's exclusivity, the founders placed deed restrictions on the land and entered into a gentlemen's agreement to exclude Jews and African Americans.⁵ An escape from the city, the community offered all of the services families needed to live comfortably. Since movies had become an important part of Americans' lives, River Oaks needed to offer that service as well.

Movie palaces whose grandeur created a fantasy world for audiences began to appear across the country in the early 1900s. Houston opened its first movie palace, the Isis, in 1913. Designers gained inspiration from the Renaissance and employed Italian, Dutch, English, Gothic, Greek,



Jacobean, Roman Imperial, Lombardic, and Egyptian styles. A 1925 Paris exhibition introduced Art Deco's characteristic angular geometric form to the world and the influence quickly spread. "In nearly every country Art Deco was adopted as a way of embracing the modern and escaping restricting values," art curator Ghislaine Wood wrote.⁶

The movie industry took a strong hold in Houston, as each day between 8,000 and 10,000 people went to see movies. Throughout the economic boom of the 1920s, the movie palaces offered a glamorous form of entertainment. The economic effects of the Great Depression, however, resulted in a drop in movie attendance that by 1932 caused some movie studios to close and others to merge. Movies still offered people a way to escape their economic worries, but the drop in attendance brought an end to the era of large movie palaces.

When movie companies began building again, things had changed dramatically. Studios took advantage of newly developed technology and introduced movies with sound. "Talking movies were the novelty of the day. The public was swarming to theaters equipped with sound," Marguerite Johnson noted.⁷ Theaters had to provide a sound system and no longer needed the place for an orchestra or piano player. To save money, architects incorporated streamlined designs in the interior and exterior of the new neighborhood theaters. "New movie theaters were based on efficiency and scientific innovation and employed a pragmatic style rather than the ornamental and ostentatious designs of the movie palace," Janna Jones explained.⁸ As cities expanded, people did not want to travel downtown to see a movie when they could see one in their neighborhood.

NOVEMBER 28, 1939

In 1939, Interstate Theaters completed two new facilities in Houston. The first was the Alabama Theater, followed by the River Oaks Theater three weeks later. It opened on November 28, 1939, with the movie *Bachelor Mother*, starring David Niven and Ginger Rogers. Ads in the *Houston Chronicle* and the *Houston Post* welcomed the new theater and proclaimed its virtues as the city's "newest and safest neighborhood theatre," which appealed to the residents of a restricted-access community like River Oaks. To appeal to families, the local Monarch Cleaners offered all night services to those going to the theater. The Dallas firm of Pettigrew and Worley designed the building, and



This ad, which appeared in the River Oaks Magazine in July 1939, spelled out the developers' intentions to protect the neighborhood. A similar ad for the theater itself described it as "Dedicated to discriminatory family taste and to the patronage of children. Designed especially for the community near which it was built."

Image courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Buck Wynn Jr. created its interior. His use of Art Deco statues and under-the-sea designs drew great praise. The interior featured "low relief goddesses – two stories tall, flank[ing] the movie screen." The *Texas Architect* added that "the broad sweep of plush seats recall a by-gone era of movie going elegance."⁹

On opening night, Mayor Oscar Holcombe attended, as did Hugh Potter, H. F. Pettigrew of Pettigrew and Worley, Buck Wynn Jr., and Paul Scott, the theater's manager and operator. The *Houston Post* reported that the theater could seat 1,000 patrons, and the wide spaces between the rows gave plenty of space for people to move about comfortably. The design took into account the theater's location in a grove of tall oak trees adjoining a residential neighborhood and was constructed with a low profile to conform to the proposed retail and office space in the adjoining River Oaks Shopping Center.¹⁰ Recently introduced at the New York and San Francisco Fairs, the latest technology, which featured a tube inserted into the aluminum hand-rail, lit the stairway to the balcony.

1940-PRESENT

Throughout the 1940s, the movie industry experienced another high point. Thousands returned to theaters to catch the latest news reel and watch a movie. By 1940, Interstate Theaters owned over 100 theaters in the state of Texas.

Suburbs began to grow as families moved out of the city centers during the 1950s. River Oaks and other suburbs provided white residents with a family-oriented neighborhood, and local businesses opened creating self-sufficient communities. Grocery stores, schools, and churches were joined by movie theaters, shops, and restaurants. Although the River Oaks Corporation dissolved in 1955, and the community opened to any who wished to live there, neighborhood associations still placed restrictions that made it hard for minorities to move into the area. Today, anyone who can afford it can move into River Oaks; however, it continues to be predominately white and has the highest socio-economic status of any Houston neighborhood.

Several changes also occurred in the 1950s that impacted the movie industry. The development of television had the most dramatic affect. Attendance at theaters began to drop as people stayed home to watch television with their families. Drive-in theaters also drew movie-going customers away from downtown and neighborhood theaters. The first one in Houston opened in June 1940 and was simply called the Drive-in Theatre.

Production studios developed new technologies like Cinemascope, Vista Vision, and Technoscope to produce better quality films, and this also had an effect on attendance. Failure to upgrade and accommodate the new technology ended in closure for many older theaters. By the 1970s, many of the downtown movie palaces had closed. With Houston's weak preservation ordinances, the historic theaters were quickly demolished. As the theaters closed, Houstonians lamented the destruction of the beautiful buildings and the material culture. In other cities, the reuse of movie palaces as museums, shops, or theaters prompted revitalizations of local downtown districts.

The River Oaks Theater survived the crisis and to remain competitive became a repertory theater that ran alternative films. In 1976, Landmark Theaters purchased the River Oaks Theater. The company, founded in 1974, became known for its historic theaters that featured classic, foreign, independent, and cult films.

By the 1980s, cable service, the VCR, and the corporate chain theaters took a toll on the older theaters. Repertory theaters were hit especially hard as many of the same features could be seen on cable or on videotape. To remain marketable, Landmark's theaters began to show independent and foreign language films, which proved successful.

The single-screen River Oaks Theater took a drastic step in 1987 when it removed the balcony and added two additional screens and an upstairs concession stand with a bar. In 1988, Heritage Entertainment, Inc., bought Landmark Theater Corporation, but the change did not affect the River Oaks Theater's daily operation or management. Today, it remains the only neighborhood theater built in Houston in the 1930s and 1940s still functioning as a working theater.¹¹

THE CRISIS

The River Oaks Theater has won many awards and remains one of Houston's beloved theaters. In 2000, Mayor Lee Brown declared March 26 River Oaks Theatre Day. One year later, the theater was given AWARD for the Preservation of a Landmark Facility as a Unique and Special Venue for Art, Vintage, and Independently Produced Films. *Inside Houston*, the *Houston Post*, and the *Houston Press* voted it the city's Best Movie Theater. In 2006, it ranked second on a list of 20 Cool Things about Houston, and Mayor Bill White again officially proclaimed a River Oaks Theatre Day. The *Houston Press* recognized the theater for the Best Film Series - Midnight Screenings in 2010. The River Oaks Theater hosts Academy Award parties, and plays cult classics, foreign, and independent films. It serves alcohol at its concession stand bar, offers alternative treats, and holds millions of memories.

Despite all of the theater's accolades, in 2006 news leaked that Weingarten Realty planned to raze the River Oaks



The theater as it appeared before construction of the adjacent shopping center in the 1940s. The developer advertised, "It sits, without electrical display or garish superstructure in a grove of tall oaks in perfect keeping with the neighborhood."

Photo courtesy of Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Shopping Center, causing a domino effect that also endangered the Alabama Theater. The news sparked a campaign to save the theaters and the center. The personal connection and memories of the River Oaks Theater, the historic design, and the one-of-a-kind experience, preservationists argued, far outweighed the desire for another chain store and cookie-cutter shop. Protest petitions had thousands of signatures within a week, prompting Weingarten to announce that if an alternative could be found to make the theater marketable, then the company would be willing to save it. This statement sums up how many people think about historic preservation: If a building is competitive and marketable, then it has value; otherwise, it is expendable. If well-established, maintained properties such as the shopping center, the River Oaks Theater, and the Alabama Theater do not bring in high profits, then they become worthless.

Customers found it difficult to park at the River Oaks Shopping Center and theater, and the busy street cutting through the center shopping area could be dangerous. The property owners believed a parking garage would create a large, safe area for people to park, making it easier to shop. With River Oaks's affluence (the area's median income in 2006 was \$185,674), property values continued to increase and the area attracted more business development.¹² Developing a new parking garage, a bigger shopping center to attract restaurants and spas, and a high rise to encourage more people to move to the area would result in even higher property values and revenues for the property owner. Weingarten saw this development as an improvement to the area, not a loss.

Weingarten's three-part plan for the new shopping center called for the demolition of the original River Oaks Community Shopping Center and construction of the garage and the new shopping area featuring Barnes and Noble. Next, the company planned to demolish the mirror shopping center across the street. The River Oaks Theater would be the last to fall. To retain the Art Deco design of



Today, the exterior of the River Oaks Theater and adjacent shopping center have a new look. The buildings have lost their characteristic Art Deco lines and color scheme to modernization.

Photo by Debbie Z. Harwell.

the new structures, Weingarten hired the internationally renowned architectural firm Altoon and Porter, which has won several awards for renovation and historic preservation and works to maintain the cultural integrity of the community in its projects.¹³

Citizens, Mayor Bill White, the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, and the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission worked to persuade Weingarten to change its plans. They offered Weingarten tax breaks as an incentive to put the property on the Historical Landmark list to save it. They gathered petitions and tried to negotiate a ninety-day waiting period. Due to Houston's weak preservation ordinances, however, it appeared that their efforts were in vain. With the destruction of the Shopping Center in September 2007, the focus shifted to saving the River Oaks and Alabama Theaters. In 2010, renovations occurred at the River Oaks with no announcements and no fanfare.¹⁴ Rather than celebrating the structure's reprieve, Houstonians were left wondering if it was really safe at all.

Why do so many people feel that the River Oaks Theater is historically significant and worth saving? What makes a theater historically significant? According to the League for Historic American Theaters, which works to save historic theaters across the country, a historic theater must be at least fifty years old and possess historical, architectural, and societal importance.¹⁵ The broad context of the history of the River Oaks Theater reveals its significance.

By changing with the times, the River Oaks Theater has managed to stay in business for over seventy years. Initially catering to suburban families by offering a safe, family-oriented theater right in the restricted River Oaks community, the River Oaks Theater adapted when television, drive-ins, and technology threatened the existence of older theaters. It persevered by showing repertory films and undergoing a massive renovation. The theater's history provides a guidepost through which to observe the movie industry's changes from the 1940s to today, the shifts in American culture and values, and the impact of this theater on this history of Houston and River Oaks.

Built at the end of the Art Deco and Art Moderne movement, the River Oaks Theater is significant architecturally

as one of the last Art Deco theaters in town, marking the end of the Art Deco era. Both architectural trends influenced so much more than buildings and design. They also represented the struggle between tradition and the future, between nature and industry. The Art Deco movement affected the way that people thought about industry, about transportation, and even about people. Everything was streamlined to become perfect and efficient. This impact was felt in Houston and around the world.

From a societal perspective, the theater's development was affected by the history of Houston as it grew into an industrial center. The developers of the River Oaks Community saw that potential growth and created a community to accommodate the people of discerning taste that would live there. The River Oaks Theater, in turn, helped to shape society and spread modern culture. Most people can recall trips to the movie theater for the social interactions and films' ability to transport them to another world and, perhaps, shape who they became. This has created a very personal connection for people with movie theaters.

While progress and profit act as powerful motivators, which have a place in free market America, sometimes we have to think with our hearts as well as our heads. Movies and movie theaters represent a part of the history of society, communities, and individuals that still play an important role in our culture. Theaters across the country have been restored and renovated, causing a revitalization of surrounding areas and business growth. Houston's own Alabama Theater's renovation into a bookstore accomplished that until the Barnes and Noble displaced it. When chain stores seen in cities all over the world replace independent businesses, it destroys the unique culture of that city. The River Oaks Theater played an integral part in shaping Houston into what it is today. Preserving the theater will ensure that it continues contributing to the Houston community well into the future.

Ramona L. Hopkins received her Masters of Arts in U.S. history from the University of Houston in 2009. She is currently working in the public school setting in southern Iowa.