

## ***Downtown Community Theaters,*** *“Edu-tainment” Emporiums.*

### **Historical Role of Main Street Theaters in Small Cities and Towns.**

Movies begat movie theaters. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until sound sprung forth in 1927, movies and movie theaters were like novelties. The Nickelodeons inhabited thousands of storefronts. The first single theater in Pittsburgh in 1905 became many theaters across America by the 1920s. Sound boomed forth in 1927; with it emerged “Hollywood”. The Golden Age movies we still love began.

Air conditioning was a great marketing ploy. The inside coolness in mid-summer drew as many patrons as the movie. The one screen theaters being preserved and renovated today were the products of this simpler time. Invariably, they are located downtown, usually on the main street.

### **Theaters are Development Assets.**

Small cities and towns across America have re-discovered the old one-screen theaters and grasped the importance of their rescue. These venues offer the opportunity to provide entertainment on main street where most of these gems were located.

They also serve as a rallying cry to save the historic theaters, the grand palaces that still command respect. Benefactors step forward, volunteers run the operation, a community trust handles the financing and Saturday night downtown once again becomes a happening.

Theaters also benefit from technological advances. Broadband high speed internet service expands the scope and elaboration of performances.

Some show current-run movies, some show the oldies, some offer live theater and music; and the most clever provide all of the above. Shows are professional, amateur and “home spun”.

### **Air Conditioning Goes to the Movies, 1925**

**In 1925, Carrier persuaded the Paramount Pictures Corporation to install his system in the Rivoli Theater - their flagship movie house under construction on Times Square in New York City. The system was ready for its test with an actual audience by the theater's opening on Memorial Day. The experiment was an outstanding success. People flocked to the Rivoli – as many to enjoy the cool relief from the heat as to see the movie. Over the next five years, Carrier installed his climate control technology in 300 movie theaters across the country. Air conditioning transformed the summer months from a financial write-off for the movie industry to its most profitable season of the year.**

**Source:**

<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/ac.htm>

### **Theaters are an Important Element of the City’s Educational, Cultural and Entertainment Asset Base.**

Theaters, in and of themselves, are valuable community assets. When included in a holistic package of civic assets with the public library, the local history or specialty museum, a public garden and a city art gallery, the importance is magnified.

## Theaters are Community Building Ingredients.

Their redevelopment helps revitalize struggling or depressed neighborhoods and downtowns. The buildings themselves are valuable; when full of people they are priceless.

## Theaters are Important Sustainability Partners.

Theaters are places where people come to know themselves and their communities.

**Theaters are entertainment venues and architectural structures that are culturally relevant.** Theaters are tenants, sometimes pro bono, sometimes not. Theater ticket windows can fill unused storefronts and be in the public library or other non-traditional locations.



Box office in main street storefront, Cocoa Village FL.



DeLand FL downtown.

**Theaters are Centers for the Arts.** Theaters, used properly, provide access to the arts for all, not just contributing patrons. Theaters provide opportunities for education with classes to encourage art appreciation and participation.

**Theaters are Champions of Youth.** Theaters teach teens important life skills and offer opportunities for expression.

## Theaters are Educational Venues.

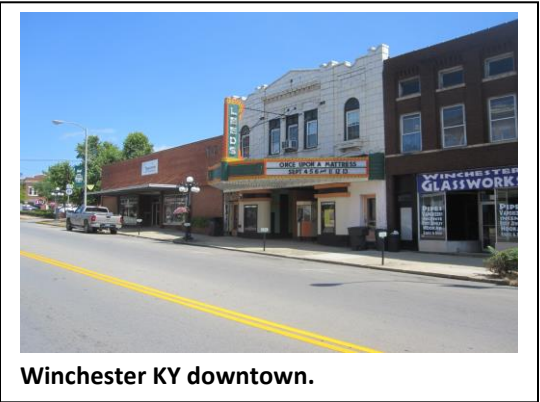
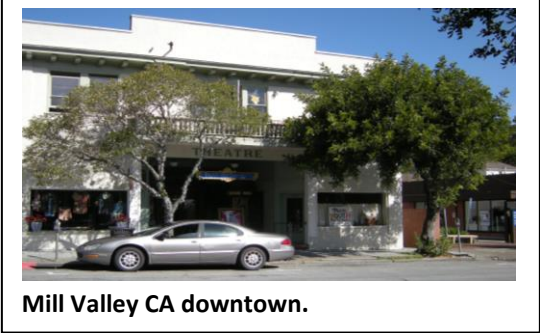
- Theaters serve as the “people’s university” with opportunities for all to enjoy modern productions, Shakespeare, the Greek tragedies and modern dance, all downtown.
- Theaters, when offered to community groups, go beyond providing content, they enable patrons to create their own content.
- Theaters promote community civility and sociability.

**Theaters are Learning Centers for Diverse Populations.** They help non-English speakers learn the language and see themselves represented in their communities.

## Theaters are Classrooms.

- Consider the role of the civic theater in the education and entertainment of its citizens, old, young and in between.
- The formal education provided by the public school system and their arts programs can use the community theater.
- Theaters offer enrichment and culture to resident families.
- Theaters are venues to entertain residents and visitors using the town’s historic, cultural and natural resources.

Main Street Theaters come in all sizes, styles and ages.





Orlando FL retail center w/retrofit theater: Plaza Live.

**Theater design is important.** The design of theaters as public buildings is important; there are a couple of choices. Like public libraries and local museums, community theaters come in a wide variety of shapes, styles and sizes.

Historic one-screen theaters, converted warehouses or retail spaces and outdoor venues in parks and parking lots serve the need for live performances, movies, recitals and lectures.

Some towns are interested in promoting a stylistic or iconic theme. Whether the product of a local architect or a world class specialist, thoughtfulness, quality design and durable materials are important features in every public building, in large cities and small towns; quality always rewards the effort.

Good building design, site planning and landscape architecture can influence private development and justify standards based on the city's example. Citing a new museum, library, theater or city hall is an important task.

**Theaters, Libraries, Museums, Public Galleries and Public Gardens as a Family of City Assets that Build the Town.** Even if the several entities have separate owners and trustees, the close cooperation and coordination of activities can pay huge benefits.

The location, design and function of public buildings, such as theaters, are critical in the development of a cohesive downtown. Its location along with city hall, the county courthouse, the local history museum, the public library and the post office needs to be on or very accessible to main street.

The city is in an ideal position to champion these connections; not for the sake of efficiency, but for the sake of public usage and admiration. Everyone benefits from better programming, better quality facilities and better community cohesion.

In addition, most civic venues are under-utilized. Providing free or bargain prices to fill unused seats and spaces offers access to families who may not otherwise partake. It fills seats, sells popcorn and enhances the quality of life for everyone. Free rides and free access for non-peak cultural events is worth considering.



"Main and main" in a new town center.



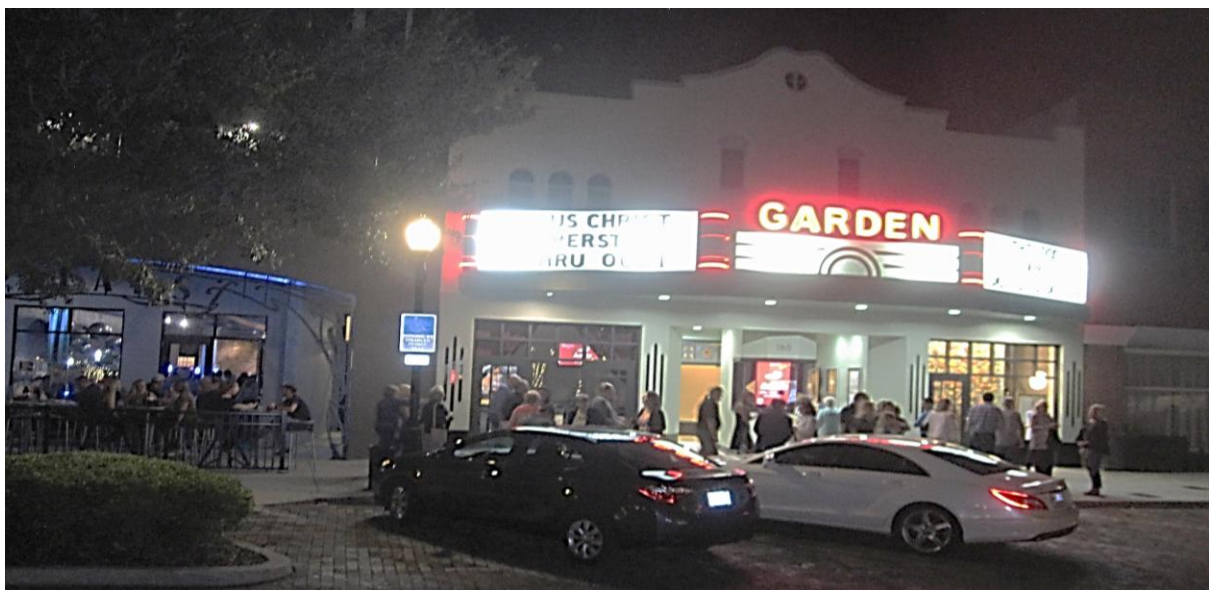
Cocoa Village FL downtown on main street.

#### Theaters as Economic Development Assets.

- Retaining businesses requires the city to be, and remain, culturally vibrant for businesses to succeed in retaining and recruiting employees.
- Nurturing start-up businesses and encouraging entrepreneurs to stay in town after they succeed needs the city to be attractive to themselves and their families.
- Building a character town with a strong cultural center is an important economic development activity.

#### **Conclusions.**

1. Community theaters, widely and wisely deployed, are great community assets, especially when located on main street.
2. Community theaters are useful for a wide variety of live performances including plays, music, dance programs.
3. Community theaters are great venues for amateur recitals, graduation ceremonies, community events, announcements and other civic gatherings requiring an indoor setting.
4. Community theaters are great learning venues for lectures and classes.
5. Civic theaters are being restored across America with tax credits, historic preservation programs and philanthropy.
6. Community theaters are also being programmed into new towns.
7. Comprehensive long term plans with annual work programs help sustain theaters and the other core components of the city's educational/cultural system for the long run.



Bright lights on a Thursday night on main street in downtown Winter Garden FL.

**The Literature:** The following articles present a selection of the usefulness of American downtown theaters in developing character main streets.



## Worcester's Urban Renewal: Old plans and new have city poised for future.

By Joshua Lyford, May 12, 2016, Worcester Magazine

It had been talked about for a significant period of time, but when Worcester's proposed Urban Revitalization Plan became available for public review just last month, it was the first chance for many to pour over the 184- page document detailing a plan to restructure and rejuvenate greater downtown.

With a focus on a newly-designed Theatre District and an overall resuscitation of the area – with a separate corner already infused with renewed vigor as part of the well underway City Square project – the planned new shape of downtown Worcester is given a long-view strategy.

**Source:** <https://worcestermag.com/2016/05/12/worcesters-urban-renewal-old-plans-new-city-poised-future/42656>

## 30 Great Small Towns for Theater Lovers



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As live theater continues to grow in popularity, theater lovers all over the United States are realizing that such big cities as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles aren't the only places one can find a good performance. Indeed, the 30 small towns on this list, all of which have populations of less than 100,000, are sure to please any theater aficionado. Some, such as Ashland, Oregon, are known for theater festivals, while others, like Staunton, Virginia, are home to well-known theater companies with impressive resumes and even more impressive production budgets. Still others, like Wolf Trap National Park in Virginia, are just nice places to watch a show while enjoying a picnic.

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|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Staunton, Virginia           | 16. Chautauqua, New York     |
| 2. East Haddam, Connecticut     | 17. Cold Spring, New York    |
| 3. Princeton, New Jersey        | 18. Westport, Connecticut    |
| 4. Milburn, New Jersey          | 19. Walnut Creek, California |
| 5. Ashland, Oregon              | 20. La Jolla, California     |
| 6. Niagara-on-the-Lake, Canada  | 21. Waterford, Connecticut   |
| 7. Shepherdstown, West Virginia | 22. Cedar City, Utah         |
| 8. Williamstown, Massachusetts  | 23. New Brunswick, NJ        |
| 9. Asheville, North Carolina    | 24. Genesee, Wisconsin       |
| 10. Jupiter, Florida            | 25. Valencia, California     |
| 11. Lenox, Massachusetts        | 26. Wolf Trap, Virginia      |
| 12. Clarksville, Indiana        | 27. Bennington, Vermont      |
| 13. Santa Fe, New Mexico        | 28. Williamsburg, Virginia   |
| 14. Spring Green, Wisconsin     | 29. Cambridge, MA            |
| 15. Pittsfield, Massachusetts   | 30. Costa Mesa, California   |

Source: <http://www.topvaluereviews.net/features/30-great-small-towns-for-theater-lovers/>

## Small towns rescuing, restoring movie theaters

By BARBARA RODRIGUEZ - Associated Press - Friday, September 26, 2014



*Work is done on the marquis of the Webster Theater, Thursday, Aug. 21, 2014, in Webster City, Iowa. When the historic downtown movie theater in Webster City, Iowa, went bankrupt and shut down last year, some wondered whether it was further proof of the small town's demise after a factory closure put hundreds out of work. Instead, residents rallied. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)*

WEBSTER CITY, Iowa (AP) - When the historic downtown movie theater in Webster City, Iowa, went bankrupt and shut down last year, some wondered whether it was further proof of the small town's demise after a factory closure put hundreds out of work.

"This community, not more than a year ago, was labeled as done. Shut the lights off - we're done," said theater volunteer Jake Pulis, recalling concerns after the appliance plant closed in the central Iowa town.

Instead, residents rallied around the theater. They held public meetings, hashed out volunteer work and launched a fundraising campaign. More than \$200,000 later, the theater reopened Saturday with a newly renovated marquee, an ode to its appearance in the 1940s.

"We're just getting started," said Deb Brown, another theater volunteer.

Webster City's story is playing out across the country, as residents of small communities work to save their historic downtown movie theaters. To many, the hope is that a theater's revival could aid a community's revival, too.

**Source:** <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/sep/26/small-towns-rescuing-restoring-movie-theaters/>