

From the Planners' Bookshelf...

The Little Theatre on the Square: Four Decades of a Small-Town Equity Theatre.

by [Ms. Beth Shervey PhD](#) (Author), [Peter PALMER](#) (Foreword), 2000.

The Idea of Theaters in Small Cities and Towns.

Exploiting remnant single screen theaters as venues for live performances or, in some cases, first run movies is an opportunity not to be missed. Who knew there exists a "little theater movement" as cited below?

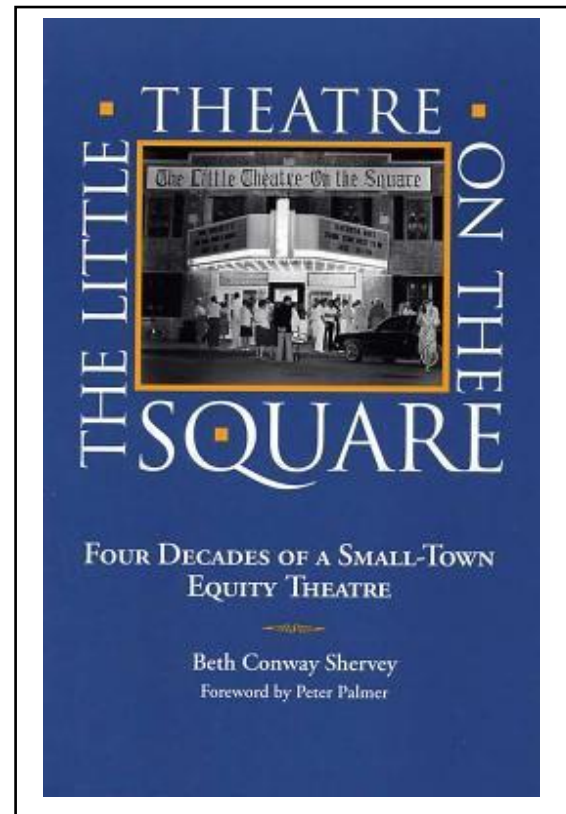
Michael Putnam's book, boxed below, comes to exactly the wrong conclusion. Single screen theaters in small cities and towns, having had an important purpose in the past, can continue to serve small towns as cultural and entertainment venues well into the 21st century.

The Little Theater on the Square points the way. Performances of travelling shows, local performances, lectures and civic events can all happen in a theater downtown.

Save the old single screen theaters until you can afford to restore them and have them incorporated into the city's asset base that enriches the community.

Book Overview from Amazon.

"Beth Conway Shervey examines the cultural consequences of an Equity theatre in a small midwestern farm town. Although many in the Midwest and beyond know the story of The Little Theatre On The Square in Sullivan, Illinois, Shervey is the first to consider what the existence of such a



theatre means to perceptions of life in the town.

"To tell the story of Sullivan and of its star theatre in a cornfield from the perspective of the residents involved, Shervey uses oral history and dozens of photographs by David W. Mobley, the theatre's longtime photographer. Sullivan resembles most small towns in the Midwest, and The Little Theatre differs little from most professional summer stock theatres.

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"Yet taken together, the small town and its theatre are clearly unusual, and the existence of the theatre obviously alters perceptions of life in the small town.

"Before the theatre opened in 1957, Sullivan decidedly was a product of its time: the town sported a strong local chapter of the WCTU, moral people avoided taverns, liberals and Catholics were the minorities, and the population was predominantly white. While the theatre didn't affect instant change, it did introduce people to Sullivan who were obviously different. Stars such as Betty Grable, Cesar Romero, Margaret Hamilton, and Pat O'Brien came into town. Aspiring actors and those behind the scenes also mingled with the residents of Sullivan.

"As a result, Shervey finds, Sullivan faced such issues as racism, homophobia, urban liberalism, and alcohol consumption at a much faster rate than similar towns. For some, the theatre disrupted a sense of the normal; for others, the theatre made life in Sullivan different and interesting, breaking the restrictive bonds typically associated with small towns."

Conclusion:

Save the screens!

LINK:

<https://www.amazon.com/Little-Theatre-Square-Decades-Small-Town/dp/0809323540>

Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater (Creating the North

American Landscape) – August 31, 2000 by Michael Putnam with Robert Sklar's Introduction.

Excerpts from Amazon Description:

"The single-screen movie theaters that punctuated small-town America's main streets and city neighborhoods since the 1920s are all but gone. The well-dressed throng of moviegoers has vanished; the facades are boarded. In Silent

"Screens, photographer Michael Putnam captures these once prominent cinemas in decline and transformation. His photographs of abandoned movie houses and forlorn marquees are an elegy to this disappearing cultural icon.

"While the images in Putnam's book can be read as a metaphor for the death of many downtowns in America, Silent Screens goes beyond mere nostalgia to tell the important story of the disappearance of the single-screen theater, illuminating the layers of cultural and economic significance that still surround it."

Link: <https://www.amazon.com/Silent-Screens-Transformation-American-Landscape/dp/0801863295>