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Ohio certainly has its share of some of the nation's most beautiful and historic theaters. By Charissa Durst

Ohio has a rich history in the architecture and design of theaters. According to Heritage Ohio, it's home to nearly 50 historic theaters — and, thanks to the efforts of preservationists — many of them are still standing.

As a historic preservation architect who has worked on the restoration of several theaters here in Ohio and elsewhere, I often find myself taking pictures of buildings while traveling or making it a point to attend a performance at an old theater, so I can experience a theater from the audience member's perspective. While it's hard to pick any favorites, several unique performance halls scattered throughout Ohio stand out because of their history, architecture and use. When I am traveling, theaters are always great places to visit, and when I go in — as an architect — I look for the “wow” factor in the lobby and main hall.

Central Ohio, of course, is home to such gems as the Palace Theatre, the Ohio Theatre and the Southern Theatre — all of which have that “wow” factor — but there are several other remarkable, if lesser-known, performance venues scattered throughout the region.

Neighborhood Revitalization

The Lincoln Theatre, which anchors the King-Lincoln District just east of downtown Columbus, has a rich connection to the African-American community in central Ohio. Developed by local African-American businessman Al Jackson, architect Carl Anderson (also an African-American) designed the theatre in the Egyptian Revival style. The building — originally named the Ogden Theatre and Ballroom — opened

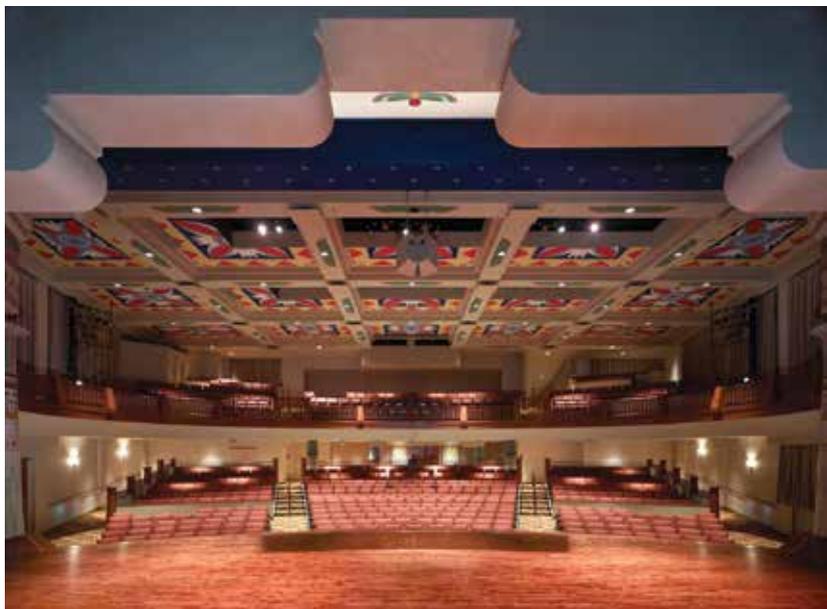
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on Thanksgiving Day 1928 and became the nexus of life in the predominantly African-American neighborhood. Even after being renamed the Lincoln Theatre in 1939, the space continued to operate as a movie theater and a nationally recognized hotspot for jazz performers. The theater is significant not only for its unique Egyptian Revival style, but also because of its history. According to the Columbus Association for Performing Arts, which now owns and manages the theater, from the 1930s to the 1960s, the Ogden gained a national reputation as a jazz mecca and drew appearances from such well-known performers as Count Basie, James Brown, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Etta James and Columbus native Nancy Wilson.

After highway construction divided the highway and the neighborhood's population plunged in the 1960s and 1970s, the theater suffered decades of damage and was facing a date with a wrecking ball in 1991. However, after repairs to the outer shell were completed in 1992, the building was added to the National Register of Historic Places. In 2002, the city of Columbus purchased the theater and the architects at Hardlines were commissioned to work on the \$13.5 million renovation of the building.



The Lincoln Theatre. Photo courtesy of Hardlines Design co.

In May of 2009, the Lincoln Theatre reopened, and its restoration helped spur the revitalization of the neighborhood. Once again, the theater is a hub of activity in the neighborhood, as it is busy all year with performances, rehearsals and classes. The Columbus Jazz Arts Group schedules performances there and uses the top floor for its Jazz Academy.

In 2009, the restoration of the Lincoln Theatre received a Merit Award from the State Historic Preservation Office and subsequently received a Heritage Ohio award and the James B. Recchie Award from Columbus Landmarks Foundation.

Atmospheric Theaters in Ohio

In the 1920s, the design of atmospheric theaters became popular. The idea of the design was that the house would transport patrons to another locale, often a much more exotic one. The most prolific architect of such theaters was John Ebersson, an Austrian-born American architect. By the end of the 1920s, he had designed more than 100 such theaters around the United States, including several in Ohio.

Ebersson's touch is still felt by visitors today who attend a performance or movie at the Marion Palace Theatre — which just celebrated its 90th anniversary in August. Ebersson's design makes you feel like you are stepping into a Spanish courtyard and features stucco walls, crawling vines and a night sky with twinkling stars and clouds that float overhead. The Marion Palace Theatre is listed on the National Register of Historic Places because of this significant architectural style.

According to the theater's documented history, by the 1970s, the theater — then used mostly as a movie theater — had fallen into disrepair. Local businessman John C. Keggan rallied the support of other local



The Lincoln Theatre. Photo courtesy of Hardlines Design co.

The Woodward Opera House, located in Mount Vernon, Ohio, is the oldest authentic 19th-century theater in the United States.

business people and a small group of them created the Palace Guard. Since then, the theater has gone through several restorations and additions, including a 2008 multipurpose addition and 2013 and 2016 restorations to the façade and exterior.

The Akron Civic Theatre, also on the National Register of Historic Places, is another of Eberson's atmospheric theaters. Designed to look like a night in a Moorish palace garden, the midnight blue ceiling in the auditorium includes twinkling stars and drifting clouds. The walls in the auditorium, the entrance and the lobby are designed to resemble a Moorish castle, with Mediterranean-style carvings.

The Akron Civic Theatre is the last remaining theater of 11 opened by Marcus Loew, who founded Loew's Theatres Inc., the former movie theater chain. Loew hired Eberson to design the theater in 1929. The theater closed its doors from mid-2001 to November 2002 to undergo an extensive \$19-million renovation that included renovating and modernizing dressing rooms, the sound system and plumbing. The theater also made improvements to its heating, cooling and ventilation system, roof exterior and electrical service, among other things. The 2,672-seat theater has a full schedule that draws audiences to concerts and theatrical productions throughout the year.

Like the Marion Palace Theatre and the Akron Civic Theatre, the Canton Palace Theatre also was designed by Eberson. The building was designed in a Spanish Colonial Revival style and the atmospheric theater, which opened on Nov. 22, 1926, resembles a Spanish courtyard, again with a starry midnight sky with clouds that seem to float across the ceiling. The theater still has the machine that makes the clouds float across the sky.

After a period of decline, the Canton theatre closed on its 50th anniversary in 1976 and also was facing demolition. However, as is the case in many cities across Ohio and the United States, concerned citizens stepped forward and saved the architectural gem. The Canton Jaycees stepped up and acted as a holding organization for the theater until the Canton Palace Theatre Association formed to take it over. The association reopened the building in 1980 and the theater has undergone ongoing renovations since. It remains a popular venue in Canton for movies, concerts and other local events.

The Opera House Era

Old opera houses dot the downtown landscapes of many small towns throughout the United States, and Ohio is no exception. Throughout the 19th century, opera houses were the center of the arts. Usually, commercial spaces occupied the first floors of these structures while the opera houses were on the second floors.

We at Hardlines Design Co. have worked on the restoration of one such opera house for the better part of 20 years. The Woodward Opera House, located in Mount Vernon, Ohio, is the oldest authentic 19th-century theater in the United States. Hardlines Design Co. is currently renovating the building as an effort to bring its historical significance to the forefront. This multiphase project, which began in 2002, was slated for completion in September.

A main challenge for us has been integrating the restoration of an 1850s theater building with the adaptive reuse of an adjacent building. Once complete, the project will include a restored opera house theater, two smaller performance venues and the restored annex.

The Woodward was the idea of Ebenezer Woodward, a local businessman in Mt. Vernon

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The Woodward. Photo courtesy of Hardlines Design co.



Sandusky State Theatre. Photo courtesy of Hardlines Design co.

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who wanted the locale to provide a performing arts venue for the local community. Once complete, the Woodward will be able to continue Woodward’s vision.

Interestingly enough, after visiting the Love Larson Opera House in Fremont, Neb., I realized how much it resembles the Woodward — and for good reason. The Love Larson was built in 1888 by J.W. Love, who was born and grew up in Mount Vernon. He must have modeled the Nebraska theater after the one from his hometown.

Complete Entertainment Venues

Why build a theater with only an auditorium when you can add other attractions as well? That must have been the thinking behind the Sandusky State Theatre, which was designed in 1928 as a complete entertainment center, with a bowling alley and billiard tables in the basement.

Placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988, the theater went through renovations in 1990. In 1995, the Golden Voiced Marvel Page Organ, which had been sold in 1961, returned to its original home in the Sandusky State Theatre.

Hardlines also has worked on this theater through the years. We were entrusted with performing exterior rehabilitation work using state and federal grant money. The theater is the home performing space for several local groups, and the public can still catch a movie and other performances there. Sadly, the bowling alley no longer operates.

In 1995, the Golden Voiced Marvel Page Organ, which had been sold in 1961, returned to its original home in the Sandusky State Theatre.

Preserving some of the best and most unique architecture that dates to the early 20th century and even the mid-19th century — as is the case with the Woodward — and investing and saving old theaters has proven to be a wise economical move for neighborhoods and cities. For example, the rebirth of theaters, such as the Lincoln, has helped revitalize neighborhoods and spawn other new businesses.

In addition to that, it’s just plain fun to visit these old theaters, enjoy a current show, and recall the history and famous people who might have once performed there.



Charissa Durst is owner and president of Hardlines Design Co.

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