Architecture and Community in the Past and Present: A Study of the Grand Theater in Crookston, Minnesota

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Abstract
How do the buildings around us really affect our lives? This is a question we rarely ask ourselves. The objective of this study is to discover just how a building can influence us by investigating how people interact with it over time. The architectural adaptations made to historic buildings are an excellent record of shifting aesthetic and technological needs of their users and are informative to this topic. The one-hundred year old Grand Theater in Crookston, Minnesota exhibits a compelling story of continuous use as both a theater and a place for community interaction. Evidence for this takes the form of interviews with current and past owners, as well as historical newspaper articles from the Crookston Daily Times and Sanborn Fire Insurance maps from the archives and State Historic Preservation Office at the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul. The evidence reveals that the theater adapted to many technological and stylistic changes over the years. As film technology developed, new spaces had to be created for the projection and sound equipment. Similarly, the interior and exterior facades of the building were modified to fit in with the style of each decade. The theater’s place in Crookston as a destination for entertainment exhibits that it affected its community. In turn, the ways the building responded architecturally to its social context show that it also came to embody the community’s values of leisure, style, and progress. These realizations can be extended to other buildings that we live and work in.

Keywords: architecture, community, entertainment

1. Introduction

This is a study of a theater in Crookston, Minnesota. Today, the town has a population of only about 8000 people, but at the beginning of the 1900s it was a booming railroad town in the northwestern region of the state. Its prosperity came from the town’s location along the major railroad line that ran from Minneapolis, Minnesota to Winnipeg, Manitoba. Even though Crookston was far removed from the center of the theater industry (at that time, New York City), the Grand Theater is representative of the evolution our country’s entertainment heritage. When it opened, it housed vaudeville and other live performances; however, as movies became more popular it became a destination for them too. While theaters like this often don’t seem to compare to the giant multiplexes seen today in larger cities, they represent an interesting case of the convergence of urban and rural politics, industry, social history, and architecture.

2. Theater Beginnings

The Grand Theater celebrated its 100th anniversary last November and is the longest continually running theater in the country. To understand its history, we must first return to 1910, when it was built and first used. This was the era of President William H. Taft, the sinking of the Titanic, and the increased use of steam power and the telegraph. Also developing at this time were various forms of movie projection devices, including the Vitascope marketed by
Thomas Edison. This invention and others like it were to give rise to the increase in popularity and consumption of moving pictures, which would have a great impact on the Grand Theater in years to come.

At this time, citizens were proud of Crookston’s position as one of the larger cities in northwestern Minnesota. However, articles in Crookston’s newspaper show that citizens felt the city was lacking in the area of quality entertainment. There were two theaters in Crookston at this time, the Lyric and the Bijou, but both offered movies and smaller live shows. The city’s larger venue, the Crookston Opera House, had closed a few years before and left the city without a venue for larger operas and live performances. A petition card circulated in the Crookston Daily Times in late 1909 lists a new opera house as one of the most important building types needed by the city. To Crookstonites, there was “…no question… that if the city is to grow and develop, an opera house is a public necessity.”¹

The building of the Grand was from the start a community-driven process. It was initiated in January 1910 by the Crookston Commercial Club, a group of the city’s leading businessmen. They recognized that the city would earn $3-5 for every $1 spent at the opera house box office, and wanted to capitalize on this opportunity immediately.² They started by raising money to be given as an incentive to the future architects. Citizens were urged to donate in order to speed the process; in so doing, they would prove Crookston’s standing as a major city in Minnesota.³ By March, the club had raised $10,000. In May, the architects—J.A. Van Wie and Theo Hays of the Twin Cities Scenic Co in Minneapolis—were selected. By the 15th of the month, after suggestions were taken from citizens, an 850-seat theater costing about $35,000 was planned. Work on the site, which was located on N 2nd St., just out of the main downtown business district, began that summer. The theater opened on November 8, 1910 to a packed auditorium. Festivities included a performance of “The Whirlwind,” starring the famed actress Margaret Illington, and the announcement of the national, state, and city election returns. The next day, the newspaper praised the theater’s success and designated the Grand as the “most modern opera house in the Northwest.”⁴ By this time, the theater was already playing host to its second engagement, the 1910 Butter and Cheese Maker’s Convention. A photo from this gathering is, incidentally, one of the first ones taken of the building. [Figure 1]

Figure 1. The Grand photographed behind the members of the Butter and Cheese Makers Convention, ca. 1910. Photo from the files of Jeanie Hiller.

3. Theater Architecture
The Grand was built in a classical style, as were many other vaudeville performance houses of the day. [Figure 1] It was constructed in brick and stone, (used above ground) and concrete (in the basement). Three sets of exterior doors were centered under five symmetrical, arched windows. An awning with a few lights protruded above the entrances. There were also a large storefront window and a display case for advertising on the front of the theater. The rear of the building houses a mural today, but it was not originally painted. Because of its location in a rural area, the Grand’s interior decoration was much less ornate than larger theaters, such as New York’s Regent, opened in 1913. However, it still provided a distinct experience for theatergoers. They were greeted by two elegant stairs leading to either side of the balcony from the central lobby; once inside the auditorium, they would see the ornamental plaster lining the proscenium, auditorium ceiling, and box seats. Even things like the exit signs were carefully detailed with stained glass.

The theater was also luxurious in a functional way. Its towering 42-foot backstage fly loft held 45 rigging lines.5 This number made it equal to Minneapolis’ Orpheum Theater, and meant that it could house even the most complex sets of the large plays touring at that time.6 There were trapdoors, an orchestra pit, and a series of dressing rooms backstage and in the basement. A second story apartment in the front of the theater made it even more versatile.7 In fact, the apartment even saved the theater once. In the 1960s, when the owners were considering closing it in favor of a newer theater they also owned, the older, harder to operate Grand was kept open because a family member was living there.8

4. The Theater through the Years

At the time the Grand was built, it shared its site with the Crookston Hotel, a bank, and a confectionary. From the 1913 Sanborn map of businesses the block, only the Grand is still in its same location. [Figure 2] However, many changes occurred at the theater through the years as it adapted to the community’s changing needs.

Figure 2. The Grand today. Photo taken by author.

4.1 stylistic trends
The first major change at the Grand occurred in May of 1914 when a fire destroyed a large portion of the auditorium and balcony. Even though the theater had only been open for four years, it reopened by September with many updates. These included: a new ventilation system; new, wider, opera chairs at the orchestra level; new plasterwork that would highlight the building’s architecture; new interior colors of old rose, gold, ivory, and French greys; a new red floor in the lobby (replacing a dull blue-gray); a foyer partition to help keep out the drafts; casement windows with the latest in art glass; and cork flooring in the foyer. All of these updates show that the tastes in theater decoration had changed significantly in a short time. After the renovations, the Grand was said to “[equal] in effect… many of the most pretentious of modern playhouses,” showing that citizens looked to the larger, urban theaters as stylistic standards. These comparisons would continue through the years, bringing new elements and decorations to the Grand.

4.2 entertainment and community influences

Though the Grand began as a vaudeville theater, the genre was actually decreasing in popularity by the 1910s. It was becoming difficult both to transport troupes around the country and to compete with the increasingly popular new form of entertainment, the ‘movies.’ Because of this, the Grand switched to showing primarily movies by 1917. The theater’s orchestra still added live music to the silent films being shown, but the large backstage loft and dressing rooms were now only used for infrequent live performances.

The new focus on the moving picture had great implications for the Grand. Plays no longer were booked and talked about in the town for weeks beforehand; instead, movies were circulated quickly, sometimes changing multiple times each week. This could have made the theater a less community-centered place. However, the Grand was soon managed by one family that would continue to own and operate it for the next 90 years: the Hillers. Charles ‘Ducky’ Hiller and his wife, Louise arrived in 1917, and their family’s continued presence would keep the Grand going as a true community theater.

The Hillers were not like typical movie theater managers. Charles played in the theater’s orchestra; Louise helped out in the box office and sold homemade candy in the aisles of the auditorium. The traditions the Hillers initiated were continued by their son, Ernotte, and grandson, Jeff. These included special shows for the people of the community, including matinees for children, Christmas shows, various community presentations, high school concerts, and other live music performances. Through this the theater became an important gathering place for the city. Many Crookstonites were even directly involved, not only in attending the theater but in operating it: some local families had generations of kids work there, and Francis Boh, the theater’s projectionist and handyman, was an employee for a remarkable 50 years.

The atmosphere of the Grand was instrumental in connecting the building to the community. The plasterwork on the proscenium made the auditorium a regal setting; it still glows under colored lights today before movies are shown. The carpets, curtains, and stained glass around the building, not to mention the elegant curve of the horseshoe balcony, were meant to inspire wonder; they were not just there for function. In this respect, the Grand took some cues from the ‘picture palaces,’ the large, elaborately decorated movie theaters being built across the country. Even though the Grand presented its decoration on a much smaller scale, it still had the effect of creating a memorable atmosphere for the citizens that frequented it.

4.3 architecture and technology

As with any movie theater, technology was an ever changing component of operation at the Grand. Perhaps even more so than with live performances, movies depended on equipment—projectors, screens, and eventually sound systems. Feature-length sound motion pictures, the ‘talkies,’ were first developed in 1927. They were probably shown at the Grand by the early 1930s, but it wasn’t until 1932 that the theater was outfitted with new sound equipment. At this time, a system the latest speakers and amplification devices were installed.

The theater was modernized again in 1949, when a concession stand was added to the left of the entrance, where the storefront had once been; the electrical system was also rewired, and new art-deco fixtures installed. The addition of concessions actually came quite late to the Grand. In most theaters across the country, items like popcorn and candy were a profitable staple during the lean years of the Depression. The reason for the delay is that the Hillers considered concessions to be tacky, and kept sales of them to their ‘B’ theater, the Gopher (which they had opened in 1940). However, modernization of the Grand in this respect proved popular, and the theater was adapted to suit the new expectations of the popcorn-consuming audiences.
A more obvious modernization occurred at the Grand five years later, in 1954, when the streamlined marquee was installed. This larger, much brighter, marquee is still in place today. Though it was a major aesthetic alteration when it was added, it has now become a significant part of the theater and its history.

4.4 adaptation

Many of the above changes to the theater influenced by technology and style were minor, even though their effect was influential. But the theater also changed in larger ways. In 1984, a second screen with 110 seats was added to the right of the theater to accommodate a demand for more variety in the movies the Grand offered. While this new addition does not display the level of decoration found in the original building, it is an important adaptation the theater went through to meet the entertainment needs of the community.

The Grand also changed significantly in 2005 when it changed ownership. In order to keep the theater running and up to code, the new owners, the Moore family, had to take out most of the balcony, (leaving the projection booth intact), because it was no longer safe. In its place they installed stadium seating. Though the auditorium is now significantly different, the plaster decoration and stenciling on the walls were left intact. The ceiling was also repainted and restored to its original appearance. The central entrance doors are no longer used; instead, visitors enter from the left side of the auditorium. In the lobby, the concessions were moved to the right of the theater. One of the stairways leading to the balcony was removed to accommodate a larger bathroom. The three exterior entrance doors have also changed—only one of them is an actual entrance, and it leads theatergoers through an inner vestibule before bringing them to the interior of the lobby. These alterations have changed the layout of the theater, especially in the lobby. However, the Grand still retains much of its historic decoration. It also continues to function as an important gathering space and entertainment venue for the community.

5. Conclusion

It is the changes that have occurred at the Grand that make it such an important example of how architecture can relate and respond to its users. Influences diverse as our stylistic tastes, developing technology, and popular entertainment all caused physical change to the theater. In turn, the building provided a place for citizens to get together and share in entertainment, whether it was live or on film. In its century of use, the Grand has become an important landmark for the Crookston community. Its adaptations have allowed it to remain relevant today. This shows how architecture can have a continuing presence in our lives, even while it constantly changes.

6. Acknowledgements

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