

After the Final Curtain

America's Abandoned Theaters

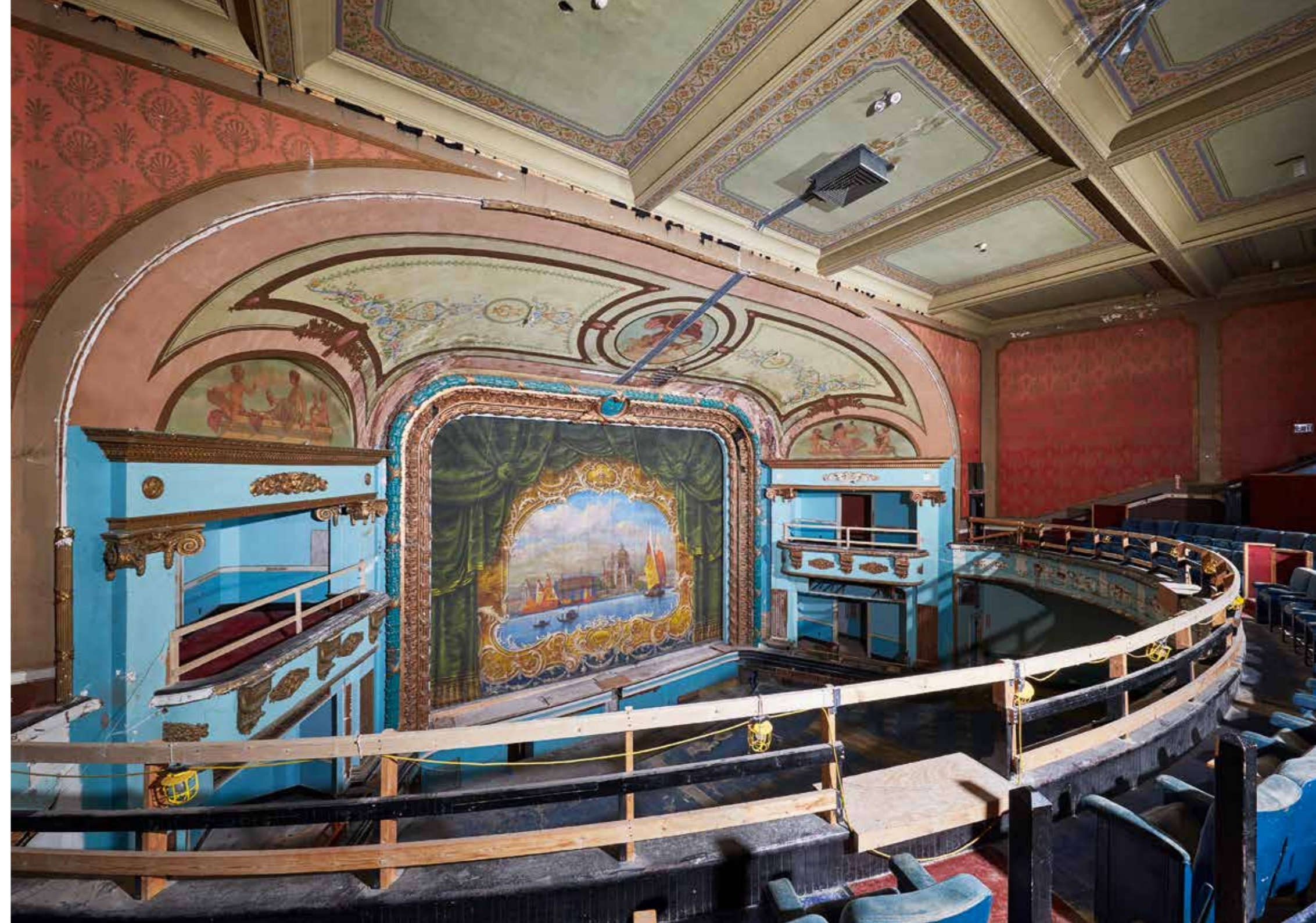


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Colonial Theatre – *Laconia, New Hampshire*

Advertised in the Laconia Democrat as “One of the handsomest play-houses to be found in New England and far ahead of anything which the average city of Laconia can boast”, the Colonial Theatre in Laconia, New Hampshire opened in April 1914. It was designed by George. L. Griffin, a local architect, in the Neocolonial style for owner Benjamin Piscopo. Piscopo was from Venice, Italy and commissioned a fire curtain with a mural depicting the city of Venice as seen from the water.





Loew's 46th Street Theatre – *Brooklyn, New York*

On February 24, 1927, Universal Chain Theatrical Enterprises, Inc. issued a call to the public in the *Standard Union* newspaper to help name their new theater on New Utrecht Avenue and 46th Street in the Boro Park neighborhood of Brooklyn, NY. The advertisement claimed that they were unable to come up with a name that was “sufficiently descriptive of the beauty of the Italian architecture, suggestive of the locality, the quality of the entertainment planned, and brief enough to be easily remembered.” They never received a suggestion that fit their criteria because the theater opened as the Universal Theatre on October 9, 1927.

The Universal was designed by John Eberson, a famous theater architect known for his atmospheric style auditoriums. Atmospherics featured small twinkling lights in the ceiling (which was painted dark blue) to give the appearance of stars, with clouds projected across the ceiling from projectors located on both sides of the auditorium. According to an account in the *Brooklyn Standard Union*, the Universal was the first atmospheric theater in the New York Metropolitan area. A Wurlitzer Opus 1678 Style 235 Theatre Organ was installed shortly before the theater opened.

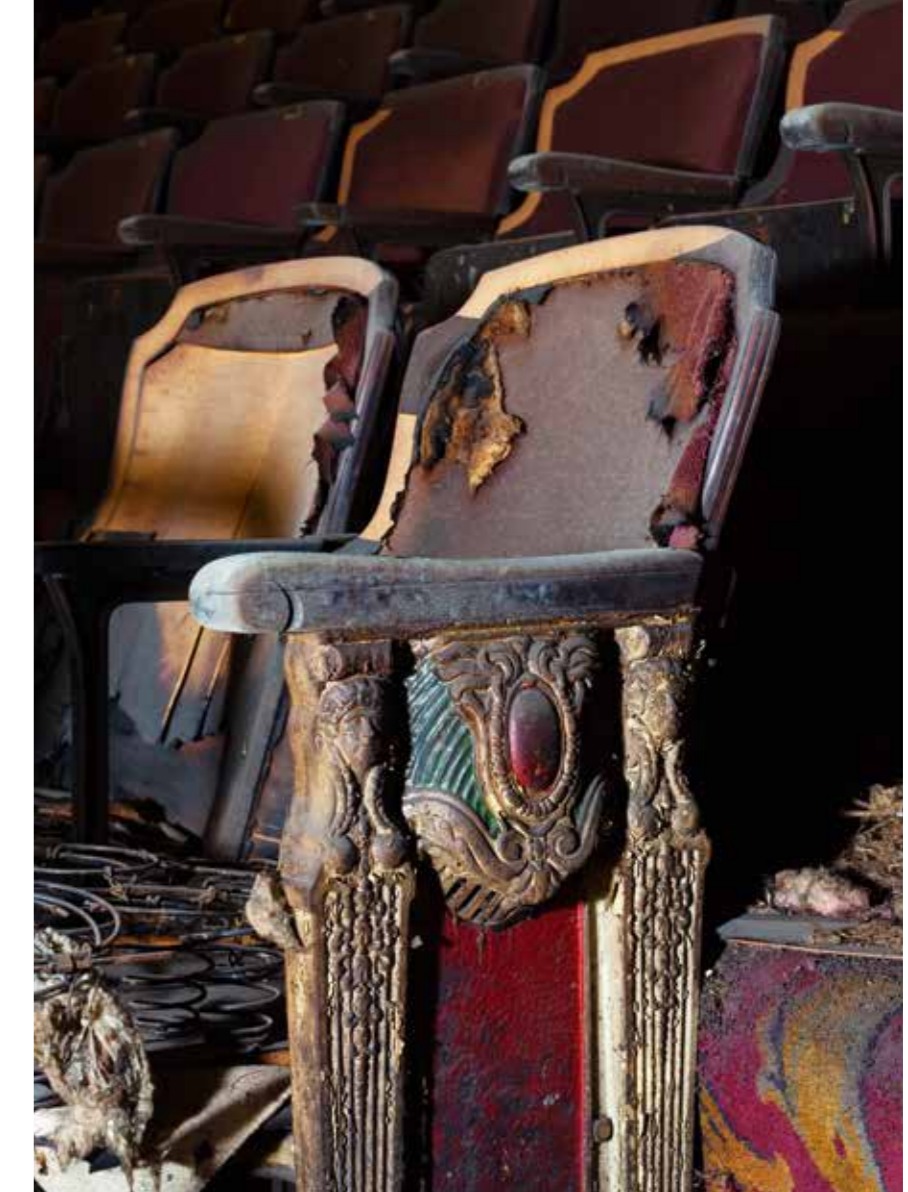




Jerome and Ryan, and a showing of the film *Beau Broadway* starring Lew Cody and Aileen Pringle. The theater was advertised in local newspapers as "Bringing Times Square to Boro Park."

By the 1940s, the atmospheric effects had fallen into disrepair and were no longer used. The Loew's Corporation transferred ownership to the 46th Theatre Company on September 14, 1966 and it was run as an independent movie theater until it closed in 1971. It was reopened later that year as the 46th Street Rock Palace and used as a bingo hall for a few years. It reopened again on February 17, 1973 as a concert venue called Bananafish Garden, managed by promoters who owned a club in nearby Bay Ridge called Bananafish Park. Both names were derived from the short story "Perfect Day for Banana Fish" by J.D. Salinger.

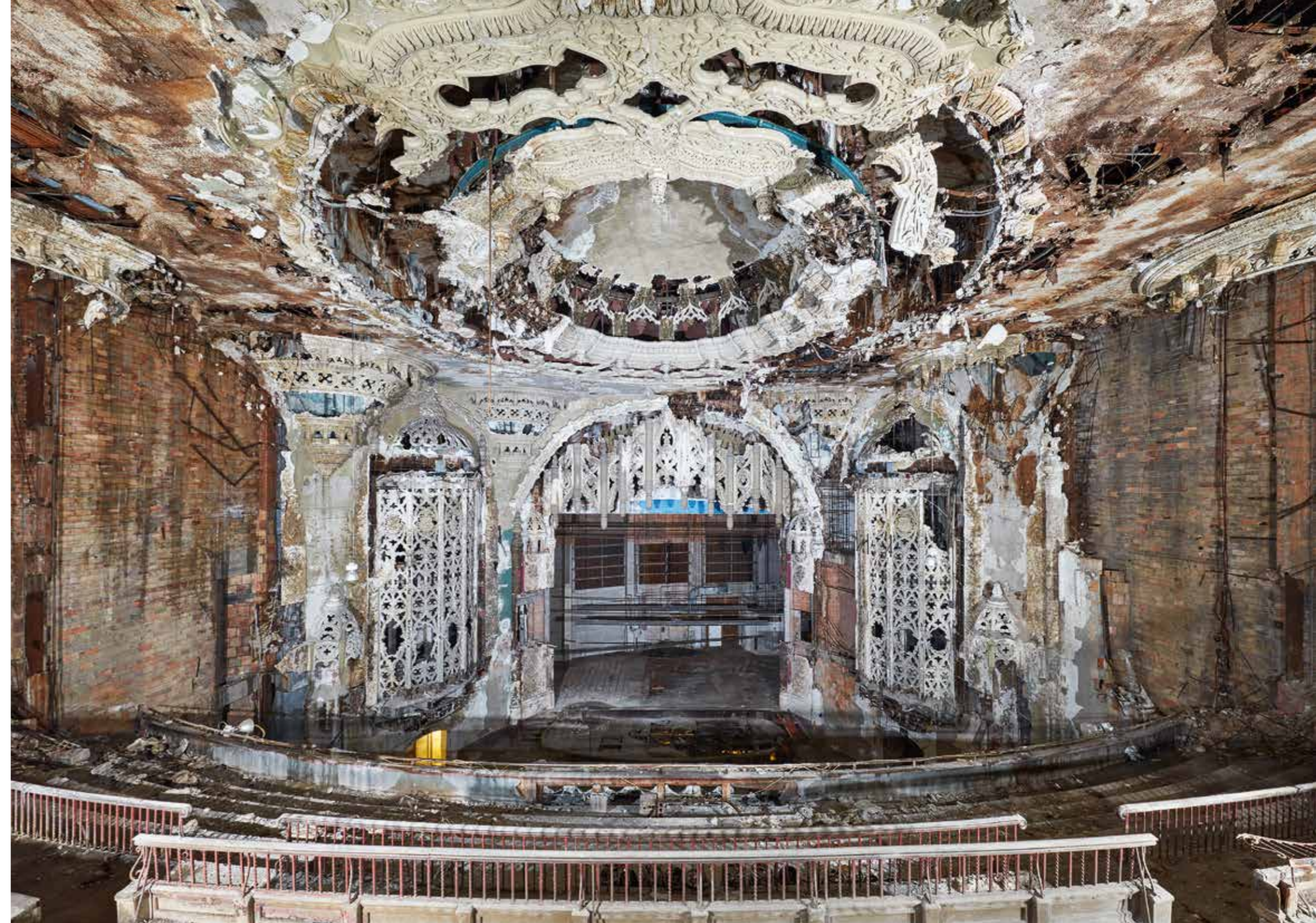
Many famous bands played shows at the theater during the years it was a concert venue: Al Green, The Byrds, The Grateful Dead, Jerry Lee Lewis, The Bee Gees, Steely Dan, Gladys Knight and the Pips,



United Artists Theatre – *Detroit, Michigan*

Designed by famed theater architect C. Howard Crane, the United Artists Theatre in Detroit, Michigan opened on February 3, 1928. It cost \$5 million (\$77.8 million when adjusted for inflation) to build the 2,070-seat theater and 18-story office building. Crane was hired by the founders of United Artist Pictures — D.W. Griffith, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin — to design the theater based on castles that Pickford and Fairbanks saw while on honeymoon in Spain. The theater's Spanish Gothic interior was very similar in design to the United Artists Theatre in Los Angeles, California, which was also designed by Crane and had opened a little over a month earlier.

An opening day advertisement in the *Detroit Free Press* called the theater "Old World Luxury combined with New World Comfort." The feature presentation on opening day was *Sadie Thompson*, a silent film starring Gloria Swanson and Lionel Barrymore. Swanson made an "appearance" via phone and spoke to the audience about the film. The United Artists was designed for feature films, though it did feature the occasional live show, and had a house orchestra as well as a Wurlitzer Opus 1824 theater organ.



Orpheum Theatre – *St. Louis, Missouri*

The Orpheum Theatre in St. Louis, Missouri opened on September 3, 1917. The Southern Real Estate and Financial Company hired G. Albert Lansberg to design the building. Lansberg designed many theaters for the San Francisco-based Orpheum Theatre Circuit. The 2,300-seat Beaux-Arts theater cost \$500,000 (\$9.6 million with inflation) to build. Unlike many other theaters, the Orpheum did not have a formal opening with special guests and speeches. Opening day was a straight vaudeville ticket with two strongmen, a contortionist, two comedians and a singer.

Many famous vaudeville acts performed at the Orpheum over the years, including Sophie Tucker, Eddie Foy, Fannie Ward and Lee Morse. Harry Houdini, the famous illusionist and escape artist, performed at the Orpheum for a week on three separate occasions: the first began on February 13, 1922; the second on January 14, 1923; and the last on December 22, 1923. When vaudeville began to decline in the late 1920s, the theater switched formats and became a playhouse. It opened on Christmas Day 1929 with a production of David Belasco's *The Bachelor Father*.



Hollywood Pacific Theatre – *Los Angeles, California*

In 1925, Sam Warner of Warner Brothers Pictures convinced his brothers to spend \$1.25 million (\$17.1 million when adjusted for inflation) to design and build a theater to showcase their new film sound synchronization technology, Vitaphone. Vitaphone — in which the sound track of a film was printed on phonograph records that would play on a turntable attached to and synchronized with the projector — was the result of a partnership between Warner Brothers and Western Electric's Bell Laboratories.

Hollywood was chosen as the location for the theater, and Warner hired San Francisco-based architect G. Albert Lansburgh to design and oversee the construction of the theater. The theater was intended to be ready in time for the premiere of *The Jazz Singer*, since the film had several scenes that used the Vitaphone process. However, Warner Bros realized in late 1927 that the theater would not be ready in time for the premiere, and the event was moved to the Piccadilly Theatre in New York City. This wasn't the last time these two theaters would be intertwined. The Marr & Colton theater organ that was built for the Piccadilly was moved to the Warner in 1928.

The Hollywood Pacific Theatre opened on April 26, 1928 as the Warner Brothers Theatre. It was designed in the atmospheric style, with colonnades in the Italianate Beaux-Arts style surrounding the orchestra level walls. However, unlike most atmospheric theaters, the Warner did not have twinkling lights in the ceiling. The 2,700-seat theater was the first designed specifically for "talkies" in Hollywood. Promotional articles by Warner Bros proclaimed that the theater had "the most advanced and largest Vitaphone equipment ever installed."





Glorious Betsy, starring Conrad Nagel and Dolores Costello, was the feature presentation at the opening, and Al Jolson, the star of *The Jazz Singer*, served as the Master of Ceremonies. A plaque remembering Sam Warner, who died six months before the theater opened, was unveiled in the theater's lobby. The theater was owned by Warner Brothers Pictures until 1953 when, due to the verdict of U.S. Supreme Court case "The United States vs. Paramount Pictures," the studio was forced to spin off its theater holdings into a separate company. To accomplish this, Stanley Warner Theatres was formed in 1953, and later merged with RKO Theatres to become RKO Stanley Warner. After many years as a first run theater, the Warner was turned into a Cinerama house, a popular widescreen format, on April 29, 1953. The seating had to be reduced to 1,500 and sections of the proscenium were removed due to the new screen being so wide. It was renamed the Warner Cinerama Theatre and showed *This is Cinerama*, a film designed to take advantage of the new widescreen, for 133 weeks before ending in 1955. A remodel in 1961 saw the Cinerama screen removed and much of the ornate plasterwork in the auditorium covered by drapes. This only lasted a year before a new Cinerama screen was installed. RKO-Stanley Warner sold the theater to Pacific Theatres during the 80-week run of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and the theater was renamed the Hollywood Pacific Theatre.

