Garden Theater

No sign on Pittsburgh's North Side better conveys a neighborhood's past, present, and future than the Garden Theater. It was a thriving movie palace for 56 years, bathed in color and light, but its pink neon has advertised an adult movie house since 1972. Following a decade-long battle by locals to shut it down, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court just ruled that the city can take possession for redevelopment.1

The Garden was designed by Pittsburgh architect Thomas Scott and built by prominent North Sider David Parks, vice president of Peoples National Bank.2 Opened in 1915, the theater retains its 59-foot-wide beaux-arts terra cotta façade along Federal Street, just down from the intersection with North Street. A towering sign recalls its past grandeur, though the structure is a composite of three pieces manufactured between the 1930s and 1950s. The sign's 20-foot double-faced vertical section is painted blue and animated by pink uppercase neon. Below, a tent-like section advertises current films, while a rectangular neon-edged marquee hangs over the sidewalk. The triangular composition draws the eye up toward the lettering as well as down to where an ornate ticket booth once welcomed patrons.

"It was so colorful when you came up the street—lights were running and neon was flashing," says Gus Kalaris who grew up nearby. "It had a striped exterior painted with gold; it looked like an old-fashioned circus with fluting." A painted sign at the corner of Federal Street advertised the Garden's coming attractions at a time when the block boasted an ice cream parlor, dry cleaner, tavern, and music school.3

As an usher in 1946, Bill Owens changed the sign on Tuesdays and Saturdays. To access the attraction board, he climbed up a catwalk and crawled out a second-story window. "They were rectangular glass letters framed by metal. They slipped into grooves and were very heavy. If we dropped a letter, it made a lot of noise." Ushers also changed incandescent bulbs that illuminated the sign's edges and underside.4

The marquee fell under the weight of snow in 1958, and was replaced with a simpler design. The attraction panels now
feature cast-aluminum letters on an illuminated white glass background. Decorative lighting has been converted from incandescent bulbs to neon tubing.\(^5\)

In 1994, filming for *The Piano Lesson* necessitated sign improvements, paid for by the filmmakers.\(^6\) Sign craftsperson Angelo Marotto replaced neon, sockets, and wiring and added protective plastic. “It was a well-built sign in its time,” Marotto said, but he attributes deterioration to moisture created by pigeon nests.\(^7\) Local historian John Canning praises the theater’s façade and sign, and hopes it can be adapted for new uses: “In the rebirth of Federal-North, we hope it comes back to life as a spot for stage and screen events.”\(^8\)

Stefanie Klavens, whose article “A Disappearing American Tradition” recounts similar stories, has sobering news for preservationists and anyone who cares about reviving urban fabric: “Recently, the single-screen historic theater topped the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s list of the most endangered places.”\(^9\) The Garden provides a chance for Pittsburghers to stem the trend.

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\(^1\) Cinema Treasures (http://cinematreasures.org/theater/2655/).

\(^2\) *Journal of the Theatre Historical Society*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 1987. When it opened, the Garden was one of 50 Pittsburgh theaters. It featured a 990-seat single-screen theater, a pipe organ, and a small orchestra pit.

\(^3\) Gus Kalaris. Interview with author. February 18, 2007.


\(^6\) Records of the Pittsburgh Film Office.

\(^7\) Angelo Marotto. Interview with author. February 23, 2007.
