

Central Park Theater

3535 W. Roosevelt Road, Chicago



Central Park Theater, 1917, Rapp & Rapp, 3535 W. Roosevelt Road. Photo Credit: Eric Allix Rogers

OVERVIEW

The Central Park Theater in North Lawndale is Chicago's first movie palace and the forerunner of a remarkable vision and partnership between theater developers Balaban & Katz and architects Rapp & Rapp. While both entities would continue to develop and build grander and more remarkable movie palaces, with live entertainment and special features, it all began with the innovations introduced at the Central Park Theater which opened to great fanfare in 1917.

The Central Park Theater closed after 54 years of operation in the North Lawndale Community as a movie theater and entertainment venue in 1971. At that time, the theater was acquired by the House of Prayer Church of God in Christ's congregation and leadership, which has stewarded the

Central Park Theater

Address: **3535 W. Roosevelt Road**

Architect: **Rapp & Rapp**

Date: **1917**

Style: **Classical Revival**

Neighborhood: **North Lawndale**



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historic theater building in the years since. Without the intervention of the church ownership, this theater and building would have likely joined the many demolitions that swept through North Lawndale in the 1970s, 1980s and continuing into the 21st Century. The congregation at House of Prayer is diminishing at a time when the historic theater's repairs continue to grow. The church has maintained the building for over 50 years and requires additional assistance to renovate and restore this historic theater building, which is a cornerstone of this West Side Community.

Tangible progress towards a restoration program has been accomplished in the recent past, in collaboration with City agencies, and the team of partners who serve on the Central Park Theater Restoration Committee, and prospective investors. The church is committed to a majority owned-interest in the theater to maintain community control and honor the legacy of their founder, Pastor Lincoln Scott. The church's vision includes a cultural center with concerts and programs in the auditorium, cultural tenants on the second and third floor, and retail uses on the first floor, which would support residents and visitors, as well as patrons of the Central Park Theater. Pastor Robert Marshall and his family continue to carry on the phased restoration and maintenance work at the Central Park Theater, but with limited capacity. With flexibility and creativity, the City of Chicago can further assist in these efforts to revision the Central Park Theater as a tremendous community asset and Designated Chicago Landmark.

HISTORY

North Lawndale is located on the West Side of Chicago, bounded by Western Avenue to the east, Cermak Road to the south, Cicero Avenue to the west, and the Eisenhower Expressway to the north. It became part of the City of Chicago in 1889 and local industry in the neighborhood helped to grow the community in a substantial way. This included the Sears Roebuck & Company world headquarters and administrative offices, along with its massive mail order warehouses and fulfillment center. Between 1910 and 1920, the neighborhood population more than doubled with an influx of Eastern European and Russian immigrants, many of the Jewish faith, comprising the majority of the community by 1930.



Central Park Theater, 1917, Rapp & Rapp, 3535 W. Roosevelt Road. Photo Credit: Deborah Mercer

It was during this early part of the 20th century in North Lawndale that a partnership formed between Sam Katz and brothers Barney and A.J. Balaban. The Balaban's interest in the world of cinema began when their family was involved in operating a modest North Lawndale nickelodeon, where they screened short silent films in cramped spaces and small storefronts, filled with uncomfortable folding chairs. In 1916, the Balaban brothers decided to partner with Sam Katz, A.J.'s brother-in-law, also a local theater owner, and the Central Park Theater became their first project.

The concept of a movie palace was then largely unfamiliar to the general public. Today, we recognize them often as a type of early cinema and entertainment venue, characterized by vast structures with large theatrical environments and spaces, with immense seating capacities. These theaters of the early part of the 20th Century, were often outfitted in opulent luxury, and modeled after palaces, castles and public spaces, far away in distant lands, and often reflecting visually beautiful and exotic places and environments. However, before the advent of the movie palace, films were usually screened in small nickelodeon storefronts and were regarded as an inferior form of entertainment. Balaban & Katz envisioned something different, with a democratic space where people of all income levels and backgrounds could be entertained for an afternoon, or perhaps for a day or evening, and for the price of a single ticket. To make this new vision a reality, Balaban & Katz commissioned architects, Rapp & Rapp, to design this prototype theater and building. Office and retail space was also added to this design to help financially support the theater's operations.

Born in Carbondale, Illinois, brothers Cornelius Ward Rapp and George Leslie Rapp, were noted as being from a family of architects. One of their early projects, the Al Ringling Theatre (1915) in Baraboo, Wisconsin, offered a combination of vaudeville and short films and its design was said to be inspired by the Royal Theatre at Versailles.



Central Park Theater, 1917, Rapp & Rapp, 3535 W. Roosevelt Road. Photo Credit: © Tom Harris

Its incredible opulence convinced the newly formed Balaban & Katz partnership to hire Rapp & Rapp to design the Central Park Theater.

Rapp & Rapp used the Ringling Theater design as a basis for designing this new commission, adding and refining details that would maximize the customer experience. The refinements included improving the lobby circulation, addressing the theater's acoustics, and improving sightlines and capacity, while introducing a column-free, cantilevered mezzanine or balcony for additional seating. These were all incorporated into the theater's overall design.

In addition, Barney Balaban's prior experience working at Western Cold Storage Company, brought about the concept of a completely mechanized air-conditioned theater, as opposed to inferior systems employed at the time that provided uneven cooling. This was especially important to the theater patrons and the general public, in an age when air conditioning on hot summer days was not generally available to many people and their homes. This brought about comfort and relief from Chicago's warm summer months, while also providing entertainment and often community engagement, highlighting local talent, along with programmed performances in the era before television's debut.

In order to convey an overwhelming sense of luxury, architects Rapp & Rapp took a more eclectic approach to the theater's design. The Central Park Theater's facade is classified as Mediterranean Revival while the theater's lobby and auditorium are a mix of French Baroque, Neoclassical, and Renaissance Revival. This mixing of architectural styles and themes was often later employed in theaters, and gave a sense of a more eclectic design.

On October 27, 1917, the Central Park Theater opened its doors and Chicago's first movie palace was unveiled to the public. Enticed by affordable splendor and mechanized air cooling systems, which was a unique feature and the first of a new prototype for American cinemas, local residents flocked to this new venue. The Central Park Theater in Chicago's North Lawndale and on Chicago's West Side, became a great destination.



Central Park Theater, 1917, Rapp & Rapp, 3535 W. Roosevelt Road. Photo Credit: © Tom Harris

The great success of the Central Park Theater, along with its revenue streams and name recognition, proved very profitable for Balaban & Katz's movie palace operations. In the years that followed, and aided by Rapp & Rapp's remarkable design skills, there was no other name more associated with grand movie palaces than Balaban & Katz. The design and construction of the Riviera Theatre (1917), the Chicago Theater (1921), the Tivoli Theater (1921), the Uptown Theatre (1925), the Palace Theatre (1926), along with the Oriental (now Nederlander) Theatre (1926) all but guaranteed and assured the Balaban & Katz firm's prominence in the history of movie and entertainment venues. By 1930, just 13 years after opening their first theater, Balaban & Katz owned more than 50 movie palaces in the Chicago area, with the great majority of them designed by Rapp & Rapp.

The Central Park Theater was always a theater reflecting and serving its community. During its earliest years of the 20th century, when the North Lawndale community had a majority-Jewish population, it was a popular destination for movie patrons and even hosted the legendary Benny Goodman in his first ever performance as a solo act. Following World War II in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Jewish and Eastern European residents transitioned to a majority African-American population. With these changes, The Central Park Theater continued to excel at catering to North Lawndale's patrons. In addition to movie screenings, the theater offered a vast lineup of live musical performers, which included soul, Rhythm & Blues, and Gospel artists. Among the many artists that performed on the stage of the Central Park Theater were Jerry Butler, Barbara Acklin, and gospel group The Mighty Clouds of Joy. Most notably, the Central Park hosted an early performance of the Jackson 5 before the 1969 release of their debut album *Diana Ross Presents The Jackson 5*.

Chicago's West Side riots following the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., impacted many businesses and buildings nearby, including those on Roosevelt Road, with many destroyed by fire. In the following months, many of the businesses that survived the fires and looting, shuttered their operations and left the neighborhood. Following these events and a period of uncertainty, the Central Park Theater's facade was also altered. Over the past century, the theater's marquees were replaced and later removed, along with the decorative ornamental structures atop the theater's two tall towers, and also the original ground-floor storefronts and entry. Despite these



Central Park Theater, 1917, Rapp & Rapp, 3535 W. Roosevelt Road. Photo Credit: © Tom Harris

changes over time, which could be restored, the building possesses incredible integrity on its exterior principal elevation, as well as its magnificent auditorium which was recently restored.

The population of North Lawndale has continued to decline and economic development has been challenging. While the INVEST South/West program and other redevelopment projects led by groups such as the Lawndale Christian Development Corporation, have had a positive impact on community revitalization, the extent of disinvestment in the area has left North Lawndale in need of additional support. Despite significant challenges, the North Lawndale community is committed to continuing progress and restoring its commercial corridors and residential areas. The effort to restore the Central Park Theater is evidence of this commitment.

Blanche Killingsworth, the president of the North Lawndale Historical and Cultural Society, has long been an advocate for the Central Park Theater since the 1960s, after relocating to Chicago from Mississippi. Over the past decade, Blanche and Dio Alridge, of The School of the Art Institute, began their outreach, which ultimately led to the creation of “The Central Park Theater Restoration Committee.” Representatives from Preservation Chicago, Jewish United Fund, Future Firm, The School of the Art Institute, The House of Prayer, and The North Lawndale Historical and Cultural Society comprise the Restoration Committee which also once included Landmarks Illinois, has been working together and assisting the church with its restoration and repair plans for the Central Park Theater.

THREAT

While the Central Park Theater is endangered, it also very much faces a potentially bright future. For many decades, the North Lawndale community and business district experienced devastating disinvestment. Businesses closed their doors and buildings were demolished along many of the commercial and residential corridors. However, on Roosevelt Road, one of the main commercial arteries of North Lawndale, the Central Park Theater has endured and survived. It is a community landmark and cornerstone, with the hope by many that one day, it will be



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recognized and designated as an official Chicago Landmark.

If not for the congregation's tireless work to maintain and restore this magnificent community asset, it is likely that the building would not be standing today. However, with a dwindling congregation, maintaining and restoring the theater has become a challenge too great for the House of Prayer Congregation. Much like the North Lawndale community, the church is committed to stewarding the theater long-term and with the involvement of the residents, wherever possible. Given its 51-year history of stewarding the theater and the thousands of congregant hours that have been invested in the maintenance of the building, as well as the church's continued presence in the community, the House of Prayer is seeking a development partnership. This partnership could allow the current owners to maintain some control of the theater upon its restoration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Central Park Theater Restoration Committee has continued to be an active community participant. In 2021, the Committee participated in partnership with Open House Chicago, organized by the Chicago Architecture Center and the Chicago Architectural Biennial. In addition, architects and structural engineers have worked together and in the recent past, offered pro-bono assistance to assist in efforts to move pre-development planning forward.

The Central Park Theater Restoration Committee is working to:

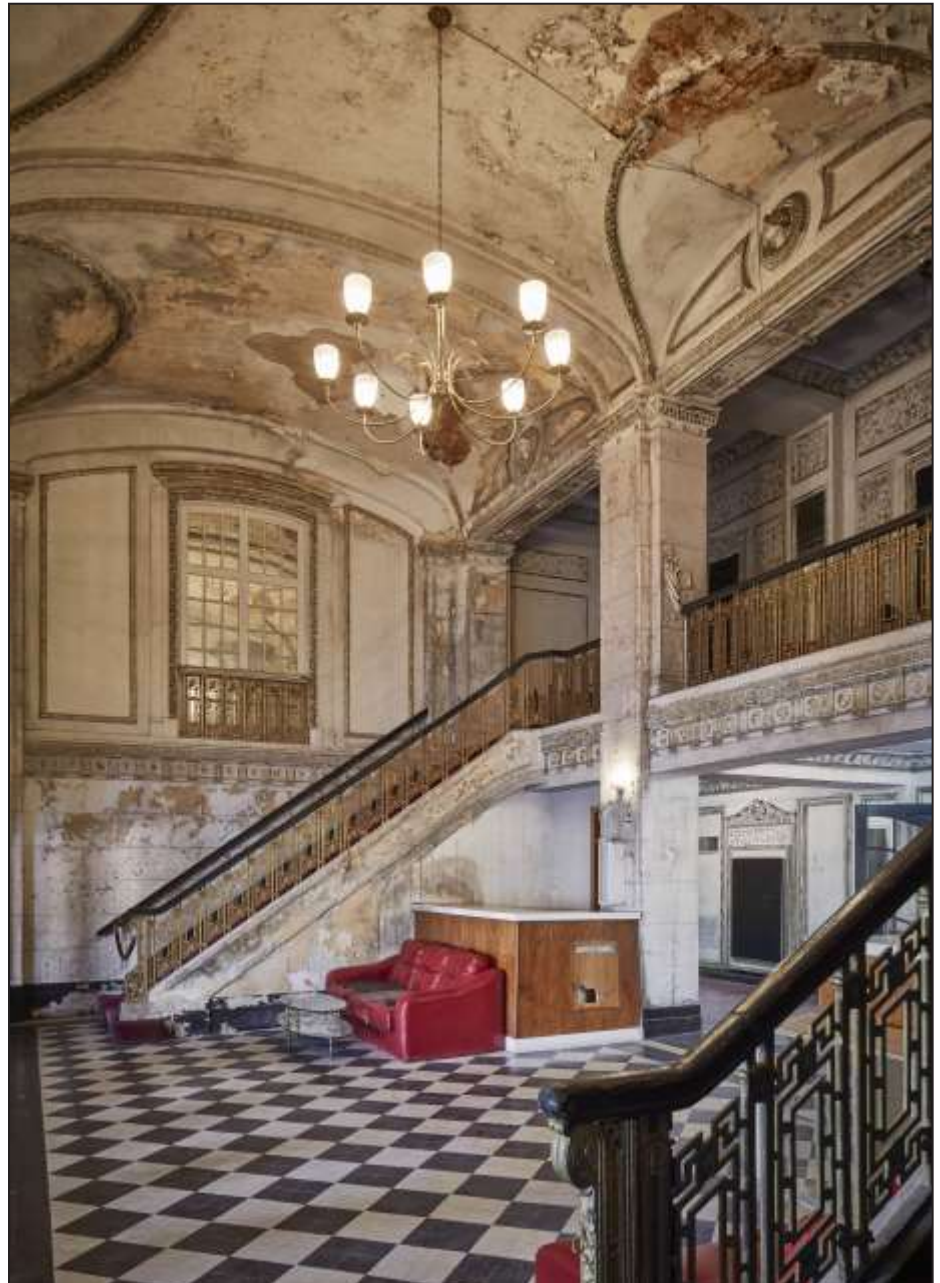
1. Establish a separate 501(c)(3) Friends group to assist with fundraising and restoration of the Central Park Theater.
2. Finalize budget estimates for the phased redevelopment.
3. Engage with the community to ensure this community-centered cultural center is improved by a community-driven planning process.
4. Negotiate with potential tenants for the first floor storefront spaces and available rental spaces of upper floors

of the theater building.

5. Plan for a leasing agent to coordinate rental of the auditorium for concerts and special events. The House of Prayer only has a limited use of the auditorium for Sunday services.

Additionally, the Central Park Theater requires the following:

1. A commitment from the City of Chicago, along with investors, bankers, developers and community leaders to join the collaboration to fully restore and revision the Central Park Theater. The proposed conversion of a two-mile section of the elevated CSX Railroad Freight line nearby, to the "Altenheim Line Nature Trail" includes highlighting the Central Park Theater. Such a development would further promote redevelopment of areas in the vicinity of the Central Park Theater and within the North Lawndale Community. A combined commitment with the City of Chicago and this new proposed rails-to-trails project, could help realize that vision and offer Chicagoans and visitors alike, a chance to experience the historic Central Park Theater.



Central Park Theater Lobby, Photo Credit: © Tom Harris

2. A Chicago Landmark designation of the Central Park Theater should be considered and implemented. Such an idea could be in tandem with the INVEST South/West program by the Department of Planning & Development and the City of Chicago. Both the Chicago and the Uptown Theaters are Balaban & Katz and Rapp & Rapp collaborations, so it is logical and reasonable to consider a Chicago Landmark designation of the Central Park Theater that precedes each of these other theaters. Such a designation would allow for the application of potential Adopt-A-Landmark funds, along with other potential incentives and programs, which would ensure the building would not be demolished or severely altered.
3. Emergency stabilization funds to address immediate and necessary repairs, including life-safety and building code violations (estimated at \$100,000).
4. Approval to perform incremental or phased preservation of the building, as funds become available. When life safety and code violations have been fully addressed in the entire building, we would request the City of Chicago allow occupancy of available space beyond the auditorium to be leased for offices, retail and other possible cultural uses.
5. Former 24th Ward Alderman Michael Scott, had issued a letter in support of a Chicago Landmark designation for the Central Park Theater. We look forward to continuing to work with the Alderperson, their Staff, the City of Chicago and others, to see this theater remain intact and restored with the involvement of the community to a vibrant center.