



The Carolina Theater



The Carolina Theater as it is now



Carolina Theater in 1946



Carolina Theater, interior, 1946

This report was written on Sept. 1, 1982. An addendum written on April 1, 2000 follows.

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Old Carolina Theater Building is located at 224-232 N. Tryon St. in Charlotte, N.C.

2. Name, address and telephone number of the present owner and occupant of the property:

The present owner of the property is:
John H. Cutter, et. al.
204 Latta Arcade
Charlotte, N.C., 28202

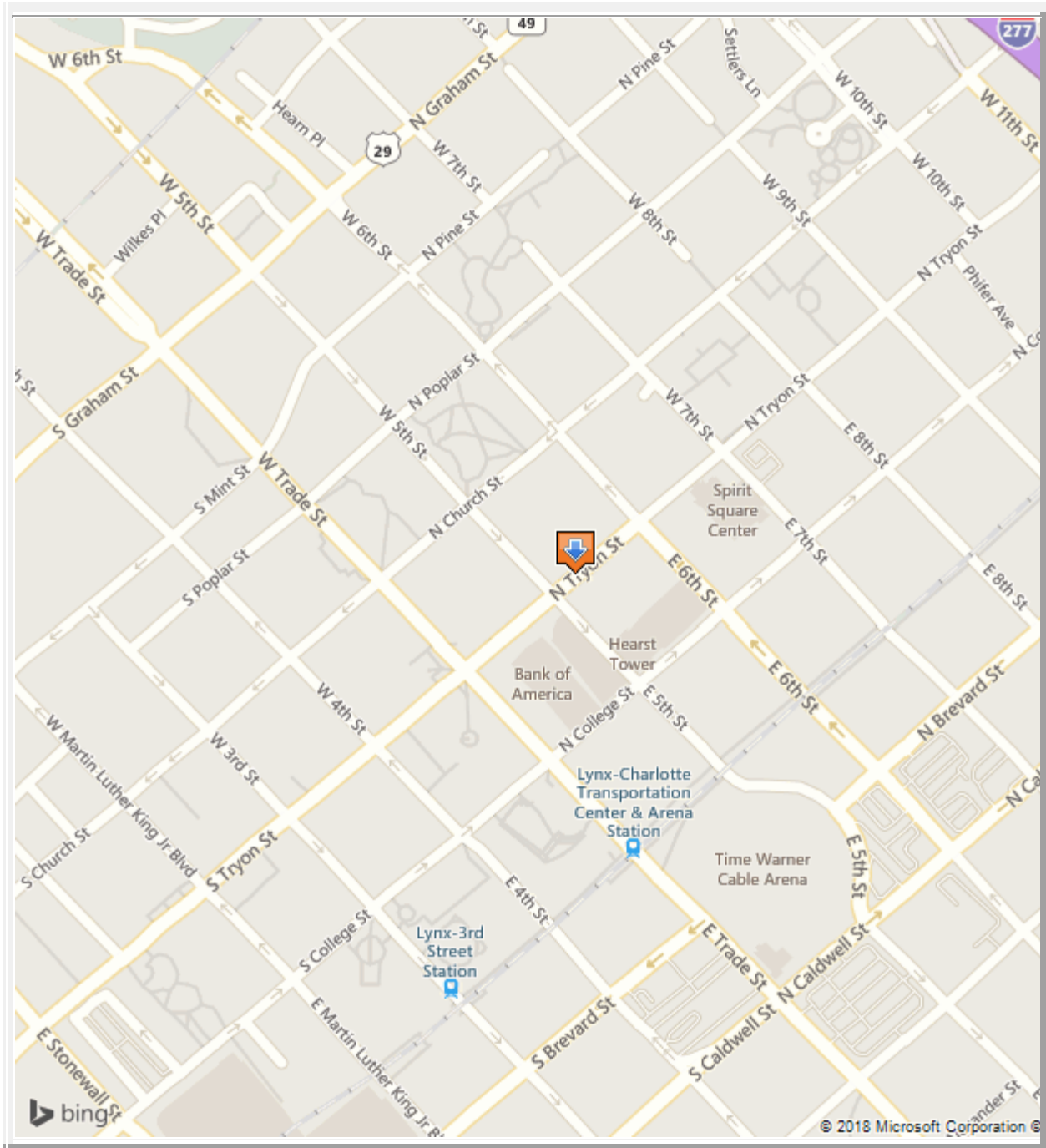
Telephone: 704/332-4975
(Bryant W. Cutter Real Estate)

The only present occupant of the property is: Ace Shoe Repair
230 N. Tryon St.
Charlotte, N.C.

Telephone: 704/333-3648

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. A map depicting the location of the property: This report contains a map which depicts the location of the property.



5. Current Deed Book Reference to the property: The most recent deed to this property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 3514 at Page 215. The Tax Parcel Number of the property is 080-011-01.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property:

The Carolina Theater opened on March 7, 1927, when Warren Ervin, who managed the Carolina for the Publix Theaters Corporation, welcomed the large audience that came to see "A Kiss In A

Taxi," starring the "ever popular" Bebe Daniels. ¹ The Carolina also presented Miss Fae Wilcox at the Wurlitzer Organ, accompanying a program of novelty slides. ² "The beautiful organ loft gives the appearance of one of the castles of old times," the *Charlotte Observer* proclaimed. ³ Features ran for only three days, and on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, the B. F. Keith Vaudeville Troupe performed on the stage. ⁴

During the 1920's, lavish cinema palaces were constructed throughout the United States. ⁵ "We sell tickets to theaters, not movies," said Marcus Loew, head of the Loew's chain. ⁶ Architects for these movie houses were free to borrow from various historical motifs and to employ ostentatious ornamentation, because their mandate was to provide an opera house for the masses. "No kings or emperors have ever wandered through more luxurious surroundings. In a sense, those theaters are a social safety valve in that the public can partake of the same luxuries as the rich, and use them to the same full extent, " one designer explained. ⁷ The architects of the Carolina Theater were New Yorker R. E. Hall and C. C. Hook of Charlotte. ⁸

A native of Wheeling, W. Va., and graduate of Washington University, Charles Christian Hook (1870-1938) had moved to Charlotte in 1891 to teach in the Charlotte Public Schools and had established his architectural practice a year later, when Edward Dilworth Latta, president of the Charlotte Consolidated Construction Company, had hired him to design houses in Dilworth, Charlotte's first streetcar suburb. ⁹ From these modest beginnings, Hook went on to establish a distinguished professional reputation as a leading architect of the two Carolinas. Among the imposing edifices in Charlotte that Hook designed was the Academy of Music Building on S. Tryon St., a turn-of-the-century opera house. ¹⁰ Consequently, it was logical that Publix Theaters, which also managed the Imperial and the Alhambra Theaters in Charlotte, would call upon Hook's expertise when planning the Carolina. ¹¹ The J. A. Jones Construction Company began building the lavish movie palace in March 1926. ¹²

Publix Theaters selected architectural styles that it deemed appropriate for the different regions of the country. Accordingly, the Carolina, a Southern theater, emphasized Mediterranean motifs. "All the best in art and architecture from the various countries bordering on this sea of famed blue are combined in a harmonious assemble," the *Charlotte Observer* explained. ¹³ Wrought-iron chandeliers, exterior balconies, and ticket booth suggested the Spanish Renaissance, as did the decorative tile on the roof and on the floor of the lobby. The overall decor of the lobby reminded one of a Venetian palace. ¹⁴ Draperies were imported from France. ¹⁵ "For sheer splendor and luxury it is a creation that will provoke admiration throughout the theatrical world," a reporter predicted when writing about the impact of the completion of the Carolina. ¹⁶

The Piedmont Realty and Development Company, headed by John Hastings Cutter (1878-1958), owned the Carolina Theater. A native of Barnesville, Ga., Cutter had come to Charlotte in 1905 and had entered the textile and cotton exchange business. Subsequently, he became active in commercial real estate, including the Citizens Hotel Company, which erected the Hotel Charlotte on W. Trade. ¹⁷ Cutter also made major contributions to charitable and religious institutions. He was a founder of the Charlotte Community Chest, a member of the board at Old St. Peter's Hospital, and a devoted communicant at St. Peter's Episcopal Church. ¹⁸ The Carolina Theater underwent a major renovation in 1961, when it became the Carolinas home of Cinerama. Indeed, the original ornamentation inside the building was sacrificed to a "modern,

suburban" look; and the projection booth was moved to the main floor.¹⁹ The last hurrah for the Carolina came in the mid 1960s. "The Sound of Music" played to 398,201 people during its run there from March 31, 1965, until October 4, 1966.²⁰ On November 17, 1965, Joseph M. Sugar, vice president of 20th Century Fox, presented a certificate to theater manager Kermit High, celebrating that the Carolina was the first theater to show "The Sound of Music" to more people than lived in the community in which the theater was located.²¹ To say the least, the once-proud Carolina Theater has fallen on hard times in recent years. It outlasted all other uptown movie houses, but even the Carolina could not overcome the changing lifestyle of middle class Charlotteans. It closed on November 27, 1978, after showing "The Fist," starring Bruce Lee.²² Fire struck the rear of the building on November 13, 1980.²³ The offices on the second floor, which once housed physicians and dentists, are now vacant; and only one store remains at street level. The future of this grand old movie palace is uncertain at best.²⁴

Notes

¹ *Charlotte Observer*, "Carolina Theater Section" (March 6, 1927), pp. 1,2, & 11.

² *Charlotte Observer* (March 5, 1927), p. 14.

³ *Charlotte Observer*, "Carolina Theater Section" (March 6, 1927), p. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵ For a comprehensive overview of movie theater architecture, see Ben M. Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats: The Story Of The Golden Age Of The Movie Palace* (Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., New York, 1961), and David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture Of Fantasy* (Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, Cincinnati, Toronto, London, Melbourne, 1981).

⁶ Naylor, p. 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁸ *Charlotte News* (March 22, 1926), p. 5A. Building Permit #6752 (Charlotte Building Inspection Department).

⁹ *Charlotte News* (May 20, 1891), p. 1. *Charlotte News* (September 17, 1938), p. 12.

¹⁰ *Charlotte Observer* (September 8, 1902), p. 5. The architectural firm of Hook and Sawyer designed the Charlotte Academy of Music Building.

¹¹ *Charlotte Observer* (March 5, 1927), p. 14.

¹² Building Permit #6752 (Charlotte Building Inspection Department).

¹³ *Charlotte Observer* "Carolina Theater Section" (March 6, 1927), p. 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁷ John Hastings Cutter's Certificate of Death (Mecklenburg County Public Health Department). *Charlotte News*(July 11, 1958), Sec. 2, p. 1.

¹⁸ *Charlotte Observer* (July 11, 1958), Sec. B., p. 1. This article contains a photograph of John Hastings Cutter.

¹⁹ "Carolina Theater" (A Folder in the Vertical Files of the Carolina Room of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Charlotte Observer* (November 14, 1980), p. 1-A.

²⁴ *Miller's Official Charlotte, N.C. City Directory* (Miller Press, Asheville, N.C., Vol. XXX, 1930), p. 1232.

7. A brief statement of the architectural significance of the property: This report contains a brief statement of the architectural significance of the property prepared by Thomas Hanchett, architectural historian.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria set forth in N.C.G.S. 160A-399.4:

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as the Old Carolina Theater Building does possess special historic significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the following considerations: 1) it is the only extant building in Charlotte-Mecklenburg which once served as a lavish movie palace; 2) it was designed by the architectural

firm of Hook and Sawyer, and C. C. Hook was an architect of enormous importance in this community; 3) J. H. Cutter, the owner of the property, was an important figure in business and civic affairs in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission judges that the exterior of the Old Carolina Theater Building does retain its integrity; also, the Commission judges that the property continues to make an important contribution to the N. Tryon St. streetscape.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes "historic property." The current Ad Valorem tax appraisal of the .416 acres of land is \$181,350. The current Ad Valorem tax appraisal of the building is \$30,880. The total Ad Valorem tax appraisal is \$212,230. The property is zoned B3.

Bibliography

Charlotte News.

Charlotte Observer.

Ben M. Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats: The Story Of The Golden Age Of The Movie Palace* (Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., New York, 1961).

Miller's Official Charlotte, N.C. City Directory (Miller Press, Asheville, N.C., Vol. XXX, 1930).

David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture Of Fantasy* (Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, Cincinnati, Toronto, London, Melbourne, 1981).

Records of the Charlotte, N.C., Building Inspection Department.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Public Health Department.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Tax Office.

Vertical Files in the Carolinas Room of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library.

Date of the Preparation of this Report: September 1, 1982

Prepared by: Dr. Dan L. Morrill, Director
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission

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Charlotte, N.C. 28215

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Architectural Description

by Thomas W. Hanchett

The 1927 Carolina Theater is a good example of an early twentieth century "movie palace", the last surviving theater in downtown Charlotte, North Carolina. The building's plan combines a restrained Classical Revival decorated theater with rental retail and office space along the two street fronts. The exterior makes use of four separate architectural styles, applied like stage sets to create the illusion that the structure is four separate buildings.

The Carolina Theater is located on North Tryon Street, the city's main street, at the corner of Sixth Street. The building consists of two-story block containing three major components. On Tryon Street is a two-story block containing the theater lobby and large retail spaces on the ground floor, with office space above. Behind it is a taller brick mass containing the theater seating, with three tiny storefronts nestled into the Sixth Street side. At the back is the tallest unit, the stage house which holds the stage and its paraphernalia.

The block fronting on Tryon Street has the most architecturally elaborate exterior. It is divided into three distinct units, each with its own architectural theme. At the street corner is the first "building" with a stuccoed exterior of Spanish origin, a style chosen by architects R. E. Hall and C.C. Hook because it supposedly reflected the theater's Southern location. Its curved-top corner parapets, tile false roof with sculpted eaves of stucco, pilasters, and arched windows with one remaining false balcony of iron are all hallmarks of the Spanish Colonial style.

The second "building" of the front is the smallest, but the most opulently decorated because it is the theater entrance. It is faced with carved stone and has a glass and steel cantilevered marquee. The architectural style is hard to pin down, for it borrows the Spanish tile roof of the first "building" and also incorporates a Classically inspired modillion cornice and oversized swag molding. The primary architectural influence, however, can be identified as Art Nouveau, because of the curved cornice and lintels, the curving wooden tracery in the transoms above the second floor windows, and the generally playful feeling of the oversized stone ornament. Art Nouveau was just emerging as the new style for storefronts at the end of the 1920s when the Carolina Theater was constructed, but never reached widespread popularity due to the Depression's curtailment of building activity.

The third "building" is faced with stone and brick in what architectural historian Marcus Whiffen has termed the Jacobethan style. It combines motifs from the Jacobean and Elizabethan eras in

England, probably chosen by Hall and Hook for its association with Shakespeare. Particularly distinctive are the flat arched windows framed by alternating bands of brick and stone. The first floor shopfront has been altered over the years: in fact, none of the original Tryon Street shopfronts survive today.

On the Sixth Street side of the theater the exteriors of the seating block and the stage house have been treated as a single architectural unit, the fourth "building". Its red brick massing conveys a robust functionalism, with hints of Classical decoration. At either end of this facade two story office/exit units pop out of the main mass of the building, joined by a one-story row of small stores. Above these, a steel stairway from the theater balcony cascades down the side of the building. Second floor windows in the office units have blind brick arches with Classically inspired keystones, springers, and sills of concrete, and there is a concrete medallion over each storefront. The simple wooden shopfronts survive much as they were when the theater was built.

One entered the theater itself from Tryon Street through the long, narrow lobby, which was decorated in the Venetian style according to contemporary newspaper accounts. The body of the theater, with its large balcony, had Classical Revival pilasters and moldings of plaster. This may be the mark of architect C.C. Hook, a local champion of the Classical and Colonial Revivals. Old photos indicate the theater was quite grand, though considerably more dignified than the gaudy opulence of some of the era's best known "movie palaces", like the Fox Theater in Atlanta.

There has been little change in the spatial configuration of the lobby and theater over the years, but a significant amount of ornament was destroyed in a 1960s remodeling. The proscenium arch remains but the pilasters that visually supported it were sacrificed to a wider movie screen. According to Bruce Keith, of David Furman Architects, who has been inside recently, the low relief plasterwork remains largely intact, and there are enough remnants of the larger pieces to accurately recreate them if desired.

Addendum to the Survey and Research Report on the Carolina Theater

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the Carolina Theater is located at 222 North Tryon Street in Charlotte, North Carolina.

2. Name and address of the present owner of the property:

City of Charlotte
600 East Fourth Street
Charlotte, NC 28202

3. Representative photographs of the property: This addendum contains representative photographs of the property.

4. Maps depicting the location of the property: This addendum contains a map depicting the location of the property.

5. Current deed book reference: The most recent deed to the property is recorded in Mecklenburg County Deed Book 6303, page 619. The tax parcel number for the property is 080-011-10.

6. A brief architectural description of the property: This addendum contains an architectural description of the building's interior.

7. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The current total Ad Valorem tax appraisal of the .416 acres of land and the building is \$2,358,510.00.

8. Date of Preparation of this Addendum: April 1, 2000

9. Prepared by:Emily Ramsey
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Lincolnton, NC 28092

Historical Overview

The Carolina Theater, completed in 1927, is the last remaining "movie palace" in center city Charlotte. The theater, which opened as a Publix Theater franchise for vaudeville entertainment and silent movies, was designed by R. E. Hall and Charlotte architect C. C. Hook as an "atmospheric theater." Hall and Hook, under direction of Publix Theaters, used a variety of Mediterranean and Spanish motifs to reflect the theater's Southern location. In its heyday, the Carolina Theater was host to prestigious stars such as Elvis Presley, Bob Hope, Guy Lombardo and Ethel Barrymore; "Gone With the Wind" premiered in the Carolinas at the Carolina Theater, and in the mid-1960s, over 398, 201 people (more than the entire population of Charlotte) flocked to the Carolina to see "The Sound of Music" on the only Cinerama screen in the Carolinas. The theater, which showed its last movie ("The Fist", starring Bruce Lee) on November 27, 1978, is now owned by the City of Charlotte. The Carolina Theater Preservation Society, a non-profit corporation formed in 1997, is currently leading efforts to restore the theater, which is presently unoccupied.

Architectural Description

Original Condition of the Theater

The interior of the theater is, despite its deterioration, representative of the extravagance of cinemas constructed during the 1920s across the United States. Originally, moviegoers entered from North Tryon Street into a long, narrow lobby, which, according to 1927 newspaper accounts, was designed to "suggest a Venetian palace." The lobby has since been demolished, physically separating the remaining facade from the theater itself. Otherwise, the spatial configuration of the theater has remained unchanged. From a promenade beyond the entrance lobby doors, one can walk down to the orchestra level or take one of two staircases leading up to a second lobby on the mezzanine level. Stairs continue upward to access the mezzanine and balcony, which originally accommodated 550 seats. The main level of the theater, the orchestra level, slopes down towards the imposing stage, which rises three stories and dominates the space.

The original design for the interior of the theater was lavish and intricately detailed, intended to give the overall effect of a Mediterranean palace and formal garden. The orchestra level of the theater formed the principal seating area, with 900 seats stretching from the promenade to the stage. The balcony, visually supported by gargoyled brackets, swept over the back of the orchestra level, creating a low ceiling lined with small, twinkling "star" lights. An orchestra pit fronted the stage. The backstage area included several upstairs and downstairs dressing rooms.

The mezzanine lobby was the most elaborate of the theater's three lobbies. The lobby featured low, exposed ceiling beams with geometric patterns and Art Deco style stenciling in shades of gold, green, and pink. Textured stucco walls provided a background for green and red tiled baseboards and intricate plaster rosettes and moldings. Each door in the lobby was also crowned with plaster detailing. The focal point of the mezzanine lobby was a decorative recessed arch framing a marble statue and pedestal, which sat on a stepped tiled base. A tiled cigar room for men and a women's rest room opened off of the mezzanine lobby.

The mezzanine and balcony levels, located directly above the mezzanine lobby, afforded the best view of the main theater space itself. The stage, framed by a proscenium arch and pilasters decorated in a colorful Spanish motif, formed the center of the space, and was flanked by two equally impressive organ chambers, which housed the pipes of the theater's 8-rank Wurlitzer organ. The organ chambers were designed to resemble romantic window balconies ñ both were topped with an elaborately decorated arch supported by spiraling columns and framed at the bottom by a balustrade. Curtains completed the illusion and hid the bulky pipes from the audience's view. Beyond the organ chambers, flanking the mezzanine, were intricately painted murals depicting a Mediterranean garden of dark painted cypress trees and flowering plants. When illuminated with blue lighting projected from the ceiling, these murals transformed the Carolina Theater into an outdoor pavilion. Each mural was bordered by projecting ionic pilasters; stuffed pigeons and peacocks perched from the balustrades that framed the murals

closest to the stage. "Garlands of flowers, clambering vines, and masses of tropical foliage" at the base of each mural completed the outdoor illusion.

Alterations and Current Condition of the Theater

The earliest alterations of the original interior came only a few years after the Carolina Theater opened. During its first years, the Carolina Theater was used mainly for vaudeville acts and silent movies. In the 1930s, the theater began showing movies with sound. To improve the acoustics, the walls of the theater were covered with soundboard. New murals with a slightly different design were painted on top of the soundboard that covered the original murals. Otherwise, the theater remained relatively unchanged until 1961, when a \$250,000 "modernization" of the theater, including the installation of a Cinerama screen, began. While this made the Carolina Theater the only Cinerama theater in North Carolina or South Carolina, it also damaged much of the original interior. To accommodate the new movie screen, which was much wider than the stage itself, the pilasters around the stage were removed. The projecting capitals of the ionic pilasters flanking the theater's murals were removed so that heavy curtains could be hung to cover the walls completely. A large portion of the mezzanine was carved out to make room for the three projectors necessary for showing Cinerama productions. The theater's original projector room, suspended above the rear of the balcony, still remains. In the luxurious mezzanine lobby, the original stucco wall treatment was covered by a smooth white plaster. The stairs leading down to the promenade were widened, and sections of the wrought iron railing were replaced with new railing with a modern, geometric shape. The wrought iron chandeliers above the balcony were replaced with sleek, modern light fixtures. Much of the original high relief plaster detailing that had covered the theater was removed.

After the Carolina Theater closed in 1978, neglect and vandalism caused further deterioration of the original elements of the theater's interior. A fire in 1982 badly damaged most of the stage, which was later rebuilt four feet higher than the original when developers considered incorporating the theater into City Fair. The effort to extinguish the fire dumped copious amounts of water into the theater ñ its effects can be seen most clearly on the soundboard murals.

Much of the originally opulent interior of the Carolina Theater is now gone. The floors, once covered with intricate tiled designs and plush carpets, are now bare concrete. None of the theater's seats remain. The detailed scenes in plaster above the organ chamber and the gargoyle brackets under the balcony are gone, and crude columns have been placed beneath the balcony to provide structural support. However, important details remain, and remnants of what used to be abound. The stage's proscenium arch, the organ chambers and balustrades, the soundboard murals (still impressive even with water-damage), and the original projection booth are all still intact. Parts of the textured stucco walls, stenciled ceiling beams, and tiled baseboards in the mezzanine lobby have been uncovered, and may possibly be restored completely. The outlines of the plaster rosettes, door crownings, and the recessed arch centerpiece of the mezzanine lobby are clearly visible, and could be recreated. The ionic pilasters framing the murals are still intact, though their capitals were damaged in the 1961 remodeling. The ceiling of the theater remains

largely as it was in 1927, suffering mainly surface damage. Well-preserved plaster detailing remains on the front of the mezzanine and balcony, and much of the low relief plaster molding remains, particularly on the ceiling.

Notes

¹ *The Charlotte Observer*. "Carolina Theater Places Charlotte in High Class As Amusement House Center" (March 6, 1927) p.10.

² A small lobby and men's restroom was located in the theater's basement.

³ *The Charlotte Observer*, "Carolina Theater Places Charlotte in High Class. . ." p. 10.

⁴Ibid.

⁵ *The Charlotte Observer*. "Cinerama Coming To Carolina Theater: Carolina's First Due Dec. 1" (November 3, 1961). The Cinerama projected movies onto a screen with an arc of 146 degrees, created almost a complete semicircle. This type of movie screen was supposed to make the viewer feel more involved in what was on the screen.

⁶Ibid.