



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: The Challenges of Movie Theater Redevelopment

By CED Program Interns & Students

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In the age of video-on-demand and digital projection, many movie theaters across the world have found themselves stuck in the past, struggling to adapt to the advancements in technology and consumer reference. With the costs associated with transitioning theaters into fully functioning digital cinemas often surpassing the \$100,000 mark, it has been estimated that up to 1 in 5 of the theaters in the USA will end up permanently closing their doors. Theaters that at one time were prized jewels of their communities, will cease to operate, leaving behind dark, strange, and empty voids, not only in the fabric of the community, but also physically in the empty building space left behind. Previous posts on the CED blog ([links here](#) and [here](#)) have explored how historic theaters can be redeveloped in line with their original use through a public-private partnership — a movie theater or a performing arts space. This post will explore other uses for historic theaters.

With the closing of these theater spaces comes the question of “what next?” It is easy to envision transforming a movie theater into a concert hall, community auditorium or church, but what if there isn’t a need for any of the aforementioned spaces? How do you go about transforming a space designed with one specific function in mind, elegantly into a space of a different use? Stepped or ramped concrete floors, limited access to daylight and high ceilings present prominent issues with the execution of any sort of drastic conversion. Yet, some theaters manage to find new life in programmatically very different roles.

In the past, retail has been a popular route. The Varsity Theatre in Palo Alto at one point underwent conversion into a Border’s Bookstore while the Alabama Theatre in Houston, also saw life as a bookstore before settling on the Trader Joe’s that it is today. However, with the uncertainty involving the shift away from brick and mortar stores, converting struggling theaters into additional retail space may also prove futile in the future. Other theaters have experienced reincarnation in the forms of a gym and a sports/entertainment venue. What seems to emerge as a shared thread between the variety of new uses is the continued inward focus of the space. Much how movie theaters transport their patrons into a place away from the hustle and bustle of the outside world, the spaces that replace them also shun the outside world in a similar attempt to provide an escape.

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