

Detroit's Michigan—Detroit, Michigan

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In Detroit, Michigan, building activity has changed from being a comprehensive undertaking framed by an “imagable” project to being an ad hoc, piecemeal, and essentially “un-imagable” activity cut free from the traditional modalities of architectural projection. The fate of Detroit's Michigan Theater is presented here as an example of this transition.

On August 23, 1926, as the world mourned the death of big screen legend Rudolph Valentino, Detroit paid its own tribute to Hollywood with the grand opening of the Michigan Theater. The seven-story, 4000-plus seat auditorium, built as an appendage to an office tower, was at the time of its construction the largest theater among a growing collection in Detroit's downtown entertainment district. The

theater's resplendent and eclectic interior, alternately referred to as “French Baroque” and “Italian Renaissance,” were considered “beyond the human dreams of loveliness. Entering it, you pass into another world. Your spirit rises and soars along the climbing pillars and mirrored walls that ascend five stories to the dome ceiling of the great lobby. It becomes gay and light under the spell of the warm coloring that plays across the heavily carved and ornamented walls as myriads of unseen lights steal out from mysteriously hidden coves to illuminate the interior with romantic sundown colors” (*Detroit Free Press*, 1926.)

After W.W.II, with the advent of the television and the great migration to the suburbs, the downtown theater audience dwindled significantly. The last great attraction of the large urban theaters—a monopoly on screening first-run films—was legally dismantled in the mid-1970's. In 1967, the Michigan Theater was slated for demolition. Last ditch efforts successfully postponed its destruction for over eight years while a string of optimistic entrepreneurs tried to find a new use for the building. A porno theater, a supper club, and a rock concert hall all failed to revitalize the old theater and in 1975 it was finally abandoned.

Two years later a proposal was made to raze the theater to provide on-site parking for the abutting office tower. The idea was not without irony, for precisely this site was the location of Henry Ford's first workshop, the birthplace of the automobile. The historic workshop had been summarily consumed in the process of urban development and the theater was to be consumed by the next fiscal imperative. But the theater and the tower were found to be structurally inter-dependent, thus jamming a process of commodification that was summed up by the building's current owner: “Architects should design buildings with removable columns and a fund should be set aside to cover the expense of demolition.”

Unable to remove the theater completely, the consulting engineer recommended appropriating the shell of the building for a secure, indoor garage. While the press referred to the proposal as “unimaginable,” the idea was curiously apt:

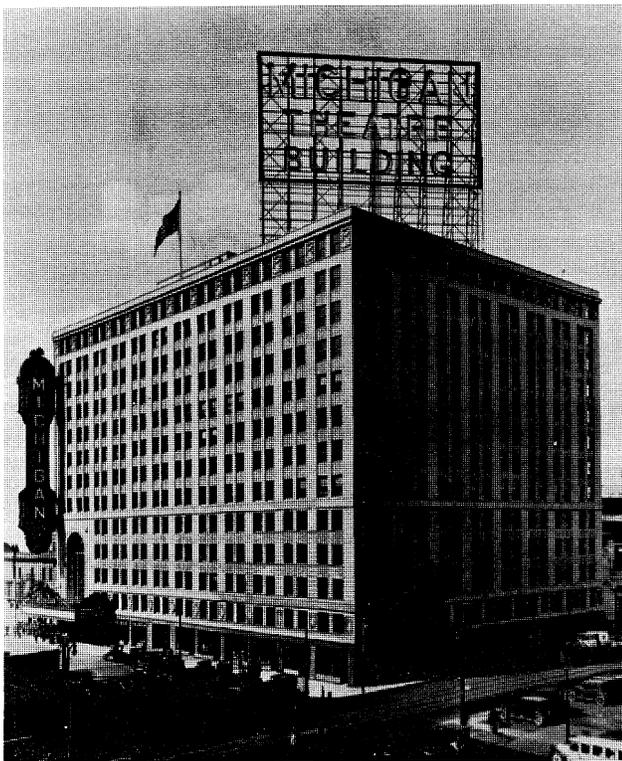


Fig. 1.

the configuration of the theater and the requirements for a three-story parking structure overlapped. The main entry, once funneling thousands of people into the foyer daily, was wide enough to allow for in and out automobile access. The long foyer with its sweeping stair was easily adapted to accommodate the approach to the curving parking ramp. The 140-by-200-by-70-foot auditorium provided enough volume to house the required 160 cars. The demolition of the theater's interior and subsequent construction of the parking structure within was executed with expediency.

The resulting work is crude. The marks of brute force are visible everywhere: sheared beams, amputated balconies, severed electrical lines, air ducts that dangle open-ended in space, the ragged plaster canopy, the shredded curtain. Rather than a work of architecture with the attendant conceit of completion and stasis, the effect is one of demolition in progress, with the attendant sense of transition. Herein lies part of the legitimate fascination of this interior: namely, the exposure of the mechanics and techniques of architectural fabrication. It is the same fascination that draws spectators to construction sites and demolition sites and ruins alike. Both the brute tectonics of the building's anatomy and the thin lining that once marked the limit of experience are revealed in a single glance. While still clinging to the interiors of its past, the theater now offers up the padding and voids that are the architect's



Fig. 2.

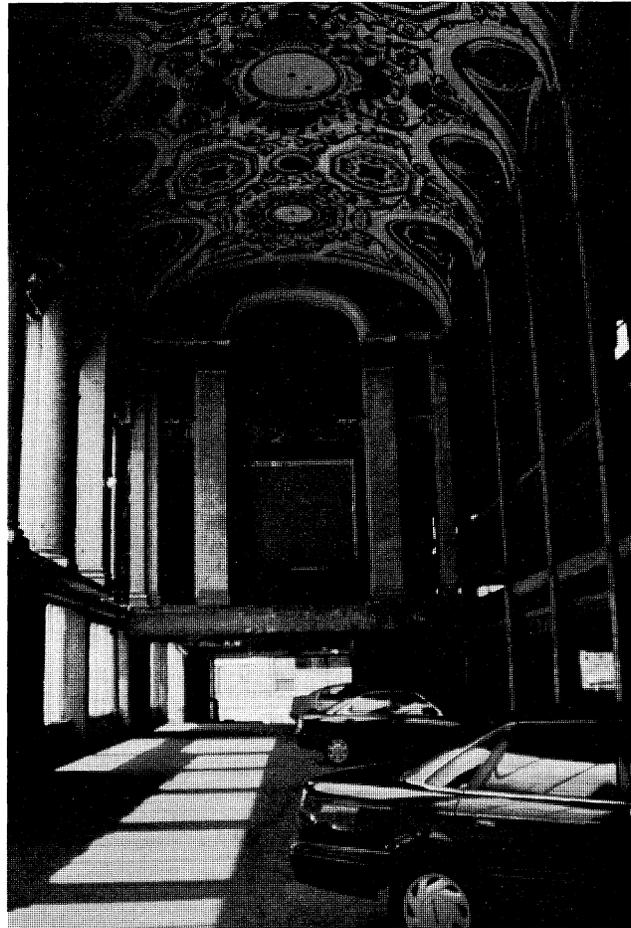


Fig. 3.

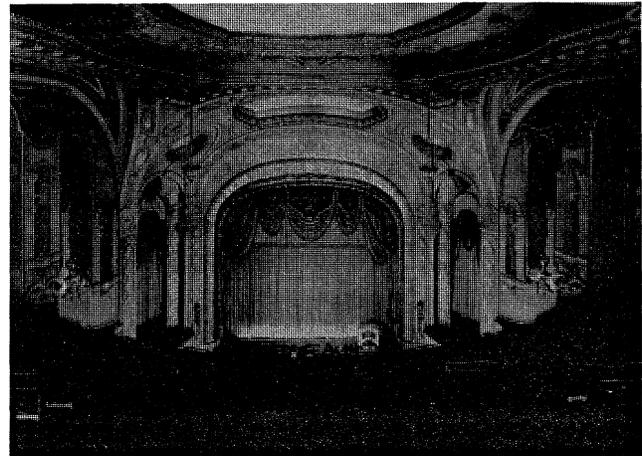


Fig. 4.

repertoire for shaping space.

This condition is rare in a building; in a sense it is an illegitimate state. In conventional architectural production, this condition corresponds more closely to that of the section drawing, for the section focuses on the creative gap—however large or small—between the veneer of experienced surface and the underlying construction required to



Fig. 5.

produce this surface. Sectioning, whether executed with a draftman's pencil or a contractor's wrecking ball, is revelatory precisely because it is transgressive; the section fascinates because it violates perceptual boundaries. Paradoxically, while fundamental to the production of architecture, the section is antithetical to the actual experience of architecture. What is most uncanny, and what constitutes a most unsettling assault on architectural projection in general, is the fact that the violated condition of the theater was *not accidental*. Contrary to appearances, this interior was remodeled "as specified" (Engineer's Progress Report, July 1977.)

The architectural treatment of the Michigan Theater is therefore not merely careless; it is anti-architectural. In the current economic and cultural landscape of Detroit, thorough destruction, itself an act of optimism and vision and investment, is as rare as thorough construction. Ad hoc dismantling and ad hoc construction have become the dominant modes of forming and inhabiting the city. This does not mean that the city or this particular building are defunct. What has expired is the comprehensive plan, the ordered transition, completeness in other words, the traditional modalities of the architectural project.