

# It's curtains for the Pantages Theatre

BY JOHN MACKIE, VANCOUVER SUN JULY 2, 2010



Pantages Theatre in 1999.

**Photograph by:** ian smith, png files

A banner hangs over a dilapidated brick building at 144-150 East Hastings reading "Pantages Theatre, reopening soon!"

No, it won't.

Rain has been leaking into the historic theatre for several years, partly because thieves punctured the membrane in the roof trying to break open a stolen parking meter. Their method was dropping it several storeys from the Regent Hotel next door.

The water has slowly rotted the building, to the point where it will probably be torn down.

"It's completely collapsed inside," said Marc Williams of Worthington Properties, which owns the theatre.

"I saw some photographs and it's just astounding, what was there three years ago [compared] to what is there now," said heritage expert John Atkin. "The problem is it's degraded to the point where it's being declared unsafe."

It's a sad ending for one of Canada's most historic theatres. Built in 1907-8, it is the oldest vaudeville theatre left in Western Canada. It is also the oldest survivor of the Pantages chain of vaudeville houses that once stretched across North America.

The Pantages was small (650 seats) and fairly modest compared to later vaudeville palaces like the Orpheum. But it was still quite charming, with a beautiful plaster ceiling, a handsome proscenium arch

over the stage and tiers of cool opera boxes on the sides.

It also had amazing sound.

“The acoustics were such that you could stand onstage and speak in a normal voice and they could hear you in the back balcony,” said Atkin. “The theatre was designed for live performance.”

Alexander Pantages built another theatre in 1917 and sold his first theatre, which had several names over the years: Royal, State, Queen, Avon and City Nights. It last operated as a Chinese-language theatre, the Sun Sing, in 1994. It closed after a flood in the basement, but Atkin said the theatre auditorium was still in excellent shape until the thieves punctured the roof and water came in.

It was the subject of several restoration schemes over the past decade. The last one was announced by Williams in April 2008 in a high-profile event where the “reopening soon” banner was unveiled.

Worthington was to spend \$26 million on restoring the theatre, which was to be leased to the non-profit Pantages Theatre Society for \$1 a year. Worthington also proposed spending about \$30 million on up to 136 units of social housing in a new building adjacent to the theatre.

But the deal hinged on Worthington receiving an unspecified amount of bonus density it could move to another site. Vancouver council balked at the plan, so Worthington put it up for sale as part of six-lot parcel. The parcel is still for sale, for \$9 million.

The theatre was sold for \$372,000 in 1999 and \$440,000 in 2004. Former city heritage planner Jeannette Hlavach suggested the city should buy it at one point and “mothball” it until it could be restored. But she didn’t get much support from city staff.

“I believe that [then city manager] Judy Rogers felt that the private sector should do it,” Hlavach wrote in an e-mail. “Cultural Affairs thought it was too small and too old. Central Area Planning was concerned about fanning social tensions. Real Estate thought it a poor purchase – too expensive to renovate.”

Atkin thinks part of the problem was the location near Hastings and Main, in the heart of the troubled Downtown Eastside. He said it’s a lot easier to get public or investor support to restore a theatre in a better location, such as the newly restored Vogue on Granville Street.

“People see [the Vogue], they know it, they’re familiar with it,” said Atkin. “With the Pantages, there’s a lot of people who don’t know that it exists. Or because it exists where it is, they get creeped out by it.

“The same thing for the York theatre on Commercial Drive [which is about to be restored]. People can envision Commercial Drive as a nice place; East Hastings they can’t.”

In any event, the longer the Pantages sat empty, the more it cost to restore it. When Dana Barnaby bought it for \$372,000 in 1999, he estimated it would cost \$2.7 million to restore, about one-tenth the cost of the Worthington proposal.

But he failed to come up with the cash to do the reno, the roof started leaking and Barnaby sold it to Worthington after going into tax arrears on the property. Worthington worked on several proposals to save the theatre, but ultimately couldn’t come up with a package acceptable to city council.

Vancouver filmmaker Tony Pantages is the great-nephew of Alexander Pantages. He was part of the Pantages Theatre Society, and is crestfallen the theatre appears a goner.

"I lost a bit of my soul with that cause," he said.

"Being in London last year pissed me off so much, staring at all these buildings that were hundreds of years apart in age, all jammed together. You still feel like you're in 14th-century medieval England at the same time you feel you're in 21st century Europe. I sat on the stage of the Globe Theatre thinking 'Why can't we save our theatre?'"

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