Luster is restored to Art Deco movie palace

The 1930s-era Fox Pomona had fallen into disrepair but gets a $10-million face-lift.

JEAN MERL

When the elegant Fox Theater in downtown Pomona opened its doors for the first time — at noon on April 24, 1931 — it drew a crowd of Depression-weary moviegoers.

To many gazing upon the Art Deco theater at 3rd Street and Garey Avenue that day, its 81-foot tower may have seemed like a beacon of hope.

The opening of the theater, in the heart of what was then a small agricultural community at the edge of Los Angeles County, brought Pomona a hearty slice of Hollywood glamour. Movie stars stopped overnight for premieres, and producers liked to try out their nearly completed films on an audience they believed resembled moviegoers in America's heartland.

The cavernous theater, built for the then-princely sum of $300,000, covered nearly half a block and seated up to 1,800, according to a Los Angeles Times account of the opening.

It boasted an elaborate pipe organ, the latest in sound technology, huge projection equipment and — a luxury back then — air-conditioning. Six enormous chandeliers hung from its auditorium ceiling. Its seats were of leather and tapestry. All the furniture in the lobby, mezzanine and "lounging rooms" was made of solid mahogany, The Times wrote.

"Dedicated to a greater Pomona, the new structure ... constitutes a monument of faith in the future which has stirred a feeling of deep pride throughout the city," the article stated.

But, like many of the other glamorous movie palaces that graced California in the 1930s and '40s, the Fox Pomona slipped from glory to neglect in the post-World War II years, when television took the luster off the "golden age" of movies.

While city officials debated for years what to do, the so-called Pride of Pomona fell further into decay and disrepute, along with the city's crumbling downtown.

As Pomona's downtown began losing customers to suburban malls, the Fox's last movie-chain owner, Mann Theaters, left the once-glamorous theater in 1976. Although efforts to save the Fox began shortly after that, none was successful, according to local historians and the theater's current owners.

Los Angeles Times

ELEGANT: The Fox Pomona's 81-foot tower may have seemed like a beacon of hope to Depression-weary moviegoers when it opened in 1931.

In the late 1970s, the building's owner used it as a venue for Spanish-language films. In the early 1990s, the theater became the home of a Brazilian neo-Pentecostal church.

By the mid-'90s, the area around the Fox had been designated the Pomona Arts Colony, featuring artist lofts, galleries, nightclubs and restaurants. With efforts underway to revitalize downtown, the theater fell into the hands of a rave promoter, who leased it for all-night dance parties.

It was during this period that the faded theater underwent its deepest ignominy, preservationists and local historians said. The promoter painted over many of the original murals, stripped the theater of most of its elegant fixtures and demolished its 1938 concession counter.

When two teenagers died in separate rave parties in 1999, the city stepped in, shutting the theater down and buying the building. With restoration money scarce, talk of demolition lingered despite the theater's listing on the National Register of Historic Places and the city's own designation of the building as a historic landmark.

"It was really, really bad," said Mickey Gallivan, president of the Historical Society of Pomona Valley and a member of the city's Cultural Arts Commission, who toured the ruined theater and recalls seeing holes in the walls, demolished seats and rodent and pigeon dung everywhere.

"But at least there wasn't a lot of structural damage; you could see it could be saved," he said.

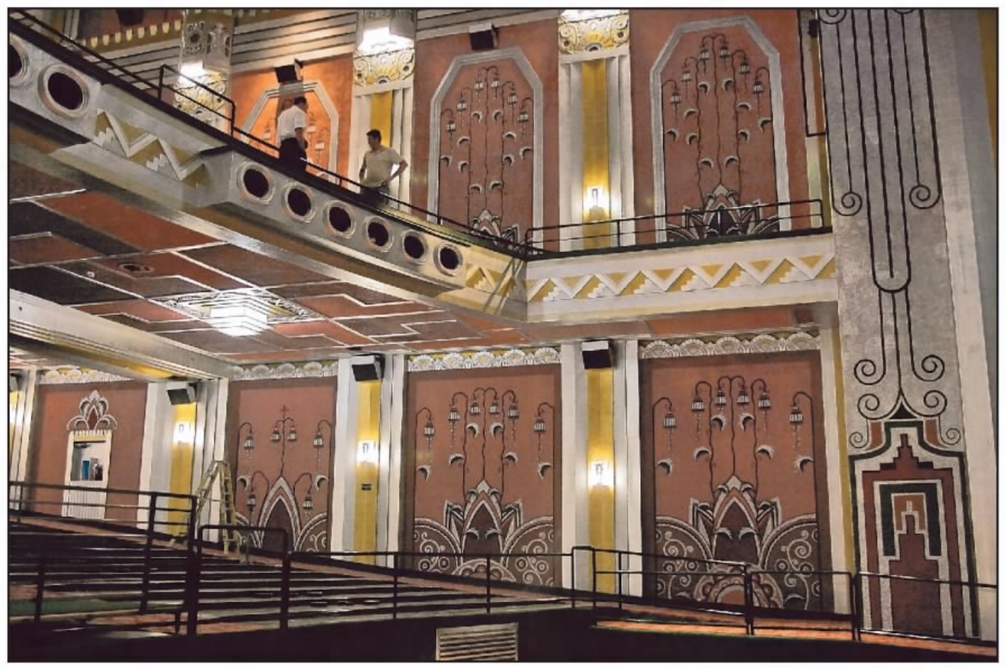
The stage was set for the Fox's encore in 2007, when two local developers who specialize in renovating historic buildings and a partner bought the theater from the city for $1.6 million and, with the help of federal tax credits and other financing incentives, spent about $10 million to restore the former movie palace.

"We were very motivated," said Ed Tessier, who along with his brother, Jerry, and concert promoter Perry Tollett, bought the theater. "This is our hometown; our corporate offices are a block away."

"For years, we'd been hoping somebody would turn it around," Ed Tessier said, adding that he and his brother had been reluctant to take on such a challenging project — until their father, who had been involved in the 1970s efforts to save the Fox, urged them to do it.

IRFAN KHAN Los Angeles Times

PROJECT MANAGER: Catherine Tessier's sons Ed and Jerry and concert promoter Perry Tollett bought and renovated the aging theater.



IRFAN KHAN Los Angeles Times

CAVERNOUS: The 1,800-seat theater covers nearly half a block. It featured six enormous chandeliers and seats of leather and tapestry.

"How do you say no to the patriarch?" Ed Tessier said.

Just last weekend, the crowds — along with the glamour and the high hopes — returned during a sold-out "Fox First Night Sneak Preview" fundraiser to show off the nearly completed restoration. Guests who paid $135 each got to see honorary guest and musical star Carol Channing, tour the lobby and auditorium, check out the restaurant areas and have dessert on the rooftop terrace.

The owners expect the Fox Pomona to become a popular venue for concerts, cinema, performances and public and private parties and to be an anchor for Pomona arts.

The Smogdance Film Festival plays there through tonight. A full calendar of upcoming events can be found on the theater's website, *foxpomona.com*, which also features historic photos and pictures of the restoration process. Other information about the theater can be found on *pomonafox.org*, the website of Friends of the Pomona Fox, the nonprofit fundraising group that has partnered with the developers to promote the theater's success.

For Ed Tessier, the theater's renovation also caps more than two decades of efforts to revitalize downtown Pomona. "The neighborhood really feels complete now," he said.

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