

April 24, 2022

Landmarks Preservation Commission
C/O Fatema Crane, Senior Planner/LPC Secretary
1947 Center Street
Second Floor
Berkeley, CA 94704

Subject: California Theater, 2115 Kittredge Street

Dear Chair and Members of the Landmarks Preservation Commission,

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of the California Theater and its architectural heritage and contribution to the Downtown. As was discussed by family members at your last meeting, the theater has been owned by our family since it was built more than 100 years ago. Our family has stewarded this property for all of that time and now we recognize the need to allow the property to support Berkeley's Downtown needs for the next 100 years. For a variety of reasons, that use is no longer as a movie theater. However, the following is an overview of how this beautiful façade and marquis can be preserved for the future – and even potentially with a new (performing arts) theater user – the Berkeley-based California Theater Consortium.



We recognize the Landmarks Preservation Commission's (LPC) interest in retaining the unique aspects of the building for future community members to honor and enjoy. To that end, we are committed to retaining the front façade and marquis. We ask only that if LPC considers landmarking the building that the designation refer to the façade and marquis as elements to be incorporated as a part of the façade of a new project, and NOT the balance of the structure. Retention of the rest of the building is not feasible for an adaptive reuse project, given the tall-ceiling nature of a theater. This request is in line with the Landmarks Preservation Ordinance, which does not afford the Commission discretion over the interiors of privately-owned historic resources.

As shared by our family at last month's LPC meeting, movie theater venues are in sharp economic decline nationally and locally. Just this year closures have occurred in San Francisco, Berkeley, and other parts of the San Francisco Bay Area. The competition from online platforms such as Netflix and large multiplexes is overwhelming. Landmarks Cinemas, the prior operator

of the California Theater, stopped paying rent just before the COVID pandemic stalled moviegoing. In Berkeley, this issue became starkly apparent for the former Harold Way project, which attempted to find a theater operator, nonprofit or otherwise, who would operate a brand new theater at a sharp rent discount because of the project's community benefits requirement. There were no takers, and both the housing and theater projects were ultimately cancelled. There simply isn't capital available that can operate an historic theater such as this one successfully and pay the taxes and building maintenance needed to support it while providing a decent return for owners.

What is important about the theater, as recognized by the Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association and others, are its magnificent façade and marquis. We are very excited to share that since working with Rhoades Planning Group, the need to preserve the façade and marquis as important pieces of Downtown architectural history was made abundantly clear to the family. As a result, both the real estate offering and the purchase and sale agreement that has been signed require the preservation of the facade and marquis, and that those elements be incorporated into any new project that may come after. The group that will purchase the property has agreed to the adaptive reuse of the façade and marquis in a new project that will rise just behind the façade and incorporate use of the façade and marquis in the new project, which is being designed currently.

In addition, the buyer of the property and their consultant Rhoades Planning Group are working with a local theater consortium in an effort to create a full performing arts theater venue as the ground floor use of the new project. That effort includes working with the California Theater Consortium - an umbrella nonprofit that represents the interest of several community based performing arts groups - to adapt the façade and the marquis for use as both the theater's entry and the project's residential entry. This could be a perfect adaptive reuse of the façade and marquis, and perhaps elements of the lobby, as the ground floor of a building that will provide reinvestment and community engagement with the property for the next 100+ years.



The importance of the theater is neither its user nor the brick box that forms the other three walls. The brick look and integrity of the brick façade was destroyed in the 1990s for the seismic

work that required a steel exoskeleton. Brick boxes in Downtown Berkeley (with and without steel exoskeletons) remain abundant. See the photo above for one such view with several such buildings, one of which is the California Theater.

Any landmark designation beyond the façade and marquis will only lead to additional time and money required to move a project forward that will provide much needed housing units and infrastructure reinvestment (and perhaps a new ground floor theater use). It is estimated that an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) would cost the project approximately \$150,000 and at least half a year of additional time. The EIR will tell the community what they already know about the building and its history thanks to the historic information already provided by others. That time and \$150,000 could instead be used toward the restoration and reuse of the façade and marquis in support of the new theater. The LPC will still help refine the project design and adaptive reuse of the façade and marquis, through the City's design review process.

Thank you for your consideration of our request. We are happy to address any questions you may have. We look forward to this beloved family and Downtown jewel to carry on as a part of a new project that will continue the property's contribution to Berkeley in new and exciting ways, while recognizing the architectural importance of the last 100+ years.

Best Regards,



E. Diane Muldoon

Co-owner of the California Theater

C: Chairperson and Members of the Landmarks Preservation Commission