

Frontiers 107: Fourth Avenue Theatre — 70 Years of History

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A series of events will be held in downtown Anchorage over the Memorial Day weekend to mark the opening of the Fourth Avenue Theatre 70 years ago.

When Cap Lathrop, who was the territory's richest man at the time, opened the doors to the theatre in 1947, it was a monument to his hopes and dreams for Alaska. He lavished his art deco movie palace with murals, some adorned with gold leaf, and fine woodwork, as well as a dark blue ceiling with the twinkling lights of the big dipper.

Today, its future is uncertain.

Peach Investments, a San Francisco-based company, owned by Joe and Mary Fang, has title to the property. Their sons, Derrick and Terrence Chang, manage the firm.

Those trying to save the theatre worry about a demolition permit the company holds for the theatre.

For now, Peach says it will use the permit to do exploratory work – to determine how serious the theatre’s problems are. The company hopes to incorporate the old movie house into a bigger redevelopment plan. But right now it’s not sure how to go about it.

Although we spoke on the phone, the Changs declined an interview with Frontiers, because both brothers were out of state. They did say they spend thousands of dollars every winter to heat the theatre, provide security and maintenance to prevent further deterioration – but still describe it as a “sick and dying building.”

Some city development leaders are hopeful the Fang family will find a way to reinvent the theatre while preserving its history. They point to the family’s successful experience in San Francisco in redeveloping old properties like its One Kearny project in Union Square.

This week on Frontiers, we look at the theatre from a variety of perspectives – it’s history, its potential role in a Fourth Avenue facelift, and efforts to get the Alaska Historical Commission to protect the landmark from destruction.

Here are the highlights on this week’s show:

- Fourth Avenue facelift: A look at how the building’s fate may depend on efforts to redevelop the neighborhood around it.
- **Sentimental journey:** We spent a delightful afternoon with Betty Berry and Carol Anne Dodd, who were among the Fourth Avenue Theatre’s first usherettes. They were high school students, with memories of a time when going to the movies was a very special thing.
- **Historical overview:** Our guest is Alaska historian and author, Steve Haycox, who tells the story of Cap Lathrop and what made him such a remarkable figure in our state’s history. Haycox also makes a case for preserving this downtown landmark.

Special thanks for providing photos and footage: Anchorage Museum, Alaska Moving Image Preservation Association, Alaska Public Media, Friends of the Fourth Avenue Theatre and the Library of Congress.

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