

## Deco Bookshelf

### Review By Jim Sweeney

The National Trust for Historic Preservation recently declared historic American movie theaters to be among the most endangered historic places. For those that survive, the question becomes what to do with them.

Churches and performing arts centers are common solutions. But there are other solutions--many other solutions, as shown in "Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater" by Michael Putnam (Johns Hopkins University Press, hardcover, \$39.95). (A selection of photos from this book is at the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building through Jan. 31, 2002.)

The book is a sometimes sad, sometimes hopeful look at the fate of old small-town and urban neighborhood movie houses. Putnam has been photographing old single-screen theaters, mostly in small towns, since the 1980s. He started out photographing old commercial buildings along Route 66, and decided that abandoned theaters symbolized the death of the American small town. (The most extreme example he found was the theater in Santa Rita, N.M. The entire town was gone, taken over by an open-pit copper mine.)

"In 1985 it was still possible to find many small-town theaters intact--usually closed but with marquees and names in place," Putnam says. But by the end of the decade, many were disappearing or being converted to some other use.

This book isn't a comprehensive survey of old theaters, but it's a large enough sample to give a good idea of trends.

As the photos go back several decades, they may not represent a theater's current situation. Many of the theaters are vacant shells, often surrounded by other vacant commercial structures. Some make you wish you'd seen them at their prime, such as the Mulkey in Clarendon, Texas, with porthole windows and dark horizontal lines punctuating its facade.

The Royal in Archer City, Texas, had its façade reconstructed for the movie version of Larry McMurtry's "The Last Picture Show." But this book shows

*(Continued on page 27)*

that the theater in McMurtry's hometown is a collapsed ruin inside. Some of Putnam's work shows influences from the New Deal photographers. His view of the Ritz in Rensselaer, Ind., is done at night, with cars parked on the street and bright haloes around the street lights.

Sometimes the end result of a theater's "preservation" isn't much better than demolition. San Francisco's El Capitan is now an Italian restaurant. The lobby beneath the marquee was torn out to provide access to parking behind the building.

Equally sad is the fate of the Ohio Theater in Louisville, Ky. The vertical sign and the small part of the lobby underneath it still stand, but the rest of the building is gone. It's now a hamburger stand. Murals on the exterior evoke the building's former purpose as a theater.

Many of the theaters that were standing when Putnam made the image are unlikely to have survived to now. The Alpine in Rainelle, W.Va., was boarded up and had huge cracks in the façade in 1989. He got inside the Earle in Big Stone Gap, Va., in 1985. The floor had collapsed into the basement and there were huge holes in the roof.

Putnam also documented the 1987 demolition of the rotting Pekin Theater in Pekin, Ill. Built in 1928, it closed in the 1970s. Unsuccessful efforts were made to turn it into a dinner theater, medical office building and a civic center.

In pages printed in black, with white text, Putnam notes the demolished theaters he has run across or heard of. He uses the same format to run lists of conversions to other uses. Many have become retail or industrial businesses. Some of the new uses refer back to the theater in some way. Houston's Alabama Theater is now Bookstop. The theater's deco detailing was saved, and new signs have deco typefaces. Miami Beach's Surf Theater is now a gym--the Theater of Fitness. Some of the more interesting new uses include day care center, shoe shine parlor, visitors information center, hotel, library, laundromat, apartments, Chevrolet dealer, bowling alley, city hall, shooting range/gun shop, roller skating rink, casino, undertaker and swimming pool.