

York Theatre Backgrounder

Wall Financial Corporation and The Cultch (otherwise known as Vancouver East Cultural Centre) have formed a partnership, with the support of the City of Vancouver, to save the York Theatre and restore the heritage building on Commercial Drive for live theatre. The theatre, built in 1912 and once a hub for live entertainment, appeared on Heritage Vancouver's 2008 list of the city's Top 10 endangered sites.

Henriquez Partners Architects' proposed design plans include restoration of the entrance façade to its 1940 appearance, rehabilitation of some of the historic interiors and upgrade to the auditorium, stage and fly tower, and new construction for the proposed addition to the building.



Architect's rendering - South view of the restored York Theatre entry.

HERITAGE VALUE OF THE YORK THEATRE

The building is one of the few historic public venues along Commercial Drive. The heritage values of the York Theatre include:

Theatre and historical components

- One of the oldest surviving theatre buildings in Vancouver and a product of the first generation of Vancouver theatre-buildings
- An adaptable theatre whose primary uses have included theatre, music and cinema
- The home for 54 years of the Vancouver Little Theatre Association and one of the oldest community theatres in Vancouver and Canada
- A venue that involved the broad community and provided a start for many of the city's best acting and directing talent
- A rock concert venue, known as the New York Theatre, that featured many important active punk bands of the 1980s and early 1990s including Nirvana, Metallica and Sonic Youth



Architect's rendering – North view of the new 2-storey glass lobby of the restored building.

Architectural components

- An early building (1913) by prominent Vancouver architect J.Y. McCarter
- Modified (1939-40) to become a good representative of Art Deco theatres by architect H.H. Simmonds, who designed several local theatres, including the Stanley
- Although the theatre has been modified many times, much of its original plan, materials, and appearance remain, as do traces of the various renovations

HISTORY OF THE YORK THEATRE

The modest theatre at 637 Commercial Drive, on the corner of East Georgia Street, has been known by many names, hosted many performers, and moved many hearts. At times it was called the Alcazar Theatre, the Palace Theatre, the Little Theatre, the York Theatre, and more recently, the Raja Theatre. An important early survivor of the city's first generation of theatres, the venue has participated in nearly a century of Vancouver's cultural history.

HIGHLIGHTS

- 1912** Opens as a small drama and recital hall on the ground floor of the residential building at 635 Commercial Drive
- 1913** Recognizing the need for a larger performance venue, the Alcazar Theatre is built next door and opens with *Too Much Johnson*, a comedy by William Gillette.
- 1915** The Alcazar closes. The building reopens as a cinema called the Palace Theatre.
- 1923** The Vancouver Little Theatre Association (VLTA) purchases the Palace, makes alterations, and renames it the Little Theatre. A concrete-block addition is built south of the lobby, to incorporate space for patrons, set construction, and storage.
- 1935-39** The Little Theatre shows movies.
- 1939** The VLTA undertakes major renovations to the building. Work includes a new entrance façade, marquee, and canopy outside, and a new proscenium and lighting inside. The design is Art Deco in character.
- 1940** The renovated building opens with a new name, the York Theatre.
- 1977** The building is converted to a cinema to show weekly Bollywood films.
- 1981** The current owners announce the demolition of the theatre. The Save the York Theatre Society is formed to save the building.
- 1983** With a new 10-year lease in place, the new owners transform the building to become a music venue and rename it the New York Theatre, which featured punk and grunge bands. The New York Theatre opens with a seven-band show, headed by DOA.
- 1993** The New York Theatre closes.
- 1996** The Raja Theatre opens and features Bollywood films.
- Early 2000s** The Raja closes.
- 2008** A feasibility study is conducted for the restoration and redevelopment of the theatre. Wall Financial Corporation and The Cultch form a partnership, with the support of the City of Vancouver, to save the York Theatre and restore the building.