

Saving the Empress: Reimagining Collective Memory

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Preface

The University of Hasselt gave me the extraordinary opportunity to study abroad in Montreal for a semester, which proved to be a pivotal moment in my academic journey. This experience exposed me to novel cultures, ideas, and perspectives, profoundly influencing my research. I am deeply appreciative of the chance to share my discoveries with others and for the privilege of immersing myself in such a distinctive environment, visiting remarkable historical sites that narrate the city's tale.

I wish to express my gratitude to my thesis supervisor, Maria Gil Ulldemolins, whose invaluable guidance and support were crucial throughout the research process. Her kind words and positive feedback kept me motivated, and her encouragement helped me navigate the challenges of writing a thesis.

I am also indebted to my project tutor, Nikolaas vande Keere, whose exceptional guidance and enthusiasm for my design project were instrumental in refining my ideas and enhancing the quality of my work.

Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the unwavering support and inspiration of my family and friends, who provided a constant source of encouragement throughout the journey. Their assistance helped me remain focused and motivated during this process.

Lastly, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to my mother for her unconditional support and love, which kept me from losing my heart. Her encouragement for my journey to Canada, as well as the past four years of my education at the University of Hasselt, enabled me to achieve this milestone.

Abstract

Residents of Montreal's Notre-Dame-de-Grâce neighborhood have been questioning whether the Empress Theater will ever be revived for the past 30 years, as the building remains abandoned and is in danger of collapsing. Despite various failed initiatives and proposals, my thesis proposes an adaptive reuse of the theater into a multi-use environment with a cultural component, aimed at preserving Canada's only Egyptian-style Art Deco theater heritage and collective memories cherished by the NDG community.

The study examines the potential of architectural imagination and the community's collective memory in revitalizing the Empress Theater, thereby salvaging this cultural landmark. Through a literature-based inquiry, the historical background of the theater is contextualized, revealing the complex interplay between orientalism, exoticism, and colonialism and how the theater's exotic décor is a product of this relationship.

Additionally, the Empress' heritage is rediscovered through personal communications with local residents and artists, news articles and historical photographs that shed light on both the intangible and tangible aspects of the site. This understanding has informed the proposal of a new program that has the potential to create an immersive experience while connecting people and preserving the theater's urban, historical, social, and architectural values.

By acknowledging the community's collective memory and imagination, the Empress Theater can become a vibrant cultural hub that is particularly pertinent in the multicultural neighborhood of Montreal.

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Introduction

The evolution of cinema has been marked by various attempts to enhance the audience's experience through the design and construction of grand movie palaces. While movie palaces emphasized the significance of architecture in the cinematic experience, the peak of immersive cinema was found in the midst of another building typology: the atmospheric cinema.

The Empress Theater in Montreal's multicultural Notre-Dame-de-Grâce neighborhood once hailed the arrival of the city's atmospheric theaters. It is a landmark with historical value on a local, national, and international scale, being Canada's only Egyptian-style Art Deco theater. There are approximately ten of these theaters left in North America, with the Empress Theater being the only one left in Canada. Several generations who experienced the Empress persist in invoking their collective memories of it.

Problem statement

Will the Empress rise again? A question that has pinched residents of the Notre-Dame-de-Grâce neighborhood in Montreal for thirty years. Around a third of the building's lifespan has passed with no occupant. It has been described as abandoned and in danger of collapsing. Over the years, a number of initiatives and proposals have been put forward in vain.

In my response to this challenge, my thesis explores the revitalization of The Empress Theater into a multi-use environment with a cultural component while preserving the heritage and the collective memories rooted in the NDG residents.

Research question

How can architectural imagination and the collective memory of the community stimulate the revitalization of the Empress Theater?

Methodology

In the first part of this thesis, I conduct a literature-based inquiry into the historical background of the theater. This has three goals: 1) to contextualize the project, 2) to help delineate what I have called the collective memory of the site, and 3) to trace how movie palaces were eventually re-cast as objects of preservation in Montreal.

In the second step, I conducted a series of personal interviews with an array of stakeholders, including local residents, artists, architects, and community activists, who provided invaluable input to my research. These efforts enabled me to gain a comprehensive understanding of the former atmosphere, environmental context, and current needs of both the Empress and the surrounding community.

The results of the literature studies, personal discussions, and archival research form the foundation for the repurposing of the Empress Theater.

1. Montreal's Movie Palace Legacy: A Glimpse into History

Montreal is the second-biggest city in Canada and the largest in the province of Quebec. About half of Quebec's population resides in the city, which serves as the province's metropolis. Although it is the only city where the two colonial civilizations of Canada, France, and England, intersect, integrate, and collide in daily life, it has led to a really unique cultural universe because of the consequent linguistic division (Armony, 2017). French heritage remains one of the most important aspects of the city's cultural roots. That said, Montreal's cultural history has also been shaped by the diversity of its immigrant communities.

The cultural melting pot that makes up the city means there is a vibrant art scene and, more particularly, a long tradition when it comes to theater. During the 19th century, there was a rich variety of theater development all around the nation. Constructed in 1825, the Theater Royal was the first properly designed and equipped theater in Montreal. The venue hosted plays and musicals as well as concerts and circuses. The large structure, with a seating capacity of 1,000, immediately gained popularity among Montrealers eager for entertainment (Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia, 2009).

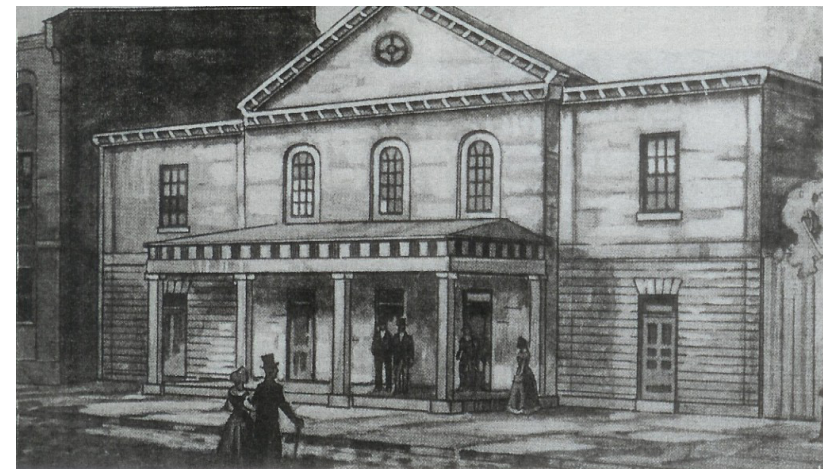


Figure 1: Le premier théâtre montréalais: le Royal ou Molson. (n.d.). IATSE Local 56. <https://iatse56.com/en/history/>

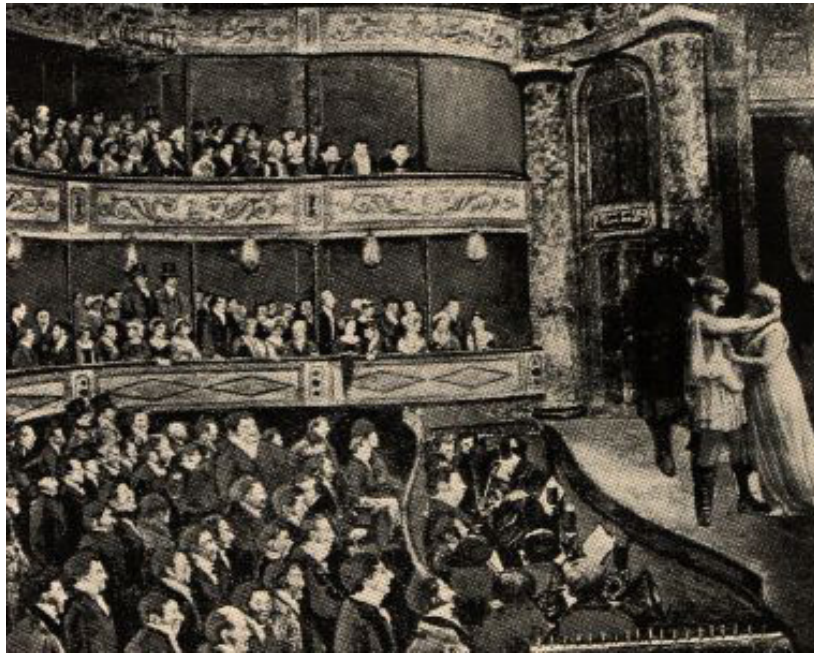


Figure 2: F. Brown and Miss Riddle in a performance of *Virginius* (1825, Theatre Royal). (2009, September 15). Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia.

According to an article by Doucette on French-Language Theater (2007), the period between the 1890s and 1910s is frequently regarded as Quebec's "golden age of theater," not because it was a particularly prolific time for dramatic writing but rather because many theaters were built during this time to accommodate both English and French plays. On January 1, 1906, Ernest Ouimet opened his first Ouimetoscope, Canada's first permanent cinema theater, in a former café-concert on Sainte-Catherine Street in downtown Montreal, ushering in the era of "scopes" in Montreal. According to Heritage Montreal (2020), these areas consisted of long, plain rooms with a capacity of 200–400 seats. They were typically established inside already-existing structures, such as commercial entities on the ground floor of busy promenades like Saint-Laurent Boulevard.

Between 1905 and 1915, the first cinematographic theaters debuted, coinciding with the appearance of scopes. They provided a variety of performances, including vaudeville and burlesque, as well as film showings. The building's design was influenced by conventional theater and performance hall architecture while also embracing cinematographic features.

The 1920s saw the birth of cinema palaces with the inauguration of opulent theaters like the Loew's Palace Theatre in 1925 and the Rialto Theatre in 1924. Exquisite paintings, elaborate chandeliers, and other luxury elements were frequently used to decorate these theaters. These imposing structures were created to provide spectators with a comfortable, lavish, and immersive movie-going experience. The Montreal movie palaces were recognized for their grandeur and elegance. Given that the design of the cine-palaces was influenced by the architecture of the world's greatest theaters and opera houses, they stand out as distinguished organizations deserving of respect. Therefore, cinemas began using the term "theater" rather than "cinema." The theaters frequently served as important markers for the city's culture. They served as significant gathering places for individuals of all ages and backgrounds, offering a rich place for a modest price (Pageau, 2009).

In 1937, cinema was having its heyday in the metropolis. There were 59 cinema theaters in Montreal at the time, and each of them served as a tribute to the time period through its exterior and interior architecture. The interior decorations, most of which were created by artist-decorator Emmanuel Briffa, creator of sets for no fewer than 150 rooms in North America (Heritage Montreal, 2020), are as lavish as the flamboyant façade.

By the 1950s, the popularity of television had begun to eat into the movie industry's profits. As people started staying home to watch television, movie theaters struggled to attract audiences. From thereon, the decline of Montreal's movie palaces was a gradual process that spanned several decades. Theater owners used tactics to compete with the development of the small screen, such as expanding their catering service, installing air conditioning, or room splitting. In spite of these strategies, several establishments had to close their doors as the attendance numbers continued to decline. This decrease was made more severe by the suburbanization trend and the expansion of shopping malls. This lured patrons away from downtown theaters and onto more practical suburban movie theaters. In new neighborhoods, smaller, less opulent movie theaters were constructed. To appeal to a particular audience, erotic and arthouse cinema emerged primarily (Pageau, 2011).



Figure 3: Entry of the Ouimetoscope in the spring of 1906. VM6, R3153.2. (n.d.). Archives De Montréal.



Figure 4: At the Ouimetoscope. 1906. VM6-R3153-2_1204E-036. (n.d.). Archives De Montréal.

Unfortunately, numerous lavish cinema palaces that once reigned supreme in Montreal's entertainment milieu have undergone a state of decay by the present time. Only a handful of these movie palaces persist in their operations today, cherished for their antiquity and symbolic depiction of the city's cultural legacy. Despite their decline, the movie palaces of Montreal have left an indelible impression, retaining a remarkable status as a crucial fragment of the city's historical and cultural fabric.

One of those movie palaces that has lost its glory is the Empress Theater. The building has been in a long-term condition of degradation and is still awaiting its fate.

2. The Empress Theatre: A Fading Memory

A Historical Overview of the Empress

Constructed in 1927 in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (NDG) neighborhood, the Empress Theatre is a testament to the development of cinemas during “the golden age of movie palaces” in Montreal. The theater, designed by architect Alcide Chaussé, theater decorator Emmanuel Briffa and assisted by sculptor Edward Gaeta, is a surviving example of Egyptian Art Deco architecture and the sole remaining theater of its kind in Canada. During this era, architects worked closely with theater decorators, responsible for transforming the practical structures into visually impressive locations for entertainment (Bédard, 2015).

During the 1930s, the Empress primarily hosted vaudeville and live shows. The theater’s change in vocation was dependent on the drop in movie theater attendance in favor of domestic television in the late 1950s. Following this decline, the Empress was transformed for a short period of time into a burlesque dinner club called the Royal Follies in 1963. However, the club faced opposition from the community for its acquisition of a liquor license against city bylaws, leading to its eventual closure (Bédard, 2013).

The acquisition of the Empress Theater by Cinelou Inc. in the mid-1960s was motivated by a need to enhance the movie theater’s profitability, which had significantly declined over the years. The renovation project included dividing the 1550-seat auditorium into two smaller rooms to enable the screening of a wider range of films, a common practice in the modernization of antiquated movie theaters during the 1960s and early 1970s (Bédard, 2013). The reopening of the theater in 1968 saw it rebranded as “The Home of Blue Movies,” primarily showcasing traditional soft-core erotic films in the Blue Room upstairs while conventional movies were shown in the Red Room downstairs. The theater subsequently underwent another rebranding exercise, becoming Cinema V, a repertory film center that showcased classic second-run art cult films (“Sherbrooke Street - Past & Present,” 1998).

During the 1980s, the popularity of repertory theaters declined due to the emergence of video stores and cineplex theaters. As a result, the Empress Theater was leased to Famous Players in 1987, which screened new films until it suffered a catastrophic collapse on August 11, 1992. The devastating fire caused extensive damage to the theater's interior, rendering it inoperable and too costly to repair. Since its closure, the Empress Theater has remained in a state of abandonment.



Figure 5: The Empress Theater in 1928. MTL Blog.



Figure 6: Théâtre Empress, 5550, rue Sherbrooke Ouest, Montréal. Université de Montréal

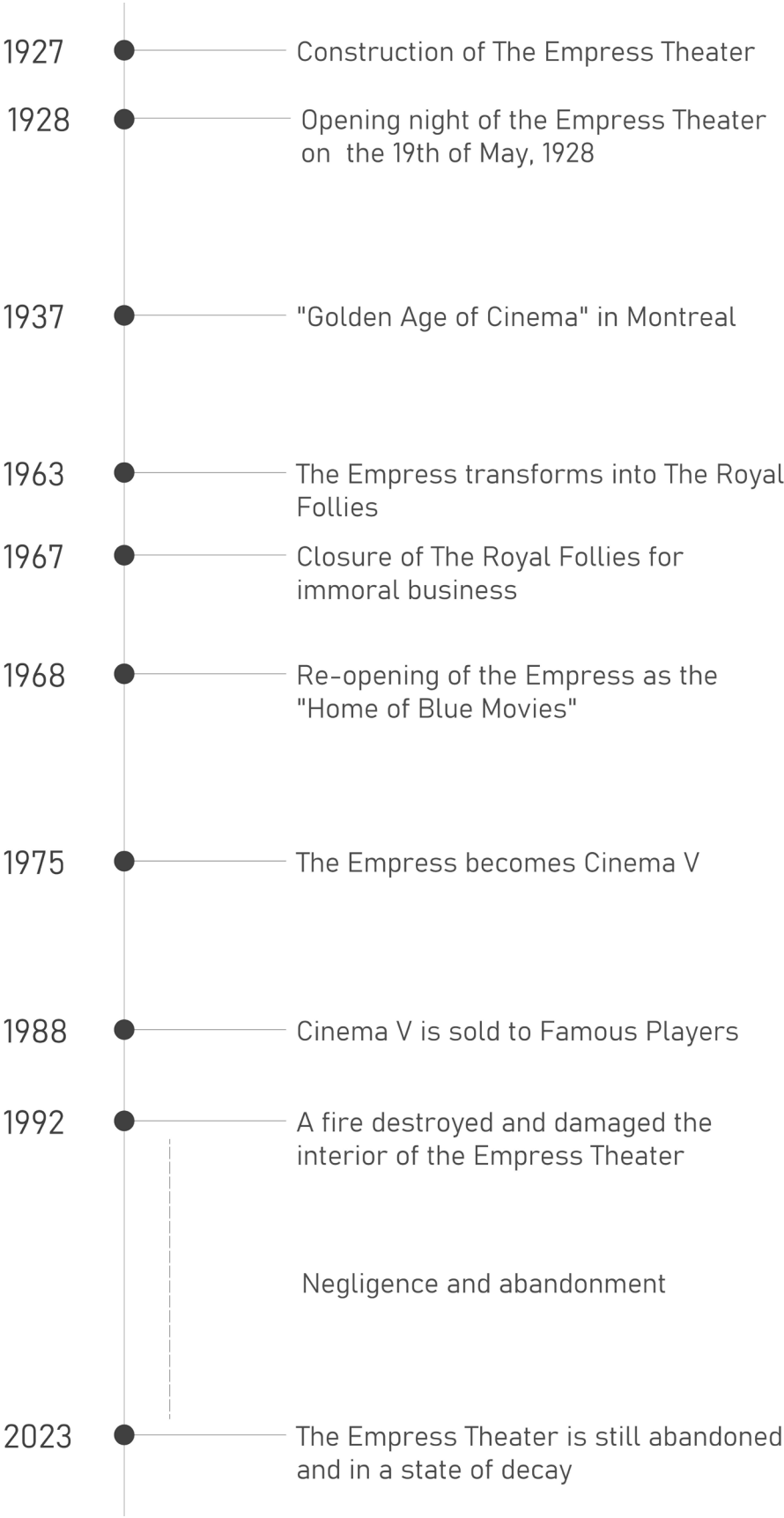


Figure 7: Timeline history of the Empress Theater by author

After the Final Curtain

Despite several unsuccessful attempts by community groups to revive the venue, such as an architectural competition initiated by the borough council of Côte-des-Neiges/Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (CDN-NDG) in 2012, the Empress Theater remained in a state of disrepair. In 2012, the aforementioned competition was held with the goal of repurposing and renovating the Empress Theater into a repertory cinema named Cinéma NDG. However, due to various challenges, its opening in 2015 did not take place until today. Regardless of the delay, plans for the renovation and repurposing of the Empress Theater have been established, with an anticipated completion date of 2024.

According to an article in the newspaper La Presse, the borough of CDN-NDG, which owns the remains of the Empress Theater, partnered with the Société de développement et d'habitation de Montréal (SHDM) to revive the abandoned site. After several consultations, the committees favored the rehabilitation of the facade, acknowledging that the building's poor condition only allowed for the preservation of the external envelope. However, the article's author, Girard, argues that the trend of facadeism is becoming too convenient and hypocritical for developers and that the practice must be halted. Girard suggests that we are no longer preserving heritage but rather vaguely recalling a distant memory of the past (La Presse, April 2021).

Despite being in a state of gradual disuse, the former movie theater on Sherbrooke Street remains a notable landmark in the residential neighborhood. The NDG Park, which is situated in front of the theater, benefits from a panoramic view of the wide facade. Given the concentration of the neighborhood's population around the Notre-Dame-de-Grâce parish church, the predominant route to the edifice emanated predominantly from the north. This processional approach serves as a conduit connecting two pivotal spaces that foster the social fabric of the locality. On the one hand, there is the movie theater, which functions as a cultural landmark, and on the other, there is the park, which provides a public space for leisurely activities (Bédard, 2015).



Figure 8: The Abandoned Theater. (n.d.) Jarold Dumouchel



Figure 9: The Abandoned Theater. (n.d.) Jarold Dumouchel

3. Notre-Dame-de-Grâce: A Cultural and Urban Analysis

The Empress Theater is located in a highly diverse and dynamic neighborhood in Montreal, which is home to over 70,000 individuals and serves as a hub of bustling activity. This community boasts a vibrant blend of languages, cultural backgrounds, commercial, and residential activity, as well as a strong emphasis on cultural and communal pursuits. Situated to the west of downtown Montreal and Mont Royal, the NDG district has evolved a distinct character, which its inhabitants cherish and take pride in. The active participation of residents in community life is a defining feature of the neighborhood, and the NDG Community Council has played a leading role in spearheading local initiatives for several decades. (About NDG, n.d.)

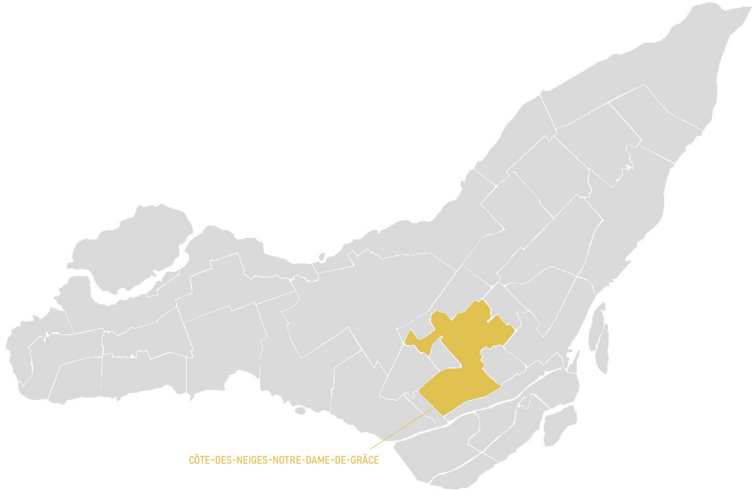


Figure 10: Map of CDN-NDG in Montreal by author

The origins of NDG date back to the early 1800s, when it was a rural community that attracted affluent French-Canadian families who were seeking country estates. A territorial analysis of the NDG borough conducted by Centraid between 2018 and 2019 revealed that a significant proportion of its residents (nearly 36%) identified as Anglophone, a percentage that exceeds the corresponding figure for Montreal as a whole (16%). The first influx of Anglophones to the area dates back to the 1920s, which gave rise to the establishment of numerous educational, religious, and cultural institutions. Many of these structures have become important landmarks in the borough's architectural heritage, such as the Empress Theater.

Presently, NDG is a densely populated residential area that encompasses a blend of single-family houses, apartments, and commercial establishments. The borough is home to a diverse population, including Anglophones, Francophones, and individuals from different ethnic backgrounds. The cultural diversity of the region is showcased through its many annual festivals, such as the NDG Arts Week and the Caribbean Cultural Festival. The borough is distinguished by its characteristic ethnic and cultural diversity, as well as its continuing social diversity. It has a longstanding tradition of promoting citizen involvement, fostering innovative forms of social and community entrepreneurship, and harmoniously integrating various linguistic groups. The borough's residents exhibit a strong sense of inclusion, which is not hindered by language barriers or differences in ethnicity or culture (Centraid, 2019).

Regarding transportation, NDG is well-served by public transit, with multiple bus routes and metro stations offering convenient access to other parts of Montreal. The borough is also home to several significant roadways, such as the Décarie Expressway and the Trans-Canada Highway, which facilitate travel to other parts of the city and beyond (Centraid, 2019).

In recent years, the NDG borough has undergone significant urban development, giving rise to concerns regarding the preservation of green spaces and historic buildings. Community members are also keen on ensuring that new developments are sustainable and do not negatively impact the local area. Investments in the creation of new parks or the improvement of existing ones may help to conserve the borough's natural beauty and encourage outdoor recreational activities. In addition, maintaining the borough's unique character and cultural heritage can present opportunities for economic growth and community revitalization.

Ultimately, the urban development of NDG can be guided by a vision that seeks to create a dynamic community while simultaneously preserving the borough's distinct identity and promoting economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental stewardship.

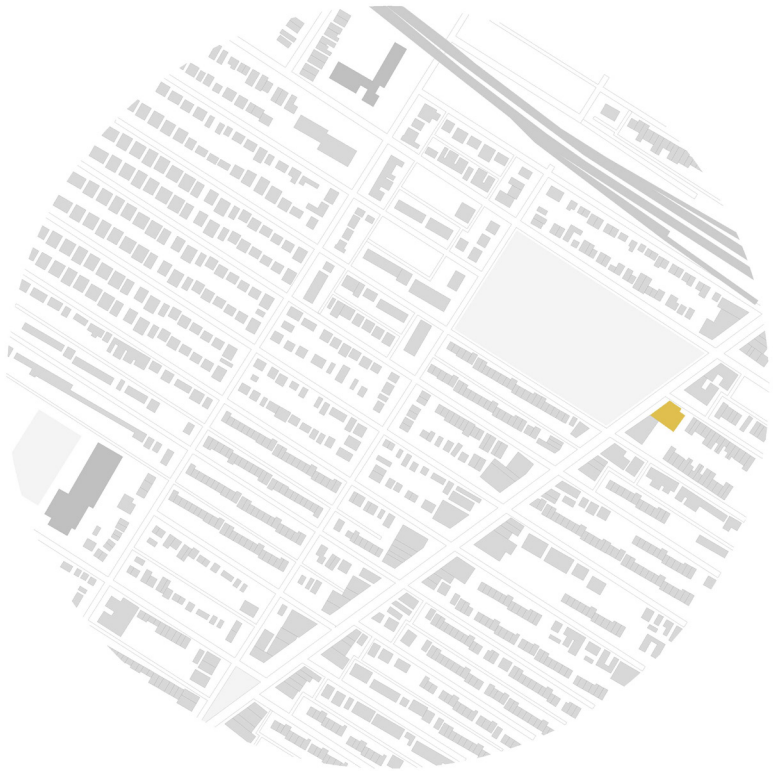


Figure 11: Site within 2 km radius of the Empress by author



Churches



Commercial

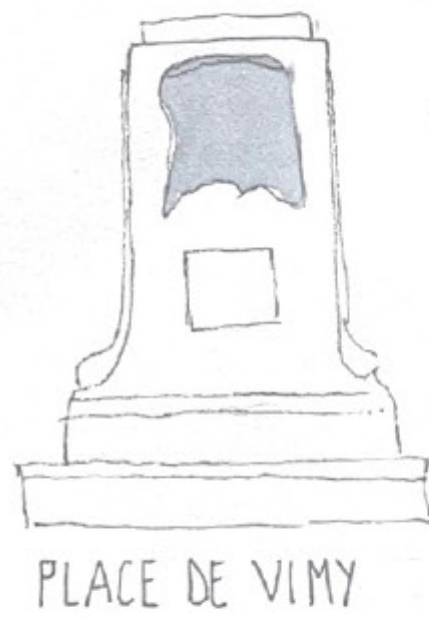
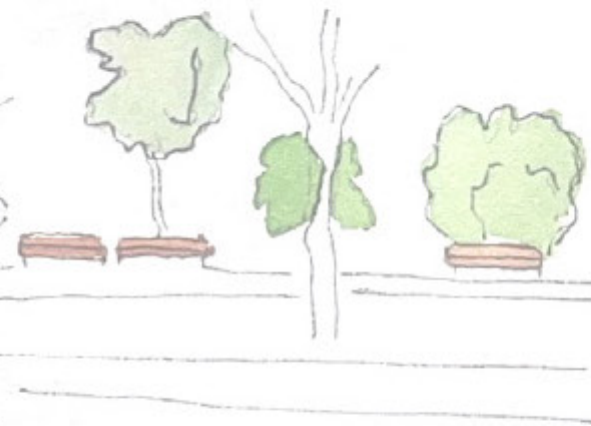
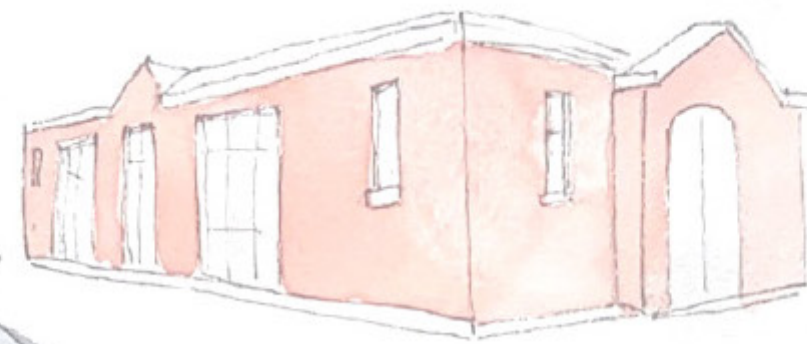


Education



Eatery

PARC NOTRE-DAME-DE-GRÂCE



EMPRESS THEATRE

Figure 12: Site Sketch by author

In a TED Talk delivered in 2012, architect Talia Dorsey discussed her efforts to examine the cultural landscape of Montreal from an urban perspective, with a focus on the qualitative characteristics of the city. Through her analyses, Dorsey aimed to identify how the needs of the neighborhood could be met at different scales, including the local, city-wide, and regional levels. One of the major axes of the city, Sherbrooke Street, was identified as having significant potential for development, although it was not well-defined at the time. As a result, it was suggested that the area could benefit from careful planning and thoughtful development to help enhance its vibrancy and character (TEDx Talks, 2012).

One of Dorsey's studies was conducted to reveal the hidden dimensions and potential of the urban context by exploring the creative content in Canada and uncovering the pattern of the supported underground system: the Montreal Metro Orange Line. The Orange Line has a close connection to various cultural institutions throughout the city, offering convenient access to museums, theaters, and other attractions. The proximity of many of these cultural institutions to stations along the line makes it easy for both residents and visitors to explore Montreal's rich cultural offerings. Consequently, the Orange Line has become a key transportation link for individuals looking to immerse themselves in Montreal's dynamic arts and culture scene.



Figure 13: Updated Version of Talia Dorsey's Analysis by author.

The depicted cultural landscape map portrays both the demolished (red dots) and operational (blue dots) movie theaters in Montreal, based on data sourced from the "Cinema Treasures" website (2023) and Dorsey's analysis from the Ted Talk (2012). A discernible deduction drawn from the map is the insufficiency of cultural establishments, particularly in the western front of the city, where NDG is located.

The Empress Theater, situated at the crossroads of major urban arteries in NDG, serves as a notable landmark in the area. In an interview conducted with Dorsey on her project proposal for the revitalization of the Empress, she stated:

We viewed Sherbrooke as an axis that holds its own legacy of cultural activities, with a rich history of artistic activities dating back to the 1960s. During that time, a remarkable procession was held in relation to Expo 67, featuring art installations that adorned the entire length of Sherbrooke. Hence, this axis not only links to the metro line but also has a distinct cultural legacy of its own. Although there have been changes in the urban landscape over time, Sherbrooke remains a highly promising location (Dorsey, 2023).

Sherbrooke Street West is a prominent thoroughfare in Montreal, Canada, distinguished by its rich historical and cultural significance. For well over a century, this street has been a hub of commercial and cultural activity, with its diverse architecture bearing witness to the changing styles and influences that have defined Montreal's development. Along with its commercial character, the street has also gained a reputation for its vibrant cultural scene, boasting numerous art galleries, theaters, music venues, and restaurants and cafes that attract both local residents and tourists. This street has played a key role in shaping Montreal's identity as a vibrant scene.

In a broader perspective, the Empress Theater holds great significance as the sole remaining Egyptian theater in Canada and thus extends its relevance not just to the city but beyond. The Egyptian Revival style of theater, which is a subset of atmospheric theater, draws inspiration from the cultural and historical context of Egypt. It is noteworthy that during the

early twentieth century, approximately 100 such theaters were erected across North America. While a considerable number of these theaters have been lost to time, some remarkable examples of this style still remain functional to this day (Dorsey, 2012).



Figure 14: Map of Egyptian Revival Theater by author

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the NDG Park, located in the vicinity of the Empress Theater, serves as a seamless continuation of the venue. According to insights obtained from discussions with community members, the park gained immense popularity in the 1970s due to a significant music festival known as ‘Sunday in the Park’.

The music festival “Sunday in the Park” was a recurring outdoor concert series that took place on Sundays during the summer months in NDG Park in Montreal in the 1970s. The festival showcased a diverse range of musical genres, including folk, blues, jazz, and rock, with participation from both local and international performers. It was a free event, and it attracted large crowds of music lovers from all over Montreal. “Sunday in the Park” was notable for its welcoming atmosphere and served as a popular gathering place for families and young people. Although the festival concluded at the beginning of the 2000s, it continues to be remembered as an exemplar of music, community, and the arts, inspiring similar events in Montreal and beyond (Cargnello, 2023).

Musician and singer-songwriter Paul Cargnello stated that “Sunday in the Park had a huge influence on me. That’s why I became an artist.” (“NDG Arts Week Showcases Neighbourhood Sights, Sounds and Tastes,” 2015). In a personal interview, he explained his efforts to revive the event and create a new iteration called ‘Samedi in the Park’.

“When I moved back to NDG, there was nothing. I wanted to bring back “Sunday in the Park” as it hadn’t been organized for a decade, and I wanted to revive it. Thirteen years later, it still exists but as “Samedi in the Park” dedicating our Saturdays. “Sunday in the Park” was such an important, mythical sort of concert for anybody in the city. I remember the shades of culture. It was legendary, and that is why I had to bring it back.” (Cargnello, 2023).

The revival of “Sunday in the Park” was a significant moment in the history of NDG, as it brought together community members and created a sense of belonging and pride. The event continues to be held annually and has become a beloved tradition in NDG. Furthermore, Cargnello states the importance of these

community events in fostering social cohesion and promoting diversity.

"It is an important organization that helps the youth and promotes diversity as it always has. Its roots were queer and positive, and it was doing much for the immigrant communities that were coming here. The NDG is the most intercultural borough in Montreal. It is a safe space." (Cargnello, 2023).



Figure 15: La Semaine Des Arts NDG in the NDG Park (2018).

4. From Sidewalk to Screen: The Architecture of Immersion in Atmospheric Theaters

The Empress' Facade

The facade of movie theaters, as defined by architectural historian Amir H. Ameri in 2011, represented an entry point that demarcated the boundary between reality and the imaginary. The theater-goers were not only limited to watching a film; it was an opportunity to be transported to an entirely different reality, where dreams and fantasies could come to life on the screen (Ameri, 2011). Thus, the show effectively commenced right on the sidewalk.

As posited by Schwarz in her publication "Urban Archeology: Montreal's Empress Theatre and Edfu," the architectural design of the facade of the Empress bears a resemblance to the entryways of ancient Egyptian temples, specifically the Temple of Horus at Edfu and the Temple of Isis at Philae. The Empress Theater serves as a symbol of the cultural phenomenon known as "Tutmania," which emerged following the discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb by Howard Carter in 1922 and heavily influenced the Art Deco movement. The enduring fascination with ancient Egypt, or "Egyptomania", characterized by the exoticism of its mystical and enigmatic heritage, was a prevalent aspect in the design of the Empress Theater (Schwarz, 2014).

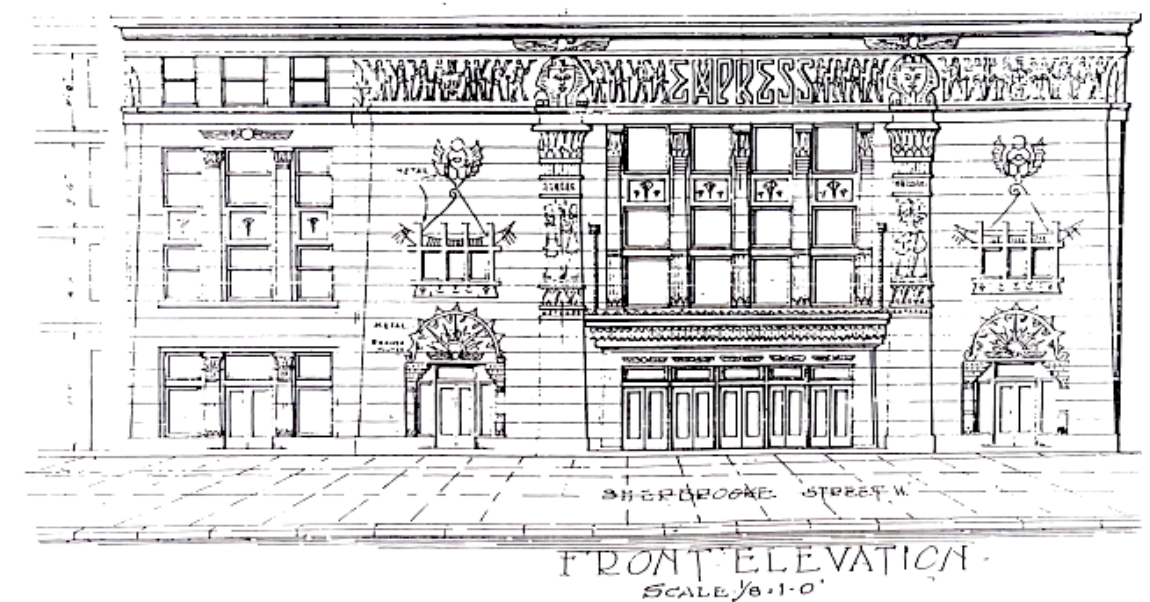


Figure 16: Front Elevation, drawing by architect Alcide Chaussé.

The notable facade provided a transformative experience, inviting visitors to enter an alternate reality that embodied the Western notion of the “exotic Orient.” The Art Deco Egyptian-style design instilled a sense of exoticism and mystery, thereby attracting customers and playing a significant role in establishing the identity of the Empress Theater.

During the initial period of the Empress, the façade was split in two by a vertical electric marquee that was affixed to the centrally engaged column. The electric marquee, commonly used by movie theaters, is a unique feature that stands out as a bright light in the urban landscape, particularly during the evening (Bédard, 2013).

In addition to the ornate decoration of the facade, movie theaters often displayed posters advertising the latest films, further enhancing the sense of anticipation and wonder. These posters typically depicted scenes from the films, tantalizing viewers with glimpses of the magical world that awaited them inside the theater (Bédard, 2013). Hence, the primary reason for the opulent and intricate design of the main facade of a movie theater is its function as the most visible part of the theater, drawing attention from the street and enticing movie-goers with a sense of anticipation and excitement. The main facade of the Empress serves as a representation of the theater itself. Conversely, the other sides of the theater are less elaborate as they are not intended to attract attention in the same manner. Additionally, the side and rear walls of the theater may be adjacent to other buildings, which further diminishes the need for elaborate design and decoration. On the corner of Old Orchard Street and in a slightly receded position, the mixed-use section of the facade featured apartments, businesses, and shops, as well as the Empress tea room.



Figure 17: Empress Tea Room. 10 September 1949. Coin Old Orchard et Sherbrooke O. à Notre-Dame-de-Grâce

The Immersive Interior

The same Egyptian architectural features and motifs found on the facade are replicated in the interior of the building by Briffa. One of the fundamental design elements utilized within the interior of these spaces is the creation of an illusion, with the immersive auditorium deceptively simulating the outdoor space of an Egyptian temple. The auditorium of the Empress Theater comprises a fictitious landscape depicted along the walls, featuring representations of columns from ancient temples, sphinxes, and colossal stone figures. Additionally, the ceiling of the auditorium is painted in a vaulted blue, resembling a night sky, complete with shimmering silver stars. This elaborate design serves to enhance the illusory effect of the auditorium space, extending the perception of reality beyond the confines of the physical space and creating an ethereal crescendo that culminates in the experience of the movie itself and the imaginative worlds it evokes (Bédard, 2013).

During the 1960s, when the Empress was divided into two separate rooms, the original decorative Egyptian features were irrevocably altered. The division of the theater involved the placement of a concrete slab that separated the balcony from the ground-floor seating area, ultimately sealing the front edge of the balcony to the top of the stage's proscenium. Furthermore Bédard expressed that the installation of the air conditioning system involved piercing the ceilings, which resulted in damage to the painted stars and further compromised the original design of the space (2013).

The primary objective of the exotic decor is not the attainment of authenticity but rather to create an atmosphere of illusion. In revisiting the Orientalist divide between the East and West, the Empress contributes to a typology of atmospheric theaters that rely on the make-believe architecture of exotic destinations. These theaters are also known as "stars and clouds" theaters, effectively transporting viewers into a dreamlike realm distant from their daily routine (MacKinnon, 2000). Visitors construct their own architecture of imagination through perception, reception, and experiences, culminating in a hybrid space that acknowledges both the tangible and intangible essence of architecture (Bédard, 2013).

Atmospheric movie theaters, characterized by their immersive environments, belong to the typology of themed spaces. Given the association of Egypt with magic, fantasy, and imagination, it became a favored subject for themed spaces. However, themed environments do not offer an authentic representation of reality but rather a projection of desires through simulation, immersion, and narrativity. Egypt held a significant geographical reference for atmospheric movie theaters as it served as a symbolic gateway from the real to the imaginary, given its association with the border between the East and West. Moreover, as Bédard stated, Egypt occupied a unique status in the colonialist project due to its location as Europe's entry point to the East, positioning it not only as an "Other," but as a gateway to additional "Others" (Bédard, 2013).

The Empress Theater, situated in the now multicultural neighborhood of NDG, was considered distinctively "Other." It provided visitors with a captivating and immersive voyeuristic encounter, affording them an opportunity for temporary escapism into a realm of imaginative exploration.



Figure 18: Photo of cupola pierced with ventilation system. Danielle Demers (2015).

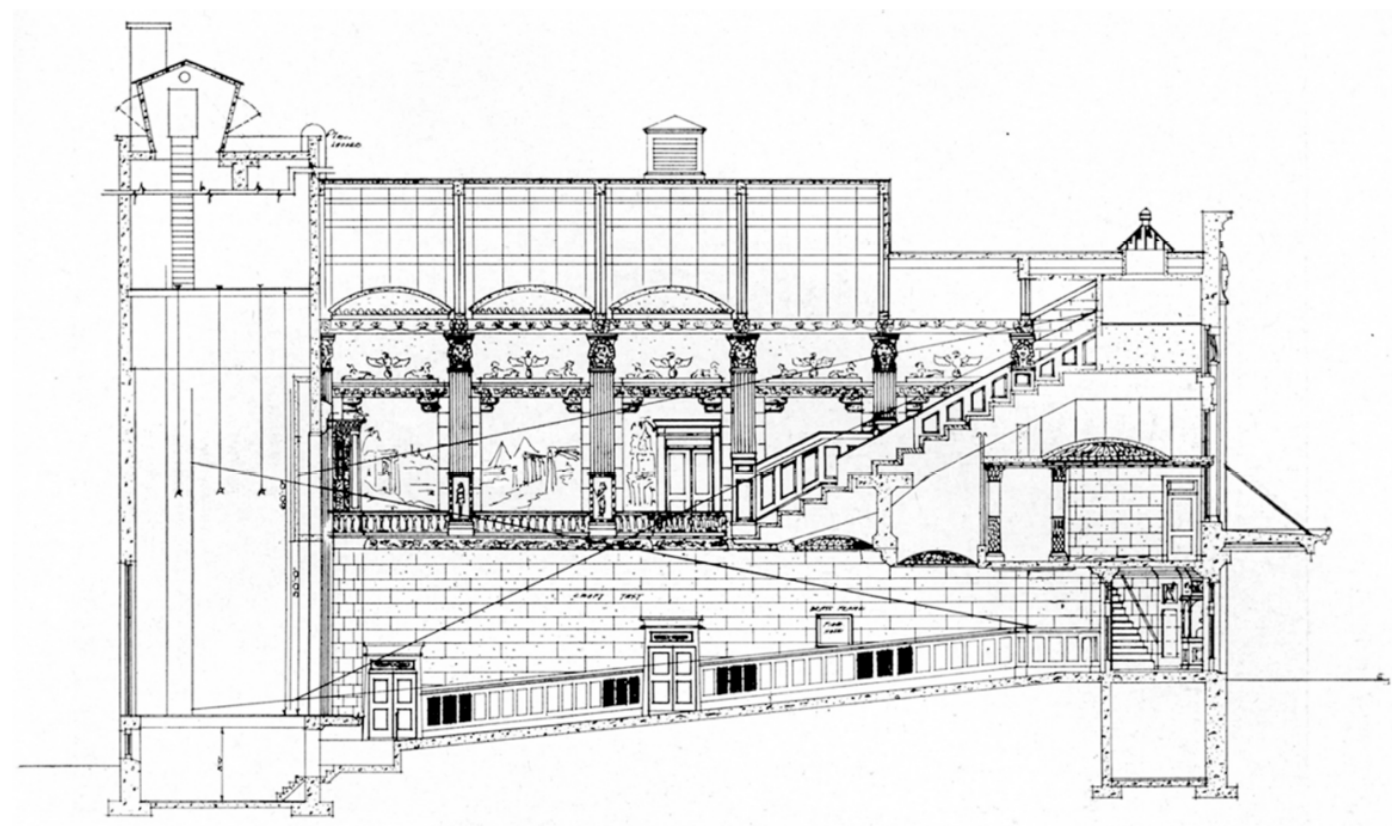


Figure 19: Longitudinal Section, Empress Theater. (1928). RAIC The Journal. p 393.



Figure 20: Restroom on Mezannine Floor, Showing Fireplace - Empress Theatre, Montreal. (1928). RAIC The Journal. p 394.



Figure 21: West Wall, From Balcony - Empress Theatre, Montreal. (1928). RAIC The Journal. p 394.



5. The Othering of the Orient

The Interplay Between Colonialism, Orientalism, and Exoticism

The relationship between orientalism, exoticism, and colonialism is a complex and yet interconnected paradigm that centers on the appropriation and negotiation of space. Exoticism is characterized by the stereotypical depiction of “other spaces” and their inhabitants. Meanwhile, colonialism is driven by the surveying, mapping, and eventual domination of foreign territories through economic, technological, and military superiority. These three concepts are linked through their shared interest in the control and appropriation of space (Zach, 2017).

Edward Said (1935–2003) was a Palestinian-American literary theorist, cultural critic, and historian. His book “Orientalism,” published in 1978, is a seminal work in postcolonial theory that examines how the West has historically constructed and represented the Orient. The arguments in the book contributed to the growth of anti-colonial and post-colonial studies, and according to “The New Yorker,” it may have been the most significant academic work of the late twentieth century (Mishra, 2021). Said is highly critical of Orientalism and its impact on Western culture and politics, arguing that it is not only a field of academic study but a set of attitudes and assumptions about the East that have been used to legitimize Western imperialism, colonialism, and cultural dominance (Burney, 2012). Hence, the portrayal of the Orient is deeply intertwined with the colonial enterprise and the assertion of Western cultural hegemony over non-Western societies.

The first chapter of the book “Counterpoints,” published by Peter Lang, delves into Edward Said’s influential work “Orientalism” and its significant contribution to the development of postcolonial theory. Said’s theory is thoroughly examined as a hegemonic power dynamic that has historically dominated literary, political, and cultural discourse concerning the Other. The concept of Orientalism is presented as a cultural phenomenon, a Western institutionalized, hegemonic gaze that objectifies the Other as exotic and restless, mystical and mythical, but ultimately inferior, secondary, and marginal. This idea of orientalism is deeply ingrained in contemporary

imagination and has become part of everyday parlance. The chapter also probes the symbiotic relationship between orientalism and empire, culture, and imperialism, as proposed by Said. Overall, this chapter offers a critical analysis of Said's seminal work and its impact on postcolonial discourse (Burney, 2012).

As noted by Burney, Orientalism's main achievement was to reveal how the East was constructed as a binary opposite to the West by uncovering the hidden structures of power and knowledge in texts and discourse, which were used by colonialism and empire to dominate and conquer the Other. The Orient was portrayed as the complete opposite, the binary opposite, the contrasting image of the Occident.¹ In addition to "conquering" the Orient and its land, colonialism and imperialism also appropriated its identity, history, culture, geography, and voice (Burney, 2012). It was the original fascination with culture that led to the emergence of political dominance, power, and ultimately the colonization of the Orient.

Burney further highlighted that the Orient was not a natural, fixed entity, but instead it was constructed through a hegemonic process that imposed Western perceptions and perspectives on it, leading to the erasure of its true identity, voice, and indigenous culture. In other words, this imagined reality was created with perceptions and perspectives derived from what Said referred to as the "Western gaze" (Burney, 2012). This objectified and exoticized the Orient, reducing it to a homogenous and subordinate entity in contrast to the Western self. Therefore, the orientalized Orient is not an authentic representation of the East but a distorted and constructed image that serves the interests of the West.

¹ The Occident refers to the West, namely Britain and France, because of their vast colonial empires, and later the USA for the rise of neo-colonialism, while the Orient refers to European ideas of the Other and the East (Burney, 2012).

The Illusion of Authenticity

Consequently, Egyptian Revival designed theaters, like the Empress Theater, are not authentic representations of real Egyptian temples.

Firstly, these theaters were designed by Western architects and artists who were influenced by their own cultural and aesthetic values rather than possessing a deep understanding of Egyptian culture and art. Said emphasizes in his book that Orientalism is a discourse that is built on continuous self-reference to past works of Western authors rather than containing any references to actual lived reality, stating that Orientalism as a practice represents "imaginative geography" (Burney, 2012). It is therefore a dubious and circular discourse that builds its foundation on words, images, textuality, and preconceptions that were already prevalent. Thus, the Orient is an imaginary phenomenon that is constructed by naturalizing a wide range of assumptions and stereotypes and is not a reflection of actual reality.

In addition, many of the decorative elements and motifs used in these theaters were based on stereotypes and misconceptions about Egypt and its people rather than accurate representations of Egyptian art and architecture. During the colonial era, Western architects often appropriated and transformed non-Western architectural motifs, such as Orientalist arches, domes, and minarets, in their designs to assert their cultural dominance over colonized peoples. In "Conflicted Antiquities," author Elliot Colla argues that colonialism was not only a political and economic project but also a cultural one that sought to control the history and identity of colonized peoples. This cultural control was achieved through the theft, looting, and exploitation of the material and intellectual heritage of colonized nations, such as their artifacts, monuments, and manuscripts (Colla, 2007).

This process created a sense of exoticism and otherness that reinforced Western stereotypes of non-Western cultures as primitive, irrational, and exotic. For instance, during Egypt's colonial rule in the 19th century, Western architects developed Egyptomania and incorporated Egyptian motifs and styles into Western public buildings, such as museums and government

buildings. The use of Egyptian motifs in Western architecture was linked to the broader colonial project of asserting Western cultural dominance over non-Western cultures, demonstrating cultural superiority, and creating nostalgia for an imagined past (Burney, 2012).

Hence, despite being visually stunning and serving their intended function as entertainment venues, theaters designed in the Western Egyptian Revival style cannot be regarded as an accurate representation of authentic Egyptian temples. Instead of being a true representation of Egyptian culture and art, they were the result of Western imagination and cultural appropriation.



Figure 23: Photograph facade of the Empress Theater by author (2023)

6. Rediscovering the Empress

Collective Memory

The notion of “lieux de mémoire,” or “sites of memory,” was initially introduced by French historian Pierre Nora in his renowned essay “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” which was first published in 1984. This seminal work has had a significant impact on the field of memory studies, shaping the way scholars approach the complex relationship between memory, history, and identity (Nora, 1989).

Nora argues that the concept of “lieux de mémoire” refers to both physical and symbolic spaces that represent and preserve a collective memory of a particular historical event or period (Nora, 1989). To investigate the specific interplay between history and memory of the Empress Theater, this study will differentiate between its historical memories, which entail the objective collection of data and archival materials, and its collective memories, which comprise a subjective and emotional experience shaped by narratives. They serve as the material and cultural artifacts that anchor memory to specific times and places. By doing so, this research aims to reinterpret memory to construct a new narrative that envisions the future of the Empress Theater.

The revitalization of the abandoned movie theater necessitates a discussion of both tangible and intangible aspects, as they play a critical role in preserving the collective memory of the community. By engaging with both aspects, the restoration project can serve as a means of preserving and revitalizing the theater while also promoting a deeper sense of community and social connectedness.

The Tangible Heritage

The Empress Theater embodies several tangible aspects that can be identified and preserved for its revitalization, including its architectural features, historical significance, urban values, and social values.

Architectural Features

As previously discussed, the Empress Theater's facade is remarkable for its neo-Egyptian style, making it a significant architectural feature. The grand exterior of the theater sets it apart from the surrounding urban landscape, featuring striking elements such as Egyptian hieroglyphs, lotus flowers, and columns that add to its unique character.

The facade was constructed using cast stone that closely resembles the sandstone found in ancient Egyptian temples. The exterior design of the theater was modeled after the mass and volume of a pylon temple from the Ptolemaic era. The suggestion of the pylon shape was created through the use of indented and inwardly curving shapes at the roofline and cavetto cornice, sloping pylonesque framing at the front entrance doors, and the two tapered pilasters surrounding the entrance, each topped with a Ramses head (Schwarz, 2014).

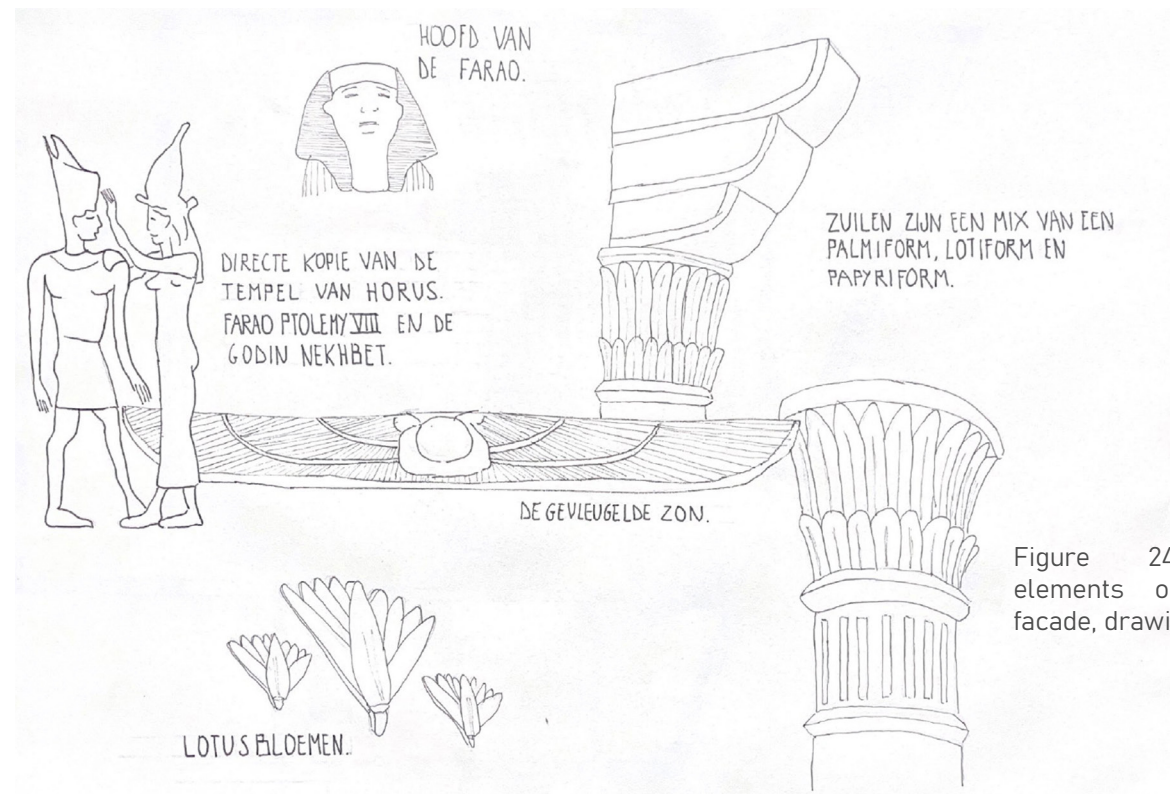


Figure 24: Egyptian elements on the main facade, drawings by author.

The sculpted male and female figures on the twin pilasters of the Empress are a direct copy of the carved wall relief from the Temple of Horus at Edfu, demonstrating a concerted effort to accurately reproduce ancient Egyptian design elements (Scharwz, 2014). The central section of the facade is emphasized by the darker stone color of the Ramses heads and the Egyptian couple in profile with their golden bronze tone, while the rest of the facade is a pale beige (Bédard, 2014). These Egyptian motifs and design elements contribute to the creation of an orientalist atmosphere that draws visitors to the Empress cinema to experience an alternative world that is removed from their everyday lives.

Furthermore, the remnants of the original interior decorative features by Emmanuel Briffa, such as the Egyptian revival moldings, opalescent glass tiles, and ceramic flooring, are highly valued architectural elements, as stated by Patrimoine Montreal's statement of heritage interest (Énoncé de l'intérêt patrimonial, 2014). Scott MacLeod, a Canadian multimedia artist and lifelong NDG resident, expressed his surprise that the surviving pieces of Briffa's Egyptian columns are still present in the theater, stating that he "still can't even believe it is still in there" (Macleod, 2023). Additionally, the surviving 1960s wall paintings further add to the historical and cultural significance of the Empress Theater. These tangible aspects of the theater's interior not only represent the artistic and architectural trends of their respective eras but also serve as material artifacts that anchor the collective memory of the community to the theater's past.



Figure 25: Emmanuel Briffa's Mural paintings. (n.d.) CCA Archives.

NDG and the Parc

The Empress Theater's urban value is derived from its prominent location on Sherbrooke West Street, which is the main thoroughfare of the NDG district. Moreover, its position directly opposite the NDG Park fosters a dialogue between the building and nature. The theater's imposing size and neo-Egyptian façade also make it a visual landmark that dominates the urban landscape of NDG, adding to its urban significance (Énoncé de l'intérêt patrimonial, 2014).

"All I could remember what the fun of the days of "Sunday in the Park" which was only held at the NDG Park." (Cargnello, 2023).



Figure 26: Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. Parc Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. 1953. VM105-Y-1_0020-005 (détail). Archives de la Ville de Montréal



Figure 27: Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. Parc Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. 1953. VM105-Y-1_0020-005 (détail). Archives de la Ville de Montréal

The Intangible Heritage

Focusing on the intangible aspects, such as the community's collective memory and emotional attachment to the Empress Theater, can help to generate a sense of place and belonging within the community, thereby reinforcing social cohesion. Intangible aspects of a movie theater are those that cannot be physically touched or observed but are experienced and felt by movie-goers.

Atmosphere

As stated before, the Empress Theater contributes to the typology of atmospheric theaters, which are designed to create a unique and immersive atmosphere that transports the audience to another time and place, defined by the sensory and emotional experience of the audience within the physical space of the theater. This experience is not a tangible object, as it cannot be physically touched or quantitatively measured. Rather, it is an impression that is created by a combination of sensory inputs, such as lighting, sound, and spatial design.

Escape

In his article "Imaginary Placements: The Other Space of Cinema," Ameri investigates the notion of cinema as an "other space" that provides an alternative reality for viewers. The author asserts that cinema presents a distinctive spatial experience that distinguishes it from our physical reality. He asserts that the process of viewing a film encompasses a transition from our tangible physical realm to an imaginative, cinematic one.

Our perception and interaction with the physical world are largely dependent on our senses, such as sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. These sensory inputs ground our experiences in the tangible, physical realm. However, when we engage in the viewing of a film, we are transported to an alternate reality, one that is not bound by our physical senses but is rather constructed through the utilization of visual and auditory stimuli (Ameri, 2011).

The Empress Theater offers visitors an opportunity to experience an Orientalist world and escape from their day-to-day reality. As such, "movie palace architects" become the creators of spaces that enable individuals to indulge in the pleasures of the East and escape from the Western world's reality, effectively transforming them into "escape artists."

Emotions

The emotions that a movie elicits in viewers add to the movie theater experience. For instance, a particularly moving or thrilling film can leave viewers feeling a range of emotions long after they leave the theater. In his reflective and introspective essay titled "Leaving the Movie Theater" published in 1989, Roland Barthes examines the experience of a moviegoer at the conclusion of a film and the ensuing departure from the theater. He characterizes the moment of exiting the movie theater as a state of "coming out of hypnosis," thereby acknowledging the powerful and immersive nature of the cinematic medium (Watts, 2016).

In his essay, he delves into the emotional experience of disappointment and emptiness that frequently follows the conclusion of a film. Barthes recognizes that cinema possesses the ability to transport individuals into an alternate reality, yet this immersive sensation is ephemeral and rapidly dissipates as the theater lights illuminate. Despite the sense of letdown, Barthes asserts that this feeling is not necessarily negative but rather a chance to gain a renewed appreciation for the beauty and enchantment of the cinematic medium. Furthermore, the author contemplates the ways in which cinema serves as both an individual and communal experience, highlighting how the reactions of fellow viewers can influence one's own perception of the film (Watts, 2016).

In addition to the sense of excitement or anticipation upon entering the cinema, visitors also experience a significant transitional moment upon departing from the movie theater, which marks a key transitional moment that requires one to come to terms with the reality of their daily lives.

Memories

The Empress Theater occupies a notable position in the collective memories of many individuals, given the significant personal experiences associated with the building and its surrounding area. In the case of NDG inhabitants, movie theaters evoke recollections of attending screenings with friends and family, gaining exposure to diverse cultures and perspectives through the medium of cinema, and participating in broader cultural dialogues.

In interviews conducted with local stakeholders, participants were asked to share their most cherished memories of the building and its environs. The majority of respondents reminisced about the era when the theater was known as Cinema V, offering both individual and collective recollections. Many personal memories harken back to events associated with their childhood or youth, highlighting the theater’s role as a social gathering place.

[...] My girlfriend and I saw so many films, or rather repertoires, for the first time. We had these little cards where they'd punch a hole in it every time you went to see a movie. The place was a split-level theater with two levels, and it was very "communaire". You could just feel how involved the people were - it was very community oriented. It was an enjoyable place because there wasn't much entertainment back there. We're speaking in the eighties, there was no Netflix, no internet. So that was our source of entertainment besides regular TV. (MacCleod, 2023).

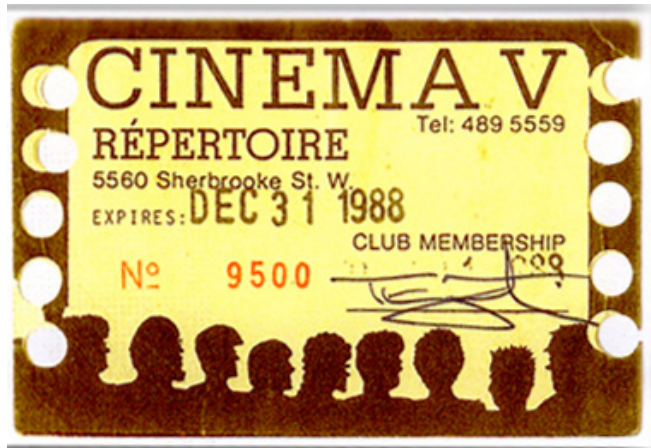


Figure 28: Cinema V club membership ticket

In addition to conducting interviews with local residents, this research has incorporated comments gathered from social media platforms. Facebook groups such as “NDG” and “Save the Empress” have been established to collect and share memories digitally among residents. These groups serve as an important platform for retrieving and preserving individual memories and experiences related to the Empress. A local musician and music teacher within the community declared in a post shared via social media platform Instagram:

I miss this cinema, [...] when I graduated from Westmount High School in 1979, the prom organizers rented out the Cinema V for us all, and this was the movie shown at midnight. Pretty cool. (@lyle_sketches, 2023).

Sense of Community

It is apparent that the gradual deterioration of the Empress Theater has caused sorrow among the residents for many years, as evidenced by newspaper articles retrieved from the Canadian Center for Architecture dated from the time of the fire in 1992 to the present day.

One such article, titled “New life for N.D.G. theater?” published on August 17, 1998, reported that a group of residents had formed the Cinema V Action Committee and had been lobbying the then-mayor of Montreal, Bourque, to restore the theater. Bourque had promised to renovate the theater, which had been met with optimism by the Committee, although some members expressed skepticism about the promises made in the past: “I’m happy that it might finally happen, but they’ve announced it so many times that they always say the same thing: We want to do something about it, and we’re negotiating. [...] How about saying yes, we are doing something about it?” (The Gazette, 1998).

Reviewing historical documents such as newspapers from the past has provided contextual information on the Empress Theater, including its cultural, social, and political significance and the events and trends that shaped the community in which it was built. These documents have revealed that the uncertain future of the Empress has been a long-standing concern in the

NDG community.

Despite years of abandonment, various events and initiatives have continued to draw attention to the significance of preserving the old Empress movie theater. One such event was the “Off the wall film festival” held during the summer of 2010 as part of the Arts NDG Weekend. The festival was well-attended, with around 500 people, including borough mayor Michael Applebaum, showing up to support the cause. Projections were screened on the facade of the Empress, celebrating its rich history and advocating for the preservation of the building, while people gathered in the NDG park to enjoy music.



Figure 29: Photograph by Scott MacLeod, Save the Empress, Projection of William Shatner on the facade of the Empress. Film by Emanuel Hessler. (August, 2010)

In addition to the film festival, a creative initiative was launched during the Arts NDG Weekend, spurred by concerns voiced by Cote-des-Neiges/NDG Borough Mayor Michael Applebaum and others that the Empress Cultural Centre could become a “white elephant” if not properly managed. The idea was to engage the creative youth of NDG to re-imagine the white elephant, made of paper mache, as a multi-colored masterpiece in protest. The aim was to push the transformation of the Empress Theatre into a cultural space that could serve the entire NDG community (MacCleod, 2023).



Figure 30: Photograph by Scott MacCleod, Save The Empress, ‘Ellie the Elephant’ (September, 2010).

This sentiment was widely shared, as many individuals regard the revitalization of the theater as a long-awaited aspiration. The restoration of this cultural landmark would not only contribute to the development of the surrounding neighborhood but also reinvigorate this section of Sherbrooke Street.

A sense of community is characterized by the emotional bond and attachment that individuals have to a particular place. The collective events that took place during the past years contribute significantly to the collective memories associated with the site. They serve as a testament to the continued cultural and social significance of the Empress Theater within the community, reinforcing its relevance and value to the local residents.

**7. From Neglect to Renewal:
The Empress Theater's Revitalization**

Project Intentions

The present research analysis and contextualization have shed light on various urban, social, and heritage concerns. This work explored the intangible and tangible heritage of the Empress Theater that helped shape the community's perception of it, contributed to the collective memory of the site, and therefore aided in rediscovering the building.

The sense of community, memories, emotions, escape, and atmospheres are interconnected with the collective memory of the building, evoking past experiences, reflecting the cultural significance of the community, and shaping its perception in the present. In other words, the intangible aspects refer to collective memory and narratives, while the tangible aspects are a place to connect. By leveraging these qualities, a sense of nostalgia and community pride can be created that contributes to the revitalization of the Empress Theater and therefore restores its glory.

The primary objective is to introduce a new dynamic in the area by integrating new passageways and functions in and around the preserved heritage. By serving as a catalyst for activation and energy, the project seeks to create a dynamic space that fosters interaction, engagement, and a sense of community among its users and visitors. The project further aims to embody a sense of movement, vibrancy, and fluidity, inspiring a dynamic experience for all who encounter the building.

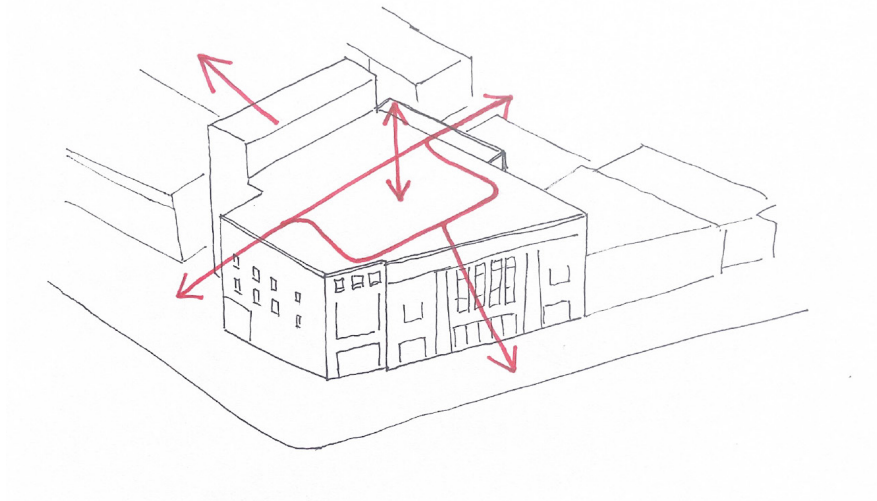


Figure 31: New circulation, drawing by author

Program Development

The proposed project aims to foster social, cultural, and communal bonds among residents by connecting art, community, and nature in the neighborhood. The Empress Theater will function as a gathering place where people can come together to exchange stories and create new memories. The use of culture in encounters and activities will facilitate social connections. It becomes an arena for creation and participation, as well as for individual and collective experience.

The revitalization of the Empress, owing to its significant potential within the urban fabric of the city, would effectively restore vitality to the surrounding area of Sherbrook Street as well as the western region of Montreal at large. The incorporation of a variety of functions, tailored to the local context and scale, could enhance the appeal of the area and gradually attract a new demographic that would contribute to a more diverse social mix.

To reinforce the community's identity as a cultural hub, a multifaceted program has been established. The principal components of this programming initiative are as follows:

Encounter

- Community Center
- Cafe
- New Public Square
- Multipurpose Halls

Cultural

- Open Stage
- Music Repetition Room
- Gallery and Exhibition Space
- Cinema and Theater hall

Accomodation

- Artist Residence

New Public Square

Emphasizing the importance of establishing communal spaces within urban settings, endeavors such as the concept of a pocket park possess the ability to fortify local identity, encourage community cohesion, and augment cultural awareness. The parking lot next to the Empress' south brick facade can be transformed into a new public square that is easily accessible and visible to passers-by on the street.

The design for the square draws inspiration from Paley Park, a meticulously designed pocket-park situated amid buildings in New York City. The park prioritizes visitor comfort, featuring lightweight and portable furniture that offers people the freedom to arrange themselves according to their preferences. The park's central location makes it a highly popular spot for individuals to enjoy a cup of coffee, read a book, or momentarily retreat from the hustle and bustle of the city streets (Paley Park, n.d.)

The square will be an essential element of the Empress Theater's revitalization, as a new volume will be added to the brick facade to serve as a second, innovative entrance to the building. This structure will feature a split-level stage elevated above the adjacent square, which will serve as an interactive podium with a bar. Depending on the program, the square and the stage within the new structure can be used as a terrace, benefiting from the southern orientation of the sun. However, mobile seating tribunes can be arranged on the square, depending on the scenario. For instance, when the stage is utilized for a musical performance, the square can be utilized as an open-air concert space without the need for seating. When seating is required for readings or other programs, mobile tribunes can be arranged and employed for the event.

Local initiatives such as "Samedi in the Park" can further promote a vibrant and active use of the space, appealing to a diverse range of potential users. The newly established square can be revitalized as a community concert with the aim of commemorating the roots of Montreal and NDG, thereby invoking nostalgia.

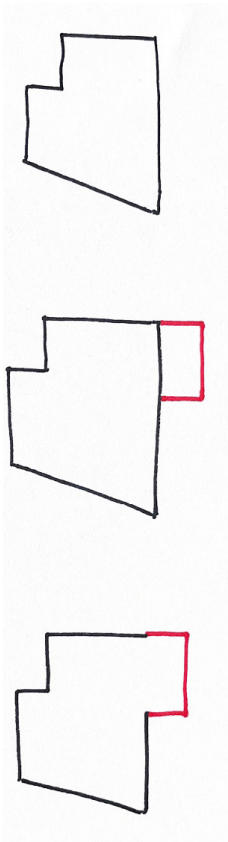


Figure 32: New volume, drawing by author

The integration of semi-professional and community-based utilization can foster a diverse range of movement and activity. The revitalization of the Empress seeks to establish community connections and encourage social cohesion across different backgrounds. To achieve this, it is crucial to empower potential users of the building to develop and implement their own programs, with the site providing the necessary resources to support these endeavors. Furthermore, the new structure features a facade that can be utilized to project films, offering a new and exciting attraction for visitors to enjoy from the square.

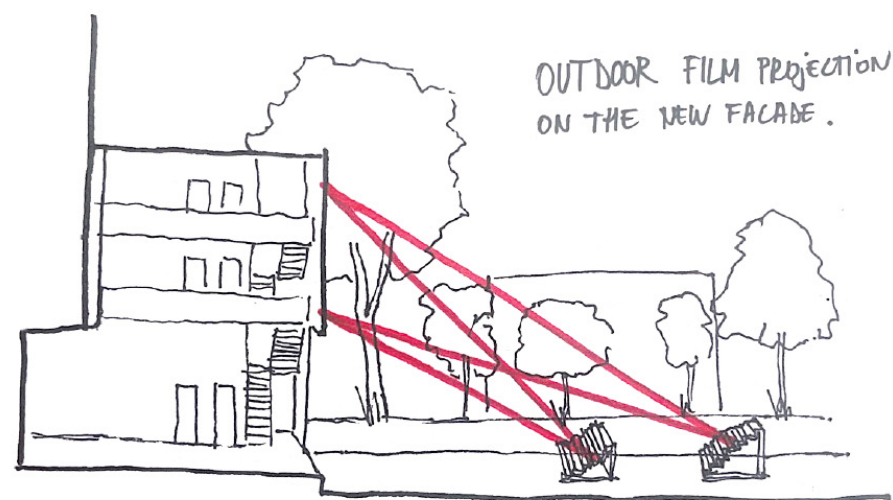


Figure 33: Outdoor film projection on the new facade, drawing by author

The facade of the new structure features operable windows that unfurl during performances and then retract when not in use or transform into an indoor café. The interplay among the closed, translucent, transparent, and movable components of the facade design is a response to the diverse requirements of the interior spaces and their respective functions. The platform is multifarious, as it can be rented as a meeting venue or workshop space when it is not functioning as a café or for performances.

The entirety of the space embodies a confluence of public, semi-public, and semi-private realms. Notably, the zoning of the space does not delineate a rigid public-to-private continuum, but instead its categorization as public or semi-private is contingent upon the specific manner in which it is utilized at any given moment.

The new addition of the volume has been instrumental in providing a means of the vertical transcending of various levels of the Empress building. The ground level, as mentioned earlier, features a versatile stage that interfaces with the new square. Accessing the second level of the newly incorporated volume by ascending the stairs leads to the artistic lodge. This level also functions as a conduit to other functions of the existing building such as the multipurpose theater room or the gallery. Moreover, the third level grants visitors access to the 'royal lodge' designed for exclusive guests or exceptional events, and it also provides a path to the recently added balcony located within the multipurpose theater hall.

The aforementioned volume also encompasses a cavity that extends through two floors and is outfitted with requisite technical components to enable potential concerts or performances on the stage at the upper level.

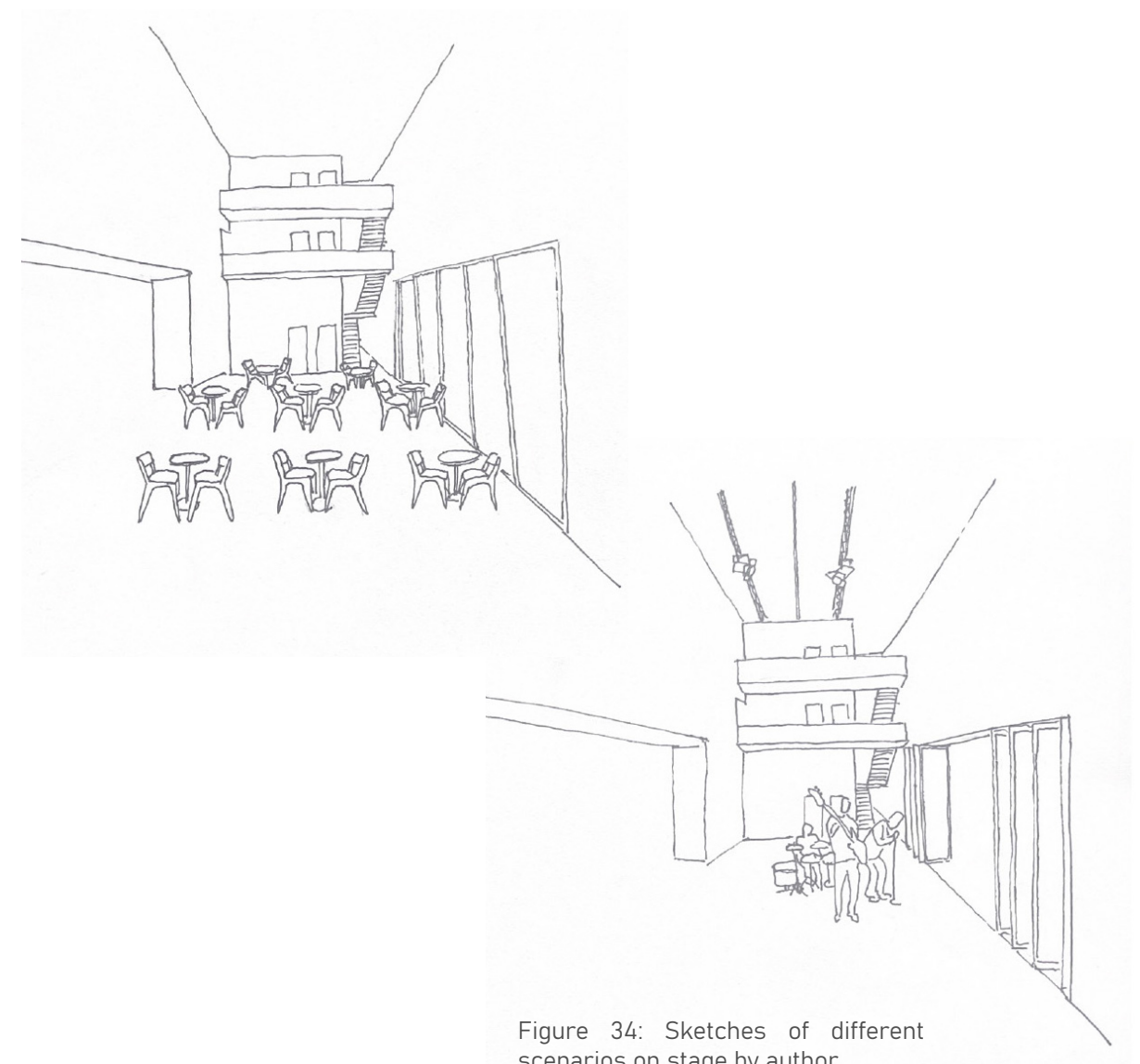


Figure 34: Sketches of different scenarios on stage by author

Passage

The emergence of both horizontal and vertical connections has been made possible by the novel passageways through the building, thereby connecting various functions of the structure. For instance, the pathway from the new square to the gallery or the new volume to the lobby provides an avenue for this connection. The ruined mural paintings of Briffa serve as a guide throughout the building, compelling visitors to encounter remnants of the past. A transportation that is both literally and metaphorically. This dynamic generates a dialogue between the past and present, visitor and space, and establishes a dichotomy between destruction and re-creation.

Spatial fluidity and multiplicity of perspectives are critical components of the visitor's journey to any area or function within the building, offering an immersive spatial experience that creates diverse scenes and avenues for imagination. The new partitions and walls establish a relationship between the inside and outside, the new and existing volumes, through materiality and openings that foster a connection with other functions while ensuring the transportation of natural light in the passages. The openings in the wall pay homage to the old projection room where apertures were incorporated to project films.

Moreover, the void in the new volume constitutes a transitional space that symbolizes departure and prolonged passage, as visitors traverse its depth to enter the imagined and imaginary world beyond.

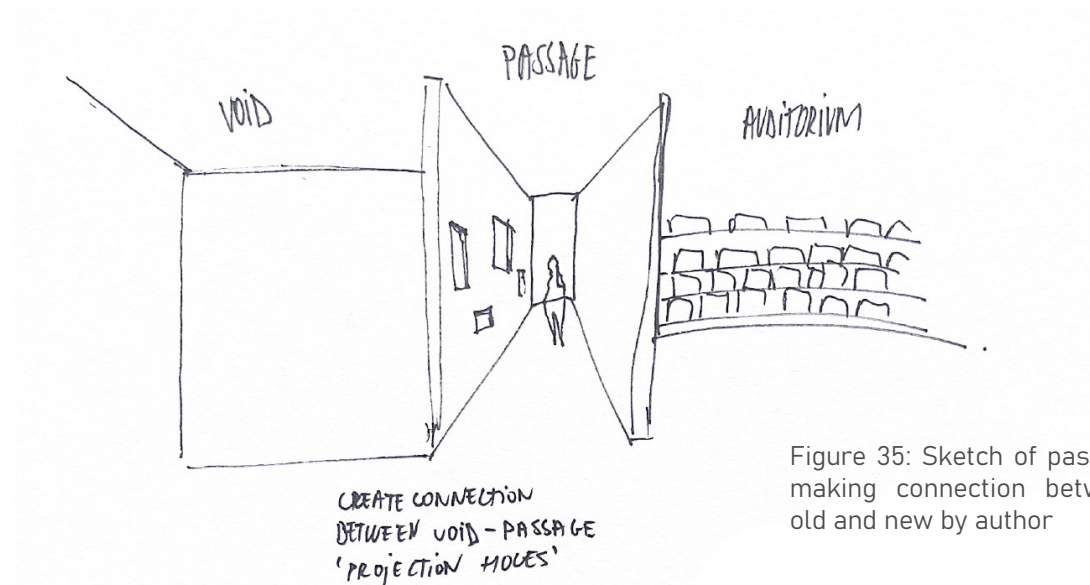


Figure 35: Sketch of passage making connection between old and new by author

Multi-Purpose Auditorium

The public space continues inside the building, which includes a versatile venue that is adaptable for various purposes. The concrete slab, which divided the cinema in the 1960s and compromised the building's interior, is removed again. It created a flexible space that can be used for conferences, meetings, seminars, art shows, exhibitions, marketing events, live music, concerts, and other performances. It can also be rented out for private events, including weddings and corporate events. The hall is connected to the new volume and the square, which can serve as additional space for receptions and the bar if needed.

New balconies at various levels have been incorporated into the hall, providing unobstructed views of the performance and allowing the audience to observe the performers from different angles, contributing to a voyeuristic experience. The upper balcony houses the "royal lodge," which is reserved for special guests or occasions during performances and includes a lounge area that is integrated into the new volume.

Artist residence

The Empress Theater's upper levels have a rich history of providing accommodation for visiting artists and performers in the past. This tradition is now being revitalized in a contemporary manner by offering artists a residence to stay in while they work on their projects or productions. The purpose is to encourage creativity, collaboration, and engagement with the local community by exchanging new ideas, perspectives, and visions for the space. In addition to providing a temporary home for artists, the residence can also facilitate the development of meaningful relationships between the artists and the Empress Theater. By fostering a supportive and stimulating environment, the residence will serve as a platform for the development of artistic talents and a space where new and exciting ideas can flourish.

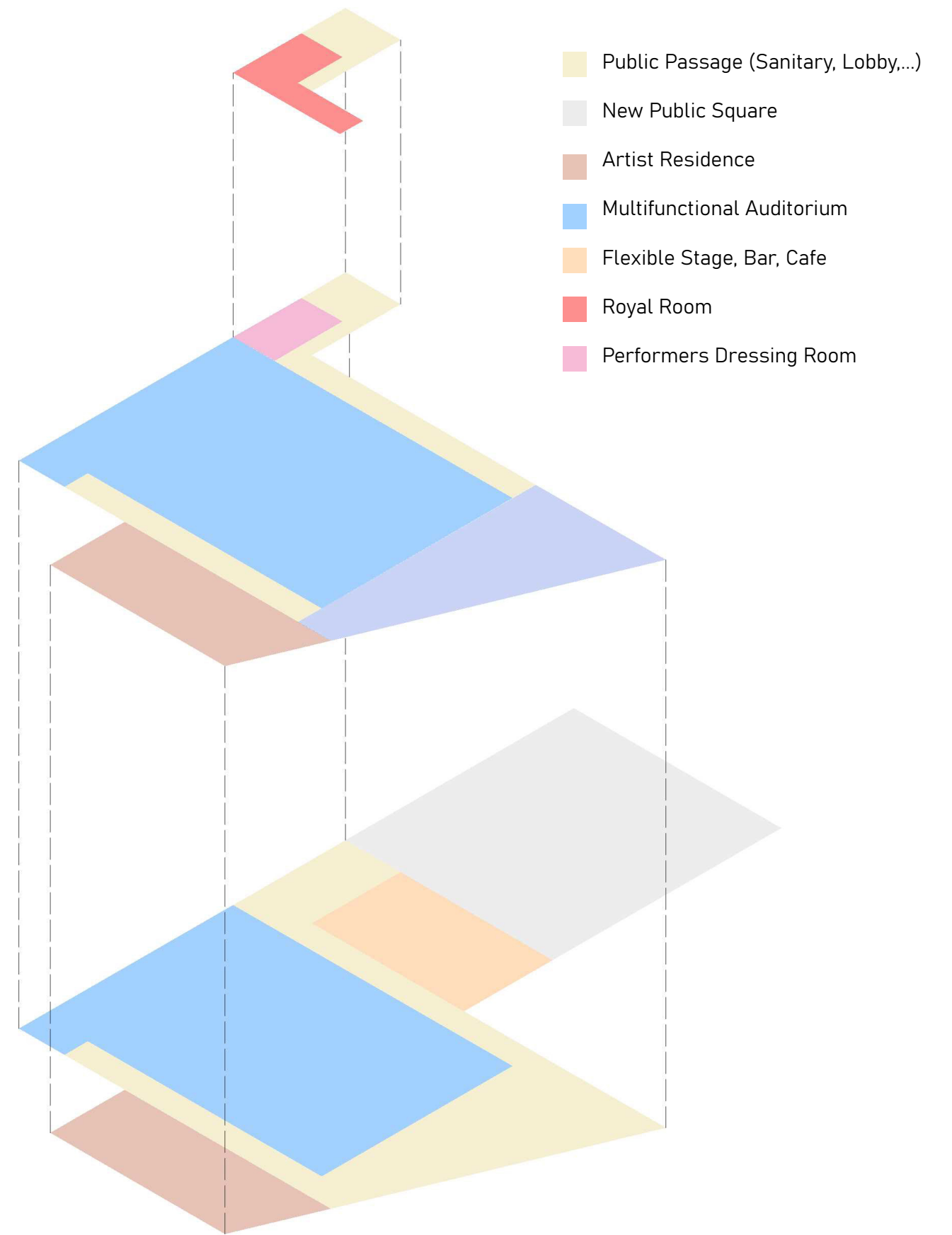


Figure 36: Program Proposal, Isometric plan by author

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Empress Theater represents a significant cultural landmark with a unique architectural design and a collective memory that has become integral to the identity of the NDG community. The Art Deco Egyptian-style facade and interior offer an immersive and transformative experience that instills a sense of community pride and nostalgia, while also recalling the “golden age of movie palaces” in Montreal.

This research has demonstrated the complex and interconnected relationship between orientalism, exoticism, and colonialism, and how the Empress Theater's exotic decor is a product of this relationship. However, the primary objective of the decor was to create an atmosphere of illusion rather than authenticity. The idea of reviving this atmospheric experience in a contemporary way as part of the revitalization adds to the imagination and memory of visitors.

The Empress Theater's cultural heritage and the collective memory of the community are crucial to its revitalization. By engaging with both tangible and intangible aspects of the building and promoting social cohesion in the community, the Empress Theater can be restored to its former glory and establish itself as a cultural venue in Montreal. The proposed multifaceted program represents a positive step towards preserving the Empress Theater's cultural significance and contributing to the vibrancy and character of the NDG neighborhood.

Moreover, it has the potential to catalyze urban regeneration in this area. The proposed program, which includes a new public square and the addition of a new volume with multifunctional purposes, can create an immersive experience that connects people through the iconic architecture and adjacent park, providing a public space for leisure activities.

By recognizing the community's collective memory and imagination, the Empress Theater can serve as a dynamic cultural hub that honors the past, celebrates the present, and shapes the future of the NDG.

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