

Anchor of the oilpatch deserves to be restored



IRENA KARSHENBAUM
OPINION

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the completion of the Barron Building and Uptown Theatre. Officially opened in 1951, it housed Mobil Oil, Shell, Socony Vacuum Oil, Sun Oil and TransCanada Pipelines.

The building was built by J.B. Barron (1888-1965), who was not only a developer, but a renaissance man. He began his career as a lawyer, was a hobbyist photographer and inventor, as well as a philanthropist in the Jewish community, but his true passion was the theatre.

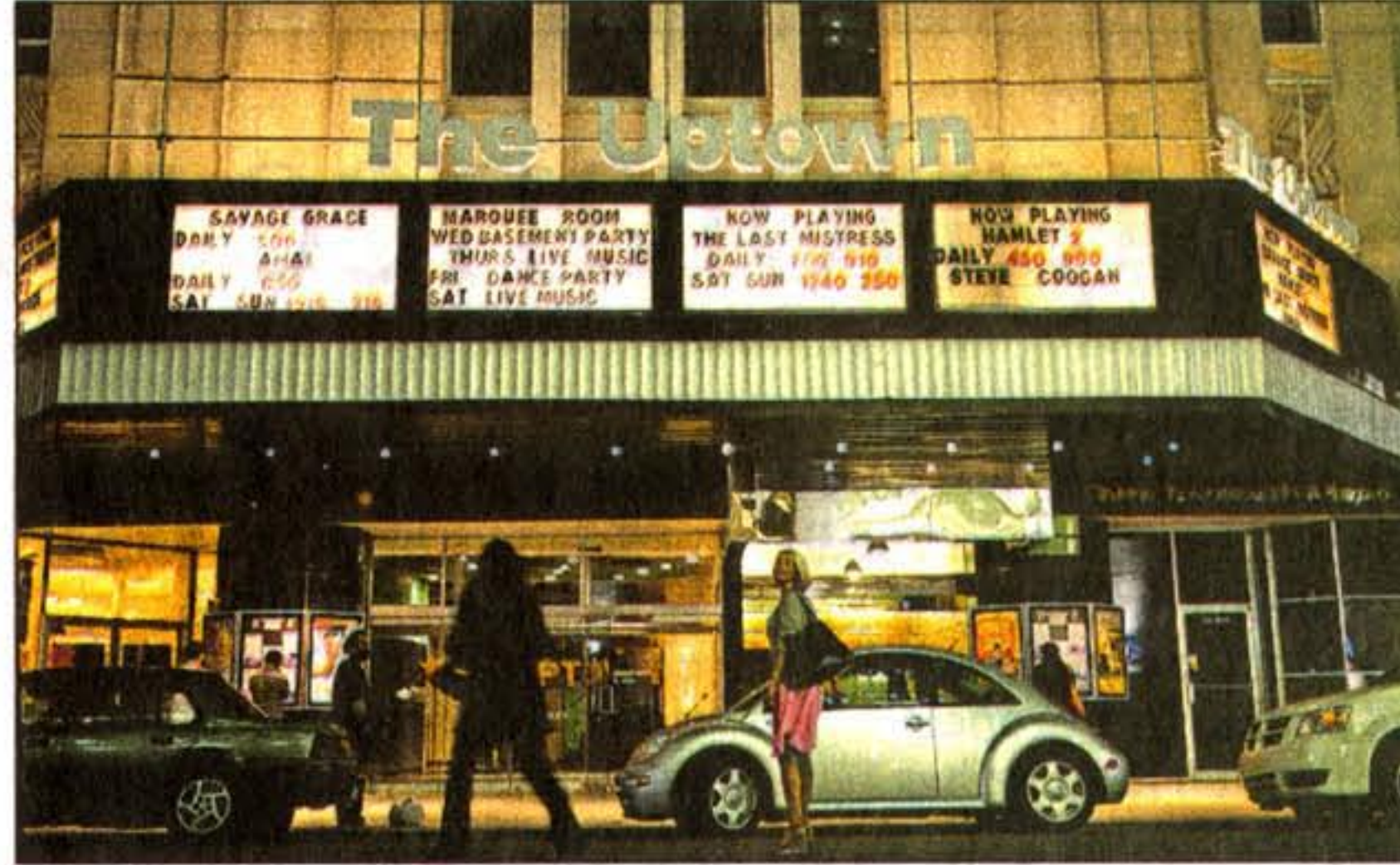
He owned the Palace Theatre, the Grand, the 17th Avenue Drive-In and the Odeon in Marda Loop. He was well known across Canada as a theatre impresario, bringing to Calgary in 1925 legendary pianist and composer Sergei Rachmaninoff. In 1947, when oil was discovered in Leduc, Barron

noticed that Calgary had little office space, so he risked his life's savings to build the city's first skyscraper.

Barron hired Calgary architect Jack Cawston (1911-66) and construction began in 1949 at 610 8th Ave. S.W. Maintaining the same concept as the 1912 Lougheed Building and Grand Theatre, the Barron Building was home to the Uptown Theatre, had retail at street level, 10 floors of office space and a penthouse on the 11th floor with a rooftop garden.

According to the City of Calgary, its architectural significance is, "Distinguished by its stepped massing and restrained detail is clad with buff-coloured brick, Tyndall limestone and polished black granite. A vertically emphasized central bay, ribbon windows, rooftop penthouse and theatre marquee serve to further characterize the building."

The stepped massing and emphasized central bay are similar to the architectural features seen on the Rockefeller Center and Chrysler Building in New York.



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Renovating the Barron Building and Uptown Theatre would ease Calgary's deficit of cultural spaces, says Irena Karshenbaum.

The Alberta Association of Architects named the Barron Building a significant Alberta architecture. The penthouse design was influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright and the rooftop garden won the Vincent Massey Award for excellence in urban planning.

The building was the inspiration for the term "the oilpatch," for all the office buildings that sprung up around it anchoring the oil industry in Calgary, as opposed to Edmonton. The City of Calgary considers

it, "the finest example of art deco-style architecture in the city and among the best examples of its type in Western Canada; it is also historically and symbolically significant for solidifying Calgary's position in becoming the centre of the oil industry . . . its theatre, the Uptown, has been celebrated as one of the city's foremost entertainment venues."

Michael McMordie, emeritus professor of environmental design at the University of Calgary, adds:

"The fact that Barron had the wit to create suitable accommodation for the oilpatch in Calgary is really quite something. I prefer describing it as art moderne, because it comes after art deco. The Barron Building is really poised between WWII and the fully developed modernism as it evolved in Canada in the later 1950s and 60s."

Given this pedigree, the building should hold court in the downtown as a mini Rockefeller Center. Instead, it stands empty and neglected. Recently, the Uptown was forced to close. Meanwhile, the City of Calgary received an application for the demolition of the iconic theatre marquee.

The Barron Building and Uptown Theatre deserve better. The building needs to be restored and we need not look far for a precedent. After years of neglect, a demolition permit and even a fire, the Lougheed Building and Grand Theatre were fully restored in 2008. It has contributed to the downtown's street vibrancy with its restaurants and coffee shop and its flourishing

Grand Theatre, while supplying the choice of funky office space to the rental market.

Similarly, the Uptown needs to be restored, and by doing so, it will ease Calgary's well-known deficit of cultural spaces. And it needs to be done right by preserving its original architectural fabric, including the Hollywood Regency-style decoration and the lobby fish pond. The restored retail frontage will extend the walkability of 8th Avenue. The office floors would be attractive for the creative sector, while the penthouse and rooftop garden could house a unique restaurant and lounge.

Given this architectural, historic and heritage significance, no other path exists for the Barron Building and Uptown Theatre than its sensitive and appropriate restoration.

IRENA KARSHENBAUM IS A WRITER AND HERITAGE ADVOCATE WHO RECENTLY LED A PROJECT TO GIFT A HISTORIC SYNAGOGUE TO HERITAGE PARK. SHE IS A FRIEND OF THE BARRON FAMILY.
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