

HIGHLANDS CHURCH: FROM THEATER TO CHURCH, A HIGHLANDS MAINSTAY

Why do you think the Egyptian Revival Style might have been so popular for movie theaters built in the early 20th century?

This storefront building opened in 1914 and was originally called The Egyptian Theater, named because of its Egyptian Revival design. The building has lived many lives—as a theater, shop, restaurant, and now, as Highlands Church. It is located, as its name suggests, in the Highlands.

In the 1950s, the theater was renovated, and all the traces of its original Egyptian Revival design were covered over with plaster and all the alcoves were boarded up. It reopened as the Holiday Theater, whose marquee still adorns the façade. It was the first theater in Colorado to feature Spanish-language films, which were presented from the 1960s into the 1980s. Many people in the community still remember going to movies at the Holiday on Saturday mornings and evenings (Highlands Church Fact Sheet).

In 2013, new owners oversaw the restoration of the building, much of which had fallen into disrepair. The original Egyptian frescoes and décor were uncovered. The new space reflects the long history of this fascinating building that has and continues to serve the community of Northwest Denver. The building was purchased to provide space in the larger Highlands community for a fairly new church called Highlands Church Denver. This faith community began in 2009, led by Rev. Mark Tidd, as an experiment in being a church unwilling to get "wrapped around the axle of the unimportant" and instead be a wildly inclusive community that reflects the congregation's understanding of the wide embrace of God (Highlands Church Fact Sheet).

The building is now used by the church, 12 step groups, artists, the Khesed Counseling Center, nonprofit functions and as a wedding venue. This building, which has seen so many different uses over its 104 year life, still serves a variety of needs.

Architectural Style

The Egyptian Revival style is simply the addition of Egyptian inspired columns and decorative motifs to buildings that are similar to the Greek Revival or Italianate styles in form. Scholarly interest in the archaeological discoveries of ancient Egypt early in the 19th century led to the development of Egyptian-themed buildings. The style attempted to recreate the appearance of Egyptian temples, especially with the use of massive columns that resemble sheaves of sticks tied at the top and bottom. Details refer to ancient Egyptian symbols—the phoenix, the sphinx, and the vulture and sun disk. This style was most often applied to public buildings, banks, prisons, courthouses, offices and cemetery structures. This style was often chosen for buildings representing eternity and the afterlife. The Egyptian Revival Style flourished yet again for public buildings (especially movie theaters) from 1920 to 1930, often utilizing poured concrete as a building material (Exotic Revival Style 1830-1850, 1920-1930).

Neighborhood

The Highlands is not just one district, but many, and was originally a city in its own right. It was incorporated in 1875. By 1890, Highlands included more than 35 separate subdivisions. The city had high aspirations of its own, touting clean air high above the smoke and industry of Denver, clean artesian water and, most important, clean morals. Although liquor was not forbidden in Highlands, liquor licenses were so expensive that none were issued until well after Prohibition. When Denver was still a dirty, dusty rambunctious frontier town, devoid of trees and other vegetation, early Highlands settlers were engaged in more civilized pursuits: planting trees and gardens. While Denver was called the Queen City, Highlands was known as the Garden City of the Plains (Potter-Highlands Neighborhood History).

References

Highlands Church Fact Sheet.

Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission. Exotic Revival Style 1830-1850, 1920-1930. Retrieved from <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/architecture/styles/exotic-revival.html>.

Denver Public Library. Potter-Highlands Neighborhood History. Retrieved from <https://history.denverlibrary.org/potter-highlands-neighborhood-history>.