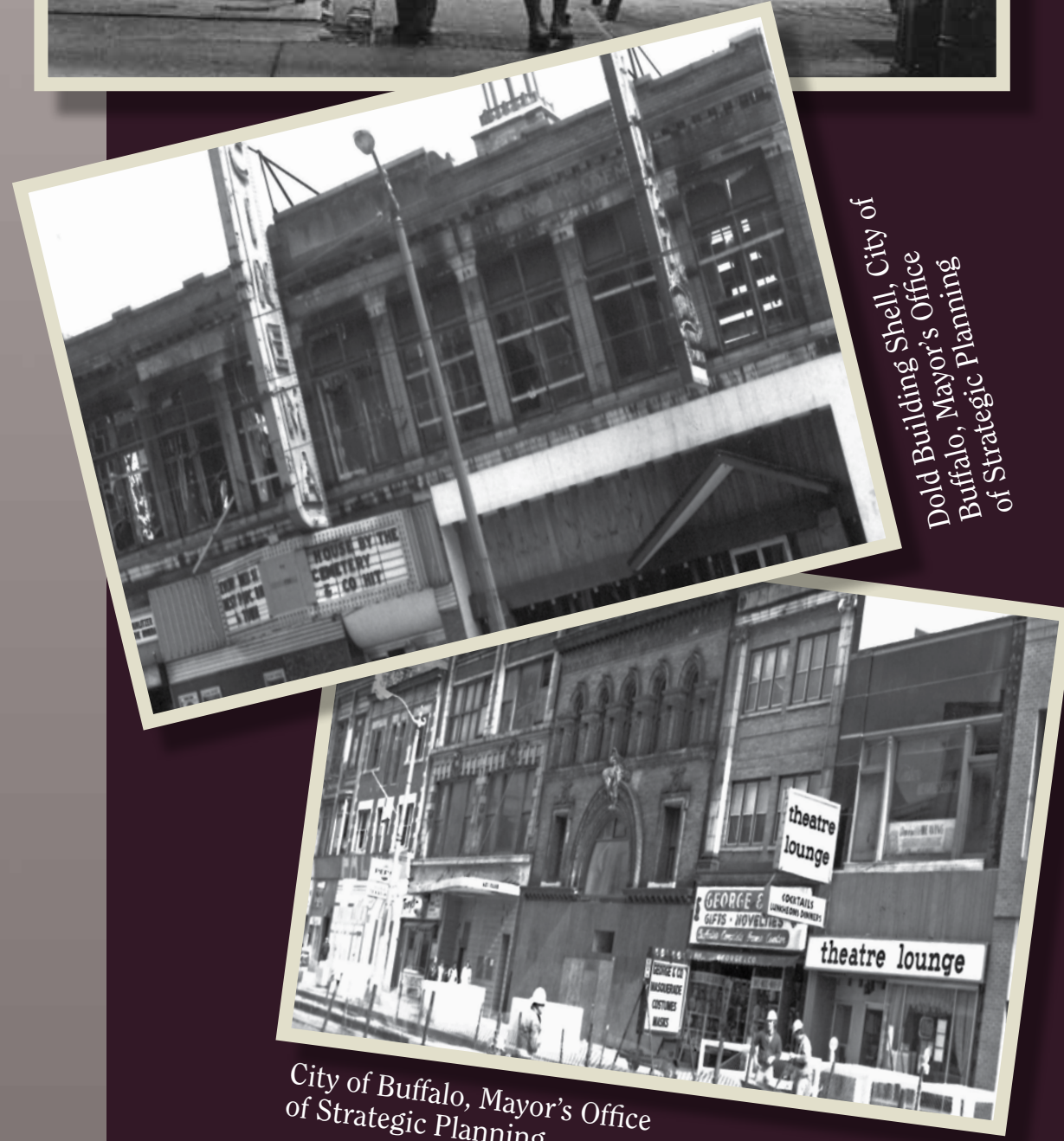
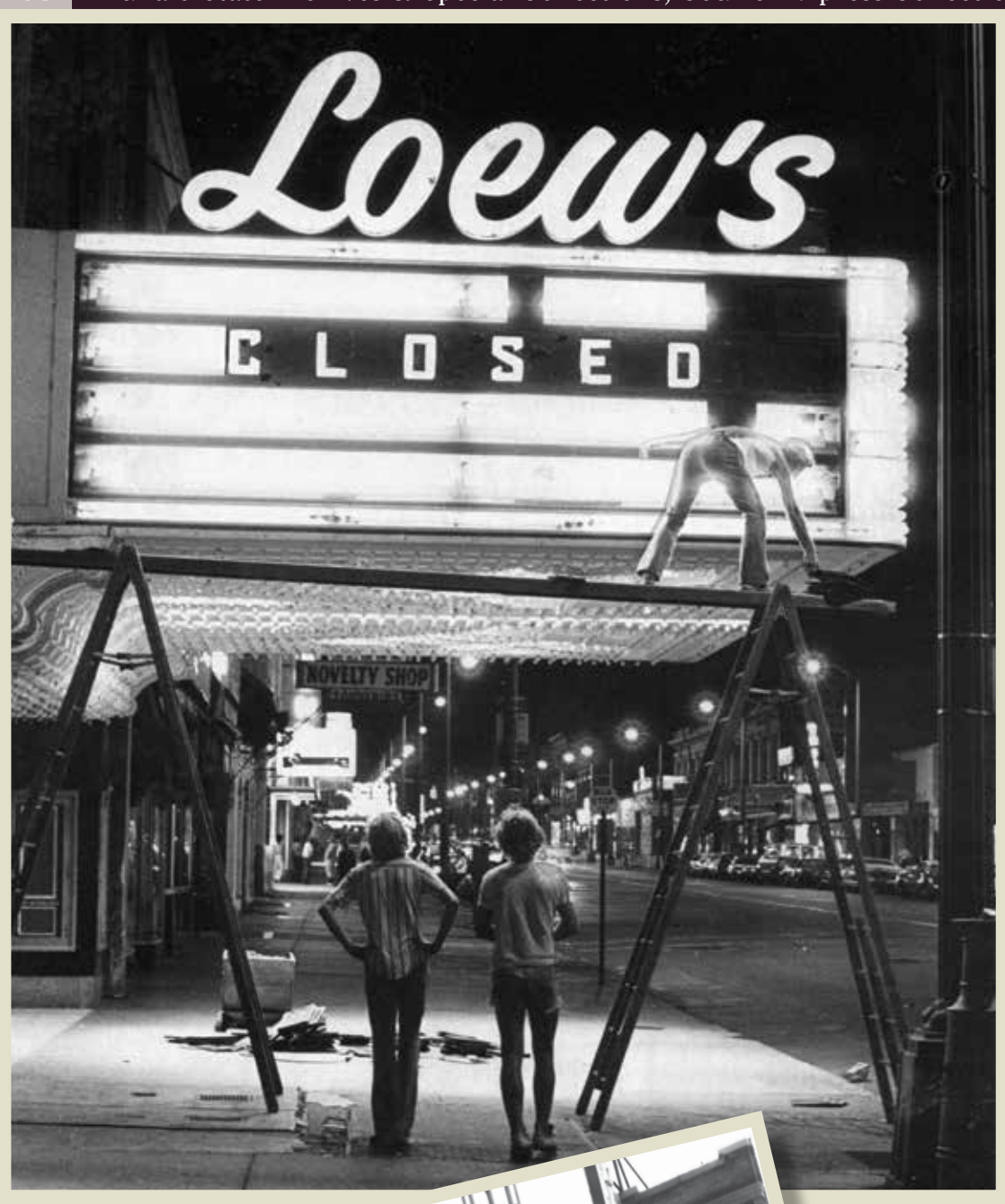


A Long And Winding Road

SUNY Buffalo State Archives & Special Collections, Courier Express Collection



Rebirth of the Theatre District: 1970s - 2014

Main Street was Buffalo's primary commercial corridor throughout its history; but by the 1970s, new economic pressures and cultural changes had taken a toll. The 1970s financial crisis coupled with the collapse of the industrial economy that had been the city's lifeblood since the early 19th century spelled disaster for Buffalo's traditional downtown commercial business.

Buffalo also faced significant population loss as the highway system of the 1950s and '60s encouraged residents to move to the growing suburbs. Losses of capital, business and population effectively brought commerce on Main Street to a halt, and, while the southern end of Main Street fared better, thanks to government and banking offices and projects like the Main Place Mall (opened 1968) and a new bus terminal, the northern end of Main Street struggled. This resulted in numerous vacant properties, as many of the City's shops, restaurants, clubs, and theaters closed, rendering the 600 and 700 blocks one of the most depressed, least desirable areas in the entire city.

The challenging road to recovery began in the late 1970s. Government and business leaders, developers, community members, and theater professionals

worked together to put available resources to best uses. Today, Buffalo's Theatre District is a place to live, work, play, worship, shop, dine, and more. New apartment and condominium developments reuse historic buildings, attracting new residents. Large 19th century retailers are gone, but a growing collection of small, owner-operated stores, boutiques and shops recall those origins. Cafes, coffee shops and fine dining establishments cater to the local lunch crowd, theatergoers, and to out-of-towners looking for a special experience. Office space for a wide assortment of professional, governmental, architectural, and other services continues to expand. The Theatre District boasts an array of independent live theaters that offer a wide range of theater styles-- from touring Broadway productions to new plays, classic dramas to modern comedies and musicals.

For much more information scan the QR Code to the right or go to www.buffaloplace.com/history/theatre#longroad

Check the QR Site for more details!



Every Journey Begins with a Single Step

James D. Griffin was sworn in as Mayor of Buffalo on January 1, 1978. One of his first acts as Mayor was to fund a survey known as the "Entertainment District Project." Published in July 1978 by the University at Buffalo's School of Architecture and Environmental Design and spearheaded by its dean, Harold L. Cohen, the report created a plan for the 600 and 700 blocks to restore shopping, dining, entertainment, and living.

Under Griffin's leadership, extending into the 1980s, the City purchased or took over many of the vacant Theatre District properties for the purpose of stabilization. The City had already acquired Shea's Buffalo Theatre for back taxes in 1974, purchased the former Greyhound Bus Depot and taken ownership of the Market Arcade Building, the former Laube's Old Spain Restaurant, and the Otto Building, among others. Vacant storefronts were boarded up with colorful murals while plans for their reuse were developed.

The City brought in developers and architects to restore and revitalize many of the properties. In 1981, the City-owned Otto and Kent Buildings were converted into the "Theater Place" office and commercial complex. The fire-damaged Jacob Dold Building was renovated into a multi-plex cinema in 1987, and serves as a mid-block pedestrian path to Main Street from Washington Street.

Saving The Crown Jewel

The restoration of Shea's Buffalo Theatre boosted the re-emerging Theatre District. The theater faced an uncertain future in the 1970s until a group of citizens led by L. Curt Mangel formed the non-profit Friends of The Buffalo Theater, Inc. and played a critical early role in protecting Shea's Buffalo from demolition. The Friends secured the building's contents, restored the Mighty Wurlitzer organ, secured listing on the National Register of Historic Places, and launched Shea's restoration with federal grant funds and thousands of volunteer hours.

Throughout the 1980s and '90s, the theater began to reclaim its past glory with increased programming, and the expansion of the stage and backstage areas to accommodate larger-scale touring Broadway shows. \$34 million was invested in the last two decades, 1994 to 2014. The Main Street façade was restored to its former splendor in 2004 with the installation of a new vertical sign replicating the original, and the restoration of the building's original decorative cornice which had been missing since the 1930s. Efforts have continued on the preservation and restoration of the building, including the opulent Louis Comfort Tiffany-designed interior. Full restoration is expected to coincide with the 90th anniversary of Shea's Buffalo Theatre in January of 2016.

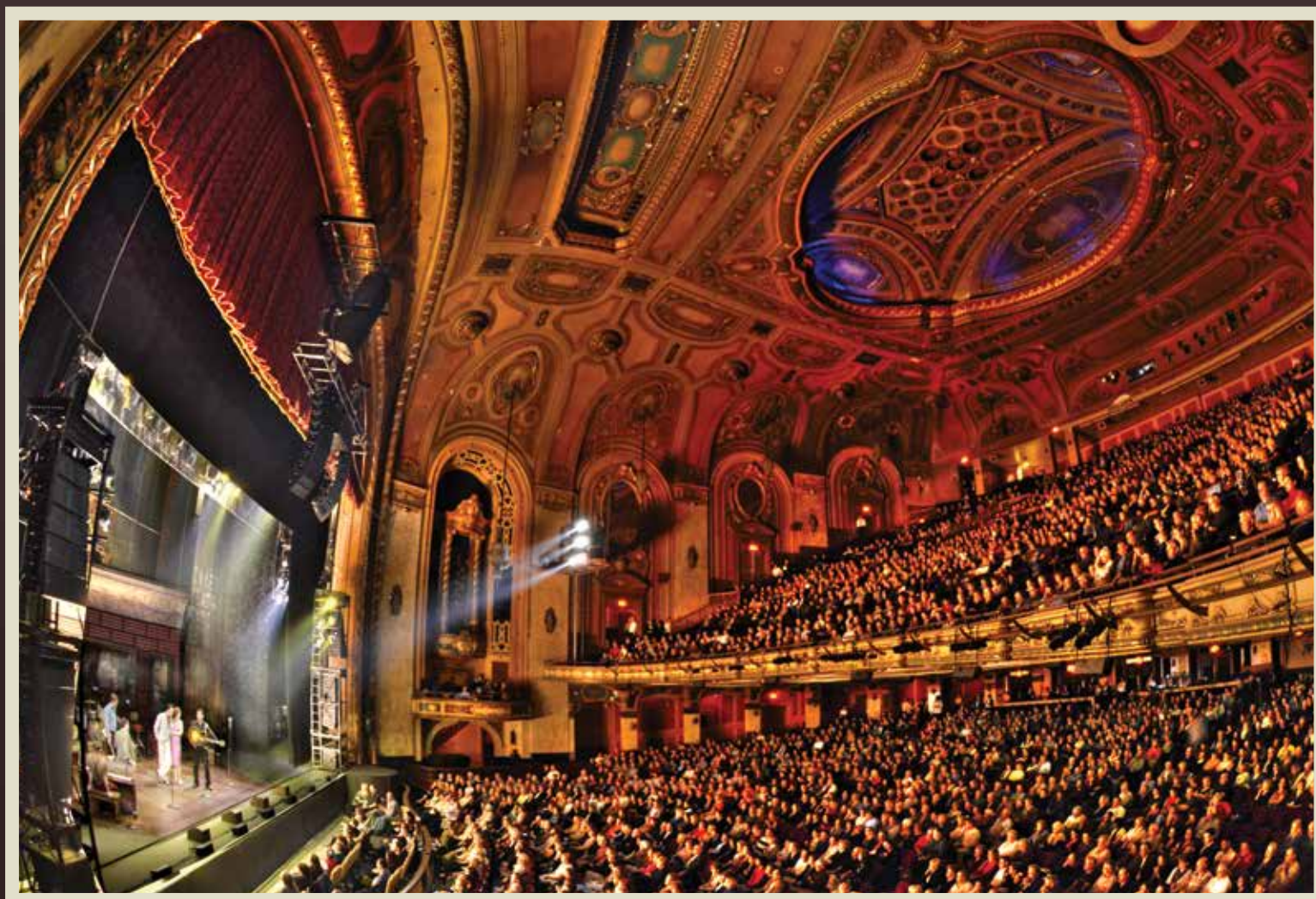
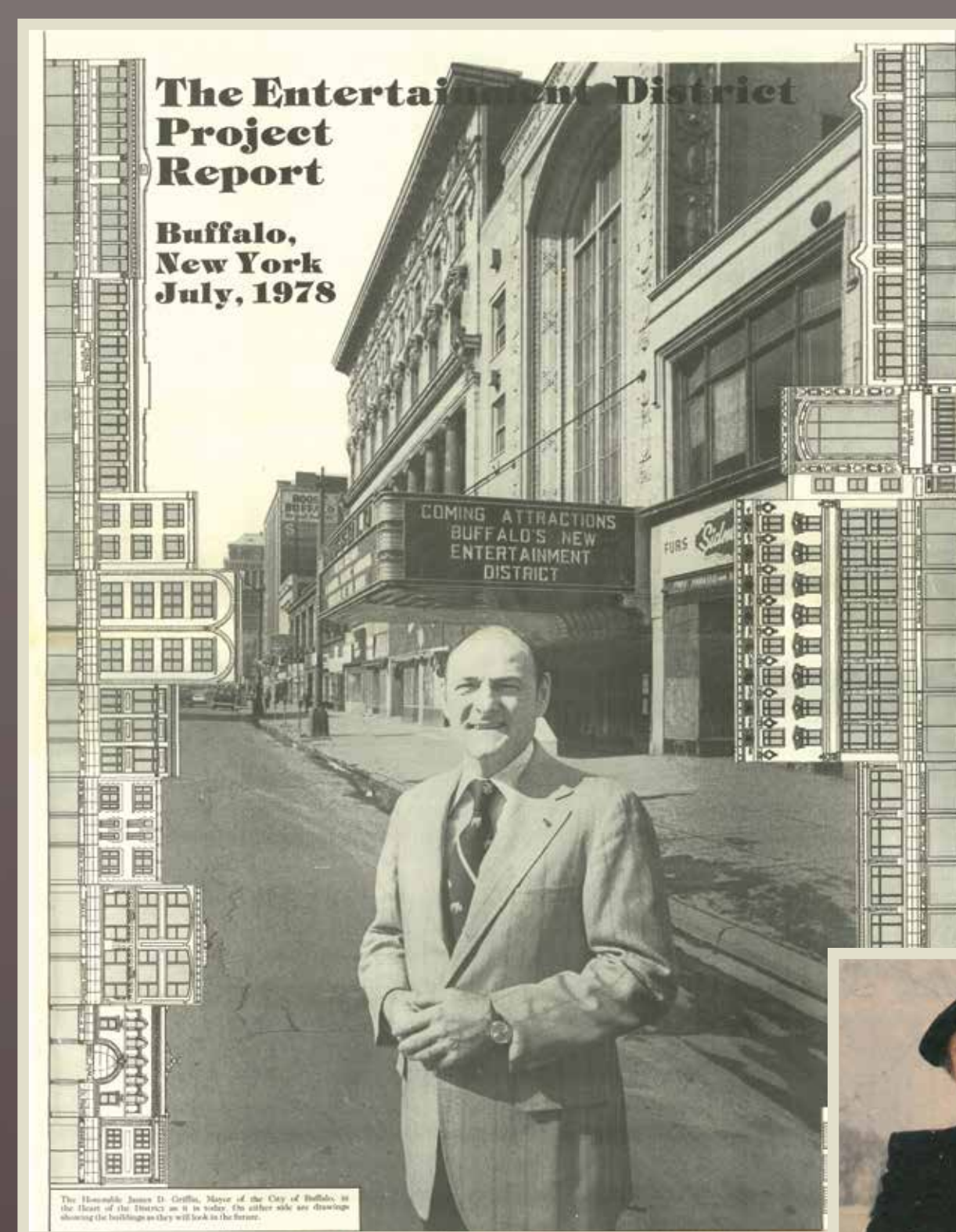


Photo by Joe Cascio, 2011. www.JCascioPhoto.com



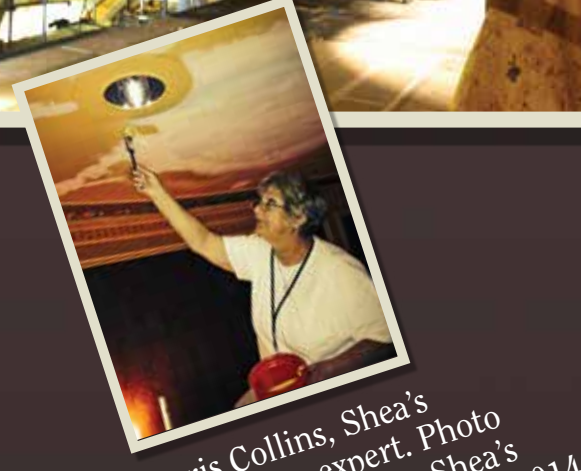
Mayor James D. Griffin on the cover of The Entertainment District Project Report, July, 1978. Photo by Mickey Ostreicher



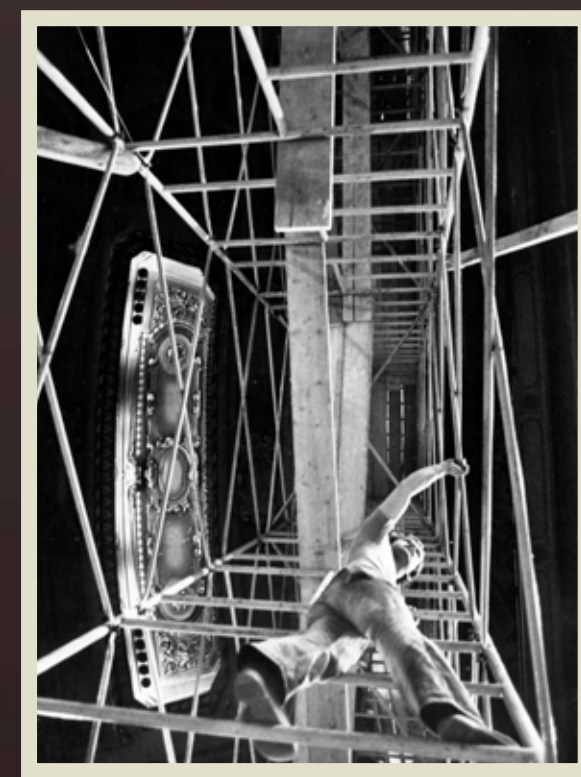
Harold Cohen, Theatre District planner, advocate, and residential pioneer. Photo by Mickey Ostreicher, Sunday Courier Express, April 9, 1978.



View of Shea's Buffalo Theatre ceiling restoration, by Mark Mulville. The Buffalo News, August 2, 2014.



Dore Collins, Shea's restoration expert. Photo by Anthony Cento, Shea's Performing Arts Center, 2014



L. Curt Mangel is seen from a straight up angle as he climbs scaffolding to inspect restoration plastering work, September 12, 1978. Photo: Bob Bakaty, SUNY Buffalo State Archives & Special Collections, Courier Express Collection

Traffic Isn't the Only Thing That's Back

After thirty years absence, the project to return vehicular traffic to Main Street beginning in 2011 has been widely hailed as the best way forward. But the Theatre District hasn't been idling, waiting for cars on Main to move into its driving lane.

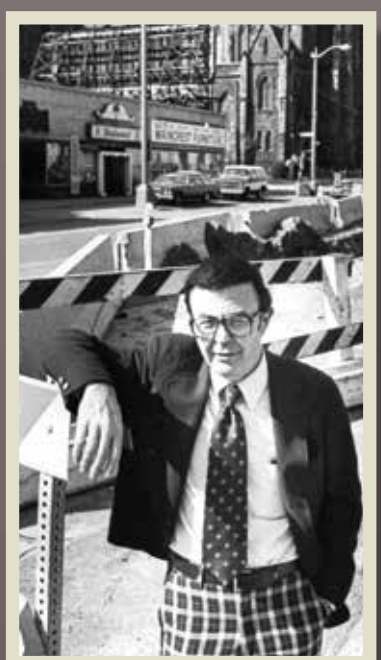
Businesses and professional offices have returned to these blocks of Main Street and new restaurants are flourishing. Twenty years after the vacant, historic Market Arcade Building was restored by the City of Buffalo, it is returning to private ownership by Sinatra and Company. Live music is featured year round at the Town Ballroom and the Tralf. Festivals held in downtown continue to bring attention to all of Main Street, and the Theatre District's popular "Curtain Up!" celebration, marking the annual start of the professional theater season in Buffalo, has been held every year since 1981 and is the only event of its kind... anywhere!



Mayors Anthony Masiello and Byron Brown enjoying Curtain Up! 2013. Photo: Circle Studios

To Traffic or Not to Traffic?

Following the urban trends of the 1960s, city planners envisioned a pedestrian mall free of vehicular traffic. In an era of auto-centric shopping, the thought was to create a safe, quiet walking zone harkening back to traditional pedestrian-oriented commerce and served by a light rail transportation system. The Metro Rail project was envisioned during the 1970s as a way to increase inexpensive public transportation into downtown Buffalo, following Main Street between the University at Buffalo's South Campus and the Buffalo River. Agreement about removing traffic from Main Street was not universal. There were those who felt that the very loss of congestion would deprive the Theatre District of excitement. However, construction began in May of 1979 and was completed by 1986, and while much of the line was subterranean, it came above ground just south of Tupper Street in the 600 block where it entered the Buffalo Place pedestrian mall.



Jerry Abelson, proprietor of Purchase Radio, 753 Main Street, and an early president of the Theatre District Association - 1980's. SUNY Buffalo State Archives & Special Collections, Courier Express Collection



Pedestrian Mall construction, 1980's, Buffalo Place Inc.

Taking action was key. The 1980s began to see an upswing on Main Street that continues to this day. While the lack of vehicular traffic on the pedestrian mall continued to be a source of controversy, considered by some to be an impediment to commercial growth and audience development, numerous private and public projects continued to grow to completion.

Theatres Make the District

Most of the live theater presented in Buffalo today is produced locally by area theater professionals. The many small companies each serve a distinctive role in the greater cast of Buffalo theaters. Within the Theatre District... Alleyway Theatre, founded in 1980 and focused primarily on producing new plays and musicals, has transformed the former Greyhound Bus Depot into a two-theater facility including its Main Street Cabaret. Irish Classical Theatre Company, relocated to the Andrews Theatre at 625 Main Street in 1999, offers seasons of traditional and contemporary Irish, American, and international plays. Road Less Traveled Theatre opened in 2006 and regularly presents plays that are new to Buffalo audiences. Shakespeare in Delaware Park maintains year-round offices in the Market Arcade building.

Shea's Buffalo Performing Arts Center also operates the former Studio Arena building, now 710 Main Theatre, as a presenting house for small touring productions and for use by local producing companies. Shea's also operates Smith Theatre, an informal cabaret theater, in the former Laube's Old Spain building at 660 Main Street.

Through recent years, a number of local producing theater companies developed, lost, and sometimes redeveloped spaces within the District. Even those that no longer exist or moved out of the District made valuable contributions along the way. They include The Cabaret, The Playhouse, Buffalo Entertainment Theatre, UB's Pfeiffer Theatre, Franklin Street Theatre, Buffalo City Lights, Buffalo United Artists and, most prominently, Studio Arena Theatre.

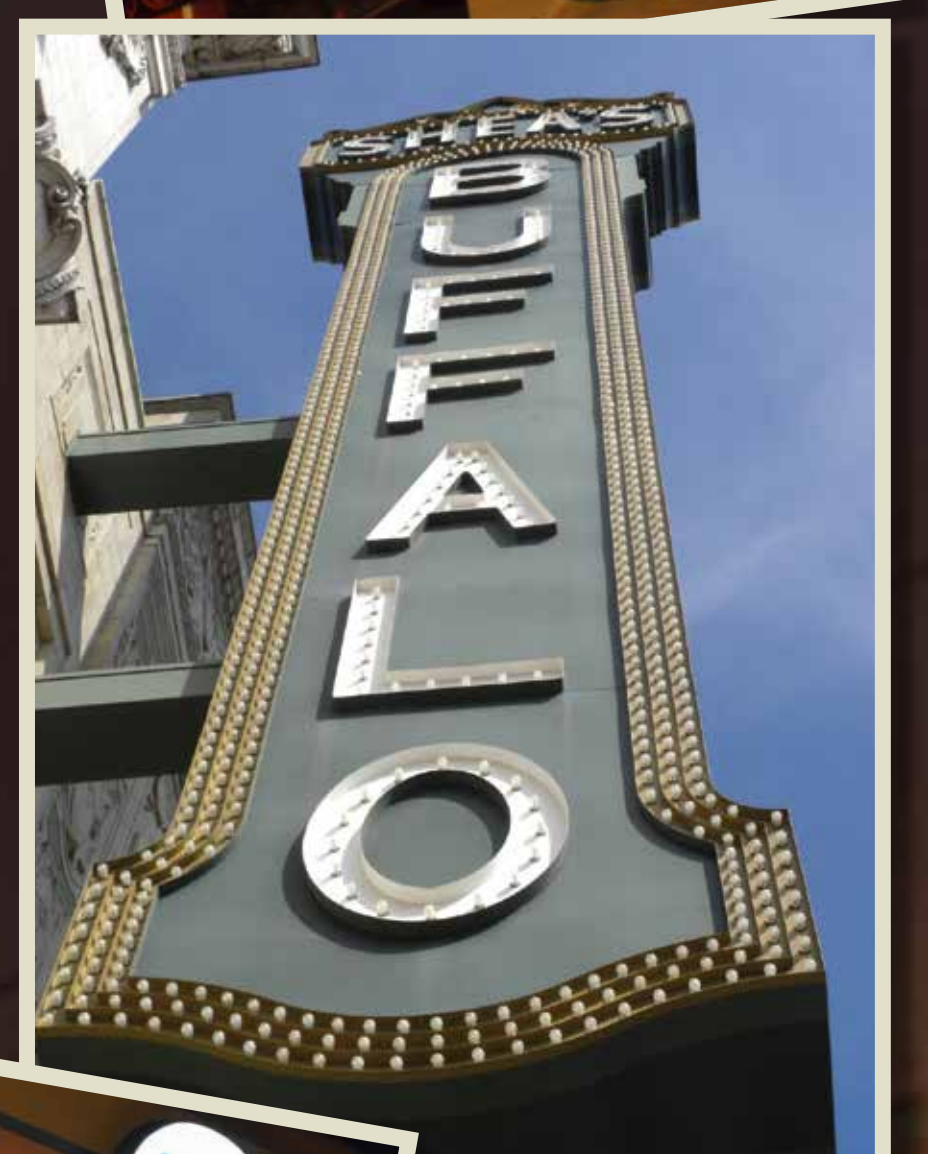
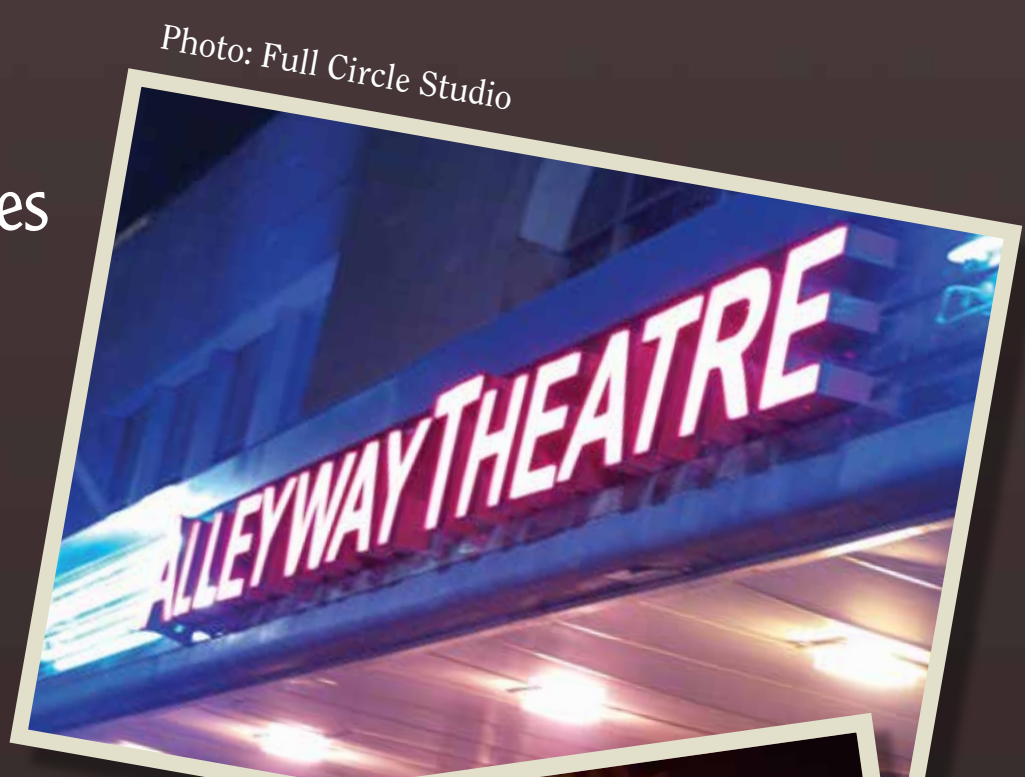


Photo: Neal Radice



George Scott Big Band, Curtain Up! 2013 Photo: Circle Studios



Early Curtain Up! street party. Buffalo Place Inc.