

## THE BOYD THEATRE AND THE GRADUAL LOSS OF A LANDMARK THE DESIGN ADVOCACY GROUP OPPOSES THE REMOVAL OF THE BOYD THEATRE MARQUEE

The Boyd Theatre, constructed in 1928, occupies a singular place in Philadelphia's architectural and cultural history. As the city's last surviving downtown movie palace and one of its most important Art Deco landmarks, it served generations as a destination for entertainment, civic life, and collective memory. Its marquee announced premieres, welcomed moviegoers, and became one of Chestnut Street's defining visual features. Today, after decades of preservation battles and the loss of much of the original theater, the marquee remains one of the last visible reminders of that history.

Pearl Properties now seeks permission from the Philadelphia Historical Commission to remove the Boyd's historic marquee and alter the recessed entrance to create a conventional retail storefront.<sup>1</sup> This proposal represents far more than the loss of a sign. It would erase one of the few remaining features that allows Philadelphians to recognize the building as the Boyd, especially after the demolition of the auditorium and the loss of much of the theater's historic fabric.

After the theater closed in 2002, preservationists, historians, architects, and community advocates spent more than a decade fighting to save it. Although they were ultimately unable to preserve the auditorium, a compromise retained portions of the façade, entrance sequence, lobby, and marquee—elements secured through sustained public advocacy, legal proceedings, and negotiation.

The current request by Pearl Properties undermines that compromise. The Boyd has already lost its principal interior spaces and much of the historic fabric that once made it one of the city's great landmarks. Its integrity now rests, quite literally, on the marquee: a grand, historically significant, and intact feature that remains the building's final, legible connection to its past.

The applicant argues that removing the marquee and recessed entrance will improve retail viability by creating a more conventional storefront, citing tenant concerns about visibility and layout. But this argument overlooks the marquee's greatest strength: it is the property's most distinctive commercial and civic asset. The marquee projects into the public realm, attracts attention from a distance, creates a memorable pedestrian experience, and establishes a sense of place that contemporary storefront design rarely achieves.

This proposal solves the wrong problem. It assumes success depends on making the building resemble countless others, rather than leveraging the Boyd's historic identity to create a singular destination. That reflects failure of imagination, not a failure of preservation.

Comparable historic theaters throughout the Philadelphia region demonstrate that preservation, entertainment, and commercial activity can coexist. The Bryn Mawr Film Institute, Ambler Theater, and Colonial Theatre in Phoenixville show that historic character can be an economic asset when treated as an opportunity rather than an obstacle. The former Seville Theatre in Bryn Mawr<sup>2</sup> is especially instructive: its restoration embraced historic features while introducing modern programming, allowing the building's identity to drive its success.

The Boyd possesses advantages those venues never had: a Center City location surrounded by residents, office workers, restaurants, hotels, and transit. A redevelopment strategy that embraces its identity could support a dynamic mix of retail, dining, cultural, and event uses. Instead, the current approach prioritizes conventional retail metrics, maximizing leasable area and minimizing perceived risk, over the building's public value as a designated historic landmark.

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<sup>1</sup> Jake Blumgart, "Boyd Theatre Owners Want to Remove Historical Marquee, Angering Preservationists," *Inquirer.Com*, May 20, 2026, <https://www.inquirer.com/real-estate/commercial/boyd-theatre-marquee-historical-preservation-pearl-properties-20260520.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "Bryn Mawr Film Institute," *Voith and Mactavish Architects*, n.d., accessed June 12, 2026, <https://voithandmactavish.com/projects/bryn-mawr-film-institute/>.

What makes this proposal particularly troubling is that redevelopment has already occurred.<sup>3</sup> The residential tower has been built, the auditorium demolished, and the site fundamentally transformed. The marquee no longer stands in the way of investment; that investment has already been realized.

The question before the Historical Commission is therefore not whether preservation will prevent redevelopment. It plainly will not. The question is whether one of the last surviving elements of a designated historic landmark should now be removed simply because a more generic retail configuration is considered preferable in the short term.

Approving this request would weaken preservation standards and set a dangerous precedent: that character-defining features may be removed incrementally, even after significant compromise has already been reached. It would signal that protections afforded to historic properties are negotiable over time, encouraging the gradual erosion of the city's architectural heritage.

The argument that the marquee lacks historic significance is equally unconvincing. Philadelphia has long recognized that signage and marquee structures contribute meaningfully to architectural character, cultural memory, and streetscape identity.<sup>4</sup> Few examples are more emblematic than the Boyd's.

Removing the marquee would not revitalize the building. It would make it less distinctive, less memorable, and less connected to the history that justified its preservation in the first place. Philadelphia would lose something unique in exchange for something generic.

The Boyd Theatre has already become a cautionary tale in the city's preservation history. The Historical Commission now has an opportunity, and a responsibility, to ensure that its final chapter is not defined by the unnecessary removal of one of its most iconic surviving features.

Too much of the Boyd has already been lost. The remaining elements deserve stewardship, protection, and respect.

The marquee is not merely an architectural feature; it is one of the last public faces of a landmark that once defined downtown Philadelphia's cultural life.

*The DAG Steering Committee*

*The Design Advocacy Group (DAG) is a public forum and advocate for design quality and equity in the planning, architecture, preservation, and physical development of Philadelphia. <https://designadvocacy.org/>*

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Bencik, "The Boyd's Demise and the Philadelphia Demolition Commission," *WHYY*, April 16, 2015, <https://whyy.org/articles/the-boyd-s-demise-and-the-philadelphia-demolition-commission/>.

<sup>4</sup> Jake Blumgart, "Boot & Saddle Neon Sign in South Philly Receives Historic Protection," *Inquirer.Com*, February 10, 2023, <https://www.inquirer.com/real-estate/commercial/boot-and-saddle-south-broad-street-solar-myth-20230210.html>.