

Thoughts on Design: Design Evanston to publish new Varsity Theater book

By Jack Weiss

Less than nine months after launching its recent book: *Hidden in Plain Sight: Evanston's Double Houses* (2024), a small team of Design Evanston members has begun work on its next book about the colorful past and interesting present of Evanston's iconic Varsity Theater.

The project is the fourth publishing effort by the design organization. Previous books included *Evanston: 150 Years 150 Places* (2013) and *Evanston's Design Heritage: Architects, Designers & Planners* (2020). All of Design Evanston's books are available locally at Bookends & Beginnings, Chicago-Main Main Newsstand, Evanston History Center, or online at designevanston.org.

The Varsity Theater: Then & Now is scheduled to be released late this fall or early in 2027. Design Evanston's team includes Kris Hartzell (author), Paula Bodnar (photo editor), and Jack Weiss (designer), with the collaboration of Varsity Theater owner, Steven Rogin, who has provided hundreds of photographs.

The Varsity Theater: Then & Now



Kris Hartzell, Paula Bodnar & Jack Weiss

Interior of the Varsity Theater, 1980s. Credit: Russell Phillips

Hartzell beautifully summarizes the history of the Varsity Theater: “When the Varsity Theater opened in Evanston in 1926, the local paper declared it “the most significant event in the history of Evanston.” The magnificent theater elevated Evanston as an entertainment destination, contributing to the successful development of Evanston’s central business district.

The theater was created by several Evanston residents with ties to Hollywood and the entertainment industry. Modeled after the grand atmospheric theaters by a **noted theater architect**, it was designed in an elaborate chateausque style that created a transformative experience for the audience. The Varsity far outshone Evanston’s existing theaters incorporating all the latest technologies in an exuberant ornamental setting.

The huge theater did not survive the proliferation of smaller box theaters, finally closing its doors in 1985. **Unable to find a profitable use as theatrical space,** ownership converted the **building** into retail space, shuttering the grand auditorium and stage. In 2023, nearly a century after its opening, it was successfully converted to residential use, while honoring its storied past.”

The book team is inviting the public to provide Varsity Theater artifacts, like ads, tickets, posters, or news clippings. Personal stories, in oral or written form, are welcomed as well. Email Jack Weiss, jack1101@att.net. (348 words)

Design Evanston’s “Thoughts on Design” articles focus on Evanston’s design history and advocate for good design in our city. Visit designevanston.org to learn more about the organization.