

Ornament ushers in new era for theater

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GP: Holiday bauble depicts movie house as restoration goes on

By J. LOUISE LARSON
Special Contributor

Killis Almond has vivid memories of trips to the old Uptown Theater.

"We had 35 cents, and that paid for getting into the movie, a soda and a popcorn. ... I remember seeing the movie *The Thing* and watching most of it with my brother from the floor behind the seat because we were so scared," he recalled.

Now a San Antonio-based architect known nationally for historic theater restoration projects, the Grand Prairie High graduate is supervising efforts to restore the Uptown's midcentury gleam.

The exterior work on the downtown Grand Prairie project is done, and the interior will be done in a year or so.

Mr. Almond's portfolio of 100 or so theater projects includes recent efforts in the Texas towns of Canadian and Gonzales.

"These buildings are in search of a use. This is a way of getting an amazing space for a fraction of the cost of a new one, and it fulfills a need by giving arts a place to expand," he said.

"There's all these emotions of rebirthing a space that's been dead for 10 years — 1994 is the last time a movie was shown there," he said.

No longer relegated to occasional rentals or even to the role of "just" a movie theater, the facility will be transformed into a performing arts venue with several spaces to entertain the audience in its 400 seats and eight restored loveseats for two, said Elspeth McDonald, managing director of the restored theater.

"We're very excited about the Uptown Theater project — we'll be able to present dance, theater, film and more," Ms. McDonald said.

The image of the center's nostalgic exterior adorns the city's 2007 collectible Christmas ornament. Proceeds will benefit various Grand Prairie charities.

The ornament features the retro marquee, blade sign and green-and-pink neon sign against a flourish of fireworks, a familiar landmark with an indelible connection to the past that Janice England hopes will remind residents when the major treat was a pickle juice snow cone that recycled juice and pucker power from the concession's



MILTON HINNANT/Staff Photographer

From left, Amy Sprinkles, Grand Prairie communications director; Elspeth McDonald, the Uptown's manager; Myrle Knox, '07 ornament designer; and Janice England, the mayor's wife, hold past ornaments.

"There's a lot of people who have very significant memories of going there with parents or date."

Elspeth McDonald, speaking of the Uptown Theater huge jars of monster dills.

In 1952, she was a middle schooler dating Charles England, the Grand Prairie boy who would grow up to be the mayor. Now spearheading the city's ornament drive, she recalls the Uptown Theater was "first class — it was the place to go at the time."

Built by brothers Jerry and Sherman Silver and their sister Helen Meagher Fisher in 1950, the Uptown opened as an "unsegregated" theater, years before others in the area would follow

suit, according to the theater's Web site.

It was revolutionary in other ways, too.

The newfangled spring-loaded seats that returned to vertical were considered state-of-the-art. There was a glass-enclosed "cry room" for bawling babies and their silver-screen fanatic moms, and midnight shows for shift working dads.

The theater's place in the community's memory bank is what could make this the best-

TO LEARN MORE

The Uptown Theater at 120 E. Main St. is the focal point of the city's 2007 holiday ornament.

Where to get one: Ornaments retail at \$14 each and may be purchased at: City Hall, Marketing Department, 317 College St.; or at the city's Tourist Center, 2170 N. Belt Line Road

Also available for \$10 are the previous entries in the series

■ 2004: Lone Star Park at Grand Prairie's Breeder's Cup event

■ 2005: "I Love Grand Prairie"

■ 2006: "Starry Nights"

Contact: call 972-237-8086 about the ornaments; for information on the theater project, visit www.uptowntheater.com

selling ornament in the city's four-year series.

"The magic of this project is the fact that it's emotionally significant to people — there's a lot of people who have very significant memories of going there with parents or dates," Ms. McDonald said. "To have the city recognize the importance of the Uptown Theater by creating the ornament for the theater was very special."

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