The single-screen movie theaters that punctuated small-town Americas main streets and city neighborhoods since the 1920s are all but gone. The well-dressed throng of moviegoers has vanished; the facades are boarded. In Silent Screens, photographer Michael Putnam captures these once prominent cinemas in decline and transformation. His photographs of abandoned movie houses and forlorn marquees are an elegy to this disappearing cultural icon.

In the early 1980s, Putnam began photographing closed theaters, theaters that had been converted to other uses (a church, a swimming pool), theaters on the verge of collapse, theaters being demolished, and even vacant lots where theaters once stood. The result is an archive of images, large in quantity and geographically diffuse. Here is what has become of the Odeons, Strands, and Arcadias that existed as velvet and marble outposts of Hollywood drama next to barbershops, hardware stores, and five-and-dimes.

Introduced by Robert Sklar, the starkly beautiful photographs are accompanied by original reminiscences on moviing by Peter Bogdanovich, Molly Haskell, Andrew Sarris, and Chester H. Liebs as well as excerpts from the works of poet John Hollander and writers Larry McMurtry and John Updike. Sklar begins by mapping the rise and fall of the local movie house, tracing the demise of small-town theaters to their role as bit players in the grand spectacle of Hollywood film distribution. Under standard distribution practice, he writes, a new film took from six months to a year to wend its way from picture palace to Podunk (the prints getting more and more frayed and scratched along the route). Even though
the small-town theaters and their urban neighborhood counterparts made up the majority of the nation's movie houses, their significance, in terms of revenue returned to the major motion-picture companies that produced and distributed films, was paltry.

In his essay, Old Dreams, Last Picture Show director Peter Bogdanovich recalls the closing of New York City's great movie palaces - the mammoth Roxy, the old Paramount near Times Square, the Capitol, and the Mayfair - and the more innocent time in which they existed when a quarter often bought you two features, a newsreel, a comedy short, a travelogue, a cartoon, a serial, and coming attractions.

While the images in Putnam's book can be read as a metaphor for the death of many downtowns in America, Silent Screens goes beyond mere nostalgia to tell the important story of the disappearance of the single-screen theater, illuminating the layers of cultural and economic significance that still surround it.

These photographs and the loss of which they speak signal the passing of a way of being together. -- Molly Haskell

List of Theaters by State

Alabama • The Lyric, Anniston • The Martin, Huntsville

Arizona • The Duncan, Duncan

Arkansas • The Avon, West Memphis

California • The Town, Los Angeles • El Capitan, San Francisco • The State, Santa Barbara

Connecticut • The Dixwell Playhouse, New Haven • The Princess, New Haven

Florida • The Gateway, Lake City

Georgia • The Judy, Hartwell

Idaho • The Ace, Wendell

Indiana • The Rem, Remington • The Ritz, Rensselaer

Kansas • The Cameo, Kansas City

Kentucky • The Crescent, Louisville • The Ohio, Louisville
I rarely buy a book immediately after I've read a borrowed copy, but I had to make an exception here. This beautiful and poetic collection of photographs and short essays moves like a dream, though it's a sad dream about a bygone way of life that may have been too good to be true.
The book opens with Robert Sklar's essay, which importantly recognizes the fight that trade associations of independent theatre operators put up in order to try to retain local control over cultural cinema offerings; even into the late 30s, most theatres were in small towns and offered a much broader range of movies than we might see today. Unfortunately, major companies, motivated by the lower maintenance and greater revenue from the bigger theatres, eventually dominated cinema and (along with the advent of television) drove most of these screens to near extinction. Molly Haskell's poem, A Wake, mourns a greater loss than this, suggesting that the closing of screens "signaled the passing of a way of being together... families no longer gathered for the big meal in the middle of the day."

The photographs are wide-ranging and honest, capturing the small movie houses in various states of abandonment, disrepair, adaptive re-use (particularly as churches), and even demolition.

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Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater (Creating the North American Landscape) by Michael Putnam - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!