



Photo by Mia Bertelsen

Internal changes made throughout the Bijou Theatre's 64-year history have not greatly affected its external appearance.

## Theater's past reveals many faces

By Brian Gallagher  
Emerald Contributor

It was first a church, then a funeral home, and now a movie theater and offices.

The Wilcox Building, at 492 E. 13th Ave., has gone through a number of changes since it was built in 1925.

According to Mrs. Wesley Nicholson, the Wilcox Building, current site of the Bijou Theatre, was originally designed by Walter Ross Baumes Wilcox, who served as a University architecture professor beginning in 1922 before he became head of the department.

It was the original site of the First Congregational Church in which Nicholson's husband first served as church minister in 1943. He held this position until about 1957.

She said Thomas Condon, one of the University's founders, was also one of the founders of the First Congregational Church, where he later trained to be a minister.

Nicholson said Condon was a very prominent figure in the church, which has always had a high respect for education

and had a congregation consisting of many people from the University community.

Then, the church comprised only a few rooms with the large sanctuary, a small chapel to the side, and several other small rooms, Nicholson said.

Today, the former chapel is used to sell movie tickets and refreshments.

In addition, a movie screen has replaced the original pulpit, and the projectionist's booth, located at the opposite end of the theater, takes up most of the balcony where "long-legged boys used to sit, where they could stick their feet down the aisle," Nicholson said.

"Those boys would always get out of there before we could meet them," she added.

In the 1940s, the pews were heated by hot water piped underneath to keep the people warm during the winter. Most of the glass had been imported from Europe, and, with Wilcox's personal designs, they are a singular piece of the area's history.

Nicholson said in 1957 the church was purchased by one of the deacons, who opened a

funeral home. But the First Congregational Church continued to meet there every Sunday until a new location was found.

In 1979, the building was purchased by Charles and Janice Rush, who made offices out of some of the small rooms and created a second auditorium for the Bijou.

The Rushes said that they don't plan any more alterations or expansions.

Considering the different functions the building has served over the years, it has remained much the same over its 64-year history.

Entering the building one can see antiques in the lobby, and the old wood architecture has been preserved.

Old lamps still hang from a high ceiling with stucco walls. The pews have been replaced by old-fashioned movie seats on a carpeted floor and electric baseboard heaters now warm the building.

But the wood architecture, as well as the windows and the stucco walls, are reminiscent of the past and along with its furnishings, it helps to create a landmark unique to the campus area.

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