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The Role of Neighborhood Theaters

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THE ROLE OF NEIGHBORHOOD THEATERS

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Marian Farmer's letter ("Did Suburban Theaters Die Because of Carousel?" Jan. 25) about the effect of the quasi-monopoly over Syracuse-area movies held by malls, raises a more important point that has not been addressed for some time: the important role movie theaters can play as economic engines in neighborhood revival.

Movies were intended for the downtown Galleries. If they had been included, that urban insert would have been more competitive from the start, against the more suburban style behemoth, "spaceship-in-parking-lot" malls. Downtown theaters would also have complemented the development of Armory Square, perhaps encouraging restaurant and retail development to move more quickly toward Salina Street.

In other cities, the introduction of movie theaters has played a critical role. In the 1970s, the TLA Theater in Philadelphia was a catalyst for the regeneration of South Street. In Washington, D.C., the introduction of theaters helped save the financially shaky Union Station rehab, now touted as a great success.

Movies spurred rapid development of the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica - a transformation so massive it has almost put the adjacent Santa Monica Place Mall out of business, forcing its owners to consider taking the mall roof off to rejoin the street.

In Syracuse, the Westcott Street Theater has been a small but vital linchpin in the survival of one of the few alternative retail streets.

Of course, the malls and their developers do not want to let the theaters go; nor do they want to promote alternatives. Exclusive or preferential arrangements with theater chains and movie distributors help draw what might otherwise might be a reluctant clientele to the malls. In some cities you can catch a movie and good meal, but in Syracuse if you want to do that, you have to eat at the mall, or drive miles out of the way in the middle of an evening. Thus, all the restaurants, shops and other businesses that might benefit from the region's entertainment dollars are left out; the mall takes all.

Already it is clear from slack post-holiday mall business and continuing store closings that Syracuse is not a dynamic retail market. If the number of visitors to Carousel going solely or primarily for movies was dropped from the total visitor count, then the big numbers flaunted by Pyramid would probably look less rosy.

Now imagine a decent percentage of those mall-moviegoers spending their time and dollars downtown at neighborhood theater clusters.

It is great that the Syracuse Mayor Matt Driscoll helped get Sutherland Corporation to relocate workers to the Galleries. Now I hope the city can help break the stranglehold of the malls on movies and move some theaters downtown, too.

Samuel Gruber, of Syracuse, once worked as a manager at the Carnegie Hall and Bleeker Street

Cinemas in New York City.

Caption: PHOTO 1998 file photo by Brenda Stever/Contributing photographer THE MANLIUS
CINEMA is said to be the oldest working movie house in Onondaga County. Color.