

Pussycat had stylish past

Idea to reclaim historic building 'flutters about'

By Kim Horner
Staff Writer

NATIONAL CITY — When it opened in Feb. 3, 1928, with the silent film version of the Victor Hugo's classic "Les Misérables," the National Theater was one of the most stylish places in town.

Each of the roughly 600 seats — prototypes of those at New York's Roxy Theater — were filled grand opening night and the lobby overflowed with baskets of flowers sent by proud residents.

Everybody who was anybody used to flock to the movie palace-style theater at 930 National City Blvd.

Now most people are afraid to even look inside.

The lavish 20s style red decor has took on a different sort of ambiance since the theater switched to "Always 3 X - Rated Films."

Calling the Pussycat Theatre a historical landmark, city and historical society officials hope to return the theater to respectability as part of National City's downtown redevelopment project.

The subject came up at an April 17 meeting between the City Council and Planning Commission in which officials considered a long-term project of renovating what the agenda called the "Old National City Theatre."

"It's an idea fluttering about. It was kind of thrown out there," Councilman Michael Dalla said.

Neither Dalla nor other officials had a clue what the inside of the theater was like. Several sources said that although they wanted to see the interior of the theater they did not feel safe or want to be seen going inside.

Please see Theatre: A-6



Staff photo by Tom Moe

The Pussycat Theater at 930 National City Boulevard is considered an historical landmark.

Theatre

Continued from page A-1

Marilyn Carnes, a member of the board of directors of the National City Historical Society, said although the group has not checked out the inside of the building, it placed the Pussycat Theatre on a list of 300 historical sites that it wants to preserve by incorporating them into the city's general plan.

"That's my dream, that it can be saved," Carnes said. "It's a good old building."

On Thursday afternoon this week, a dozen men spread throughout the large theater to watch a triple matinee of "Black Obsession," "Morals Part III" and "Acts of Confession." Faint groans could be heard above the Las Vegas lounge-style music.

The theater was fairly clean, except for the men's bathroom, where sperm, urine, water and toilet paper were smeared across the floor, the sinks and mirrors were dirty and the toilet stall door was removed.

Graphic graffiti with homosexual overtones was scratched in

concrete on the walls above the toilet.

The women's bathroom appeared untouched, yet a sign warned that "common decency" — and state law — require customers to wash their hands.

"Smile, you're on camera," read a sign under a closed-circuit television camera that monitors the lobby. An attendant sold

many times the theater has changed hands.

As the movie played, two men performed sexual acts with each other in the back row and made lewd comments about the men on the screen.

When the movie ended, one of the men stood up, pulled up his trousers and buckled his belt while walking down the aisle.

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candy, popcorn and the usual movie-watching fare in addition to new and used X-rated video-cassettes.

Inside the darkened theater, a video machine projects the movies on the large screen. The original projection system, called "state of the art" in early newspaper stories about the theater, apparently has been lost after the

Both men left the theater by the back door.

The historic theater has changed from a family-oriented social spot to a hangout — with military and senior discounts — for men of all ages and from all walks of life.

And although the National City Historical Society and city

officials have called the Pussycat Theatre a historic landmark, its manager Steve Lathrop said he doesn't see "any historical significance of the building."

He would not allow reporters or photographers to tour the building, but two reporters entered as customers Thursday.

"No chandeliers, no balcony, it's just an old-time theater that takes a lot of work just to keep it from falling in over our heads," Lathrop said.

He added that he didn't know city officials had discussed the possibility of renovating the theater and using it as a showcase for Lamb's Players, a local acting group.

"No, I haven't heard a word about it," Lathrop said.

The Pussycat Theatre has been an adult-oriented establishment since the 1960s, when under the name of the Paris it sparked controversy for showing "risque" films, records in the history room at the National City Public Library show.

From 1956 to 1963, the building housed a family theater

called the Abalee, principal librarian Anne Campbell said. The National Theatre closed in 1954. And it is not clear when the Pussycat took over the building.

In 1964, however, parents and church groups pressured the theater to show family films. Theatre owners submitted, showing "Children of the Damned" as their first film for the general public, Campbell said.

The theater returned to adult films within two years, when the manager claimed that movies like "Daughter of Fanny Hill" brought in \$200 per night while family films attracted about \$20 worth of customers.

"The public is more broad-minded and likes to see this kind of picture," the manager argued in 1966. He explained that the pornographic movies teach young people how to stay out of trouble by seeing how other people get involved in it.

Staff Writer D. Wade Booth contributed to this news report.