SAN FRANCISCO NEON SURVIVORS AND ICONS FROM THE ARCHIVES
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The newly restored New Mission gleams over Mission Street like a freshly waxed Cadillac. It is strange how bringing back a very old landmark, especially one as big as a movie palace, with a huge illuminated sign that can be seen from a mile away, can transform a city street, signifying big changes and uncertain futures, just as it must have done a century ago, when the theater was actually new. For the New Mission, this is at least the third time it has arrived on the scene. In the 1930s, Timothy Pflueger remodeled the theater, giving it the art deco panache that no doubt made the theater particularly worth saving.—Tom Downs

Plate 1. New Mission Theatre, 2550 Mission Street
2016 Al Barna
The Lafayette Coffee Shop sign is restored and glowing again on Hyde Street! The new owners wanted to restore it because they thought “it would be nice to preserve some of the city’s history. The Lafayette sign features a classic design that cannot be replicated.”

The previous tenants of the iconic Tenderloin coffee shop have relocated their restaurant with the same name and menu to 611 Larkin Street.

Plate 2. Lafayette Coffee Shop, 250 Hyde Street

2016 Al Barna
Details from photo opposite: Kearny Street at Market Street
1957 photo courtesy SFMTA Photo | sfmta.com/photo
This photo features a remarkable collection of San Francisco favorite places on Kearny Street: Pastine’s, The Iron Horse Restaurant, Brooks Camera, Selix Formal Wear, Sherman Clay Steinway Pianos, The Oyster Loaf Restaurant, and Top Hat Cocktails. All of these signs have disappeared over time. The Sherman Clay sign was moved to Mission Street in the 1990s. It was removed from Mission Street in 2015 because it was not considered a historic sign. But this Kearny Street photo shows it had a long legacy in the City.
The Hotel Carlton vertical blade sign hangs six-stories tall on the corner of this tourist hotel in the Tender Nob. We booked the room just above the large capital “C”, and Al hung onto me as I leaned out to capture the sign and street below. —Randall Ann Homan
The Great Star Theater was built in 1925 as a Chinese opera house. It eventually screened Hong Kong produced action films for nearly 50 years. Shuttered for the past 15 years by an owner who could not procure necessary redevelopment permits, the theater reopened in 2016 under the guidance of local impresario Paul Nathan. The multi-talented John Law restored the vertical neon sign.
THE NEW MISSION IS BACK

I took a walk in the Mission District the other night, on my way to meet up with Al Barna and Randall Ann Homan at the New Mission Theater. I hadn’t been in the neighborhood for several months, and with things going as they have been, a visit after so long often turns into an appraisal of recent changes—old shops and restaurants shuttered, buildings demolished, construction projects underway, discernible shifts in demographics, and so on. These clinical observations aside, the Mission remains one of the country’s most vital and interesting neighborhoods to just wander around in.

On the block between 21st and 22nd streets, I was quick to spot a major recent development—the New Mission Theater’s five-story neon sign, pointing skyward, freshly painted and sporting a new set of neon tubes that actually work. I knew the sign would be on, as that is partly why I was in the neighborhood, but it was nevertheless mildly astonishing to see it for myself. I had never before seen its neon tubes glowing.

When Star Wars the Force Awakens opened here last December, it was the first time a movie had shown at the New Mission since 1993. At the time of the theater’s demise, Mission Street had become a graveyard of old cinemas, their statuesque signs, now peeled and busted, looking like headstones placed directly on the spots where theaters had died or were dying. Across from the New Mission was the Cine Latino [formally The Crown Theatre], one block south was the Grand, and a block north was the Tower Theater. All of these theaters closed in the late ’80s to the mid 90s. For architectural preeminence on the strip, none outclassed the El Capitan, two blocks north of the New Mission. Its baroque façade is a city landmark, but the theater closed in 1957 and shortly after that it was gutted and turned into a parking garage. You can drive right in beneath the marquee.

I always saw these old theaters as the denouement of earlier times, the last warm embers of somebody else’s fire. I found them beautiful in a temporary sort of way, to be enjoyed while they lasted, knowing that unchecked deterioration gathers momentum, and that people who invest in real estate have little appreciation for arrested decay in the inner city. Sometimes preservationists intervene and make the old and crumbling sparkling and new again. But preservationists have to choose their battles, and in the 1990s, Mission Street was not yet a battleground.
In Al and Randall’s book, *San Francisco Neon: Survivors and Lost Icons*, there is a black and white photo of the Tower Theater’s sign and marquee, taken by Al in 1978. The photo is dark and atmospheric, with a figure in silhouette who appears to be hovering in front of the theater’s marquee; it is too dark to see the ladder or lift he must be using. The silhouette is obviously putting up lettering for Spanish language films that will screen in the theater in the days ahead, which alludes to a future that the Tower currently does not have. At this writing, the Tower is disintegrating in super slow motion; every time I walk by it I am reminded of archival footage of a bi-plane shedding its siding mid-flight. The Cine Latino has been shorn of its façade and something entirely new is about to become of the building’s empty shell. The Grand has been given new life as a creative technology entertainment and education space.

Meanwhile, the newly restored New Mission gleams over Mission Street like a freshly waxed Cadillac. It is strange how bringing back a very old landmark, especially one as big as a movie palace, with a huge illuminated sign that can be seen from a mile away, can transform a city street, signifying big changes and uncertain futures, just as it must have done a century ago, when the theater was actually new. For the New Mission, this is at least the third time it has arrived on the scene. In the 1930s, Timothy Pflueger remodeled the theater, giving it the art deco panache that no doubt made the theater particularly worth saving.

—Tom Downs, 2016
Excerpt from essay “The New Mission is Back”