Did a Kensington/HBI deal doom the Gaiety?

By Paul Restuccia

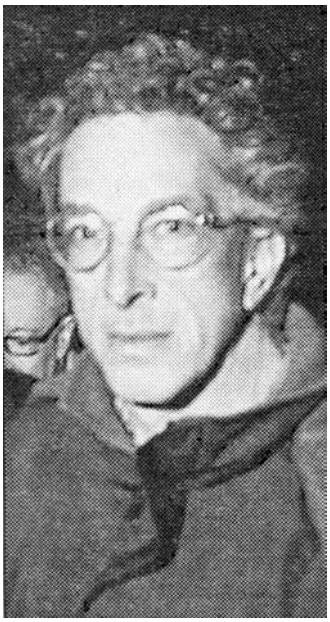
For the Gaiety Theatre, the end was always near.

And now it's here.

Designed by renowned architect Clarence Blackall, the historic burlesque house smashed early barriers between black and white performers.

Built in 1908, the Gaiety once hosted the likes of Josephine Baker, Ethel Waters and Sammy Davis Jr. Years later, of course, it ended up showing double features in what became the Combat Zone.

Today it's been reduced to rubble, with the site at LaGrange and Washington streets slated for a 30-story apartment tower.



Tough Loss: Lee Eiseman helped lead the un-successful effort to save the Gaiety Theatre

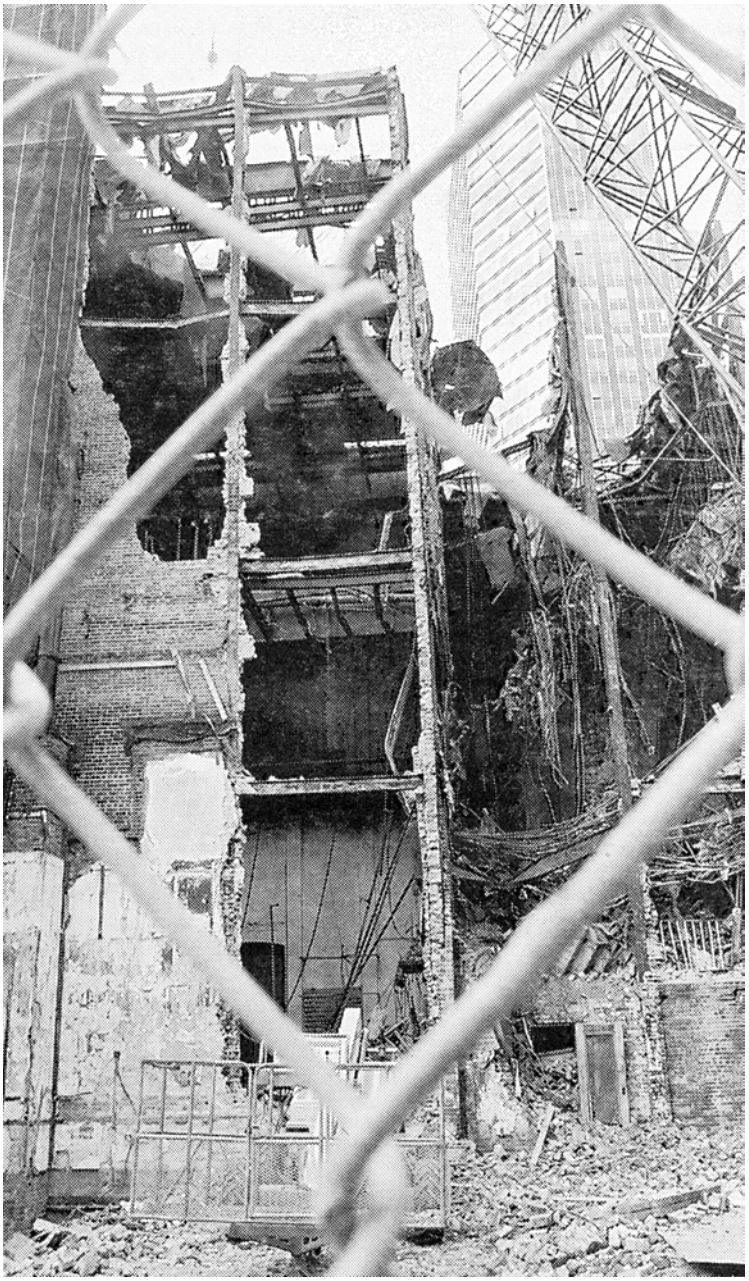
Now a key figure in the failed efforts to save the Gaiety says some of the Hub's own preservation advocates - in particular Historic Boston Inc. - had a willing hand in its destruction.

"For years we've been looking to find the piece of the puzzle that explains why the preservation community spoke with one voice against saving the Gaiety," said Lee Eiseman, a preservationist who serves as treasurer for Friends of the Gaiety Theatre. "Now we may have found it."

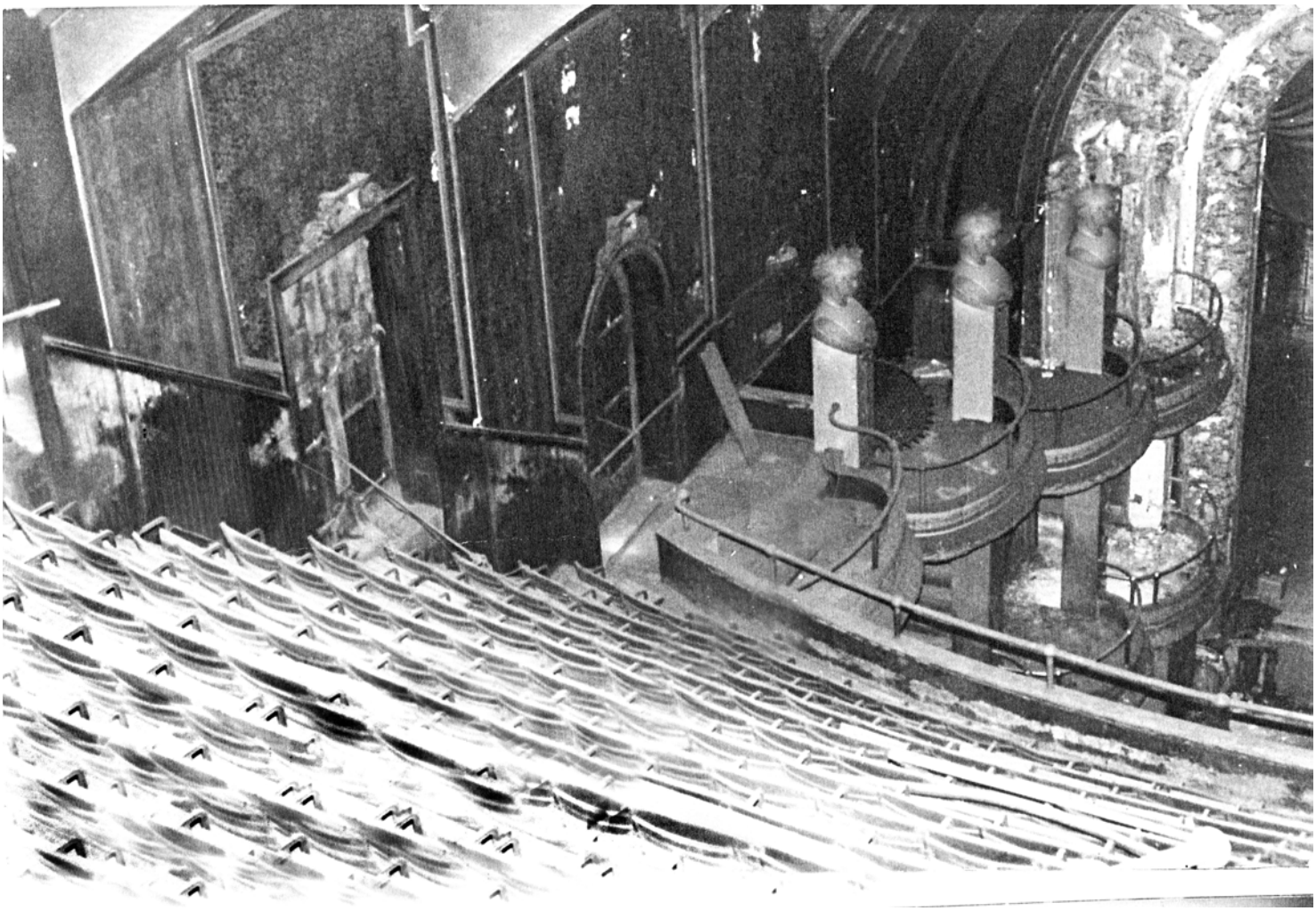
The charge: That developers bought Historic Boston's acquiescence to bulldozing the Gaiety with a deal to acquire the nearby Hayden building - a protected landmark that HBI has been trying to unload for years.

The rub: The developers dropped plans to buy the Hayden building soon after demolition of the Gaiety began.

Eiseman said Kensington Development, which controls the Gaiety site, three years ago obtained a "secret option agreement" on the Hayden building.



...but now he's charging that some of the city's preservation establishment had a hand in the destruction of the historic theater on Lower Washington Street—which has been reduced to rubble, above



Lost Gem: The now demolished Gaiety Theatre was known for its horseshoe-shaped boxes and its fine acoustical qualities. Kensington Development has torn it down to build an apartment tower.

Gaiety backers blaming deal for theater's end

Critics say the apparent agreement raises the possibility that HBI opposed the granting of landmark status for the Gaiety as a quid pro quo for the option on its own building.

"I have been told by two knowledgeable sources that there was a secret option agreement executed between Kensington Development and Historic Boston," said Eiseman.

Eiseman and others note that two key figures - former HBI executive director Stanley Smith and HBI board member Henry Moss - uncharacteristically opposed well-publicized efforts to save the Gaiety. Those efforts have been well chronicled in both the Herald and Boston Globe.

And in a March 2003 piece in the Christian Science Monitor, officials from the American Vaudeville Museum and the Theatre Historical Society of Boston described the Gaiety as "an entertainment venue ... quite superior to almost everything in Boston," "a virtually intact burlesque house" and "a jewel."

"In 20 years of soliciting opinions from everyone on what buildings should be saved, the Gaiety never came up," Smith said in an interview - denying that any option on the Hayden building ever existed.

It was Smith who convinced the city to save the crumbling Modern Theater - a venue in far worse condition than the Gaiety - a few blocks away on Washington Street.

But critics say Smith was effectively compromised on the Gaiety issue by Kensington's purported option to purchase the Hayden building, which is surrounded by Kensington-owned buildings on lower Washington Street.

He and Moss were considered key voices in convincing the city's Landmarks Commission in 2003 not to give the Gaiety landmark status.

Meanwhile, Kensington's lawyer, Matt Kiefer, is also president of the board at HBI, a dual connection that raises a possible conflict of interest. At the time of the alleged secret deal was made, Kiefer was actively garnering support from the preservation community to oppose landmarking the Gaiety.

"This is a clear conflict of interest," said Shirley Kressel, head of the Association of Boston Neighborhoods, which supported saving the Gaiety. "The developer's attorney (used) his position at HBI to create a deal that co-opted and corrupted preservationist groups which might have otherwise supported landmarking a historic building."

Kressel and other sources say that Stanley Smith has privately had harsh words for Kensington, because the developer decided not to exercise the alleged option right after it began demolition of the Gaiety this spring.

Sources say Smith has told preservationists that he felt "badly used" and "betrayed" by Kensington.

"Once Kiefer and Kensington got what it wanted out of Smith and HBI, they dumped them," Kressel said.

Both Kiefer and Smith maintain there was no option on the Hayden building, and Smith denies ever saying he was "badly used."

But Smith and HBI board member Todd McGrath, who teaches at MIT's Center for Real Estate, acknowledged that HBI tried to make a deal with Kensington for the Hayden - saying only that the developers and HBI could not agree on a purchase price.

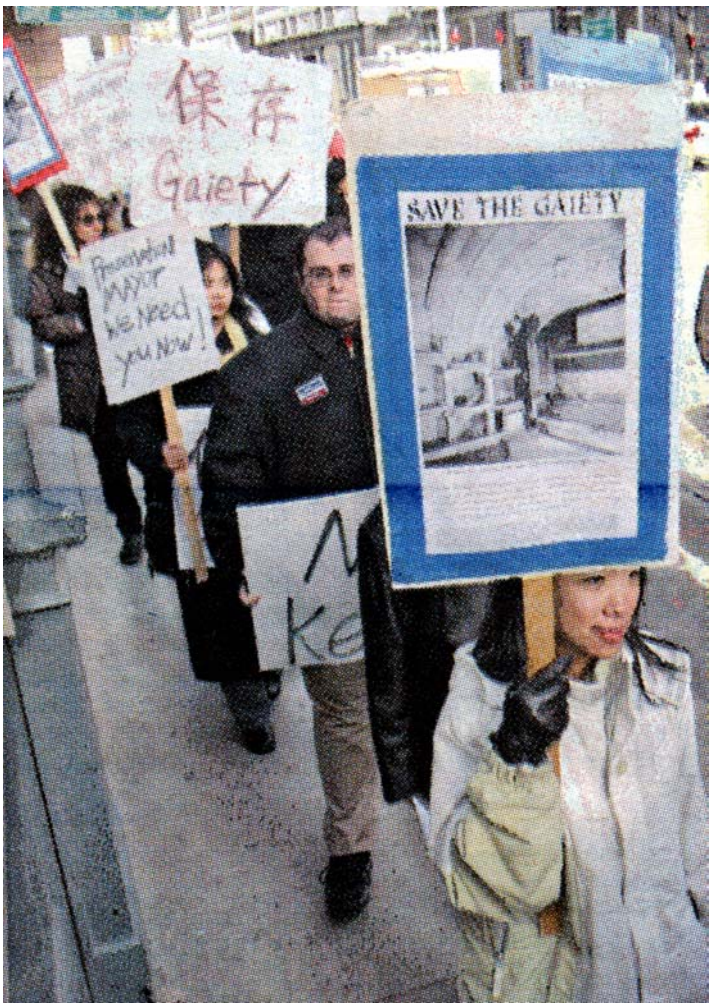
"I was not directly involved in any negotiations between Kensington and HBI," said Kiefer. "I was kept informed about them as president of HBI's board, but since Kensington is my client, I cannot wear both hats."

Kiefer is a former staffer and vice chairman of the Boston Landmarks Commission.

What you have is an interlocking directorate that provides a lot of potential conflicts of interest," says Michael DeLacey, a local preservation attorney who supported efforts to save the Gaiety.

Kiefer was also a board member of the Boston Society of Architects, along with longtime friend and architect Henry Moss. DeLacey says that Moss, who co-chairs the BSA's Historic Resources Committee, wrote a letter on BSA stationery opposing the Gaiety's landmark status soon after Kiefer gave him a personal tour of the theater.

Moss wrote the letter without any input from the members, as he initially promised he would," says DeLacey, who serves on the Moss- led committee. "There were all kinds of reasons for (us) to support landmark designation for the Gaiety. It doesn't look good that the (committee) ... thumbed its nose at this. I felt as though the rug were pulled out from under us."



SAVE IT: The grassroots movement to save the Gaiety, that included this protest outside the theater in January, was unsuccessful. Some feel the city's preservation establishment is partly to blame.

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