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Ridglea Theater's would-be rescuers are years late and many dollars short

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Eight years have passed since the old 7th Street Theatre crumbled to dust.

Back then, we talked about how preservationists really ought to be saving the Ridglea Theater.

Nobody did.

So here we are, years later and not one bit wiser, reliving 2002 like *Groundhog Day* as the Ridglea heads for a future as a bank with a really nice sign and marquee.

And here come the preservationists again, hoping to stage another last-ditch rescue.

I don't blame them for trying. I love the Ridglea, too.

I was there the night in 1988 when a young Julia Roberts walked its halls at the premiere of the HBO movie *Baja Oklahoma*.

But at some point, these rescues have to start with money and buyers and a business plan, not with last-gasp pleas for government intervention.

That's how Grapevine saved a theater.

What is now the Palace Arts Center had been written off as lost at least three times before a foundation bought it at a 1991 foreclosure sale.

The theater was once closed for 20 years and used to store hay. Now, after several rescue misfires, preservationists partnering with Rocky Gribble and the Grapevine Opry have turned it into a showpiece on historic Main Street.

"I can't believe it was going to be torn down for a burger drive-through," said Ross Bannister, the city's director of historic preservation.

"But it took people with a plan and the determination to see it through."

The Arlington Theater, now the Arlington Music Hall, also has been saved by private investors.

"We're going to rent it for dance recitals, award ceremonies, anything we can find," said Kevin Bailey, president of Center Street Station Downtown and the Arlington Music Hall.

The Burk Collins Co. restored the 1950s ticket booth and turquoise tile. A Babe's Chicken Dinner House will open in fall.

"We're excited to get this rolling," Bailey said.

In west Fort Worth, North Carolina-based Bank of America is the only buyer making an offer for the perpetually for-sale Ridglea.

The bank promises to keep the neon sign and facade.

One historic Fort Worth theater, the Rose Marine, has been preserved as a city arts hall. Another, the Bowie, is completely preserved as a bank. Cars park inside the old Hollywood downtown.

At least six other neighborhood theaters remain, including the 1930s-era New Isis in the Stockyards and the 1960s Wedgwood, now a church.

Now is the time to pick one and get to work saving it.

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