

Lesson 3: THE WESTLAKE THEATRE (638 S. Alvarado St.)

- What You Need to Know:**
- Grade Level: All Levels
 - Curriculum Connections: English—Language Arts, History—Social Science
 - *Kids' Guide* Correlation: As students explore the Parks District (pages 8-9), use this study of the Westlake Theatre to lead students to a deeper understanding of the role of movie palaces in Los Angeles' social and cultural history. This lesson is designed to complement a class trip to the Westlake Theatre, where students do first-hand observations. You can modify this activity by using the “observe and reflect” guide of the student worksheets to have students explore other buildings in your neighborhood.
 - Website Correlation: Go to “Explore the Blvd.” at www.curatingthecity.org. Use the neighborhood profile for the “Parks District” section and, within that section, the building profile for “Westlake Theatre” for photos and background information. You can also view other theaters on Wilshire by using “Sort By” or “Filter” at the bottom of each page.

- Focus Questions:**
- What architectural features can you discover in a movie palace?
 - How can observation help you learn more about a building's purpose and history?
 - What can the change in a building's use tell you about how a neighborhood has changed over the years?
 - What is preservation?

- Expected Learning Outcomes:**
- Students will be able to define and identify architectural features including *terrazzo*, *column*, *balcony*, and *mural*.
 - Students will be able to describe how the use of the Westlake Theatre has changed over the years.
 - Students will be able to use their knowledge about the Westlake Theatre to identify how the surrounding community has changed over time.
 - Students will be able to explain the concept of preservation.

Assessment: Use the “How to Look” rubric to write a detailed description and “review” of the Westlake Theatre.

Essential Vocabulary:

- terrazzo
- column
- balcony
- mural
- neon
- preservation

Materials: Lesson 3 worksheet
pencils
paper
cameras (optional)

PROCEDURE

Motivation: Ask students to describe the inside of a typical modern-day movie theater. What details are common to all movie houses? Make a list on the board of the elements that they name. Now, ask them to think about what it must have been like in Los Angeles during the early days of the movies. What design elements might architects have used to make early movie theaters attractive and appealing to customers? Invite students to imagine what a “fancy” movie theater might have looked like. Tell students that they will be doing some detective work and exploring a building that used to be a movie theater – their job will be to discover the architectural “ghosts” of the past.

Making Connections: Ask students to consider buildings they know that have served multiple purposes over the years. Perhaps they’ve been in an apartment building that used to be offices, or they’ve been in a store that used to be a family home. Challenge students to name the “clues” that they observed that told them that the building used to be used for something different.

Guided Instruction:

1. Before your visit to the Westlake Theatre, take some time in your classroom to discuss the definitions of some key architectural features. They will be looking for these features when they visit the theater. Share the photographs with students so they can have an accurate picture of what they will be looking for.
2. Students will be using the “How to Look” rubric found on pages 4-5 of the *Kids’ Guide*. Review the steps of the rubric with students before visiting the theater.
3. During your site visit, encourage students to look closely at the architectural features of the building. Encourage them to look for hidden details that give some clues as to the original interior of the building. Be sure to point out the ticket booth, the terrazzo, the columns, the balcony, the painted curtain, and the murals on the ceiling. Invite students to make pencil sketches of what they see; if cameras are available, delegate a few students to take photos that you can examine together back in the classroom.
4. When you return to the classroom, direct students to use the “How to Look” rubric as a starting outline for a written review of the Westlake Theatre. Help students to use the sequence of the rubric questions as an effective way to organize their ideas.
5. Follow up the students’ observations with a discussion of the word *preservation*. Help students understand that preservation is the act of saving or maintaining a building for future generations to enjoy. Ask students to examine how the building is used today and what it was used for previously. Are there ways that the building might better use the architectural features that make it special, or be cleaned up to better reveal its former glory? What else could be done to preserve the theater? What would be the benefits of doing so?

- Assessment:** Have students write, revise, and share their reviews of the Westlake Theatre.
- Reflection/
Critical Thinking:**
1. Think about how the Westlake Theatre is used today. How is it different from how it was used in the past?
 2. What are the benefits to reusing an old building like the Westlake Theatre? What are the difficulties, and how can they be overcome?
 3. Why do you think 1920s movie palaces like the Westlake Theatre were designed on such a grand scale? Why do you think movie houses today look so different?
 4. What does the building tell us about the history of the neighborhood?
 5. Can you think of ways to preserve the building?
- Enrichment
Opportunities:**
1. Have students imagine that they could decide the fate of the Westlake Theatre. Encourage them to write a proposal for turning it back into a theater or finding another use that would employ its original architectural features.
 2. Have students do web research to learn more about how new technology like movies and recordings changed cultural life in the early twentieth century.
 3. Have students do web research to find out more about the Westlake district. Who lives there today? From what countries do most immigrants come? What is the dominant language in this neighborhood?
 4. What movie stars might have been featured on the Westlake Theatre's movie screen during its heyday? Have students find out about early Hollywood celebrities such as Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Buster Keaton, and John Wayne.
- Worksheet Answers:**
1. balcony
 2. mural
 3. terrazzo
 4. column
 5. neon
- Observe and Reflect:* Answers will vary.
- California Standards:** *English-Language Arts (Writing):*
- 2.1.0 Students write clear and coherent sentences and paragraphs that develop a central idea. Their writing shows they consider the audience and purpose.
 - 3.1.1 Create a single paragraph.
 - 3.2.2 Write descriptions that use concrete sensory details to present and support unified impressions of things or experiences.
 - 4.1.1 Select a focus, an organizational structure, and a point of view based upon purpose, audience, length, and format requirements.
 - 4.1.2 Create multiple-paragraph compositions.
 - 5.1.2 Create multiple-paragraph expository compositions.
 - 5.1.6 Edit and revise manuscripts to improve the meaning and focus of writing by adding, deleting, consolidating, clarifying, and rearranging words and sentences.
 - 5.2.3 Write research reports about important ideas, issues, or events by using the following guidelines.

- 6.1.2 Create multiple-paragraph expository compositions.
- 6.1.6 Revise writing to improve the organization and consistency of ideas within and between paragraphs.
- 6.2.2 Write expository compositions (e.g., description, explanation, comparison and contrast, problem and solution).
- 7.1.1 Create an organizational structure that balances all aspects of the composition and uses effective transitions between sentences to unify important ideas.
- 7.1.2 Support all statements and claims with anecdotes, descriptions, facts and statistics, and specific examples.
- 7.1.3 Use strategies of note taking, outlining, and summarizing to impose structure on composition.
- 7.2.4 Write persuasive compositions.
- 8.1.1 Create compositions that establish a controlling impression, have a coherent thesis, and end with a clear and well-supported conclusion.
- 8.1.2 Establish coherence within and among paragraphs through effective transitions, parallel structures, and similar writing techniques.
- 8.2.4 Write persuasive compositions.
- 9.1.1 Establish a controlling impression or coherent thesis that conveys a clear and distinctive perspective on the subject and maintain a consistent tone and focus throughout the piece of writing.
- 9.1.2 Use precise language, action verbs, sensory details, appropriate modifiers, and the active rather than the passive voice.
- 9.2.3 Write expository compositions, including analytical essays and research reports.
- 11.1.1 Demonstrate an understanding of the elements of discourse (e.g., purpose, speaker, audience, form) when completing narrative, expository, persuasive, or descriptive writing assignments.
- 11.1.3 Structure ideas and arguments in a sustained, persuasive, and sophisticated way and support them with precise and relevant examples.

History-Social Science:

- 2.1.0 Students differentiate between things that happened long ago and things that happened yesterday.
- 2.5.0 Students understand the importance of individual action and character and explain how heroes from long ago and the recent past have made a difference in others' lives (e.g., from biographies of Abraham Lincoln, Louis Pasteur, Sitting Bull, George Washington Carver, Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, Golda Meir, Jackie Robinson, Sally Ride).
- 3.3.0 Students draw from historical and community resources to organize the sequence of local historical events and describe how each period of settlement left its mark on the land.
- 4.4.4 Describe rapid American immigration, internal migration, settlement, and the growth of towns and cities (e.g., Los Angeles).

- 4.4.6 Describe the development and locations of new industries since the nineteenth century, such as the aerospace industry, electronics industry, large-scale commercial agriculture and irrigation projects, the oil and automobile industries, communications and defense industries, and important trade links with the Pacific Basin.
- 4.4.9 Analyze the impact of twentieth-century Californians on the nation's artistic and cultural development, including the rise of the entertainment industry (e.g., Louis B. Mayer, Walt Disney, John Steinbeck, Ansel Adams, Dorothea Lange, John Wayne).
- 8.12.9 Name the significant inventors and their inventions and identify how they improved the quality of life (e.g., Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, Orville and Wilbur Wright).
- 11.5.6 Trace the growth and effects of radio and movies and their role in the worldwide diffusion of popular culture.
- 11.5.7 Discuss the rise of mass production techniques, the growth of cities, the impact of new technologies (e.g., the automobile, electricity), and the resulting prosperity and effect on the American landscape.
- 11.8.2 Describe the significance of Mexican immigration and its relationship to the agricultural economy, especially in California.
- 11.11.1 Discuss the reasons for the nation's changing immigration policy, with emphasis on how the Immigration Act of 1965 and successor acts have transformed American society.

STUDENT WORKSHEET

Name _____



Westlake Theatre, 1937

(Herald-Examiner Collection/Los Angeles Public Library)



Westlake Theatre, 2005

During the 1920s and 1930s, movies were a brand-new form of entertainment. People flocked to movie theaters almost every week to see their favorite movie stars in spine-tingling adventures and heart-stopping romances.

Movie theaters were new, too. Theater owners wanted to design glamorous, exciting buildings that would draw customers in. Early movie theaters were fancy and full of expensive details. These buildings were so incredible that people started calling them “palaces.” Movie-goers could dress up and feel like they were getting a fabulous night on the town, all for a nickel!

The Westlake Theatre was one of those movie palaces. Built in 1926, it featured an enormous, glowing neon sign that attracted customers from miles around. As you entered the theater, you could look down and see designs in the terrazzo sidewalk. The ornate columns and decorations on the building were full of amazing details, and even the ticket booth was beautiful!

Once inside, you’d be thrilled to look up at the arched columns of the balconies, designed to look like they had been built hundreds of years before. Look up at the ceiling, and you’d find a mural that might remind you of seventeenth-century Italy. Even the curtain was painted with unique designs.

For decades, the Westlake Theatre entertained movie fans. But today, it’s not a movie palace anymore – it’s home to a swap meet, where many people shop every day. If you visit, you’ll see stalls crammed with all kinds of merchandise for sale. But if you look closely, you can find some amazing architectural “ghosts.” You can find many clues to this building’s special past.

READ AND MATCH.

Read the definitions and see if you can match each term to the correct picture.



terrazzo: a type of floor or wall design made of colored marble chips set in a mixture of sand, plaster, or cement, then ground and polished to be smooth and shiny



balcony: a platform that projects over the main floor in a theater



columns: the tall, straight “legs” that hold up or decorate a building, usually in the front



neon: a special gas that is sealed in glass tubes and electrified to create a glowing sign



mural: a large painting that is painted directly onto a wall or ceiling

OBSERVE AND REFLECT.

Use the guide below to take notes when you visit the Westlake Theatre. If you wish, you may also sketch what you see on the other side of this page. You will be using these notes to write a detailed review of the building.

1. Observe.

What does the building look like? _____

What colors does it have? _____

What materials is it made of? _____

What details make this building different or special? _____

2. Compare.

How is this building like other buildings that you've seen before? _____

How is it different? _____

3. Ask a Question.

How do people use this building every day? _____

What is this purpose of the building? How can you tell from the way it looks? _____

Why do you think the architect made the building look this way? _____

How has this building changed since it was built? _____

4. Make a Good Guess.

Use what you've observed and what you already know to come up with some possible answers to your questions.

5. Form an Opinion.

After all that looking and thinking, here's the big question:

Do you like this building? Why or why not? _____

What do you like about it? _____

What would you change? _____

What would we be missing if this building were gone? _____
