

Manhattan to bid adieu to a moviehouse icon

By Randee Dawn
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NEW YORK _ When it opened in 1952, New York Times film critic Bosley Crowther called it a "class theater." Twenty-five years later, Woody Allen elevated it to icon status by featuring it in his Oscar-winning "Annie Hall." And this Sunday, the Beekman Theater will show its last film _ a screening of Universal's "The Interpreter."

"The Beekman epitomized New York moviehouses at their best," remembers Allen, whose films often had exclusive engagements at the Upper East Side moviehouse. "The size, the architecture, the location seemed perfect. I saw many great films there by great foreign filmmakers, and it was an honor to have my films shown there."

So what has brought down one of the last remaining single-screen theaters in the city? Not finances, and not neglect. Beth Simpson, a spokeswoman for Clearview Cinemas, which has operated the house for more than six years, says, "We love the neighborhood, and have proudly brought quality movies to this community. Unfortunately, the theater's landlord has exercised a lease option to take back the property. Regrettably, we have no choice but to cease operation of the theater."

That leaseholder is Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, and the Beekman _ along with the other buildings in the immediate area _ will be replaced by a breast and imaging center for outpatient care. Which more or less nullifies the argument for preservation.

"It's hard to make the case for preservation when that's going to be taking precedence," admits Seri Worden, executive director of Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts, an organization that has lobbied for the Beekman's landmark designation since 2001. A last-minute postcard campaign directed at the landmarks commission is under way, but Worden concedes the cause is lost.

"Still," she says, "we can make a little bit of noise."

Built to accommodate postwar movie audiences, the Beekman's "class theater" status was typical of the small, neighborhood theaters that took root in the 1950s and '60s. Tied into the switch-over from newsreel theaters into art house theaters, the Beekman was designed to appeal to wealthy and upper-middle-class locals and features a Streamline Moderne late-period art deco design, exhibited best in its scripted neon name perched on the marquee. Inside, the 510-seat theater's mezzanine and arced rows feel like a small opera house, not a cinema.

Over the years, the Beekman has maintained its classy status, even if moviegoers now all come in jeans, and remains a favorite among cinemaphiles and historians alike. "The Beekman always attempted to create an upscale version of moviegoing, maintaining a meticulous theater that really has an emphasis on presentation," explains Ross Melnick, co-founder of the Cinema Treasures Web site and co-author of a book by the same name. "People have a hankering for the 'old days.' They appreciate that attention to detail and service, even to the opening and closing of curtains over the screen before every showing."

The theater's name will live on a block away, as Clearview re-names its New York One Two theaters the Beekman One and Two. Yet it's hard to imagine Allen's Alvy Singer trying to buy tickets in that recessed interior for himself and Annie.

"It may be nice to have a Beekman One and Two so residents can remember the theater they will ultimately miss," Melnick muses. "But I think the Beekman will always be the Beekman and will never be replaced."