

## Ousting institutional racism

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I have never seen a performance from the balcony of the Turnage Theater in my hometown of Washington, N.C.

As the first phase of the restoration of Turnage nears completion, many local residents have elicited fond memories of the building. Granted, of course, that those reveling in the nostalgia are white.

Although Washington's black leadership has been very gracious in its support of the restoration efforts, it is not hard to understand why the black community in general has been less than enthusiastic about embracing the project.

For many blacks in Washington, the Turnage Theater does not bring back a rush of warm memories.

In my childhood, there are three distinct vestiges of institutionalized racism that remain both clear and troubling to me.

The first, obviously, is represented by the schools.

I did not experience total integration until I was in the seventh grade.

Secondly, I remember segregated waiting rooms in doctors' offices.

The final agent of Jim Crow is the Turnage Theater.

Simply put, in my childhood, blacks were relegated to the balcony. Saturday after Saturday, I found a comfortable seat downstairs and up front.

Every community in North Carolina has a Turnage Theater.

Oh, it may not be a theater, and it may not even be a building. But in every hamlet in our great state there is an institution or some hallowed ground whose past is a source of embarrassment but whose future can be a source of pride.

All it will take is people of goodwill reclaiming the footprint in the name of social justice and civic engagement.

Given the scarred and racist past of the Turnage Theater, does it really deserve our continued full support for its total restoration?

Like all the sites around North Carolina, the answer is a resounding "yes," with one simple caveat.

The Turnage deserves not only a total physical rehabilitation; it demands a moral rehabilitation as well.

Once the theater is rebuilt and ready to once again host performances, it needs to be dedicated to the ideal that the facility has been reborn as a venue to serve all people, a powerful and much needed social

catharsis.

In that spirit, I would love to see an early public performance in the cleansed Turnage to be one of my favorite black blues guitarists, a musical legend like B.B. King, Taj Mahal or Robert Cray.

I will be there, in a new seat, with a new perspective. With any luck at all, I will be in the balcony.

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