

City of Madison Landmarks Commission  
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (1)

Name of Building or Site

Common

Historic (if applicable)

Majestic Theater

Majestic Theater

Location

Street Address

Aldermanic District

115 King Street

6th

ClassificationType of Property (building, monument, park, etc.)  
building

Zoning District

Present Use

C4

theater

Current Owner of Property (available at City Assessor's office)

Name(s)

Middleton 20th Century Drive-In Corp.

Street Address

Telephone Number

10624 N. Port Washington  
Mequon, WI 53092

unavailable

Legal Description (available at City Assessor's office)

Parcel Number

Legal Description

0709-242-0303-0

see attached sheet

Condition of PropertyPhysical Condition (excellent, good, fair, deteriorated, ruins)  
good

Altered or Unaltered?

Moved or Original Site?

altered

original site

Wall Construction

brick load-bearing

Legal Description:

Original plat. Begin on King St. 101.65 feet W from E corner block then S 40.7 feet then SE 43.5 feet to Doty St., then SW on Doty 40 feet, then NW 60 feet then N 56 1/2 feet to King St., then E 40 feet to beginning part of Lots 2 and 3 block 104.

Bibliography

- Cox, Randy. "Madison's Movie History." Historic Madison Newsletter (Spring 1993): 7-8.
- Custer, Frank. "Medicine Shows to Vaudeville to Movies: That's Majestic and Site." Capital Times, 20 January 1958.
- Custer, Frank. "60-Year-Old Majestic Theater Once 'Shrine of Silent Drama'." Capital Times, 14 December 1966.
- "For Art's Sake." Isthmus. 18 November 1994, 34.
- Fox, Darryl. "Civic Development and Theater History: The Case of the Madison Theatre." Marquee 20 (1988).
- Moore, Bill. "Majestic: Alternative Theater Remains Secure - So Far." Wisconsin State Journal, 18 March 1990, 1I-2I.
- "\$1,750,000 Worth of Building in Madison During the Year 1906." Wisconsin State Journal, 2 January 1907, 1.
- "Open Majestic Theater." Wisconsin State Journal, 15 December 1906.
- Orr, Gordon. "Louis W. Claude: Madison Architect of the Prairie School." The Prairie School Review 14 (1981): 5-35.
- Photographs. Visual and Sound Archives. State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
- Silver, Jonathan D. "End of a Majestic Movie House." Capital Times, 31 August 1992, 1A.
- Silver. "Majestic Gets New Life After Near Death." Capital Times, 1992, 5B.
- Stockinger, Jacob. "Theater Marks 80th Birthday." Capital Times, 9 December 1986, 17-18.

City of Madison Landmarks Commission  
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (2)

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Describe Present and Original Physical Construction and Appearance:

The Majestic Theater, located at 115-117 King Street, was built to the designs of Claude and Starck. The building has a three story street facade with the upper portion of brick with stone detailing in the Second Renaissance Revival style. Originally built as a two story theater in 1906, the third floor was added in 1907.

The detailed brick facade of the Majestic is visible above the marquee. Bands of alternating brick and stone, set in from the corner and defining the edges of the building, give the impression of large pilasters or elaborate quoins. A projecting cornice of modillion blocks with dentils below caps the building horizontally. Between the second and the third story, a second, simple cornice runs from one set of alternating bands to the other, giving a further impression of pilasters at the corners. Decorative features provide visual interest at the center of each floor elevation. Above the marquee is a group of five windows with square headed windows below and segmentally arched windows above. The windows form a single grouping contained within a stone Gibbs surround with alternating large and small blocks. At the center of the third floor, alternating blocks of stone and single courses of brick frame four areas of brick wall, giving the appearance of window openings. The pilaster like features support a large, plain entablature with a small cornice projection.

While the upper portions have remained unchanged since their construction, the entry to the theater has been altered several times over the years. A 1908 photograph indicates a three part division of the lower elevation. Farthest to the left was the ticket window and a pair of doors. The entrance was given prominence by a porte cochere like canopy. Extending across the sidewalk, Tuscan columns on plinth bases supported the large white canopy. At the corners of the roof were orbs. Facing the street, the theater name was written in script in a panel with a segmental arch top. Above the canopy was a lit marquee (light bulbs are visible in the photograph). Further along the facade were paired doors and display cases with advertising. A row of clerestory windows ran above the doors and ticket window.(1)

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(1) Photo from the collection of Jerry Fladen. Diane Kostecke and Katherine Rankin, "Madison's Historic Movie Palaces," Journal of Historic Madison 7 (1981-1982): 29.

Photographs from the 1930s indicate that the entrance had been modernized. Photographs indicate multiple doors of glass with metal frames. The marquee /canopy became more streamlined, with a central rectilinear section between arched ends. The name was now in bold capital letters and the theater boasted: Air-Conditioned Cool and Comfortable.(2) In 1941 Arthur Desormeaux installed a new front and marquee.(3) This may have been the final alteration, as by 1954 the ground floor had acquired its present appearance.(4) The lower facade is paneled with with metal plates of pale yellow with black piping and with burgundy plates at the base. A rounded ticket booth is located in the center of the ground floor facade with doors and display cases to either side. The marquee is rectilinear, projecting out to King Street as a truncated triangle. The name appears in capitals along the top of the marquee, one set facing each direction of King Street.

When it opened in 1906 the Majestic had 750 seats. The drop curtain featured a large painting, "The Crossing Place," of a river crossing with two peasant women beckoning a ferry boat.(5) A balcony and boxes were added with the construction of the third floor. While undoubtedly other interior changes took place over the years, a major remodeling occurred in 1957, removing original plasterwork and one row of box seats. Then, new seats and carpeting, a new screen, new or improved heating and air conditioning, as well as "completely new ultra-modern decorations in the interior" were installed.(6)

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(2) Photograph ca. 1938, Visual and Sound Archives, State Historical Society.

(3) Frank Custer, "Medicine Shows to Vaudeville to Movies: That's Majestic and Site," Capital Times, 20 January, 1958.

(4) Photograph by John Newhouse. King Street looking toward Capitol, 1954. Visual and Sound Archives, State Historical Society.

(5) Frank Custer, "60-Year-Old Majestic Theater Once 'Shrine of Silent Drama'," Capital Times, 14 December 1966.

(6) Custer, "Medicine Shows to Vaudeville," 20 January 1958.

City of Madison Landmarks Commission  
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (3)

Original Owner  
Edward and Otto  
Biederstadt

Original Use  
theater

Architect or Builder  
Claude and Starck

Architectural Style  
Second Renaissance Revival

Date of Construction

1906

(subsequent interior and facade alterations)

Indigenous Materials Used

List of Bibliographical References Used

see attached sheet

Form Prepared By:

Name and Title

Daina Penkiunas

214 Acewood Blvd.

Madison, WI 53714

(608) 243-8144

Organization Represented (if any)

Madison Trust for Historic Preservation

Address

PO Box 296

Madison, WI 53701

Telephone Number

(608) 251-4615

Date Nomination Form Was Prepared

June 15, 1995

City of Madison Landmarks Commission  
LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (4)

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Significance of Nominated Property and Conformance to  
Designation Criteria:

The Majestic Theater was built in 1906 for Edward and Otto Biederstadt, at a cost of \$20,000.(7) It is significant for the role it played in the social life of Madisonians and is the oldest theater in operation in Madison. It is also significant as a theater design by the Madison architectural firm of Claude and Starck.(8)

The Majestic was built for vaudeville shows, while its contemporary, the Grand opened in 1907, was used as a nickelodeon. The Wisconsin State Journal noted the Majestic's opening on December 15th:

The Majestic theater was formally opened at 3 o'clock this afternoon, when the Arion orchestra appeared on the stage and struck up enlivened music. The room was crowded and the lights turned on to show the beauty of the inside of the vaudeville house. The stage is nearly as large as at the Fuller opera house and the scenery is very artistic. The room was comfortably filled by several hundred people.(9)

The program for the theater's first week included: Four Luciers, Edith Dombey and Company, Dixon and Fields, Henry Clifford, and the Majestiscope. Matinee shows cost 10 cents. Evening prices were 15 cents for general admission, and 20 cents for reserved.(10)

Earlier Madison theaters included the 1890 Fuller Opera House and the Hooley Opera House, first opened as the Madison Lyceum in 1858. (The Hooley closed in 1884.) The Flom built in 1902 on East Main began as a burlesque and vaudeville house.

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(7) "\$1,750,000 Worth of Building in Madison During the Year 1906," Wisconsin State Journal, 2 January 1907, 1.

(8) "Buildings Under Way," Wisconsin State Journal, 2 January 1907.

(9) "Open Majestic Theater," Wisconsin State Journal, 15 December 1906.

(10) Advertisements, Wisconsin State Journal, December 1906.

Renamed the Bandbox in 1917, it was converted to a nickelodeon. By the early teens the number of theaters in Madison showing movies had increased dramatically. The Star on East Washington opened in 1911, the Varsity on State Street, the Olympic on University Avenue, the Lyric on South Baldwin, the Gem on Winnebago, the Orton on Williamson Street, and the Royal on Atwood Avenue all opened between 1911 and 1914.(11) As movies become increasingly more popular the older theaters changed their entertainment formats. On 20 May 1912 the Majestic put on its last vaudeville show; the program included the Casino Boys (a local quartet), the Masqueria Sisters, The Carnellas, the Three Saint Julians, and Sam Rowley.(12) After this performance, the Majestic, which had always shown newsreels, became a movie house. In the mid-1920s, the Majestic Players, a stock theater group formed in 1924, performed at the theater.

With the change in format came changes in ownership and management, including Francis Fischer, S.M. Kerwin, Paramount Pictures, Arthur Desormeaux, and Warner Brothers. All struggled to keep up with the changes in entertainment, including the competition from the larger and more elaborate movie palaces opened in the late 1920s in Madison. With the advent of television and the later construction of multiplex cinemas, many older theaters went into decline. The Majestic was threatened with closure due to lack of profitability in 1992 when Madison 20th Century Theaters Corp. took over management.(13) The Majestic exists today as an "art house" theater, showing foreign and American movies.

The Majestic is significant as an example of the work of Claude and Starck. Both members of the firm were born in Wisconsin in 1868. Louis Claude died in 1951, Edward Starck in 1947. They received their architectural training locally, and in Milwaukee and Chicago. In 1896 Claude and Starck opened their practice in Madison; the partnership lasted until 1929. The firm designed a wide range of building types in a variety of popular styles. Their works include houses, schools, hotels, banks, libraries, municipal and commercial structures. In Madison, in addition to numerous residences, their projects include the 1908 Teckemeyer Candy Company, the 1915 Lincoln School and the 1921 Luther Memorial Church.

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(11) Darryl Fox, "Civic Development and Theater History: The Case of the Madison Theater," Marquee 20 (1988). And, Kostecke and Rankin, "Madison's Historic Movie Palaces," 27-28.

(12) Custer, "Medicine Shows to Vaudeville," 20 January, 1958.

(13) Jonathan D. Silver, "Majestic Gets New Life After Near Death," Capital Times 5B.

The Majestic Theater design displays the firm's liking of brick with stone detailing and the use of classical vocabulary popular in their early works, most commonly seen in their library designs. Here, the use of classical features is lighter and less academic. In addition, this same exterior detailing indicates Claude and Starck's ability to lend scale and elegance to a relatively small facade.