

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

<i>Name of Building or Site</i>	
<i>Common</i> Orpheum Theater	<i>Historic (if applicable)</i> New Orpheum Theater
<i>Location</i>	
<i>Street Address</i> 216 State Street	<i>Aldermanic District</i> Fourth
<i>Classification</i>	
<i>Type of Property (building, monument, park, etc.)</i> building	
<i>Zoning District</i> C4	<i>Present Use</i> movie theater
<i>Current Owner of Property (available at City Assessor's office)</i>	
<i>Name(s)</i> Madison 20th Century Theatres Corp.	
<i>Street Address</i> 10624 North Port Washington Road Mequon, WI 53092	<i>Telephone Number</i>
<i>Legal Description (available at City Assessor's office)</i>	
<i>Parcel Number</i> 0709-144-2702-0	<i>Legal Description</i> see attached
<i>Condition of Property</i>	
<i>Physical Condition (excellent, good, fair, deteriorated, ruins)</i> good	
<i>Altered or Unaltered?</i> altered	<i>Moved or Original Site?</i> original site
<i>Wall Construction</i> brick and stone	

Landmark Nomination
Orpheum Theater, 216 State Street

Legal Description

ORIGINAL PLAT-BEG 208 FT E FR W COR OF B
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LOT 3 85 FT FR W JOHNSON TH SE TO E COR
OF LOT 3 TH S ALG W LN OF DAYTON BLDG CO
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COR OF LOT 4 TH NELY TO BEG ALSO LOT 5
BLK 64

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

Describe Present and Original Physical Construction and Appearance.

The Orpheum Theater, designed by noted theater architects C. W. Rapp and George L. Rapp of Chicago, has a street facade of two stories built of smooth-faced limestone with a tan brick veneer on the first floor. The front of the building sits between two commercial buildings along the upper State Street commercial district. This facade belies the fact that the bulk of the building lies at an angle behind its neighbors to the west. This part of the building is constructed of red brick and the large auditorium section rises almost six stories in height, reflecting the large auditorium and backstage area of the theater.

The front facade has a parapet roofline and Art Deco detailing. Between the stone pilaster strips are narrow windows (boarded up at the present time), above which are panels of low-relief ornamentation. The first floor front facade reflects the 1967 remodeling, with its tan brick veneer and several sets of contemporary glass entry doors. Dominating the front facade are two marquees. A towering vertical "Orpheum" sign rises from the roofline. It is devoid of decoration. The second marquee, over the door area, is a horizontal white and red lighted rectangular marquee decorated by lights around the edges of the marquee. In the front, the marquee is topped by a decorative "Orpheum" sign as well.

The interior shows some of the effects of remodeling during the 1960s. The original ticket lobby has a 1960s appearance, and the grand lobby has also had some remodeling, but does retain many of its original French Renaissance details, an interior style favored by Rapp and Rapp. The wide marble staircases on each side of the grand lobby remain and the hallways still show some of the walnut veneer panels and decorated walls and ceiling of the original interior.

The auditorium, however, still has most of its French Renaissance detail, although in need of restoration. There is an abundance of raised, gold-toned ornamentation around the stage area, the walls, private boxes and the balcony. The private boxes and balcony are relatively intact and most of the flame and gold draperies are still in evidence. There are a number of wall panels with their original tapestry brocade material as well. Most impressive, though, are the gold and crystal light fixtures and chandeliers still decorating the walls and ceiling of the auditorium. The basement lounge areas have been largely remodeled with modern bathroom fixtures. The stage area has been blocked off for the purposes of providing the movie screen. The generous backstage area has been entirely remodeled into a second theater, so has lost much of its original detail.

The large auditorium is an impressive sight to movie goers accustomed to the small, plain boxes currently in vogue at most new or remodeled theaters. When one looks closely, there are many old stairways, light fixtures, and doors left from the original construction.

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LANDMARKS AND LANDMARK SITES NOMINATION FORM (3)

<i>Original Owner</i> Beecroft Building Corp.	<i>Original Use</i> vaudeville-movie house
<i>Architect or Builder</i> Rapp and Rapp, Chicago	<i>Architectural Style</i> Art Deco and French Renaissance
<i>Date of Construction</i> 1925-1927	<i>Indigenous Materials Used</i> n.a.

List of Bibliographical References Used

- Hall, Ben M., *The Best Remaining Seats*, New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1961.
- Kostecke, Diane and Katherine Rankin, "Madison's Historic Movie Palaces," *Journal of Historic Madison*, 1981-1982, pp. 25-38.
- MacMillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, New York: The Free Press, 1982, v. 3, Rapp and Rapp entry.
- "Madison's New Orpheum Theater," Chicago: The Orpheum Circuit, no date, brochure on file at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
- Mollenhoff, David V., *Madison: A History of the Formative Years*, Dubuque: Kendall Hunt Publ. Co., 1981.
- Naylor, David, *American Picture Palaces*, New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1981.
- Naylor, David, *Great American Movie Theaters*, Washington: The Preservation Press, 1987.

Form Prepared By:

Name and Title

Carol Cartwright and Katherine H. Rankin

Organization Represented (if any)

Madison Trust for Historic Preservation and Madison Landmarks Commission

Address

P. O. Box 2985, Madison, WI 53701

Telephone Number

266-6552

Date Nomination Form Was Prepared

January 16, 1986 and October 21, 1998

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

Significance of Nominated Property and Conformance to Designation Criteria:

The Orpheum Theater is significant for architecture as the most intact example in Madison of the early twentieth century movie-vaudeville theater. It was designed in the grand movie palace tradition by noted theater architects C. W. and George L. Rapp (Rapp and Rapp) of Chicago in 1925 and was built in 1925-1927. The theater is also historically significant because it is the finest example of the movie palace era in Madison, a time between 1910 and 1930 which is significant to the history of mass culture in the United States. The movie palaces, with their silent pictures, usually accompanied by stirring organ music, along with live variety acts were a widely popular form of entertainment in Madison and around the country. The popularity of this type of entertainment was an important cultural phenomenon that helped establish the twentieth century tastes of mass popular culture in America.

Architecture

The New Orpheum Theater opened March 31, 1927, and was one of the two finest theaters in Madison designed in the grand movie palace tradition (the Capitol Theater across State Street, built in 1927-1928, was the other). The Orpheum was designed by noted Chicago theater architects Rapp and Rapp, nationally famous for their opulent movie houses in cities across the country. The Orpheum's design, while not as grand or elegant as the largest of Rapp and Rapp's designs in larger cities, was typical of the firm's work in the late 1920s.

Cornelius Ward Rapp (1861-1927) and George Leslie Rapp (1878-1942) grew up in Carbondale, Illinois, sons of a carpenter-architect. C. W. Rapp worked for his father, then began practicing alone in 1891. George received his architectural training at the University of Illinois, worked for Chicago architect Edward Krause, then in 1906 joined his brother. Together they formed the partnership of Rapp and Rapp. Rapp and Rapp started working for the Balaban and Katz chain of theaters in 1917 and soon became one of the three leading theater architects (with Thomas W. Lamb and John Ebersson) in the nation. During the 1920s, Rapp and Rapp designed hundreds of theaters. The firm was adept at all three of the major theater interior styles: the royal palace (featuring European opulence), the exotic (with Oriental, South American or East Indian influences), and the atmospheric (featuring imaginative weather or sky patterns decorating the ceilings, along with opulent wall decor). But most of Rapp and Rapp's interior designs were executed in their favorite style -- the royal palace tradition, particularly the French Renaissance. They especially preferred to use Louis XIV designs, often replicating interiors from the Sun King's grand palace at Versailles. Their first well-known design in this style was a significant design built in a relatively tiny community -- the Ringling Memorial in Baraboo (1915). Inspired by the Opera Hall at Versailles, the Ringling was one of the first movie "palaces" in the country (David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces*, p. 43).

While noted particularly for their theater designs, Rapp and Rapp also designed a number of ballrooms, commercial and industrial buildings around the nation (Ben Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats*, p. 332; *American Picture Palaces*, pp. 32, 48; *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, v. 3,

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p. 332).

Besides the Orpheum, Rapp and Rapp are known to have designed two other theaters in Madison -- the Strand on East Mifflin Street (1916, demolished) and the Capitol Theater, across from the Orpheum (now the Civic Center). The old Orpheum on Monona Avenue (demolished) was also probably a Rapp and Rapp design (attribution based on similarity of design to the Majestic in Dubuque (now the Five Flags Performing Arts Center).

Before its transformation into the Civic Center, the Capitol Theater was probably the best design of the three Rapp and Rapp theaters in Madison. The Capitol's Moorish exterior and grand, Spanish-influenced interior was a good example of the opulence of the Rapp and Rapp tradition. Although the auditorium of the Capitol Theater was restored in the 1970s during the Civic Center development, and a small part of the facade still exists, the restored auditorium is encased within an ultra-modern interior lobby area, which includes the Madison Art Center and other theater and civic facilities.

The Orpheum, at the present time, is the most intact Madison example of the great movie palace era. Although some of the 1960s remodeling has changed the lobby and basement lounge area, the auditorium and hallways still retain much of their opulent details, including ceiling and wall panel decorations, walnut veneer paneling (some of it is now painted), original doors and hardware, and the somewhat run-down but still impressive decor of the large auditorium, including the massive balcony area and sumptuous light fixtures. The Orpheum interior also is a good example of the late 1920s designs of the Rapp and Rapp firm, which was one of the most adept at integrating the increasingly popular Art Deco style of decoration with the classical opulence and grandeur of the movie palace that the public, by that time, expected.

The Art Deco facade may also be significant in its own right. Publications documenting the architectural history of the movie palace tend to concentrate, quite naturally, on the interior lobby and auditorium spaces. However, a review of these books suggests that the exterior design of most movie theaters tended toward the Neo-classical or the Spanish Baroque. Only in the 1930s did Art Deco design become a popular style for exterior design. The Art Deco of the Orpheum exterior may be one of the first uses of this style for a movie theater in the country. Further research may help to establish the importance of the Orpheum facade in movie theater history.

History

During the late 1910s and 1920s a new entertainment medium -- the motion picture -- spawned a unique historical and architectural phenomenon -- the movie palace. These theaters, which featured a combination of live music, comedy/vaudeville acts and dance numbers, along with a

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feature silent movie accompanied by an organist, were extraordinarily popular with the general public. They also served as an educational resource, with news reels bringing to local communities the most significant events from around the world. The demand for this entertainment and information resulted in the development of a significant architectural phenomenon --the lavish movie palace -- in which Americans could revel in the fantasy land of Hollywood, and stroll through the opulent splendor of theaters designed like French royal palaces, Spanish haciendas or Oriental pagodas. The entertainment, in many cases, was not as important as the experience of going to the theater. Indeed, one movie mogul, Marcus Loew, said that "we sell tickets to theaters, not movies" (quoted in Naylor, *Great American Movie Theaters*, p. 18). Theater builders of the time were conscious of the political impact of their work. George Rapp, himself, noted that the movie palace was a "shrine to democracy where the wealthy rub elbows with the poor" (quoted in Naylor, *American Picture Places*, p. 31).

The motion picture, ironically, was to eventually doom these impressive theaters, as the increasingly sophisticated movies, themselves, became the experience, and the surroundings only incidental.

Madison has a long history of theater construction. In 1858, the City Hall housed a 900-person auditorium on the third floor. Also in that year, two private theaters were built -- Van Bergen Hall at Doty and Pinckney Streets (demolished) and Turner Hall (demolished). In 1870 the Hooley Opera House (formerly Van Bergen Hall) opened to become Madison's grandest theater, and it operated until around 1885. In 1890, the Fuller Opera house, a modern and lavish theater, opened; during the 1890s it was the center of high-quality and popular entertainment in the community (demolished). Live entertainment was a Madison staple in 1907, when the first exclusive movie theater was built -- the Grand at 204-206 State Street (demolished). The fascination with movies that swept the nation was evident in Madison during the 1910s, as the Fuller Opera House began showing films regularly, and two other major movie houses began operation -- the Majestic, constructed in 1906 as a vaudeville theater, switching to movies exclusively in 1912 (extant), and the Amuse Theater in 1910 at 16 E. Mifflin Street, remodeled as the Strand in 1917 (demolished).

There were other, smaller storefront style movie theaters and nickelodeons in operation during this time, but the above theaters were the most important movie houses during the 1910s. The 1920s saw the transformation of movie theaters into movie palaces. The trend peaked in 1927 with the construction of the Orpheum and Capitol Theaters, across the street from each other along upper State Street. The Orpheum, which cost \$750,000 to build, was financed in part by a Madison dentist, Dr. William Beecroft, whose efforts here and with other local theaters earned him the nickname "Mr. Theater." On its opening night, March 31, 1927, the program included a news reel, a feature movie, an organ concert, vaudeville acts and a dedicatory address by the Mayor. The Orpheum was associated with the RKO Orpheum chain, formed in 1927 when RCA

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took over the Keith-Albee-Orpheum vaudeville circuit (parenthetically this merger helped create the demise across the country of the vaudeville house, since RCA arranged for the big performers to broadcast live on radio). The Capitol was erected by a consortium of Milwaukee and Madison investors. Its opening on January 21, 1928 created a modest but real theater district in downtown Madison. Madison's only "suburban" movie palace, the Eastwood on Atwood Avenue(extant), was built in 1929. It was the last movie theater built in Madison until 1966.

Of the movie palaces in Madison there is no question that the Orpheum and the Capitol were the largest and most lavish. As discussed earlier, the Capitol has lost much of its original integrity and the other smaller movie theaters have been extensively remodeled. The Orpheum Theater best captures the era when the movie, combined with live entertainment, was a significant cultural phenomenon both in Madison and across the country (David Mollenhoff, *Madison: A History of the Formative Years*, pp. 87, 246-247, 428). For decades the Orpheum was a center of amusement, fantasy, education and entertainment for thousands of Madisonians.

The depression of the 1930s and World War II sobered the American public to the perceived excesses of the 1920s. Americans still went to the movies, but they came to think of the movie palaces as extravagant and outdated. Some architects also began rejecting the excesses of designs which recalled earlier periods in favor of the functional International style. As Hollywood became more sophisticated, the movie itself became the focus, rather than the spectacle of live entertainment in theaters. Finally, the era of the shopping mall with its suburban theaters during the 1960s and 1970s drew patrons away from the still operating large movie houses in downtowns across the country.

During the past several decades, many movie palaces have been demolished, remodeled, or subdivided, leaving few still intact theaters. In Madison, only four of the eleven buildings constructed as live entertainment or movie houses between 1890 and the Depression still exist -- the Majestic, the Orpheum, the Capitol (now the Civic Center), and the Eastwood. Historically the movie palace was a cultural and entertainment center that touched the lives of nearly every Madisonian. The Orpheum is by far the most intact and finest remaining example of the movie palace era in Madison.