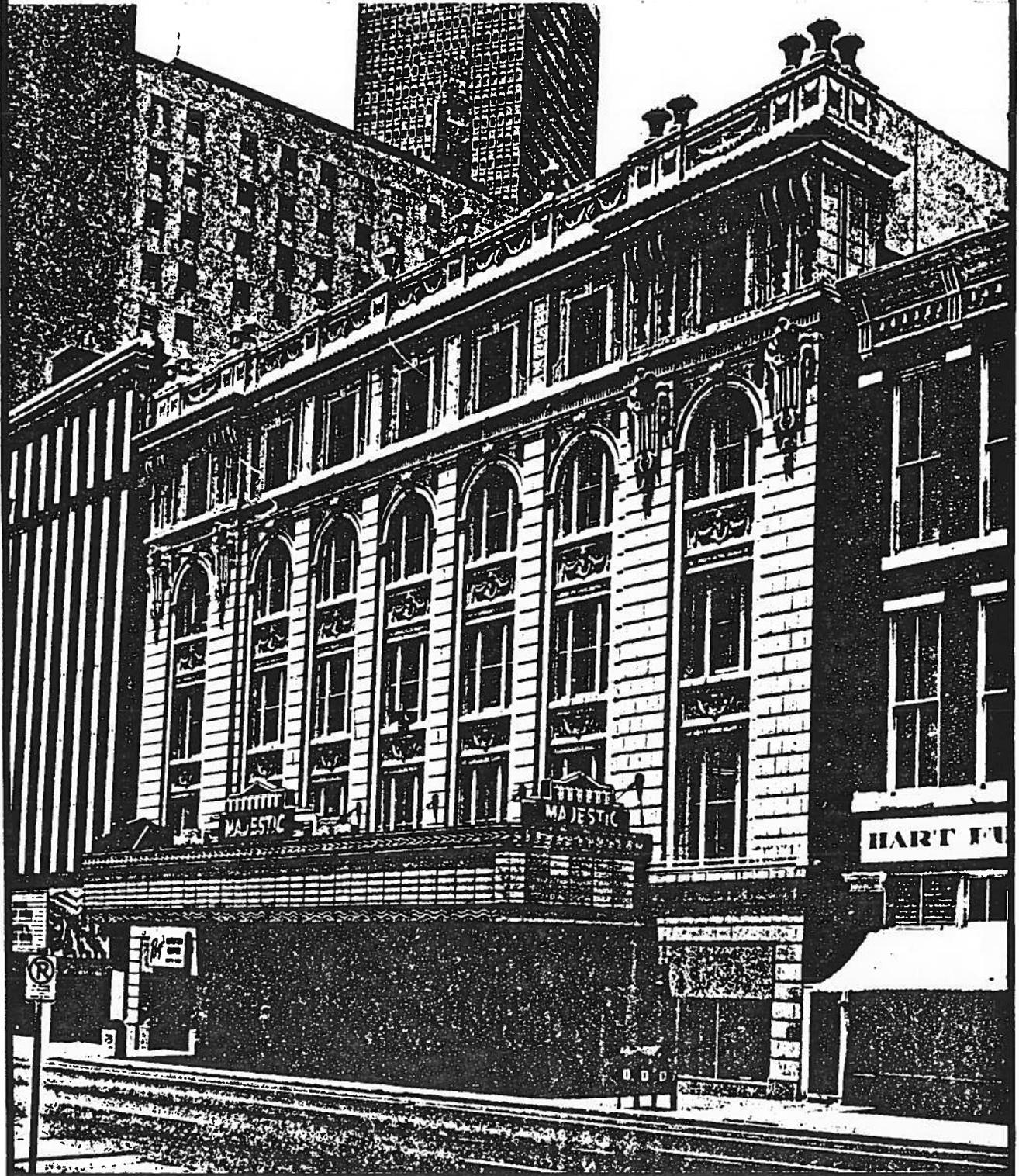


MAJESTIC THEATRE
DESIGNATION REPORT
CITY OF DALLAS



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Cultural Significance

Dallas' Majestic Theatre stands today as a reminder not only of the city's architectural heritage, but also of its social and cultural past. A classic example of the once prominent, opulent movie palace that is all too quickly disappearing, the Majestic's physical quality reflects cultural preferences that no longer exist. The present structure was built to replace an earlier Majestic that had been built in 1905, but had burned. The first building had been one of four original theatres that would later grow into the great chain known as Interstate Theatres. The new Majestic cornerstone was placed on 18 October 1920 and had the words:

All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players...
Shakespeare

Dedicated to art, music, and wholesome entertainment in grateful
recognition of the support given me by the people of Dallas.

Karl Hoblitzelle

Karl Hoblitzell (1879-1967) was the main force behind the Majestic, as well as the entire Interstate group. Hoblitzelle was instrumental in the organization of Interstate Amusements in 1905. This chain acted as a link for entertainers travelling between the east and west coasts. Originally he did not wish to be actively involved in the operation and took over reluctantly when his backing was required. By 1906 he had become president. It was his intention to bring good clean entertainment to the people of the southwest and vaudeville was his medium. Concerned with the potentially questionable, risqué nature of vaudeville, Hoblitzelle personally screened each act. If the act could not be altered to meet certain standards of respectability it was discarded. It was the interest of the corporation and its president to provide entertainment for the entire family. Safety, comfort, and courtesy were stressed for the patron; "Dedicated to community service" was the motto. When movies became part of the entertainment package, it was his practice to show films of diverse viewpoints if he felt they were beneficial to the public. The Texas legislature trusted his judgement so much that in 1945 they refused to pass a film censorship rule.

Hoblitzelle was a pioneer in the theatre industry. His were the first theatres in the southwest to install air-conditioning and they were the first to be wired for the new sound films. In addition, he maintained a personal policy that his theaters have more fire exits than state law required. Hoblitzelle was also an innovator in the use of earphones in the seats for the hard of hearing, crying rooms where mothers could take their children and continue to watch the show and "kiddie" seats so that children could see better. The lower level also had "Majesticland," a free nursery complete with nurses, crackers and milk, a petting zoo, a slide in the shape of a shoe, and a carousel. Also known as a philanthropist, throughout his life, he was involved in operations beneficial not only to the community, but also to the nation. He worked for the establishment of a Texas Rural Development Commission to help Texas farmers through rural planning. With a \$250,000 gift he founded and helped fund the Texas State Research Foundation. During WW I he went to Washington to assist the Red Cross in organizing entertainment programs for hospitals. His contribution aided Southwestern Medical Foundation, Southern Methodist University, and the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts. During and after WW II Hoblitzelle was awarded for his activities during the conflict.

In 1930 Hoblitzelle sold his group to RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum) and Paramount Pictures. Intending to retire, he took his wife on a tour of Europe. As it became apparent that neither company was able to maintain the chain due to financial problems caused by the

depression, he decided to return home and repossess the organization. By doing so, he saved the jobs of many of his associates and employees.

Originally, the bill was for "seven clean acts of vaudeville twice daily," but in 1925 with the increasing influence of the film industry, motion pictures were added to the fare. Until the mid-30's, films supplemented the live entertainment. But vaudeville was dying out and movies became the chief source of entertainment. The Majestic was known as the "action house" for it was here that movies of an adventurous nature were most often shown in Dallas. In 1949, a serious attempt was made to revive vaudeville at the theater, This endeavor was not successful and eventually the theater again offered only movies. In 1951, the Interstate organization was once more sold to Paramount, but the Majestic was not included when the one hundred and sixty-five theatres changed hands. It remained in the possession of the Hoblitzelle Foundation. Movies were shown at the Majestic until it closed in July 1973 with a James Bond movie, reminiscent of the James Bond movie Thunderball which grossed the largest amount in ticket sales for one week: \$75,000 in 1965. After three years of negotiation, the theater was given to the City of Dallas on 28 October 1976. The city plans to open the Majestic as a center for the performing arts, and hopes that renovation will contribute to the development of a theater-entertainment area which would benefit from proximity to the convention area and compliment the Thanksgiving Square pedestrian center.

The list of theatrical, musical, vaudeville and motion picture stars that have performed on the Majestic stage is impressive. The gala opening night performance on 11 April 1921 was given by the "incomparable" ballerina, Olga Petrova. At that time, telegrams of congratulations were sent by Gloria Swanson, William S. Hart and Dorothy Gish. Mae West performed there, as did the comedians Jack Benny, Burns and Allen, Milton Berle, and Bob Hope. The magicians Houdini, Blackwell and Thurston astounded audiences with their sleight of hand and mystifying routines. Ginger Rogers started her career at the Majestic. Duke Ellington's and Cab Calloway's bands, as well as John Wayne, James Stewart and Joan Crawford made appearances at the theater.

The history of the Majestic Theatre is colorful, and the structure essentially represents the entertainment industry at its height of glamour and romance in the 1930's and 1940's. It stands as a memorial to Karl Hoblitzelle, a prominent figure who established a respectable social and cultural center for Dallas' citizens and to its architect, John Eberson, who was to become the principal architect for the Interstate chain.

Architectural Significance

The Majestic Theater remains in good condition on its original site. The facade enhances Elm Street with detail and strong architectural rhythms. Located in downtown Dallas, the structure is fronted on Elm Street and is surrounded by commercial buildings. The building spans five bays and is five stories tall. Built as the flagship of the Interstate Theater chain, its twentieth century interpretation of the Renaissance Revival style is suitably ornate and expressive of the prominence the Majestic wished to suggest. The exterior of the theater essentially remains unchanged, with the exception of the first floor elevation which has received extensive remodeling. Originally a large canopy projected over the entire first floor elevation. While the canopy's detailing mirrored the classical references of the building, the overall form was reminiscent of the art nouveau. A large marquee extended vertically from the fourth floor level over the canopy. In 1948 the canopy was enclosed by a new larger marquee. A series of tripartite windows set into square and arched frames extends across the front elevation of the second through fourth stories. Fifth story square windows are framed by elaborate moldings. The structure is terminated by an enriched cornice of applied ornament. The floors are divided by decorative panels. Large scored pilasters marked by sculptural ornament act as vertical terminating elements while smaller scored pilasters divide the bays.

The main lobby and the theater have experienced only superficial modifications, and thus have retained much of their ornate detailing. As one entered the theater, the first sight was the marble fountain, complete with plump cherubs. In the lobby, the black and white Italian marble floor has been carpeted. Also, chandeliers have been removed, and the fountain has been replaced by a concession stand; the original articles remain in storage. The lobby and theater are enhanced by a plethora of details which allude to their classical sources. These areas are marked by Corinthian columns, egg and dart molding, cartouches, Roman swags and fretwork. Within the theater, the proscenium arch, flanked by two Corinthian columns (originally covered with gold leaf), frames the set-back stage. There were once real stuffed peacocks, the symbol of the theater, over the arch and the boxes and near the organ pipes. The orchestra pit was sunken in order to minimize the audience's distraction. Seating for 2400 was laid out in the shape of a fan and was arranged for three levels--the main floor and two balconies. Originally the seats were of woven cane, each with its own hat rack for gentlemen. The auditorium walls are decorated with large paintings set into panels which reflect the theme of the theater, "Roman Gardens". Back-stage there is a six foot high fly loft to accommodate backdrops and other scenery. An original set of wooden light controls is of special interest.

Underneath the peeling paint and the acrid smell which "assaults the visitor's nose... right at the door," stands a solid building in structurally good condition. The five stories of steel, stone, and terracotta remain intact behind many coats of bright paint and a formica facade added in 1948. However, the structure's facade essentially remains unchanged, with the first floor remodeling altering the art nouveau atmosphere almost imperceptibly. A large marquee extends from the fourth floor to encompass a canopy which originally had details similar to the classical reference of the building. A series of tripartite windows set into square and arched frames extends across the front elevation of the second through fourth stories. Fifth story square windows are framed by elaborate moldings. This structure is terminated by an enriched cornice of applied ornament.

Inside the floors are divided by decorative panels and large Corinthian columns which are complimented by smaller ones dividing the bays. The interior has been divided into theater and office space. Offices which house the headquarters of Karl Hoblitzell's Interstate Theaters occupy about 20,000 square feet of the upper

four floors in the forward portion of the building. Remodelled in the art deco style, much of the office furniture and fixtures remain intact. Entry to the office space at the front of the building is gained by an elevator accessible through a separate street entrance.

The main lobby reflects the ornate detailing of classical sources; the black and white Italian marble floor has been carpeted. Creeping mold in the now dark and drafty building has contributed to the ruin of the carpet and seats. The chandeliers have been removed and a concession stand pre-empts an original large fountain. Under the peeling paint, the lobby is replete with classical detailing including the Corinthian columns, egg and dart molding, cartouches, Roman swags and fretwork.

Designed by the noted theatre architect, John Eberson, the Majestic Theatre is exemplary of the opulent theatre popularized in America during the twentieth century. Eberson was nationally known for his "atmospheric theatres" which often featured ceiling "skies" of floating clouds and twinkling stars mechanically controlled. The Majestic was one of his atmospheric theatres and the machinery that produced these effects remains intact. A proscenium theatre, the stage was set back beneath an arch flanked by massive Corinthian columns. The orchestra pit was sunken in order that the audience would not be distracted. Seating over 2400 was laid out in the shape of a fan and was arranged on three levels - the main floor and two balconies. Originally the seats were of woven cane, each with its own hat rack for the gentlemen. Ceiling fans and lighting fixtures original to the auditorium have been removed. The auditorium walls are decorated with large paintings set into panels which reflect the theme of the theatre, "Roman gardens."

Backstage there is a six foot high fly loft to accommodate backdrops and other scenery. An original set of wooden light controls is of special interest. Off-stage are twelve dressing rooms. Other original facilities included a spacious men's smoking lounge and a nursery called "Majesticland," complete with a slide, carousel and a petting zoo, where children could be left while their parents viewed the show.

Originally mirrors, large potted plants and several stuffed peacocks, the symbol of the theater, adorned the lobby to complete the dazzling decor. Many of the decorative objects remain in storage and could easily be returned to their original locations.

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Designation Merit

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| <p>A. Character, interest, or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City of Dallas, State of Texas, or the United States. <u> X </u></p> | <p>H. Embodiments of elements of architectural design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship which represent a significant architectural innovation. <u> </u></p> |
| <p>B. Location as the site of a significant historical event. <u> </u></p> | <p>I. Relationship to other distinctive buildings, sites, or areas which are eligible for preservation according to a plan based on historic, cultural, or architectural motif. <u> X </u></p> |
| <p>C. Identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the culture and development of the city. <u> X </u></p> | <p>J. Unique location of singular physical characteristics representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the city. <u> X </u></p> |
| <p>D. Exemplification of the cultural, economic, social, or historical heritage of the city. <u> X </u></p> | <p>K. Archeological value in that it has produced or can be expected to produce data affecting theories of historic or prehistoric value. <u> </u></p> |
| <p>E. Portrayal of the environment of a group of people in an era of history characterized by a distinctive architectural style. <u> X </u></p> | <p>L. Value as an aspect of community sentiment or public pride. <u> X </u></p> |
| <p>F. Embodiment of distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen. <u> X </u></p> | |
| <p>G. Identification as the work of an architect or master builder whose individual work has influenced the development of the city. <u> </u></p> | |

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Recommendation

The Landmark Survey Task Force requests the Historic Landmark Preservation Committee to deem this proposed landmark meritorious of historic recognition as outlined in city ordinance 19-A.

Date:

Further, this task force endorses the preservation criteria, policy recommendations, and landmark boundary as presented by the Dept. of Urban Planning staff.

Chairman, Landmark Survey Task Force

Urban Design Program Manager
Department of Urban Planning

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Preservation Analysis

STRUCTURE

- 1. Surface Materials
- 2. Fenestration and Portals
 - a. style, type
 - b. o/w ratio
 - c. rhythms
 - d. placement
- 3. Trim and Detailing
 - a. style
 - b. unique trim or detailing
 - c. structural members
- 4. Roof
 - a. style, form
 - b. slope
 - c. materials
- 5. Design Concepts
 - a. stylistic demands
 - b. functional concepts
- 6. Utilities
 - a. design
 - b. placement
- 7. Signs
 - a. style, design
 - b. placement
- 8. Exterior Connections
 - a. design
 - b. penetration points

SITE

- X 1. Prohibited Structure Areas
 - a. approach
 - b. view corridors
 - c. site feature protection
 - d. vertical additions
- 2. Access/Egress
- 3. Adjacent R.O.W.'s
 - a. existing treatment
 - b. proposed changes
- 4. Landscaping
 - a. existing plant removal
 - b. new plant selection
 - c. site design
- 5. Site Fixtures
 - a. furniture
 - b. sculpture, art
 - c. paths
 - d. utility units
 - e. signs
- 6. Lighting
 - a. exteriors
 - b. grounds

COLOR

- X 1. Surface Materials
- X 2. Trim and Details
- 3. Roof
- 4. Utilities
- 5. Signs
- 6. Site Fixtures
- 7. Accent Color

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Land Use Analysis

Proposed zoning change:

from: CA-1

to: No Change

Recommended use variances:

None
