



**AVALON THEATER
2469-2483 S. KINNICKINNIC**

FINAL HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

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AVALON THEATER
(January 2004)

I. NAME

Historic: Avalon Theater

Common: Avalon Theater

II. LOCATION

2469-2483 S. Kinnickinnic Avenue

Legal Description: Hillside Subd in NW ¼ SEC 9-6-22 Block 1 All Exc W. 120' Front by 128.22' Rear by 97' on E'ly Line Lot 20

14th Aldermanic District
Aldersperson Suzanne M. Breier

III. CLASSIFICATION

Building

IV. OWNER

Avalon Investments Inc.
P.O. Box 070072
Milwaukee, WI 53207
Craig T. Ellsworth, registered agent

Nominator

Donna Schlieman

V. YEAR BUILT

1926-1929

Architect

Russell Barr Williamson

VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Avalon Theater is a three-story, mottled tan/brown brick, flat roofed, Mediterranean Revival style commercial building located on Kinnickinnic Avenue, about three miles south of the central business district. It occupies most of its L-shaped lot with no setback along Kinnickinnic Avenue and only a slight grassy planting bed along Homer Street. The north elevation abuts an adjacent building and the rear elevations allow for a pedestrian walkway

and trash storage. The surrounding area consists of a neighborhood retail strip of small one- and two-story stores along Kinnickinnic Avenue and late nineteenth and early twentieth century residences on the side streets. The Avalon has two principal facades, east along Kinnickinnic Avenue and south along Homer Street, while the north and west walls are mostly blank.

The 160-foot-long Kinnickinnic Avenue elevation is divided into three distinct parts reflecting the different functions of the building. The highly ornamented theater façade dominates the center of the building. It consists of a broad center bay flanked by projecting pavilions. The center bay features the ticket booth and entry doors sheltered by a lighted marquee. To either side of the ticket booth are glass display panels designed to hold movie posters and photos. The panels are surrounded by black structural glass and framed by pilasters that feature twisted shafts with foliated capitals. Above the marquee is a grand cast concrete-enframed triple window with engaged twisted columns supporting a massive cast concrete lintel. The window openings today feature plain glass but old images indicate that they were filled with steel casement sash. The lintel is a fanciful mix of foliated forms and horizontal reeding that foreshadows Art Deco design. The brick parapet wall above the windows is broken in the center to frame a niche for a tall, pierced urn. This portion of the building was once crowned with a shaped gable that terminated in a baldacchino or canopy of cast stone supported by twisted columns. The date of its removal is not known at this time. Flanking this broad central entrance bay are a pair of narrow, three-story, tower-like pavilions with cast concrete quoins and stepped concrete caps. These pavilions are identically fenestrated with double doors at the street level that once held glass but are now blocked up by wood. The second story features arched windows with steel sash that are embellished with iron balconets and a large scrolled cartouche at the keystone emblazoned with the capitol letter "A." At the third story is a rectangular plaque with colorful terra cotta tiles. Pierced urns once graced the tops of the pavilions.

To the north of the theater façade is a storefront framed by cast concrete foliated ornament. Its entrance is set into an arched opening that has an ornamental cast stone lunette. On the second story is a grouping of three arched, steel casement, multi-paned windows centered on the façade. A single square terra-cotta tile plaque ornaments the third story and is positioned below the sloping pent roof with Spanish tile.

The three-story wing to the south of the theater contains storefronts on the ground story and apartments on the upper two floors. Two of the storefronts are separated by a brick pier embellished by a foliated capital. The third storefront is rather unique in form. It is located in the southernmost bay and is entered through a recessed arched opening that is set into a projecting pavilion. This entrance is accented with cast stone decoration and an iron balconet. The storefront itself rounds the corner to Homer Street. Windows to the apartments above are evenly spaced in units of two or three and devoid of ornament. The current sashes appear to be replacements.

The Homer Street elevation contains the entrance to the apartment building portion of the complex. Windows are grouped on either side of the recessed walk-up apartment building lobby entrance. The arched entrance with its cast concrete Hispano-Mooresque surround is the principal architectural feature. A sloping pent roof is covered with Spanish tile.

The Avalon Theater remains essentially intact after 74 years of use. The storefronts remain in their original locations with their cast stone surrounds. A number of the original steel casement windows survive as well. As indicated above, the unique baldacchino at the apex of the theater façade was removed some decades ago, allegedly after damage from lightning,

and it appears that the apartment windows have been replaced. The prominent vertical sign spelling out “Avalon” was also removed some time ago. The most recent alterations occurred in October 2003 when the current owner removed the letters spelling out “Avalon” and removed the ticket booth at the center of the theater’s façade. None of the alterations detracts from the Avalon’s importance, however, and virtually all of the changes are reversible or restorable.

Significance

The Avalon Theater is architecturally significant as a distinctive example of the Mediterranean Revival style with inventive foliate forms integrated into the more traditional Mediterranean elements like tile roofs, twisted columns, arched openings, decorative tile plaques and cartouche. The Avalon Theater is also significant as the city’s best remaining example of an atmospheric theater and the first theater in Wisconsin to be built for the new “talking” and “sound” pictures. Atmospheric theaters were a product of the prosperous 1920’s when entertainment venues reached new heights of exoticism and strove to lure patrons into a virtual reality of opulent palaces and faraway places that would suspend their otherwise humdrum lives, at least for a few hours. Atmospheric theaters were created to simulate the experience of sitting in an open-air plaza or courtyard. The sidewalls were disguised with false building fronts and garden wall motifs and the ceiling was painted blue with twinkling light bulbs to simulate a starry sky. A cloud machine created the effect of moving clouds to further the illusion. The introduction of technology to provide talking pictures only enhanced the experience. Of the five atmospheric theaters once located in Milwaukee, the National (demolished), Venetian (converted to a liquor store), Egyptian (demolished), Zenith (converted to a church) and the Avalon, only the Avalon survives intact today.

The Avalon Theater is a major work of prominent local architect Russell Barr Williamson. Although remembered today chiefly for his Prairie Style residential designs in the 1920’s, Williamson also produced two important commercial projects which are landmarks of their era, the Eagles Club at 2401 W. Wisconsin Avenue and the Avalon Theater in Bay View. The Avalon’s location on Kinnickinnic Avenue, the “main street” of the former village of Bay View, helped to enhance the thoroughfare’s status as the center of culture and recreation in the neighborhood and the theater remains an important visual landmark in the area.

VIII. HISTORY

Motion Picture Overview

One of the most popular and enduring forms of entertainment in the twentieth century has been the motion picture. Moving pictures were a draw as early as the 1840’s when large panoramas of continuous scenes were painted on giant stretches of canvas and unrolled to a scripted narration and the musical accompaniment of harp, violin or melodion. Viewings would take place in the large halls located at the upper stories of commercial or fraternal buildings in the downtown.

The next manifestation of the motion picture came when images were captured on film rather than painted canvasses. Unlike panorama viewing, which often lasted several hours, the new motion picture was often a short vignette taken from daily life or scenes of dance segments, comedy spots and the like. Considered a novelty item in the late 1800’s, moving pictures were initially used as incidental entertainments with traveling circuses, amusement parks and penny arcades. The old variety halls also found that films could attract substantial audiences and added them to their already diverse programs. Continued technical innovation resulted in such

outstanding novelties as “Hale’s Tours” that combined the thrills of a railroad trip with the convenience of never leaving the theater. A railroad-like contraption would tilt and sway in accord with the filmed train ride and was accompanied by clacking railroad sounds and rushes of air from a fan.

As audience demand grew, the early travelogues and slice-of-life vignettes soon evolved into long narrative features with the result that more permanent viewing houses were established. Popular from 1906 to 1915 were the nickelodeons, which derived their name from the nickel admission charge. Patronized by individuals who could not afford the legitimate theater, the nickelodeons appealed to a broad segment of society. Nickelodeons were often located in converted storefronts that were little more than a darkened hall with wooden chairs. In addition to the moving pictures, the shows generally provided a variety of entertainment, which included colored slides, singers, dancers and lectures. The legendary Saxe Brothers ran Milwaukee’s first permanent nickelodeon, located downtown, and they soon came to dominate movie distribution in Milwaukee. By 1910 there were ten nickelodeons throughout Milwaukee, some downtown and others in neighborhood shopping centers along trolley line routes.

Stiff competition for audiences and continued improvement of the film medium led to the construction of finer and more permanent viewing houses. The first of the major theaters built specifically to show only motion pictures was the Princess Theater, formerly at 738 North Third Street, which opened on December 16, 1909. Its glistening white façade was lit by 1200 incandescent lamps and the interior showcased the city’s first theater organ to provide musical accompaniment while uniformed ushers assisted guests to the 900-seat auditorium with cushioned opera seats. The Princess set the bar for a generation of theaters to follow, legitimizing the movie-going experience and offering high-class amenities and a glittering ambience that was affordable for the average person. Later theaters continued to be built larger than the previous ones with plush interiors, fine restrooms and refreshments.

Aside from the growing popularity of motion pictures and the desire for larger profits, the shift to larger and more elegant movie houses was also the result of pressure from local reform groups. Sleazy, fly-by-night promoters showing films in dimly lit viewing halls were regarded with suspicion and blamed for contributing to adolescent delinquency. Also, local legislation sought to control the exhibition of the highly flammable film stock in order to reduce the large numbers of theater fires. To head off too much municipal interference and show good faith with the community, local theater owners formed the Exhibition League of Milwaukee in 1911 and monitored lighting and ventilation, pushed for fireproof equipment and censorship, and, in general, anticipated the city ordinances passed in 1913, which dealt with these same areas.

By the 1910’s as motion picture theaters were being built throughout the downtown and into neighborhood shopping districts, they were finding competition from the large vaudeville houses and legitimate theaters that began incorporating movies into their programming. The Orpheum, Strand and Davidson all began to feature movies in their scheduling and D.W. Griffiths’ *Birth of a Nation* premiered at the Davidson in 1915. Even some restaurants got into the act and Charlie Toy featured Milwaukee’s “smallest and most unique photoplay house” at his six-story restaurant-entertainment-import company building formerly located on Second Street just north of Wisconsin Avenue.

Although vaudeville would continue as a popular form of entertainment into the 1930’s, the motion picture was definitely the trend of the future. Perhaps the biggest coup for movie distribution in Milwaukee took place in 1911 when Saxe Amusement Enterprises acquired the lease for the deluxe Alhambra Theater at the northeast corner of Fourth Street and Wisconsin Avenue. A former vaudeville house, the Saxes converted the theater to a movies-only program

and the 2,600 seat building instantly gave the Alhambra status as one of the world's largest all-movie theaters of its day. The Alhambra, with its many amenities like babysitting service, free perfume, and elaborate lounge areas, also foreshadowed the construction of the full-service movie palace of the 1920s.

The 1920s and 1930s saw the culmination of this trend toward ever larger and more lavish picture houses until they could truly be called picture palaces. Movie distributors local and national, as well as local investors, came to dominate the construction of these lavish structures. In the downtown, the 2,700-seat Wisconsin Theater was incorporated into the six-story Carpenter Building in the 500 block of W. Wisconsin Avenue and was opened in March of 1924. Saxe Amusement Enterprises operated the theater, hailed as one of the three largest movie palaces in the U.S. at the time, as well the Wisconsin Roof Ballroom at the top of the building and a recreation arcade in the basement. The construction of multi-use buildings was typical of the era especially in the larger commercial districts and continued the trends set in the 19th century. Upper story halls in commercial buildings were commonly used for meetings and theatricals in the 19th century because there just was not the revenue stream to support a stand-alone theater. While some stand-alone theater buildings could be found downtown, like the Pabst, or in neighborhoods, like the Granada/Empire on Mitchell Street, picture houses were often combined with office space, restaurants, apartments and amusement arcades to maximize income on investment and ensure adequate maintenance and activity around the theater when performances were not taking place.

As neighborhood shopping districts expanded in the prosperous 1920's, it was logical that investors began developing lavish movie palaces throughout the city. Theaters like the Oriental, the Garfield, the Venetian, the Zenith and the Uptown dominated their local districts and became instant landmarks recognizable for their exotic architectural details, blazing marquees and colorful vertical signs. The interiors were plush, filled with imagery from faraway places and architectural details patrons would only have seen in magazines. Fine restrooms, separate lounges for men and women, grand staircases, spacious lobbies, beautiful light fixtures and chandeliers and the newest technology in heating and ventilating made the experience of entering the picture palace as important as viewing the movie itself. Thousands of patrons would attend showings and the picture palace became the hub of social life in most neighborhoods, generating activity and economic spin-off to many a nearby restaurant, soft drink parlor, candy shop and the like.

The era of the grand movie palace was short lived. With the onset of the Great Depression movie palace construction came to an end and movie house operators resorted to give-aways and special incentives to keep patrons coming back. After World War II television became the major source of entertainment for most residents and changes in tax structure and motion picture distribution and the motion picture industry led to a decline movie theater patronage. As retail began to locate in strip malls in suburban neighborhoods new movie theaters eventually came to be constructed there as well and catered to the car culture. The new venues were little more than utilitarian boxes that did away with fancy lobbies and interior and exterior ornament but did offer convenient parking. The downtown and neighborhood movie palaces, dependent on pedestrian and public transportation, languished, and were by-passed by national distributorships. Most of the grand picture palaces have been demolished, especially in the downtown. A few survive in the neighborhoods, converted into office or church use. A few, like the Oriental and the Downer, are still showing movies today. They have seen a resurgence in business following modifications to their interiors to make them competitive with their suburban counterparts.

The Avalon Theater

The Avalon Theater, Bay View's only true movie palace, was constructed at 2473 South Kinnickinnic Avenue and opened on May 4, 1929. The Avalon had been under construction for four-and-a-half years and its completion was rather remarkable given its history of false starts, changes in ownership and lawsuits. Plans for a new movie theater for this site, the former front yard of the old pioneer Joseph Williams homestead, were announced as early as November 1924 but no construction was begun at that time. The *Bay View Advance* ran another story on the project on August 14, 1925 at which time the complex was to consist of a 1,800-capacity movie theater, a ballroom and six stores. The article went on to say that Russell Barr Williamson, the project's architect, designed the building in the Spanish style. The architect and Frank Rigas were the owners of the property on which the theater was to be built and the two men, along with Ira Fecht, had incorporated the Bay View Theater Company in July 1925. Construction barricades went up around the property in December 1925 as excavation began. Work on the project stopped shortly thereafter and in March 1926 the Bay View Theater Company transferred seventy-five percent of its stock to National Theaters, Inc., an Indiana corporation. National Theaters was building a chain of movie houses and the Bay View Theater, as it was then called, was to be the fourth in its chain. Work resumed on the construction of the theater in August 1926 and the plans were altered slightly to reduce the number of stores to five. Work halted again in January 1927 when the contractor failed to receive payment for the structural steel delivered to the site. Immel Construction Company of Fond du Lac subsequently purchased the incomplete structure at a sheriff's sale and work started up again in October 1928. A variety of materials was used to help expedite the construction process including cinder block, cream city brick, clay brick, and poured concrete. Williamson's final plan for the building eliminated the ballroom, substituted twenty apartments instead and reduced the number of stores to four. By this time, former Milwaukee exhibitor J.H. Silliman had become involved in the project in an attempt to reenter the theater business. The theater, now called the Avalon, was finally completed and opened on May 4, 1929 and the apartments were completed a short time later on June 21, 1929. The project's cost was over one million dollars. The 1,637 seat theater was named after a Jolson/Rose song *Avalon* (1920) that popularized the island of paradise found in Arthurian legend.

The *Bay View Advance* claimed that the Avalon was the first theater in Wisconsin to be designed and built exclusively for talking and sound motion pictures. The Mediterranean style exterior featured brick with cast stone detail, twisted columns and large urns at the parapet. A pair of twisted columns once supported a canopy or baldacchino that framed a large urn at the center of the façade but this feature was removed after being damaged by lightning. The original vertical sign spelling out Avalon in colored lights and the three-sided marquee have also been removed.

The interior of the Avalon, still mostly intact, was one of five atmospheric theaters in Milwaukee, the others being the National (demolished), the Venetian (converted to a liquor store), the Egyptian (demolished), and the Zenith (converted to a church). The Avalon's auditorium space was designed to look like a Mediterranean courtyard and utilized Spanish roof tile, stucco walls, Baroque twisted columns, and Moorish capitals. The garden scene along the sidewalks had vases, busts, and sculptures along the balustrade and gave the impression of looking out at silhouetted rooftops. Wrought iron railings and hanging lanterns enhanced the effect. The proscenium arch was decorated in an acanthus leaf motif flanked by statues of the goddess Athena, patroness of Wisdom, the Arts and Civilization, above the organ lofts. The ceiling was made to mimic a night sky with small, twinkling lights for stars and a cloud machine simulated clouds. The theater's stage was equipped for live performances and there was also a generous-sized orchestra pit and spacious balcony. The lobby continued the Mediterranean theme with a

tiled floor and mock wood beam ceiling, wrought iron chandelier and railings, and twisted columns.

Atmospheric theaters were designed to give patrons the experience of sitting in an open-air courtyard or plaza. Sidewalls were disguised with false building fronts and rooftops and garden wall motifs were often embellished with painted or silk foliage. The light show of dusk descending upon a cloud-strewn starlit sky was intended as an extra entertainment feature for the audience. The atmospheric theater type was invented by prominent theater architect John Eberson in Texas in the early 1920s and quickly spread throughout the nation. Milwaukee's first atmospheric theater opened in 1926, just as the Avalon construction was getting under way.

The Avalon's opening feature was *The Doctor's Secret*, an all-talking Paramount release starring H.B. Warner. It was accompanied by the filmed Vitaphone Act of Ruth Etting, who sang two songs, a talking Christie comedy and an all-talking novelty. Admission was 35 cents for adults and 10 cents for children. The Avalon's programming typically showed feature films in a continuous showing from 1:00 P.M. to 11:00 P.M. with a change in the program three times a week. Beginning in November 1929, the Avalon also presented high-class vaudeville on its stage for a short time. The Avalon's innovations led other Bay View theaters to wire for sound in an attempt to keep up with the competition. The Mirth converted on June 2, 1929, the Lake on July 28, 1929, and the Avenue on February 15, 1930.

The Avalon remained a motion picture theater throughout its 74-year history. For one year in the 1970's the name was changed to the Garden but it soon reverted back to the Avalon. In recent decades the theater began to show second run films with discounted prices. One of the theater's popular attractions were the organ concerts performed by members of the Dairyland Theater Organ Society. The concerts are performed on a Wurlitzer 21 rank organ, a rebuilding of the original three-console, eight rank model. The console is a replacement but resembles the original and was actually owned by Racine real estate salesman Fred Hermes and was under lease to the theater. A smaller movie screen was added to the theater in 1995. The theater stopped showing films in July 2000. In 2002, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reported that the Avalon would be sold to Henry Doane and partners. Doane owns the Orpheum Theater and leases the Majestic Theater, both in Madison, and has been successful in incorporating live performance concerts into his theaters. The land contract sale eventually fell apart and Craig Ellsworth and Greg Capanica have resumed ownership of the building under the name Avalon Investments Inc.

The Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission considered historic designation of the Avalon once before, in 1989, but tabled the item at its June 19, 1989 meeting after building owners Craig Ellsworth and then partner Ben Pencikowski assured the commission that they would not alter the façade or interior of the theater. The current nomination was prompted by the removal of the letters "Avalon" from the marquee and the removal of the ticket booth from the façade by the owners in preparation for converting the theater into office space.

Kinnickinnic Avenue and Bay View

In addition to its importance in the history of movie palace history in Milwaukee, the Avalon Theater is significant as a reminder of the social and commercial importance of Kinnickinnic Avenue as the Main Street of the West Bay View neighborhood. Kinnickinnic Avenue, known throughout Milwaukee simply as "KK," started life as an Indian trail meandering through the swamps and thickets between the Kinnickinnic River and Lake Michigan. Kinnickinnic was the native word for a mixture of leaves and red willow bark smoked by the Indians. Early settlers reported meeting Indians of many tribes on the trail and finding Indian burial grounds along its

course, including a large one near the intersection of present day KK and Lincoln Avenues that continued to yield artifacts to souvenir hunters as late as 1900.

After the Black Hawk War of 1832, the Wisconsin Indians ceded their lands along Lake Michigan and were removed to western reservations, opening up Milwaukee County to white settlement. Soon the narrow KK footpath was widened to accommodate the carts and wagons of Yankee settlers making their way up from Chicago to settle in the wilderness of present day Milwaukee. Gradually, the woods flanking the trail gave way to the homesteads of such early day farmers as Joseph Williams, who settled on the KK Road in 1836. The Avalon Theater stands today in the front yard of the Williams homestead. Williams' Italianate house, built in 1865 was long recognized as a landmark in the Bay View community. It still stands on its original hilltop site behind the theater at 606 E. Homer Street but its commanding views of Lake Michigan are now blocked by the theater.

The process of taming the wilderness required decades, but by the end of the Civil War, KK had emerged as a quiet country highway known as the Chicago Road, lined with the well-groomed farmsteads of the pioneer Yankee settlers.

This bucolic period was soon to end, however, for beginning in the 1880s KK was transformed from a peaceful rural lane into a bustling suburban thoroughfare. As Milwaukee's population, fed by massive European immigration, exploded, development crept inexorably south from Walker's Point toward the marshy banks of the Kinnickinnic River. To the east, the establishment of the Milwaukee Iron Company in Bay View in 1868 prompted a boom in population that soon overflowed the narrow confines of the original village and spread westward across the Deer Creek Swamp to the KK Road. Other industries located in the area prompted further population growth. Between 1880 and 1910, KK grew into the residential, commercial and institutional center of what became known as the community of West Bay View.

Presaging the urban development of KK, a horse-drawn streetcar line had been extended from Walker's Point as far south as Russell Avenue by 1882. As a result of this transportation innovation, previously isolated West Bay View was conveniently linked to Milwaukee for the first time, setting the stage for more intensive development. Soon commercial strips of closely built two- and three-story business blocks with flats above had appeared at the key intersections of Bay Street, Lincoln Avenue, and Potter Avenue. At these nodes were the saloons, grocery stores, butcher shops, barbers, laundries, bakeries, dry goods stores, and blacksmiths that served the neighborhood. The fine brick and frame commercial buildings extant today are a reminder of the prosperity of these early merchants.

Between the commercial areas, single-family houses, row houses and duplexes filled the lots carved out of the subdivided fields of the pioneer farms. Although many of the early houses were unpretentious carpenter-built cottages, by the turn of the century certain sections of KK had become prestigious residential zones. The area between Conway and Homer Streets, for example, boasted substantial architect-designed houses such as the 1903 Dr. William Batchelor House at the northwest corner of Wilson Street just north of the Avalon Theater. The residence was designed by prominent Milwaukee architect Alexander C. Eschweiler. Even the most modest cottages, however, displayed some ornamental touches as an expression of the taste and individuality of their owners.

The religious aspirations of the primarily German, Irish, Polish, and Yankee residents of West Bay View are reflected in the imposing churches they built along KK. The predominant German presence was marked by the soaring towers of St. Lucas Evangelical Lutheran

Church at Dover Street while the Irish community clustered around the stately Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Church at Russell Avenue, and the widely dispersed Anglo-Saxon population looked to the picturesque Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church at Clement Avenue.

KK also served the recreational and social needs of West Bay View's residents. The imposing Lake Lodge of the Masons on the northwest corner of Otjen Street is the only survivor of several fraternal order lodge halls that were once located along KK, such as the Odd Fellows Hall that faced KK from Potter Avenue where the McDonald's now stands. The luxurious Avalon Theater at the northwest corner of Homer Street was the neighborhood's only true movie palace and delighted audiences as much with its "atmospheric décor" and light shows as it did with its feature films. Several bowling alleys were clustered at Lincoln Avenue, and others were spotted along its length. Farther south, just north of the railroad track overpass, KK Field has provided playing fields for area residents since the City acquired the former Standard Brick Company brickyard and claypit in 1915 and developed it into a park. Prior to that, private picnic groves and beer gardens with their dance pavilions and beer halls were popular attractions. The Schlitz-operated Union Park located on the east side of KK north of the railroad tracks, where the former Kohl's supermarket was later located, was a favorite with West Bay View residents at the turn of the century.

As the most important street in the area, KK has always been the center of civic services for the neighborhood. The Bay View Post Office, for example, was located at KK and Lincoln Avenue for decades after its establishment in the 1890s. The neighborhood fire station was on the east side of KK between Homer and Otjen Streets. The Bay View Village Hall was sited at the triangle formed by KK, Clement and Pryor Avenues until the annexation of the once independent village by the City of Milwaukee deprived the building of its function. The Village's Public Library was housed in a building just to the north of it between Potter and Logan Avenues until Llewelyn Library replaced it in 1914. In recent years, the Bay View library returned to KK in a striking new building. The Bay View High School and the Dover Street School also were purposefully sited near KK.

KK enjoyed its heyday from 1885 to 1950. During this period it was virtually the pulse of the West Bay View community. After World War II, however, the aging neighborhood service center was assaulted by competition from new retailing concepts, such as the supermarket, the suburban shopping center, and the discount department store. These reduced neighborhood reliance on the numerous small independent merchants that had previously been indispensable components of neighborhood shopping centers. Gradually, KK declined in commercial importance. Storefronts became vacant, and the center of retailing shifted southward leaving the once vibrant intersections of Lincoln and Potter Avenues to slumber through the 1960s and 1970s. However, recognition of the fine qualities of historic Kinnickinnic Avenue and a renewed vitality in the surrounding residential neighborhoods are once again focusing attention on KK as the heart of West Bay View. The Avalon Theater is poised to reclaim its role as a vital force in fulfilling the entertainment needs of neighborhood residents as well as drawing patrons from throughout the city.

The Architect

Russell Barr Williamson (1893-1964) was a prominent Milwaukee architect who practiced from the early 1920s into the later 1950s. After apprenticing with internationally known architect Frank Lloyd Wright in Chicago from 1914 to 1917, the Indiana-born Williamson established his own practice in Milwaukee. His architectural work in the 1920s was primarily a mix of prairie style residential designs true to the theories of Frank Lloyd Wright and Mediterranean Revival commercial buildings. The most outstanding surviving examples of his own particularly robust

interpretation of the Mediterranean Revival mode are the Eagles Club, 2401 W. Wisconsin Ave. (1925), and the Avalon Theater. There are considerable similarities in the design of the two structures, which were conceived only a year apart and were under construction at the same time. Later in his career, Williamson designed in the modern style popular in the 1940s and 1950s.

Williamson was known primarily as a residential architect who produced designs for single-family homes, duplexes and apartments. His commercial work is rare and ongoing research may reveal other projects that were significant in the Milwaukee area. In this context, the Avalon Theater is one of Williamson's most important works. The Avalon Theater and the Eagles Club are among the most distinctive structures in the city from the 1920's, taking Mediterranean design elements like tile roofs, Baroque twisted columns, arched openings, wrought iron, and tile but infusing them with fanciful elements like the giant figural frieze at the Eagles Club and the inventive foliate forms and almost Deco-like stepped forms on the Avalon façade that lend an aura of exoticism to the building. In recognition of its unique design the Eagles Club has been locally designated since 1989.

Sources

Swofford, Hugh and Rankin, Jim. Avalon Theater Tour Script. Prepared for Historic Milwaukee's Spaces and Traces Tour 1989. Milltown to Milwaukee. Bay View.

Vollmert, Les, Hatala, Carlen and Wenger, Robin. Central Business District Historic Resources Survey. Milwaukee: 1986. (Motion Pictures)

Vollmert, Les, Hatala, Carlen and Jakubovich, Paul. Bay View Neighborhood Historic Resources Survey. Milwaukee: 1990 (Motion Picture Theaters)

Widen Larry and Anderson, Judi. Milwaukee Movie Palaces. Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1986.

IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Avalon Theater be given historic designation as a City of Milwaukee Historic Structure as a result of its fulfillment of criteria e-5, e-6 and e-9 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 308-81(2)(e) of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances.

e-5. Its embodiment of the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen.

The Avalon Theater is an important example of Mediterranean Revival theater architecture. Architect Williamson used many of the traditional features of the style including Spanish roof tile, decorative glazed tiles, arched openings for windows and entries, and twisted columns, giving the forms an inventive twist with the exaggerated scale of the three monumental engaged columns of the façade and the hybrid forms of the massive lintel with its large foliated forms and Deco-like stepped forms. The eye-catching baldacchino at the crest of the façade, now lost, was unique in the city and comparable only to the Oriental Theater's prominent minarets.

- e-6. Its identification as the work of an artist, architect, interior designer, craftsman or master builder whose individual works have influenced the development of the City of Milwaukee, State of Wisconsin or of the United States.

Russell Barr Williamson has long been considered an important architect in Milwaukee, not only carrying on the tradition of the Prairie Style well into the 1920's but also designing houses and apartment buildings in a variety of period revival styles, most notably the Mediterranean. His work is colorful and distinctive and can be found throughout the city and first ring suburbs like Wauwatosa, Shorewood and Whitefish Bay. His rare excursions into commercial work were nothing short of amazing with the Eagles Club and the Avalon Theater designed in eye-catching exotic forms that distinguished them from the more sedate period revival commercial blocks and clubhouses.

- e-9 Its unique location as a singular physical characteristic which represents an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or of the City of Milwaukee.

The Avalon Theater has been a visual landmark along Kinnickinnic Avenue in the Bay View neighborhood since its completion in 1929. Positioned between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century commercial nodes at Kinnickinnic and Lincoln and Kinnickinnic and Potter, the Avalon occupies almost the entire frontage on Kinnickinnic Avenue between Wilson and Homer Streets and dominates the streetscape with its architectural detail.

X. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

The following preservation guidelines represent the principal concerns of the Historic Preservation Commission regarding this historic designation. However, the Commission reserves the right to make final decisions based upon particular design submissions. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or the restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements. As in all designations, historic status does not require the removal of alterations made prior to the designation. Routine repair and maintenance of these features is permitted. Modifications to any part of the structure, whether original or a later alteration, is subject to review with modifications being defined as changes in cladding, placement, size, material, complete removal and replacement, and so on.

A. Roofs

Retain the roof shape. Skylights or dormers are discouraged but may be added to roof surfaces if they are not visible from the street or public right of way. Avoid making changes to the roof shape that would alter the building height, roofline, overhang or pitch. If replacement is necessary, duplicate the appearance of the original roofing as closely as possible. Construction of rooftop penthouses or gardens would impact on the reading of the building as a movie theater and apartment complex. Any requests for rooftop construction would have to be evaluated by the Historic Preservation Commission to determine their visibility. The tile-clad pent roofs may not be removed. It is recommended that tiles be selectively replaced if repairs are required.

B. Materials

1. Masonry

- a. Unpainted brick, terra cotta, stone or cast stone should not be painted or covered. Avoid painting or covering natural terra cotta or stone. This is historically incorrect and could cause irreversible damage if it was decided to remove the paint at a later date.
- b. Repoint defective mortar by duplicating the original in color, style, texture and strength. Avoid using mortar colors and pointing styles that were unavailable or were not used when the building was constructed. The use of mortar consisting only of Portland cement is prohibited due to the damage it will cause to brick. Use a mortar formula and style that matches the original.
- c. Clean masonry only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible. Sandblasting or high pressure water blasting or the use of other abrasive materials on limestone, terra cotta, brick or cream brick, stone or cast stone surfaces is prohibited. This method of cleaning erodes the surface of the material and accelerates deterioration. Avoid the indiscriminate use of chemical products that could have an adverse reaction with the masonry materials, such as the use of acid on limestone.
- d. Repair or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the old as closely as possible. Avoid using new material that is inappropriate or was unavailable when the building was constructed. Covering stone, cast stone or brick features with vinyl or aluminum is not allowed. Historic Preservation staff can assist with determining the appropriate repairs to the cast stone detail.

2. Wood/Metal

- a. Retain original material, whenever possible. Avoid removing architectural features that are essential to maintaining the building's character and appearance.
- b. Retain or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the appearance of the old as closely as possible. Avoid covering architectural features with new materials that do not duplicate the appearance of the original materials. Covering wood trim or sheet metal with aluminum or vinyl is not permitted.
- c. The installation of the walkout balconies is discouraged, as they would be inappropriate for building. The original, small, decorative iron balconets were intended to serve as embellishment and were not functional.

C. Windows and Doors

- 1. Retain existing window and door openings. Retain the existing configuration of panes, sash, surrounds and sills, except as necessary to restore to the original condition. Avoid making additional openings or changes in existing fenestration by enlarging or reducing window or door openings to fit new stock window sash or new stock door sizes. Avoid changing the size or configuration of

windowpanes or sash or blocking down the storefronts. Use storm windows or protective glazing which have glazing configurations similar to the prime windows and which obscure the prime windows as little as possible. Restoration of the existing original steel sash is recommended if at all possible. Retention of the original storefronts is required.

2. Respect the building's stylistic period. If the replacement of doors or window sash is necessary, the replacement should duplicate the appearance and design, material and profiles of the original window sash or door and the framing and mouldings around the openings. Avoid using inappropriate sash and door replacements. Avoid the filling-in or covering of openings with inappropriate materials such as glass block or concrete block. Avoid using modern style window units, such as horizontal sliding sash or casements, in place of double-hung sash or the substitution of units with glazing configurations not appropriate to the style of the building.
3. Steel bar security doors and window guards are not allowed.

D. Trim and Ornamentation

There should be no changes to the existing trim or ornamentation except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. Replacement features shall match the original member in scale, design, color and appearance. Retain the decorative iron balconets on the Kinnickinnic Avenue and Homer Street facades.

E. Additions

Any additions will be reviewed by the Historic Preservation Commission.

F. Signs/Exterior Lighting

The installation of any permanent exterior sign or light fixture shall require the approval of the Commission. Approval will be based on the compatibility of the proposed sign or light with the historic and architectural character of the building. Signage is not to be placed over architectural features. Signs are to be installed through existing mortar joints and not through brick, stone, cast stone or sheet metal. Plastic internally illuminated box signs are not permitted. The letters spelling out "Avalon" may be reinstalled on the marquee.

G. Guidelines for New Construction

Should there be additional property acquired with the intention of expanding the original structure, it is important that new construction be designed to be as sympathetic as possible with the character of the structure.

1. Siting

New construction must respect the historic siting of the building. It should be accomplished so as to maintain the appearance of the building from the street as a freestanding structure.

2. Scale

Overall building height and bulk, the expression of major building divisions including foundation, body and roof, and individual building components, such as overhangs and fenestration that are in close proximity to a historic building must be compatible to and sympathetic with the design of the historic building.

3. Form

The massing of the new construction must be compatible with the goal of maintaining the integrity of the building as a freestanding structure. The profiles of roofs and building elements that project and recede from the main block should express the same continuity established by the historic building if they are in close proximity to it.

4. Materials

The building materials, which are visible from the public right-of-way and in close proximity to the building, should be consistent with the colors, textures, proportions, and combinations of cladding materials used on the building. The physical composition of the materials may be different from that of the historic materials, but the same appearance should be maintained.

H. Guidelines for Demolition

Although demolition is not encouraged and is generally not permissible, there may be instances when demolition or removal of a portion of the building may be acceptable if approved by the Historic Preservation Commission. The Commission shall take the following guidelines, with those found in subsection 9(h) of the ordinance, into consideration when reviewing demolition requests.

1. Condition

Demolition requests may be granted when it can be clearly demonstrated that the condition of a building or a portion thereof is such that it constitutes an immediate threat to health and safety and is beyond hope of repair.

2. Importance

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building is of historical or architectural significance or displays a quality of material and craftsmanship that does not exist in other structures in the area.

3. Location

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building contributes to the neighborhood and the general street appearance and has a positive effect on other buildings in the area.

4. Potential for Restoration

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building is beyond economically feasible repair.

5. Additions

Consideration will be given to whether or not the proposed demolition is a later non-historic addition that is not in keeping with the original design of the structure or does not contribute to its character.

