



MILWAUKEE HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION HISTORIC SITE DESIGNATION APPLICATION

An application fee of \$25 (cash or check) is required with this application.

1. Property Name

Historic: Milwaukee Auditorium and Milwaukee Arena

and/or Common: Milwaukee Theater, High Life Theater; MECCA Arena, U.S. Cellular Arena, UW-Milwaukee Panther Arena

2. Location

Address: 444 -518 West Kilbourn Avenue

Aldersperson(s): Ald. Robert Bauman

District Number(s): 4th Aldermanic District

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Present Use			
☒ building(s)	☒ public	☐ agricultural	☐ park	☐ government	☐ transportation
☐ structure(s)	☐ private	☐ commercial	☐ cemetery	☐ industrial	☐ vacant
☐ object(s)	☐ both	☐ educational	☐ religious	☐ military	☐ other
☐ site		☒ entertainment	☐ private residence	☐ museum	

4. Owner of Property

Name: Wisconsin Center District

Address: 500 W. Kilbourn Ave.

City: Milwaukee State WI Zip 53203

5. Representation in Existing Surveys

Inventory: Wisconsin Architecture and History Inventory

Date: Surveyed 1975, 1985, 2002, 2010, 2019 ☐ federal ☒ state ☐ county ☒ local

Depository for survey records:

Organization Wisconsin Historical Society

Street & number 816 State St

City Madison State WI Zip

Previous historic designation:

☐ National Register Date _____ Historic Name _____
☐ City of Milwaukee Landmark Date _____ Historic Name _____
☐ Other Name of Program _____ Date designated _____

6. DESCRIPTION

Condition:

- ☐ excellent
☒ good
☐ fair
☐ deteriorated
☐ ruins

- ☐ altered
☐ unaltered

Location:

☒ original site

☐ moved, date: _____

Walls:

- ☐ clapboard; ☒ brick; ☐ stucco; ☐ stone; ☐ wood shingle; ☐ slate; ☐ terra cotta; ☐ asphalt siding;
☐ asbestos tile; ☐ aluminum siding; ☐ artificial stone; ☐ other _____
-

Building form:

Number of stories 2 _____

Foundation

- ☐ stone ☒ brick ☐ concrete block ☐ concrete
☐ other _____

Roof

- ☐ gable (☐ flank; ☐ end; ☐ cross)
☐ gambrel (☐ flank; ☐ end; ☐ cross)
☒ hip ☐ mansard ☐ flat
☒ other _____

Written description: (Continue on a separate sheet, if necessary)

Milwaukee Auditorium:

The Milwaukee Auditorium covers the western half of the block bounded by N. Vel R. Phillips, N. 6th Street, Kilbourn Avenue (formerly Cedar Street), and State Street. It is located in the Central Business District in an area characterized by civic and institutional buildings. The main auditorium occupies the larger, western half of the building; the smaller eastern portion is now referred to as the Auditorium Annex, and it contains smaller meeting rooms, and the original front entrance. In the 1940's, when the Arena was built to the east, the front entrance to the Auditorium was enclosed to connect it to the newer building. The main access of the Milwaukee Auditorium was moved to the south side on Kilbourn Avenue. The Auditorium/Arena complex now interrupts 5th street.

According to the building permit issued on October 3, 1907, the structure is 312 feet across the front, 316 feet across the rear, and 300 feet 5 inches deep. The main auditorium is three stories tall while the annex is two stories tall. The main auditorium, then known as Bruce Hall, encompasses the full height of the western half of the building, while the Annex contains two floors of rooms with a central rotunda. When constructed, the main auditorium was 65 feet high and covered 330 by 180 feet. The hall's floor itself was 225 feet long and 100 feet wide prior to a 2002 renovation that removed a portion of the floor for construction of a rotunda. The north end houses the stage, while the other three sides contain the seating. This seating area is divided on two levels, with the upper row originally backed by an arcade that ran completely around the three sides of the room and rounded out the south end. These arches once housed windows. Sometime since construction, decorative ribs have been added to the vault in the main auditorium. The lobby areas included tasteful classical details, such as paneling, ionic pilasters, and sculptural plaques. The structure is built of reinforced concrete and steel and has a red brick exterior.

The style of the Auditorium is generally called "Classical Revival," or "Neo-Classical." It is a two-story red brick building with ionic details. A wide entablature and a belt course of beige stone emphasize the horizontal character of the building

and tie the two-part structure together. These horizontals divide the raised basement, the main floors, and the tall parapet that goes around the roofline of the whole building. This lighter stone is also used for the columns originally on the front and the bases and capitals of the piers around the building. All of the windows of the building have been replaced, but their size and shape have not changed. The original tripartite window arrangement featured French detail, which lent the structure something of a Beaux Arts character.

The Auditorium Annex housed the original front façade along Fifth Street. This wing is rectangular in shape and feature projecting end pavilions and a projecting center entrance. The entrance featured a series of two-story fluted ionic columns, the middle ones grouped in twos; they have been replaced with flat brick piers similar to others on the building. At the north and south projecting end pavilions are two story engaged columns on either side of centered windows. Five windows flank either side of the original front entrance, and five windows span both the south side and north side of the Annex. The windows are separated into bays by ionic pilasters of brick. The three middle windows on the north side have been bricked shut, as have the squat rectangular windows at the basement level. The roof appears to be flat; it cannot be seen from the ground due to the brick parapet wall.

The south facade of the main auditorium has now become the primary front of the building. The roof of the main auditorium is hipped, but a parapet wall of beige metal that extends the original brick parapet wall now obscures the lowest part of the roof. Nine entry doors are centered along this façade in a projecting one story pavilion. The 2002 renovation created a concrete landing where a grand stair was originally located. This landing is covered with a rounded flat roof with metal tracery. To either side is a two-story pavilion with pairs of exit doors on the ground level and windows on the second story. Tripartite windows are located on the upper story across the façade. The 2002 renovation also created a semi-circular vehicular drive for pedestrian drop-off at the Annex. This drive is also covered with a flat roof similar to the main auditorium.

The west elevation is utilitarian in character and consists of a series of large and small tripartite windows. It appears to have been little altered.

The north elevation was originally set back from State Street due to the early deed restrictions about the property's public use. With the widening of State Street this buffer zone has been reduced. This elevation, like the west front, is utilitarian in character. This portion of the building was rebuilt in the 2002 renovation due to failing foundation piles. The façade is relatively unadorned and clad with red variegated brick to match the historic facades. The façade contains two loading docks. No windows are located on this façade.

The Auditorium Annex houses rooms named after prominent Milwaukee figures. For instance, the John Plankinton Hall is on the second floor. On the first floor is the Kilbourn Hall.

The Milwaukee Auditorium is part of western downtown's civic center. The official Civic Center includes the Court House, the Safety Building, the State Office Building, the Milwaukee Arena/UW-Milwaukee Panthers Arena, the Baird Center, the Public Museum and the nearby Fiserv Forum, the Public Library, newly constructed Frank Productions concert venue, and numerous hotels.

Alterations to the exterior basically consist of modifications to the original doors and window areas as mentioned above, plus the early-2000s renovations that modified the W. Kilbourn Avenue entrances and reconstructed the rear of the building. This renovation also reduced seating capacity in the main auditorium, created better sightlines, and new galleried rotunda. The original main entry on Fifth Street has been modified with the construction of an addition that links the Auditorium to the Arena. The parapet wall has been extended above the original but the original is still intact. Many of these alterations are reversible and do not impact negatively on the building's significance to the community. Windows can be restored to their original appearance and the connector wing to the Arena could be removed with the entrance returned to its former condition.

Milwaukee Arena:

The Milwaukee Arena occupies a block bounded by W. Kilbourn Avenue, N. Vel R. Phillips Avenue (formerly 4th Street) and W. State Street on the south, east and north, respectively. To the west is the Milwaukee Auditorium built in 1909. The subject building sits on a large urban lot and has an approximate setback of 30 feet from the back of curb of N. Vel R. Phillips Avenue

The brick-veneered, Contemporary-style, Milwaukee Arena features a roof consisting of a series of round-arched, telescoping sections, which are sheathed with copper on their north and south faces. The primary (south) facade consists of a slightly projecting section from which projects the rectilinear entrance block. The word "ARENA" in raised

metal letters is found on the east elevation of this entrance block. The entrance is composed of large windows divided by angled heavy concrete piers resting atop a broad, flat-roof, aluminum-faced canopy with rounded corners that shelters the first floor. This level is sheathed with a polished, red granite veneer and contains a long series of entrance doors. On each side of the slightly projecting section are horizontal window openings on the first level and vented openings above. The entire facade is framed by canted corners featuring modest, vertically oriented brickwork with applied, vertical aluminum elements. Additional entrances are found on the canted corners. The building and its projections are topped with aluminum coping.

The side (west) elevation features long, horizontal window openings within simple limestone surrounds. Louvered vents are found by the upper corners of the facade. A brick, one-story, enclosed passageway on this elevation connects the subject building with the neighboring Milwaukee Auditorium (500 W. Kilbourn Avenue, WHPD #73319).

The side (east) elevation similarly contains long, horizontal window openings within simple limestone surrounds and louvered vents in its upper corners. An additional entrance contained within a limestone surround featuring large windows over a series of doors is located in the middle of this elevation.

The rear (north) elevation also has an entrance contained within a limestone surround featuring large windows over a series of doors. A flat-roof, aluminum-faced canopy shelters the doors. This elevation also contains vented openings, as well as what appears to be a modern metal screen, which hides rooftop mechanical units.

Exterior alterations are largely minimal. Modern fenestration is found within the long, horizontal window openings, however, the large windows above the primary entrance are original.

On the interior, the original ticket booth inside the primary entrance is extant, as is a secondary, smaller ticket booth located inside the rear (north) entrance. Flooring predominantly consists of modern tile, however, the upper concourse features its original terrazzo floor. Inside the arena, original lights and seats are extant, although additional lighting has been added and the seats re-upholstered. The large suspended scoreboard was installed within the past thirty years. Alterations consist of the removal of a few rows of seats by the concourse openings and construction of concrete platforms in these areas (for spectators confined to wheelchairs). As well, concession stands have been remodeled and walls that formerly created office areas have been removed and these areas assumed into the concourse.

7. SIGNIFICANCE

Areas of significance:

- | | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
| ☐ agriculture | ☐ economics | ☐ law | ☐ science |
| X architecture | ☐ education | ☐ literature | ☐ social/humanitarian |
| ☐ art | X engineering | ☐ military | ☐ theater |
| ☐ commerce | ☐ engineering | ☐ music | ☐ transportation |
| ☐ communications | ☐ exploration/settlement | ☐ philosophy | ☐ other (specify): _____ |
| X community planning | ☐ industry | ☐ politics/government | |
| ☐ conservation | ☐ landscape architecture | ☐ religion | |

Date built or altered: 1909; 1949 _____

Builder/architect: Ferry & Class (Auditorium); Eschweiler & Eschweiler (Arena)

Written statement of significance: (continue on a separate sheet, if necessary)

Statement of Significance- Milwaukee Auditorium:

The Milwaukee Auditorium, constructed between 1907 and 1909, is significant in the areas of Politics/Government, Entertainment/Recreation, and Community Planning and Development, and in the area of Architecture. Alongside Milwaukee City Hall, the Auditorium is among the most important civic structures in the city, both for its architectural qualities and its association with events of local and national significance.

Civic and Political Significance

The Milwaukee Auditorium reflects the City Beautiful ideals and civic center planning efforts that shaped Milwaukee's downtown in the early twentieth century. As the first completed structure in the city's proposed civic center, the building helped convince city and county leaders to proceed with locating the County Courthouse at its present Ninth Street site, thereby anchoring the civic complex that continues to define the west side of downtown. Designed to embody civic pride and to serve as a model of modern urban design, the Auditorium offered what contemporary accounts described as "all the requirements for a large and commodious convention hall." Its ample seating capacity, stage facilities, wardrobe and storage rooms, banquet and assembly halls, and modern conveniences such as telegraph and telephone connections ensured its adaptability and functionality.

The building has served as the venue for Milwaukee's major political, cultural, and social events for more than one hundred years. Nationally, the Auditorium holds a unique place in history for its association with the 1912 assassination attempt on former President Theodore Roosevelt. After being shot while leaving the Gilpatrick Hotel on October 14, 1912, Roosevelt insisted on proceeding to the Auditorium, where he delivered a scheduled campaign speech to 9,000 people despite his injury. His statement to the audience—"I have just been shot, but it takes more than that to kill a bull moose"—cemented the event in American memory and secured the building a permanent place in national political history.

Architecturally, the Milwaukee Auditorium is a significant local example of the Classical Revival style as interpreted by the Milwaukee firm of Ferry & Clas. The firm is best known for refined public and institutional commissions such as the Milwaukee Central Library and the State Historical Society Building in Madison, but the Auditorium represents a unique and monumental work within their portfolio. Unlike their library and archival buildings, which were designed primarily to house collections, the Auditorium was conceived to accommodate large-scale civic events and popular entertainment. The result was a building that was at once elegant, functional, and versatile—a model for similar civic auditoriums constructed in other cities.

The structure's reinforced concrete and steel frame represented a significant technological achievement for its time, allowing for a vast unobstructed interior and improved fire safety. Classical Revival and Beaux-Arts details—including Ionic pilasters, sculptural plaques, and a prominent entablature—aligned the building with national civic architecture of the time, while the use of red brick and restrained ornament reflected Milwaukee's practical, working-class ethos. This combination of elegance and pragmatism made the building both monumental and distinctly local.

The versatility of the Auditorium further enhances its architectural importance. The arrangement of main auditorium, the Annex spaces, meeting rooms, and assembly spaces allowed the building to host a wide variety of events, from political rallies to orchestral performances and conventions. This multi-functional capacity distinguished it from the single-purpose arenas and stadiums that became common later in the twentieth century. Throughout its history, the Auditorium proved financially sustainable precisely because of this adaptability.

Although alterations have occurred—including window replacements, modifications to the Fifth Street entrance, and the addition of a connector to the Arena—these changes are largely reversible and do not compromise the building's overall significance. The primary massing, materials, decorative detailing, and monumental character remain intact. The Auditorium continues to convey its historic associations with Milwaukee's civic identity and its architectural expression of Classical Revival ideals.

Statement of Significance- Milwaukee Arena:

The Milwaukee Arena, constructed in 1949–1950, is significant in the areas of Entertainment/Recreation and Community Planning and Development, and in the area of Architecture.

Completed in the immediate postwar years, the Milwaukee Arena represented the city's first major civic improvement in more than two decades, following the economic stagnation of the Depression and the resource restrictions of World War II. Designed as a multi-purpose venue for athletic events, conventions, and exhibitions, the Arena quickly became a focal point of civic pride. At its opening ceremony, attended by 11,000 citizens and public officials, the theme of "progress" was repeatedly invoked. The Milwaukee Journal editorialized that the building positioned Milwaukee to compete with any Midwestern city for conventions and events, reflecting the community's aspirations for growth and modernization.

The Arena's success was immediate and measurable. In its first year of operation, the building returned a profit, an achievement that reinforced public confidence in civic investment. Its success directly influenced the advancement of other public projects during the 1950s and early 1960s, including the construction of a new outdoor stadium, improved zoo facilities, a war memorial, an addition to the central library, and a new public museum. In this way, the Arena catalyzed a wave of mid-century civic improvements that reshaped Milwaukee's cultural and institutional landscape. As both a venue for athletic competition and a site for conventions and exhibitions, the Arena has remained an important component of the city's civic identity from its opening to the present.

The Milwaukee Arena is also significant for its architecture as a distinct and well-designed example of mid-twentieth-century Contemporary architecture. Executed by the respected Milwaukee architectural firm of Eschweiler & Eschweiler, the design reflects modernist principles adapted to a large-scale public facility. The building's form, materials, and detailing illustrate the streamlined and functional qualities associated with Contemporary architecture of the postwar period, while its monumental scale and civic purpose imbue it with symbolic importance.

As a major work of Eschweiler & Eschweiler, the Arena also represents the continuing contribution of one of Milwaukee's most prominent architectural firms, whose projects shaped the city's built environment over multiple generations. In combining modern architectural design with cutting-edge engineering for its time, the Milwaukee Arena embodies the optimism and civic ambition of the postwar era.

The Milwaukee Arena retains integrity of location, setting, design, materials, feeling, and association. Despite later additions and the evolution of neighboring civic buildings, the property continues to convey its original appearance and function as a mid-twentieth-century civic arena.

8. Major Bibliographical References

National Register of Historic Places Determination of Eligibility Form, Milwaukee Arena
Designation Study Report, Milwaukee Auditorium
Wisconsin Center District facilities timeline

9. Property Description

Acreage: 6.39 Obtain from <http://assessments.milwaukee.gov/>

Legal property description: CERTIFIED SURVEY MAP NO 6245 IN NE & NW 1/4 SEC 29-7-22 PARCEL 1 BID #21

10. Form Prepared By

Name/Title: HPC staff on behalf of Ald. Robert Bauman _____

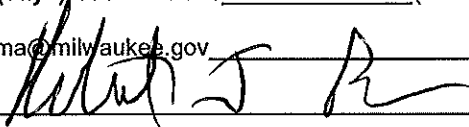
Organization: City of Milwaukee _____

Street: 200 E. Wells Street _____

City: Milwaukee _____ State: WI _____ Zip: 53202 _____

Telephone (days) 414-286-2886 _____ (evenings) _____ Date: 10/3/2025 _____

Email rjbauma@milwaukee.gov _____

Signature  _____

Return to: Historic Preservation Commission
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