

Wisconsin Word Processing Format (Approved 1/92)

**United States Department of Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900A). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

**1. Name of Property**

**historic name** Oriental Theatre  
**other names/site number**

**2. Location**

<b>street &amp; number</b>	2216-2230 North Farwell Avenue	N/A	<b>not for publication</b>
<b>city or town</b>	Milwaukee	N/A	<b>vicinity</b>
<b>state</b> Wisconsin	<b>code</b> WI	<b>county</b> Milwaukee	<b>code</b> 079
			<b>zip code</b> 53202

**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets \_ does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant \_ nationally \_ statewide  locally. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property \_ meets \_ does not meet the National Register criteria.  
( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting official/Title Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

Oriental Theatre  
Name of Property

Milwaukee  
County and State

Wisconsin

#### 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:  
\_\_\_ entered in the National Register.  
\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.  
\_\_\_ determined eligible for the  
National Register.  
\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.  
\_\_\_ determined not eligible for the  
National Register.  
\_\_\_ See continuation sheet.  
\_\_\_ removed from the National  
Register.  
\_\_\_ other, (explain:)

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Signature of the Keeper

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

#### 5. Classification

**Ownership of Property**  
(check as many boxes as  
apply)

private  
 public-local  
 public-State  
 public-Federal

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one box)

building(s)  
 district  
 structure  
 site  
 object

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources  
in the count)

contributing	noncontributing
1	buildings
	sites
	structures
	objects
1	0 total

**Name of related multiple property listing:**  
(Enter "N/A" if property not part of a multiple property  
listing.)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources  
previously listed in the National Register**

0

#### 6. Function or Use

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)  
RECREATION AND CULTURE: THEATER  
COMMERCE/TRADE: BUSINESS

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)  
RECREATION AND CULTURE: THEATER  
COMMERCE/TRADE: BUSINESS  
COMMERCE/TRADE: RESTAURANT

#### 7. Description

**Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions)  
OTHER

**Materials**

(Enter categories from instructions)  
foundation CONCRETE  
walls TERRA COTTA  
BRICK  
roof OTHER  
other

#### Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Oriental Theatre  
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## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for the National Register listing.)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

### Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

### Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ARCHITECTURE

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### Period of Significance

1927

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### Significant Dates

1927

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### Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked)

N/A

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### Cultural Affiliation

N/A

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### Architect/Builder

Dick & Bauer (architects)

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### Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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## 9. Major Bibliographic References

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

### Previous Documentation on File (National Park Service):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

### Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local government
- University
- Other  
Name of repository: Milwaukee Public Library

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 16 427893 4767811  
Zone Easting Northing

3 \_\_\_\_\_  
Zone Easting Northing

2 \_\_\_\_\_  
Zone Easting Northing

4 \_\_\_\_\_  
Zone Easting Northing

See Continuation Sheet

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet)

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title	Michael T. McQuillen, M.S.	date	August 2021
organization	McQuillen Historical Consulting, LLC	telephone	(414) 817-2571
street & number	1900 E. Wood Place	zip code	53211
city or town	Shorewood	state	WI

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### Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

#### Continuation Sheets

**Maps** A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.  
A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs** Representative black and white photographs of the property.

**Additional Items** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

### Property Owner

Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

<b>name/title</b>	Tim Gokhman	<b>date</b>	August 2021
<b>organization</b>	Oriental Building SPE, LLC	<b>telephone</b>	(414) 271-5263
<b>street &amp; number</b>	1840 N. Farwell Avenue, Suite A	<b>zip code</b>	53202
<b>city or town</b>	Milwaukee	<b>state</b>	WI

<b>name/title</b>	Jim Owczarski, Milwaukee City Clerk	<b>date</b>	August 2021
<b>organization</b>	City of Milwaukee	<b>telephone</b>	(414) 286-2221
<b>street &amp; number</b>	200 E. Wells Street, Room 205	<b>zip code</b>	53202
<b>city or town</b>	Milwaukee	<b>state</b>	WI

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects, (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Oriental Theatre  
Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

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[Start description on line below](#)

**Summary**

Constructed in 1927, the Oriental Theatre was designed by the well-regarded Milwaukee architectural firm, Dick & Bauer.<sup>1</sup> In addition to their residential, commercial and industrial commissions, Dick & Bauer specialized in theater architecture executing plans for over sixteen theaters in Wisconsin. The Oriental Theatre was designed and built as a movie palace at the height of popularity of this property type. Movie palaces were noted for their ornate and lavishly detailed interiors, especially within their expansive lobbies and theater auditorium. The Oriental is specifically an excellent example of an exotic movie palace, which was designed to make patrons feel as though they were in a distant and foreign land. The theater incorporates elements of East Indian, Moorish, Islamic, and Byzantine architecture to create a “temple of Oriental art” executed in ornamental plaster and decorative painting. The theater’s decorative features include false beams in the lobbies painted to resemble hewn timbers; tile floors; draperies; seated mystical figures within decorative niches in the theater auditorium; ebony-colored lions lining the stairs to the balcony; and elaborate plaster work consisting of over one hundred elephants and other mythological creatures. Large murals depicting exotic palaces and intricately detailed eight-foot light fixtures add to the ornate nature of the lobby. In addition to its decorative features, the theater has retained its interior layout with the existing floorplan closely resembling the original Dick & Bauer architectural plans. Character-defining spaces and elements, including the original ticket booth and entrance lobby, theater lobby, theater auditorium, balcony and balcony promenade, projection room, and stage and orchestra pit, are intact. Although not as opulent as the interior, the Oriental Theatre also retains its original exterior design elements that make it stand out from the surrounding streetscape. These include its onion-domed minarets and glazed terra cotta-clad primary façade with decorative balustrade, pilasters, and finials. Similar to other movie palaces in the city, the building was constructed to include additional functions; specifically, a basement-level recreation venue, four storefronts, office space above the storefronts, and a one-story commercial wing on the side (southwest) elevation. Possessing excellent integrity of design, materials, workmanship, feeling, association and location, the Oriental Theatre is the only building on its lot.

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<sup>1</sup> Historic period documentation – including the Oriental’s original architectural plans, opening night program, and references to the theater in *Motion Picture News* – all use the ‘Oriental Theatre’ spelling rather than ‘Oriental Theater.’ Therefore, the ‘Oriental Theatre’ spelling is utilized for this nomination.

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Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

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**Description**

Site and Setting

The Oriental Theatre is located on the east side of North Farwell Avenue between East Ivanhoe Place and East Kenilworth Place within the Lower East Side neighborhood of the City of Milwaukee. Due to the building's L-shaped massing, the primary (northwest) facade faces North Farwell Avenue, while the side (southwest) elevation fronts East Kenilworth Place (as a result, the building wraps around the lot containing a one-story restaurant building and parking lot at the east corner of Farwell Avenue and Kenilworth Place, which is a separate property unaffiliated with the Oriental Theatre). Abutting the sidewalk on both North Farwell Avenue and East Kenilworth Place, the building's theater marquee extends over the sidewalk along North Farwell Avenue. An alley is located along the rear (southeast) elevation. This alley has been recently transformed into an outdoor art gallery featuring murals branded, Black Cat Alley. It is modestly landscaped. The immediate setting surrounding the building is a densely built, urban environment, predominantly consisting of one-to-three-story, early-to-mid-twentieth-century, brick commercial buildings. A block to the south is a large, seven-story building recently remodeled for University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee student housing.

Within the broader context of the city, the Oriental Theater is located approximately two miles northeast of Milwaukee's central business district. It is situated only four blocks west of the bluff overlooking Lake Michigan and the Ascension-Columbia-St. Mary's Hospital complex is found a block to the east. The Oriental Theatre is a well-known landmark at the northern end of Milwaukee's Lower East Side neighborhood. Situated on a strip of land between Lake Michigan and the Milwaukee River, the Lower East Side historically developed in the late nineteenth century as a neighborhood featuring both the wealthy, who resided closer to the lake, and the working class residing closer to the river. The neighborhood was fully settled by the turn-of-the-twentieth-century and a thriving business district developed to serve its residents. The Oriental Theatre established itself within this district and became one of the most popular movie palaces in Milwaukee.<sup>2</sup>

Exterior

Built in 1927, the Oriental Theatre is an exotic-themed movie palace. Resting on a concrete foundation, the primary (northwest) façade is clad with glazed terra cotta, while secondary elevations are brick-veneered. The building's L-shaped massing results in the primary facade oriented toward

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<sup>2</sup> John Gurda, *Milwaukee: City of Neighborhoods* (Milwaukee: Historic Milwaukee, Inc., 2015), 303-306; "Dancer," *The Milwaukee Journal*, July 2, 1927, Page 4.

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North Farwell Avenue, while the side (southwest) elevation fronts East Kenilworth Place (*photo 2*). The composition of the building consists of three component parts: the two-story section on Farwell Avenue; a large, unfenestrated, rectangular block containing the theater auditorium situated behind, and perpendicular to, this two-story section; and a one-story wing attached to the theater auditorium facing Kenilworth Place. This one-story wing was originally occupied by an automotive service garage, while the portion of the building on Farwell Avenue contains the theater entrance, four storefronts, and offices above the storefronts. Each of these component parts of the building has a flat roof.<sup>3</sup>

Although not as opulent as their interior spaces, movie palace exteriors were designed to be distinct from the surrounding streetscape and the Oriental Theatre certainly reflects this trait. The character-defining features on its primary façade are two, glazed terra cotta-clad minarets situated atop the theater-entrance bay of the building (*photos 3 & 4*). From the street-level, the minarets appear to feature balconies with paneled balustrades accented with regularly spaced finials and pendants below the balustrade; however, they are purely decorative and do not possess exterior walkways. The minaret to the south is taller and has two of these false balconies, compared to the single example found on the minaret to the north. Both minarets share the same architectural elements: canted bases, tall window openings with oriental arches containing leaded glass windows, and projecting cornices with decorative pendants. Each minaret also has a copper-clad, onion-dome, although the onion-dome on the minaret to the north is wider and less elongated than the example to the south. A decorative, bracketed balustrade is located between the minarets. Below the balustrade is a horizontal course of ornamental terra cotta panels with alternating diamond-shaped and rosette moldings. Below the canted bases of the minarets are vertically oriented, recessed panels into which the marquee hang rods are anchored. Between these recessed panels and behind the marquee is a recessed area trimmed with ornamental molding containing three, round-arched window openings. The window in the center is larger and taller than those flanking. The upper portion of each opening contains fixed, multi-light, steel sash that rests on a molded cornice. Fluted, terra cotta pilasters with decorative capitals frame each of the window openings, which are partially obscured from view by the existing marquee. This lighted marquee is surmounted on two sides with lettering spelling 'ORIENTAL' outlined with neon-lighting. The marquee and porcelain-enamel-panel theater entrance surround with poster display cases were installed in 1947. Modern aluminum-and-glass doors access the theater.

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<sup>3</sup> Dick & Bauer, Architects (Milwaukee), "Theatre, Store & Office Building for the M. L. A. Investment Co.," June, 1926, Job No. 123; Original building permit (July 23, 1926), 2216-2230 North Farwell Avenue, on file at the Department of City Development, City of Milwaukee, 809 N. Broadway (First Floor), Milwaukee, WI.



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Adjacent to the theater-entrance bay, the two-story section is composed of five bays consisting of four storefronts and two entrances within the center bay. Containing modern aluminum-and-glass doors, one entrance leads to the basement recreation venue, while the other accesses the upper-level office area above the storefronts. These entrances are sheltered by a circa 1970 canopy that has hang rods anchored to the façade. Each of the four storefronts appears to be remarkably intact. Featuring recessed entrances within round-arched openings that have textured stucco ceilings within their entryway, the copper-trimmed storefronts are composed of a tiled base and large storefront windows with multi-light, leaded, prism-glass transoms. Transom openings on the southernmost storefront are obscured by signage. Tile cladding the base of the storefronts is set in a herringbone pattern. Copper pilasters with recessed panels divide the storefronts. The glazed terra cotta-cladding and design elements of the theater-entrance bay are repeated above the storefronts. Notably, the decorative, bracketed balustrade located between the minarets is repeated above the upper level, albeit with simple brackets. The center bay modestly projects above the rest of the façade featuring additional ornamentation. Specifically, blind round-arches are located above the windows and a course of decorative corbels is found above these arches. Framing the center bay are pointed finials with acanthus leaf bases situated on top of the balustrade. Similar decorative elements lacking pointed finials are located on the balustrade and spaced to define each bay of this two-story section (note, these decorative elements are not missing their finials, the original architectural plans reflect the existing conditions). Each bay of the upper level has three window openings. Pilasters featuring a capital, base, and decorative molding frame each window opening. Fenestration consists of modern windows reflecting the appearance of the original sash windows. Recessed horizontal panels are found below the sill course of the windows and above the storefronts within each bay.

The side (southwest) elevation of the two-story section is veneered with common brick and largely obscured from view by the neighboring building. The side (southwest) elevation of the theater auditorium block has a face brick veneer in contrast to the common brick veneer of its northwest elevation (*photos 2 & 5*). Situated by the west corner of the elevation, a fresh-air intake tower has concrete coping and a large opening containing a louvered vent and limestone sill. The boiler chimney is located on the elevation's south corner. This chimney has modest brick corbelling at the top of the stack and a concrete cap. A large mural painted on the southwest elevation was completed at the time of the aforementioned Black Cat Alley installation. Projecting from this elevation of the theater auditorium is a one-story wing also composed of face brick. It features modest brick corbelling at the top of its primary façade and limestone coping. The left-of-center entrance contains modern aluminum-

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and-glass doors and sidelights. A concrete ramp with metal railing accesses the entrance. Originally used as an automotive service garage, the vehicle bays have been converted to window and entrance openings, except for the westernmost bay, which contains a modern overhead garage door and transom. The original architectural plans also suggest the easternmost window opening was originally smaller and later enlarged to its current dimensions. These window openings contain limestone sills and modern fenestration. An additional entrance is situated at the eastern end of the façade. This entrance is flanked by window openings with limestone sills that have been infilled with brick. The side (northwest) elevation of the wing has four small openings containing louvered vents.

The one-story wing projects beyond the rear (southeast) façade of the theater auditorium block. This portion of the wing features small window openings with limestone sills and original steel-sash fenestration on its upper level below which are four door openings containing steel doors. These doors access the back-of-stage area and the windows provided natural light for the dressing rooms. The southeast façade of the theater auditorium is largely a solid common-brick-veneered wall excepting for the two door openings that access fire escapes (*photos 6 & 7*). Two, small, concrete block enclosures are found on this elevation. An alley consisting of a concrete walkway spans the length of the rear facade. This alley recently became an outdoor art gallery, which accounts for the murals painted on the rear elevation.

Although the primary façade of the Oriental Theatre abuts the building to the north, the theatre's side (northeast) elevation, which consists of a solid painted-brick wall, is setback from the neighboring building when viewed from the alley (*photo 8*).

Exterior alterations include the replacement of the original theater marquee (see *Figure 2: Oriental Theatre, exterior, 1929 photograph*). The existing marquee and associated porcelain-enamel-panel entrance surround with poster display cases was installed in 1947 by the Everbrite Electric Service Company.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the original blade signs for the theater and basement recreation venue have been removed. Original fenestration on the upper level of the primary elevation was replaced with the existing modern windows, which reflect the appearance of the original window sash. The exterior doors to the theater, basement recreation venue, and second-floor office area also are modern aluminum-and-glass examples installed at an unknown date. Finally, the one-story wing facing East Kenilworth Place originally consisted of a series of garage doors that have been converted to large

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<sup>4</sup> Building permit (August 27, 1947), 2230 North Farwell Avenue, on file at the Department of City Development, City of Milwaukee, 809 N. Broadway (First Floor), Milwaukee, WI.

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windows, which likely occurred when the use of this wing changed to a warehouse. The Oriental Theatre otherwise is unchanged and possesses excellent exterior integrity.

**Interior**

It is important to note that the interior was designed to evoke the feeling of exoticism referencing East Indian, Moorish, Islamic, and Byzantine architecture, while not featuring exact historical replicas of elements of these architectural forms. Saxe Amusement Enterprises acknowledges as much in their promotional materials for the Oriental Theatre stating that it is “symbolical of the Far East” and ambiguously noting that features of the theater “all embody the Oriental touch.” Even the original Dick & Bauer architectural plans for the building do not provide clarification in terms of their intent regarding specific design details since they repeatedly use the notation, “enriched ornamental plaster” to describe most decorative elements on their drawings. Perhaps the most overt reference in the Oriental’s design are the multiple applications of elephants, which reflect the elephant with howdah carriage image on the cover of the Oriental Theatre’s opening night program (see *Figure 5: Oriental Theatre, July 2, 1927 Saxe-O-Grams program*).<sup>5</sup>

***Entrance & Entrance Lobby:***

The area immediately inside the theater entrance consists of a concrete and tile floor (*photo 9*). The space features textured plaster walls and ceilings and a decoratively painted, three-part crown molding. The original ticket booth remains inside the entrance. It is composed of a tiled base upon which rests Tuscan columns supporting a decorative cornice. Ticket booth windows are situated between the columns within oriental arches. Tasseled drapery adds to the decorative composition of the booth hanging down to the spring line of the arches. Attesting to the longevity of the theater, the finish has been worn away from the floor tile in front of the ticket booth where an innumerable number of patrons have purchased their tickets. Radiators are inset in the wall and feature decorative radiator screens. Outlined with decoratively molded trim, poster cases have plaster moldings of an elephant in profile at the lower corners of the case.

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<sup>5</sup> “Gala Oriental Opening,” Saxe-O-Grams (a publication of Saxe Amusement Enterprises, Milwaukee), Volume 4, Number 23 (July 2, 1927); Dick & Bauer, Architects (Milwaukee), “Theatre, Store & Office Building for the M. L. A. Investment Co.,” June, 1926, Job No. 123.

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Beyond the ticket booth, the entrance lobby is a transitional space between the entrance and the theater lobby (*photo 10*). Elements found inside the entrance that are repeated within the entrance lobby include the textured plaster walls and ceiling, the poster cases and radiator screens. Floor tile also is evident and used as a border around the carpet. The entrance lobby features false beams decoratively painted to resemble an exotic dark wood. Four, colored-glass light fixtures hang from the beams. These beams are supported by pilasters that encircle the room. Containing a recessed panel within their marbled shaft, these pilasters exhibit an elaborately molded and painted capital and base. Indeed, the base is particularly impressive featuring its own small columns between which are a rosette above a rectangular molding with scrollwork. Poster cases and radiators are situated within slightly recessed sections of the wall. Each recessed section has its own crown molding mimicking the decorative motif of the pilaster capitals. On the west wall of the entrance lobby, a door with an upper section featuring an oriental-arched opening containing glass accesses the ticket booth. On the east wall are three openings containing double-doors with oriental-arches that lead to the theater lobby. In the southeast corner of the room is a door opening accessing a corridor that leads to the men's and women's restrooms. Featuring floor and wall tile laid in geometric patterns, the restrooms were expanded into the neighboring storefront interior during the current rehabilitation project (the Oriental Theatre is being rehabilitated under the federal historic preservation tax credit program as an ongoing five-year phased project; for project work completed to date, see description under the following header, "current rehabilitation project").

***Theater Lobby:***

Progressing from the impressively detailed entrance lobby into the theater lobby, an Oriental Theatre patron notices an increased degree of ornamental embellishment. It is easy to understand why *The Milwaukee Journal* declared this theater lobby to be, "probably the most beautiful of any in the state" when the Oriental opened in 1927.<sup>6</sup> Like the entrance lobby, the theater lobby features false beams, although these beams exhibit a different decorative paint scheme to resemble hewn timbers (*photo 11*). The beams are supported by finely detailed elephant-head brackets finished in silver leaf. Flooring consists of carpeting with a tile border. Balconets lining both sides of the lobby are painted and covered with plaster ornamentation. Clusters of silver-leaf pendants hang below the balconets. Each balconet features either marbled columns or pilasters with decorative silver leaf capitals supporting large oriental arches with draperies (those on the south wall have columns; on the north wall they have

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<sup>6</sup> "Ald. Greene Sees Show! Theater Is Too Handy," *The Milwaukee Journal*, July 3, 1927, Page 8.

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pilasters). Balconets along the south wall are open to the balcony promenade, while those on the north wall have blind arches.

Elaborately detailed banded pilasters lining the theater lobby are located between the balconets. Featuring a black marbleized shaft, these pilasters have applied ornamentation and intricately detailed capitals and bases, which appear to be finished in silver leaf. Brackets with pendants at the top of the pilasters are similarly detailed. Slightly recessed wall sections under the balconets contain multifoil arches featuring large rosettes, scrolls and other ornamentation. Decorative stenciling is found on the wall within the multifoil arch. Below the stenciling is a painted plaster molding of an elephant with howdah in profile. These recessed wall sections are trimmed at the bottom with a modestly decorative sill molding. Situated below the sill molding are radiator screens and inset radiators. Exceptions to this are cases where doors are located below the multifoil arch, such as along the south wall, which features double-doors with oriental-arches accessing each of the three theaters.

Painted murals located over the theater lobby entrance/exit doors and along the stairs to the balcony add further decorative embellishment to this space. Situated between the pilasters and outlined with drapery, both murals depict exotic palaces in a seaside landscape. Carpeted stairs to the balcony feature ebony-colored lion statues seated on tiled platforms lining the stairs, which are found at the east end of the theater lobby. An office/storage area is located under the stairs. Original lighting fixtures within the lobby consist of three intricately detailed eight-foot fixtures hung from the ceiling, as well as paired sconces found on the north and south walls. Finally, the concession stand along the north wall was installed during the current rehabilitation project. The theater lobby is remarkably intact as shown by the historic photograph of this space taken at the time when the Oriental Theatre was completed (see *Figure 3: Oriental Theatre, interior, theater lobby [1927 photograph]*).

***Main Theater Auditorium & Two Smaller Theaters:***

Built as a single-screen movie palace, the original architectural plans reveal that the three theater auditorium entrances from the lobby accessed a narrow “auditorium promenade” with auditorium seating extending from under the balcony to the orchestra pit (see *Figure 9: Heywood-Wakefield advertisement showing Oriental Theatre seats* for a view of the auditorium from the stage). In 1988, two smaller theaters were sensitively installed under the auditorium balcony.<sup>7</sup> This adaption was well-

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<sup>7</sup> Building permit (November 25, 1987), 2230 North Farwell Avenue, on file at the Department of City Development, City

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planned considering that it did not impact the large volume of space and decorative elements within the theater auditorium and maintained the entrances from the lobby; each of which now accessed a separate theater. That project involved constructing walls to contain each theater, building projection rooms, and replacing theater seats. As well, an original oval-shaped, textured-plaster dome ceiling under the balcony was truncated to be separately contained within each of these smaller theaters (*photo 22*). Original decorative features on the outer walls of each theater were maintained. The current rehabilitation project installed new theater seats and aisle carpeting in the two theaters.

A carpeted corridor leads to the auditorium, which rivals the theater lobby in its outstanding exotic-themed detailing (*photos 15 & 18*). Perhaps the design element that is most identified with the Oriental are the large mystical figures on each side of the auditorium (*photo 16*). Seated on decorative platforms, these figures are situated within textured plaster niches featuring multifoil arches supported by ornate columns. Drapery is hung behind the arch. The figures contain lights within their headdress that glow red in the darkened auditorium. Next to these niches, the plaster has been scored and painted to resemble cut stone. Black marbled banded pilasters very similar in design to those in the theater lobby are located between the niches, while marbled panels below the niches are a lighter color. Ascending the side walls, a decoratively molded and painted cornice is situated above the niches. Above the cornice are textured plaster niches containing banded, black marbled columns supporting paired round arches. Plaster panels composed of multiple rosettes that are decoratively painted are located between the niches and lighted ornaments are situated in front of these panels. Crowning this wall section is another decorative cornice with small pendants. Above this cornice the ceiling cove features ominous mythological creatures that encircle the theater auditorium. These creatures are perched on elephant heads with ceiling pendants abutting their own head. Their eyes contain lights that glow green. Situated between each mythological creature are decoratively painted plaster panels composed of rosettes and scrolls. The auditorium's textured plaster ceiling is recessed behind the cove and it features a large ceiling ornament composed of geometric shapes, scrolls, and radiating lines.

The auditorium stage features a decoratively painted, ornate plaster proscenium arch. Above the arch is a large circular medallion flanked by plaster ornamentation similar to the radiating lines of the ceiling ornament, all of which is decoratively painted. On either side of the stage are balconets like those in the theater lobby. The balconets nearest the stage contain marbled banded columns and exquisite drapery embroidered with peacocks, flowers and other imagery. These textiles screen the

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organ loft. The columns support elaborate plaster moldings featuring pendants. Paired black marbled banded pilasters are found next to the proscenium arch, between the balconets, and between the balconet and sidewall. Balconets farther from the stage contain female statuary. They also feature marbled banded columns that support a multifoil arch and more modest drapery. Above these balconets are niches containing identical female statuary. Next to the niches are decoratively painted panels depicting a peacock and flowers. Below the balconets are theater exits. Theater seating and carpeting within the auditorium was installed during the current rehabilitation project.

The auditorium's movie screen is located on the stage, which retains an original curtain. In front of the stage is the orchestra pit containing the organ enclosure (*photo 17*). The Oriental Theatre originally featured a Barton organ, which was removed. During the period when the theater was owned by the Pritchett brothers, they installed a Kimball organ as a replacement; however, that has been recently removed. As a result, the Oriental currently does not possess a theater organ. The back stage area retains its dressing rooms for performers as shown on the original architectural plans. Below the stage on the basement level are rooms for the organist, orchestra leader, and the musicians, although their partitioning appears to have been altered in the past.<sup>8</sup>

***Balcony promenade & balcony:***

Open to the theater lobby, the balcony promenade is carpeted with a textured plaster ceiling. Pilasters featuring black marbled shafts and ornamental capitals and bases line both sides of the promenade. These pilasters are similar to those in the theater lobby, but are not as decoratively embellished. They support a decorative plaster crown molding. Drapery is hung in the space between the pilasters. Carpeted ramps with textured plaster walls at each end of the promenade access the balcony.

The balcony features a domed, textured plaster ceiling and decorative crown molding (*photo 21*). A portion of the plaster ceiling has been stabilized due to prior wall infiltration from the roof. Fabric-wrapped acoustical panels cover the balcony walls. Niches on the side walls are framed by columns with black marbled shafts and decorative capitals and bases. Niches contain a decorative rectangle-shaped object with rosette molding that has a base and finial. Openings in the rear wall are the location of the movie projection equipment. The balcony has tiered seating with carpeted steps and a carpeted

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<sup>8</sup> Larry Widen and Judi Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee's Movie Theaters* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2007), 118, 142.

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cross aisle. The brass railings situated along the cross aisle are original, although they no longer feature their original curtains (see photo in *Figure 8: Motion Picture News "Three De Luxe Houses Recently Added to Saxe Chain" article*). Unlike the theater auditorium, which had its seats replaced during the 1988 project creating the two small theaters, the balcony retains its original theater seating. Most of the seats have been reupholstered; however, those in the back rows appear to retain their original upholstery (see *Figure 9: Heywood-Wakefield advertisement showing Oriental Theatre seats [Motion Picture News]*). These seats reveal an interesting anomaly; namely, aisle end standards featuring a pharaoh's head exactly matching the aisle end standards used in Milwaukee's Egyptian Theater (3719 North Teutonia Avenue, no longer extant).<sup>9</sup> Historic photographs reveal that this feature is original to the Oriental (see *Figure 4: Oriental Theatre, interior, theater auditorium* where these aisle end standards are visible in the theater auditorium). Research did not reveal the reason for the inclusion of this seemingly out of place Middle East decorative element within the Oriental Theatre's Far East design scheme.

In the rear of the balcony, wood-paneled doors at each end of the space open to stairs accessing two storage rooms and the projection room (on the original architectural plans, the storage room to the west was designated the ushers' room). The projection room has a concrete floor, plaster walls and a suspended, acoustical tile ceiling. The storage rooms have concrete floors and plaster ceilings. The storage room to the west has plaster walls, while the one to the east has both plaster and exposed brick walls.

A women's lounge and restroom is located at the southern end of the balcony promenade. Accessed by descending a short set of terrazzo stairs featuring a wrought-iron balustrade, the lounge is carpeted and has textured plaster ceiling and walls. A single doorway leads to the restroom from the lounge. The restroom retains original floor and wall tile. While the original architectural plans identify this room as a "ladies retiring room," a *Motion Picture News* article reporting on the Oriental's opening notes, "a feature unique in the Saxe neighborhood theatres is the nursery room, delightfully fitted with toys and contrivances for children."<sup>10</sup> A nursery room is not identified elsewhere on the original architectural plans; however, given the size of this lounge, it is possible this room also served that purpose.

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<sup>9</sup> Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee's Movie Theaters*, 70.

<sup>10</sup> "Three De Luxe Houses Recently Added to Saxe Chain," *Motion Picture News* 37, no. 1 (January 7, 1928): 30-31.



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Next to the entrance to the women's lounge and restroom at the end of the balcony promenade is another door accessing a carpeted stair that leads to a small office and a storage room. The original architectural plans identify this area as the theater manager's office and projectionist room. The space is utilitarian with smooth plaster walls and ceiling. Its interior partitioning is different than shown on the original architectural plans.

Comparing the existing floorplan of the theater with the original Dick & Bauer architectural plans reveals that the interior spaces and circulation patterns are largely unchanged. The most notable alteration has been the addition of the two smaller theaters in 1988. However, as previously indicated, by inserting these theaters underneath the balcony, the large volume of space and decorative elements within the theater auditorium were left intact. Theater restrooms have been expanded into one of the storefronts reducing its interior space. An additional modification within the theater was the removal of its original organ. Recorded alterations to the theater in the City of Milwaukee building permit file for the property consist of the aforementioned addition of the two smaller theaters in 1988 and the replacement of the concession stand, which occurred at the same time (it was later replaced with the existing concession stand during the current rehabilitation project). Alterations within the storefronts, offices, basement recreation venue, and one-story wing are discussed under the following descriptions of each of these areas.

***Storefronts:***

The storefront interiors feature terrazzo flooring and predominantly hard-surface ceilings and walls, presumably composed of original plaster. Each storefront interior has an open plan with partitioning limited to the back of space for toilet and storage rooms. Light fixtures are modern. While the northernmost two storefronts maintain their exterior appearance as separate entities, each with its own entrance, the interior partition wall dividing them has been removed and they consist of a single large space currently used as a restaurant. A kitchen and food prep area with an acoustical tile ceiling is located along the north wall, while exposed ductwork is found within the seating area.

Storefront tenants early in the Oriental Theatre's history included a soda shop, delicatessen, milliner, women's clothing shop, and a shoe store. One of the storefronts appears to have been consistently used as a restaurant, albeit under different names, into the 1960s.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Milwaukee, Wis.*, 1910 updated to 1961; *Wright's City of*

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***Offices:***

Terrazzo stairs lead to the office space on the second level above the storefronts. A stair enclosure on the second floor features double-doors with a transom and a bank of windows, all of which have wooden trim (*photo 22*). The corridor located next to the stairs also exhibits terrazzo flooring, while offices have both terrazzo and modern carpet tile flooring. Men's and women's restrooms are accessed from the corridor and retain their original wall and floor tile matching that in the theater. Hard-surface ceilings and walls, presumably composed of both plaster and gypsum board, are found throughout the office area, which has modern exposed ductwork. A kitchen with modern cabinets and fixtures is located within the southeast corner of the office space.

The original Dick & Bauer architectural plans reveal that the outline of the office area, stairs, corridor at the top of the stairs, and restrooms remain unchanged; however, interior office partitioning has been significantly modified. Specifically, the second floor was designed to feature nine individual offices with shared waiting rooms for pairs of offices (office no. 3 was the exception with its own dedicated waiting room). Interestingly, the architectural plans feature the notation "dental unit" for each office no. 1-7 and offices no. 2, 6 & 7 were planned with their own separate laboratory rooms. Although not as many offices were occupied by dentists as originally intended, city directories indicate that at least two offices contained dental practices from the time when the building opened to the 1950s (indeed, dentist Henry J. Halberstadt maintained his practice within the building for twenty-eight years). Additional early office tenants included physicians, lawyers, a beauty salon, an insurance office, a photographer, chiropractor, and the Schaum Piano School founded by well-known local pianist and composer John W. Schaum who wrote piano instruction books for children. By the 1960s, city directories listed an increasing number of office vacancies within the building. In 1977, the multiple-office configuration had been consolidated to two offices. The original partitioning for waiting rooms, laboratories and office closets has been removed and, in the current configuration, these spaces have been absorbed into the overall office space, which is occupied by a single tenant.<sup>12</sup>

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*Milwaukee Directory* (Milwaukee: Wright Directory Company, 1935, 1940, 1947, 1955, 1963).

<sup>12</sup> Dick & Bauer, Architects (Milwaukee), "Theatre, Store & Office Building for the M. L. A. Investment Co.," June, 1926, Job No. 123; *Wright's City of Milwaukee Directory* (Milwaukee: Wright Directory Company, 1928, 1935, 1940, 1947, 1955, 1963, 1971, 1977).

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***Basement recreation venue:***

The original architectural plans feature a ‘general lobby’ at the bottom of the stairs accessing the basement recreation venue. Surrounding this lobby, the plans included a check room, barber shop, kitchen, toilet rooms, and a number of storage rooms. Opposite the general lobby, the majority of the basement recreation space was dedicated to the bowling alleys and a billiard room. Originally operated by Bensinger Recreation, an advertisement published for their opening indicated the venue contained sixteen bowling lanes and twenty billiard tables, as well as a soda fountain, grill room and barber shop (see *Figure 10: Bensinger Recreation opening advertisement*). Shortly thereafter, five additional bowling lanes were installed exclusively for open bowling (see *Figure 11: Bensinger Recreation advertisement*).<sup>13</sup>

An article celebrating the ninetieth anniversary of the basement recreation venue discusses changes to that space. Currently named “Landmark Lanes,” the venue continues to feature sixteen bowling lanes (*photo 23*), which had automated pinsetter systems installed in 1957. The former billiard room is occupied by two separate bars featuring booths, tables and a few pool tables (apparently, this area also was the location of the aforementioned five open-bowling lanes, which reportedly remain underneath the existing floor). A third bar occupies a portion of the lobby and former check room (the check room had later served as a bowling locker room). Finally, a portion of the general lobby and barber shop are now dedicated to an arcade and lockers for bowlers.<sup>14</sup>

The stairs accessing this level are carpeted with modern railings. Finishes throughout the basement recreation venue similarly are modern and predominantly consist of suspended, acoustical tile ceilings, wall-paneling, and carpeting. The side bar is an exception with its modern ceramic tile floor. The bowling alley similarly has an acoustical tile ceiling and both vinyl tile and carpeting with the seating area. The men’s toilet room features original wall and floor tile matching that in the men’s restroom of

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<sup>13</sup> Dick & Bauer, Architects (Milwaukee), “Theatre, Store & Office Building for the M. L. A. Investment Co.,” June, 1926, Job No. 123; “Here’s Your Invitation to Attend the Formal Opening of Bensinger Recreation” (advertisement), *The Milwaukee Journal*, September 23, 1927, Part 2, Page 7; “A Christmas Present to the Public: 5 New Alleys for Open Bowling Only” (advertisement), *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, December 23, 1927, Page 8.

<sup>14</sup> Bobby Tanzilo, “Urban Spelunking: Landmark Lanes, which celebrates 90 years this week,” published May 15, 2017, copy accessed online at OnMilwaukee.com.

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the theater. The ladies' toilet room also has original floor tile matching that in the ladies' restroom located at the end of the balcony promenade.

***One-story wing fronting Kenilworth Place:***

The original architectural plans identify this area as a garage with four vehicular bays featuring wood-paneled garage doors containing upper panes of glass topped by multi-light transoms. The interior consisted of a large open space with the garage office situated in the southeast corner [see *Figure 15: Oriental Theatre, Dick & Bauer 1926 architectural plans (first floor plan)*]. Located next to the office was a toilet room and, next to that, a storage room. Both the original architectural plans and *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map* image of the building note the concrete floor and exposed steel trusses (see *Figure 1: Oriental Theatre, Sanborn Map Company image*). The original occupant is alternatively listed as a Simoniz Service Company Garage or Simonizing Authorized Service Station in city directories. From the 1940s into the mid-1950s, this space was occupied by the Theatres Candy Company and utilized as their office and warehouse (see *Figure 12: Theatres Candy Company, Inc. advertisement*). The Theatres Candy Company supplied candy and popcorn to independent movie theaters throughout the Midwest. By the 1960s, the space was used by a nearby Ford dealership as a storage facility.<sup>15</sup>

This area of the building is currently occupied by an axe-throwing bar (*photo 24*). Its open floorplan remains largely intact, although a three-sided bar has been constructed in the middle of the space and is surrounded by axe-throwing lanes featuring wood-and-wire-mesh partitions dividing the lanes. Original finishes in the form of exposed brick walls, concrete floor, clay-tile ceiling, and exposed steel trusses also are intact. Two original steel skylights provide natural light within the room. Exposed spiral ductwork has been installed next to, and through, the steel trusses.

**Current rehabilitation project**

The Oriental Theatre is being rehabilitated under the federal historic preservation tax credit program as an ongoing five-year phased project (NPS Project #38,200). Project work to date has focused on improving the theater experience for patrons in terms of sight, sound, and comfort. Additionally,

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<sup>15</sup> Dick & Bauer, Architects (Milwaukee), "Theatre, Store & Office Building for the M. L. A. Investment Co.," June, 1926, Job No. 123; Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Milwaukee, Wis.*, 1910 updated to 1961; *Wright's City of Milwaukee Directory* (Milwaukee: Wright Directory Company, 1928, 1934, 1938, 1945, 1955, 1965).

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handicap-accessible seating and hearing-assistance technology has been introduced in each theater. Code-compliant measures, such as upgraded aisle lighting provided by fixtures located underneath theater seat armrests, have been installed. General lighting improvements also have been made, which better highlight the ornate decorative features throughout the Oriental Theatre. This work included retrofitting fixtures with LED lighting and replacing a non-functioning dimmer rack backstage allowing light fixtures to once again function as originally designed with dimming capabilities. This rehabilitation work is being planned and carried out by Milwaukee Film, Inc. Since 2009, the Oriental Theatre has served as the anchor theater of the Milwaukee Film Festival. In addition to running the festival and offering year-round programming for members, Milwaukee Film is in charge of general operations at the Oriental. Their rehabilitation project was planned to allow the Oriental Theatre to serve as a movie house for decades to come.

Within the smaller theaters – theaters B & C – that were originally added in the 1988, project work addressing the movie-viewing experience included improvements to their projection rooms. Acoustical wall panels on projection room walls and projection room doors were replaced to prevent sound-leak issues. To improve the viewing experience, projection windows were downsized to reduce the amount of light emitted into those theaters during screenings. Other work consisted of replacing the carpeting within the aisles, repainting the floor in the seating area and replacing the 1988 seating with existing theater seats. To aid acoustical separation between these two theaters and the main theater, fabric-wrapped acoustical panels separating the theaters were removed and sound-isolation clips and an additional layer of gypsum wallboard were added on the south walls of the smaller theaters prior to installation of new fabric-wrapped acoustical panels. As well, the modern doors from theaters B & C accessing the main theater were replaced with existing solid-core wooden doors featuring acoustical sound seals.

Project work in the main theater (theater A) included many of the same provisions as in the smaller theaters. Specifically, the floor in the seating area was repainted; new carpeting was laid within the aisles and passageway from the theater lobby to the main theater; and 1980s era seating was replaced with existing theater seats. Project work also included areas of plaster ceiling repair that were previously damaged from water filtration due to a leaking roof. That work was completed under the supervision of Conrad Schmitt Studios, Inc., a firm that has provided decorative painting and ornamental plaster restoration services on a number of historic movie palaces and other rehabilitation tax credit projects. The projection room to the main theater is situated behind the rear wall of the balcony. Project work within the projection room included installing a suspended, acoustical tile

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ceiling with recessed light fixtures that are dimmable to one-percent illumination. In order to address a light-leak issue stemming from the original door accessing the projection room, a new metal door was installed. The toilet room within the projection room also was refurbished with new wall tile and fixtures installed.

Additional project work has involved expanding the existing first-floor restrooms and making them handicap-accessible (the women's restroom was expanded into a storefront interior; see *Figure 16: existing first floor plan*). As well, the existing concession stand featuring ADA-compliant counters replaced a concession stand that dated to 1988. It mirrors the footprint of its predecessor. Although it is not known when a concession stand was originally introduced in the theater, the existing example is at least the third iteration of this feature considering that a 1988 building permit noted that the concession stand proposed at that time was to replace another one. A historic photograph dating to 1927 does not show a concession stand within the theater lobby (see *Figure 3: interior, theater lobby*).<sup>16</sup>

**Integrity**

According to *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin* (CRM), when evaluating movie theaters for integrity, they should retain the open space of the theater auditorium, original seating levels, and stage. The Oriental Theatre possesses an extraordinarily high degree of integrity; in addition to retaining those spaces listed by CRM, the theater features its original ticket booth and entrance lobby, theater lobby, orchestra pit, balcony promenade, and projection room. Indeed, the existing floorplan of the theater is little changed when comparing it to the original architectural plans prepared by Dick & Bauer. The most notable alteration was the addition of the two smaller theaters in 1988. These two theaters were inserted underneath the balcony, thereby leaving intact the large volume of space and decorative elements within the theater auditorium. Theater restrooms were expanded into one of the storefronts; however, this only resulted in a reduction of the storefront's interior space, leaving the rest of the storefront unaffected. The building also possesses excellent exterior integrity featuring its original massing, copper-domed minarets, glazed terra cotta ornamentation, and primary elevation storefronts. Although the original blade signs for the theater and basement recreation venue have been removed, and the original theater marquee replaced in 1947, these are typical exterior alterations for theaters as seen with each of the comparison movie palaces cited in this nomination; all of which have

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<sup>16</sup> Building permit for concession stand (April 20, 1988), 2230 North Farwell Avenue, on file at the Department of City Development, City of Milwaukee, 809 N. Broadway (First Floor), Milwaukee, WI.

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had their original marquees replaced. Specifically as a movie palace, the Oriental Theatre has outstanding integrity maintaining those elements that reflect trends in the development of the movie palace property type. An example would be its single high-capacity balcony, which had become a key feature of movie theater architecture by the late 1910s. Most notably, the Oriental possesses its original ornate and lavishly detailed interior that characterizes it as an exotic movie palace. Historic interior photographs included with this nomination reveal that its painted murals, original lobby light fixtures, elaborate plaster work depicting elephants and lions along with mythological creatures and mystical figures, as well as its decorative painting and moldings, are intact. Finally, the building retains all of the component areas of its original design; namely, its theater, basement recreation venue, four storefronts, office space above the storefronts, and one-story commercial wing facing East Kenilworth Place. Interior partitioning within the office area has undergone alterations typical of a space with regular turnover in tenants and, similarly, modifications within the basement venue, including the installation of bars within the original billiard and check rooms, reflect changes in the evolving recreational pursuits of its clientele; however, these changes do not diminish the overall building integrity. As a result, the Oriental Theatre possesses a high degree of integrity that allows it to convey its architectural significance as an excellent example of an exotic movie palace.<sup>17</sup>

    End of Description of Physical Appearance

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<sup>17</sup> Barbara Wyatt, ed., "Performing Arts and Motion Pictures," *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*, 3 vols. (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Historic Preservation Division, 1986), Page 12; William Paul, *When Movies Were Theater: Architecture, Exhibition, and the Evolution of American Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 104, 109.

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     **Insert Statement of Significance**

**Statement of Significance**

The Oriental Theatre is locally significant under Criterion C: Architecture as an excellent and highly intact example of a movie palace; a property type which has become increasingly rare within Milwaukee. Built in 1927, the Oriental was constructed at the height of popularity of this property type. That same year, sixteen new movie theaters – consisting of 18,200 seats – were being designed, built, or opened in Milwaukee. Compared with a typical movie theater of that period, the movie palace was larger and grander featuring expansive lobbies, balconies, a stage with orchestra pit, and restrooms with lounges. The Oriental Theatre possesses these features, as well as exhibiting ornate and lavishly detailed interior spaces, which was the defining characteristic of the property type. Designed by the Milwaukee architectural firm, Dick & Bauer, the Oriental specifically is an exotic-themed movie palace with an interior that evokes distant and foreign lands. Developed by Saxe Amusement Enterprises, the Oriental Theatre was considered the crown jewel in their chain of theaters, which consisted of multiple venues within Milwaukee. Its design incorporates elements of East Indian, Moorish, Islamic, and Byzantine architecture to create a “temple of Oriental art” in ornamental plaster and decorative painting. Decorative features include false beams in the lobbies painted to resemble hewn timbers; tile floors; draperies; multifoil and oriental arches; seated mystical figures within decorative niches in the theater auditorium; ebony-colored lions lining the stairs to the balcony; and elaborate plaster work consisting of over one hundred elephants and other mythological creatures. Large murals with scenes depicting exotic palaces and intricately detailed eight-foot light fixtures add to the ornate nature of the theater lobby. The Oriental Theatre is also notable given its rarity within Milwaukee considering that the city has lost most of its historic movie palaces. The period of movie palace construction was short-lived generally spanning from the mid-1920s and ending with the Great Depression. The 1930s were peak years for the exhibition of motion pictures in Milwaukee with eighty-nine theaters in operation. However, mirroring national trends, the drop from this peak by the mid-twentieth century was striking. Featuring eighty theaters in 1950, the number of movie theaters operating in the city was reduced by half ten years later. While some historic movie palaces were repurposed for uses including live performance venues or churches, many were razed. Authors Larry Widen and Judi Anderson note the singular quality of the Oriental in their outstanding book, *Silver Screens: A Pictorial History of Milwaukee’s Movie Theaters*, “it [the Oriental Theatre] is a living



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museum, providing movie-goers a sense of what it was like to attend a movie in the heyday of Hollywood.”<sup>18</sup>

**Period of Significance**

The period of significance is 1927, which reflects the building’s date of construction.

**Land Acknowledgement**

This nomination recognizes the depth of human presence here, the ancestral homeland of American Indians for millennia. From as early as the seventeenth century, Euro-American exploration and settlement, and ensuing military campaigns, all had the effect of repeated displacement of Indians of many tribal affiliations. This continuous tribal movement resulted in Wisconsin being home to many tribes who originated from other parts of the country, generating a pattern of immigration, relocation, and formation of a new homeland. Some of these tribes remain in Wisconsin; others may not, but numerous count Wisconsin as home: Brotherton, Dakota, Fox/Meskewaki, Ho-Chunk, Kickapoo, Mascoutens, Menominee, Miami, Munsee, Odawa, Ojibwa, Oneida, Potawatomi, Stockbridge, Sauk, and Wyandot tribes. We acknowledge that the property that is the subject of this nomination is located on land long occupied by American Indians, and since 1850, by the Potawatomi tribe.

**Historical Context: Brief History of Milwaukee**

The City of Milwaukee was built upon the marshes that existed at the confluence of the Milwaukee, Menomonee, and Kinnickinnic rivers before they flow into Lake Michigan. The land was originally populated by American Indian tribes such as the Potawatomi, Menominee and Ojibwe. The city was geographically divided into east, west and south sections by the rivers. Solomon Juneau claimed the east side (Juneautown), Byron Kilbourn the west (Kilbourntown), and George Walker the south (Walker’s Point); all of which incorporated as the City of Milwaukee in 1846. This former trading post became the largest city and commercial center in Wisconsin.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Larry Widen and Judi Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee’s Movie Theaters* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2007), 119.

<sup>19</sup> Landscape Research, *Built in Milwaukee: An Architectural View of the City* (Milwaukee: City of Milwaukee, Department of City Development, 1981), 3, 7, 9; John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical

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Industrial concerns including tanning, meat-packing, brewing, and machinery manufacturing began to dominate Milwaukee's economy in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1914, manufacturing output in the city was \$223.56 million and, within five years, this number had risen to \$576.16 million. Manufacturing output stood at \$700.76 million in 1929, at which point Milwaukee was the twelfth largest city in the United States featuring 578,249 residents.<sup>20</sup>

**Motion Picture & Movie Palace Development – Nationally and Wisconsin**

As a form of entertainment, the motion picture industry evolved from live theater. Motion pictures began as a novelty in the latter years of the nineteenth century. Early films were silent, short, and of poor quality. As audiences started growing for movies, managers began to show them in opera houses and live-performance theaters (the first movie shown in Milwaukee debuted at the Academy of Music in 1896). Movies were shown as filler acts in vaudeville shows and as curiosities in dime museums and traveling circuses. At the turn of the century, entrepreneurs identified that motion pictures could serve as the primary means of entertainment and established small theaters in stores, warehouses, and halls. Interiors were generally a long, open room with the film projected onto a wall or sheet. If there was seating, it consisted of moveable chairs or benches generally accommodating no more than 300 individuals. Early movie theaters dating from the turn of the century were often called nickelodeons reflecting the five-cent price of admission.<sup>21</sup>

With the increasing popularity of movies, the nickelodeon was soon replaced by a building-type designed specifically for showing motion pictures: the movie theater. The era of the movie theater in Wisconsin began in 1903 and continues through the present. Movie theaters can be divided into two broad types: the movie theater and the movie palace. Both types generally featured an auditorium at ground level entered through a wide lobby that opened into the street. The auditorium frequently included a platform stage in front of the screen for live productions and contained, fixed, upholstered

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Society, 1999), 6-8, 19-21, 60-61.

<sup>20</sup> Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, 160-164, 241-243, 246, 255.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Wyatt, ed., "Performing Arts and Motion Pictures," *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*, 3 vols. (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Historic Preservation Division, 1986), Pages 5-6; National Register of Historic Places, Orpheum Theater, Madison, Dane County, Wisconsin, National Register #07001460, Section 8, Page 2.

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seating. A projection booth, rest rooms, air conditioning, and a ticket booth were other elements found in both movie theaters and movie palaces. A marquee advertising the latest show was situated over the entrance and illuminated at night.<sup>22</sup>

As the market for motion pictures continued to grow during the early twentieth century, so correspondingly did investment in movie theater construction. The economics of film exhibition made operation of multiple theaters a common trend and theater chains were established throughout the country. This arrangement ultimately evolved into the studio system where film exhibitors aligned themselves with Hollywood filmmakers in a mutually beneficial arrangement guaranteeing a constant source of quality movies for exhibitors and venues in which to show them for the studios.<sup>23</sup>

As theater owners competed to attract movie patrons, grand movie palaces assumed a greater role in the exhibition of films. The theater owner, “believed that people go to the theater to live an hour or two in a different world; that the atmosphere of a palace should prevail in a theater, and that this could be arrived at by gorgeous stage settings, luxurious drapes and enchanting music.”<sup>24</sup> In Wisconsin, the period of movie palace construction generally spanned from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s. The movie palace was larger and grander than the movie theater featuring expansive lobbies, balconies, restrooms with lounges, an orchestra pit, and dressing rooms for performers. It should be noted that although the feature film was central to the experience of “going to the movies,” variety in programming, which included a mix of feature and short films and live performances, remained a key element of film presentation in the 1910s and 1920s. This accounts for the continued inclusion of a stage, orchestra pit and dressing rooms for performers and musicians in the movie palace era. In Milwaukee, many of the palaces continued to feature stage shows in their programming into the mid-1930s. Two overlapping factors – the increased production of talking films and the Great Depression – contributed to discontinuance of live performances since their elimination was the simplest way for a

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<sup>22</sup> National Register of Historic Places, Orpheum Theater, Madison, Dane County, Wisconsin, National Register #07001460, Section 8, Page 2.

<sup>23</sup> David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981), 44.

<sup>24</sup> Wyatt, ed., “Performing Arts and Motion Pictures,” *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*, Page 7 (quote from George L. Rapp, “The History of Cinema Theater Architecture,” 1930).

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theater to reduce expenses.<sup>25</sup>

The ornate and lavishly detailed interiors of movie palaces most distinguished them from movie theaters. Theater designers wanted patrons to feel as though they were in a unique setting such as an exotic, faraway land or different period in time. Popular movie palace interior motifs included atmospheric theaters, which simulated the experience of sitting in an open-air plaza or courtyard, and the royal palace, which drew on European Renaissance and Baroque precedents for decoration. Contrastingly, movie theaters, which were built both before and after the era of the movie palace, were generally smaller and lacked lavish interior finishes.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to atmospheric and royal palace theaters, a third popular motif utilized by architects designing movie palaces was the exotic. The exotic movement was inspired by the excavation of King Tutankhamen's tomb, which began in November 1922. This discovery, as well as the opening of Grauman's Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood on October 18, 1922, prompted a revival of ancient Egyptian architectural forms and their use in movie palaces throughout America. By the end of the 1920s, approximately forty-to-fifty Egyptian-themed theaters were built and located in such locales as Ogden, Utah (1924); Indianapolis (1925); Boise, Idaho (1927); and Milwaukee (1927, no longer extant). In addition to Egyptian themes, exotic theaters utilized characteristics of other distant cultures including the Orient and Central America in what has been characterized as "some of the most flamboyant theater architecture ever seen."<sup>27</sup> The subject Oriental Theatre is an exotic that incorporates elements of East Indian, Moorish, Islamic, and Byzantine architecture. As a result of this movement, exotic movie palaces were built throughout the nation. In addition to Milwaukee's Oriental Theatre, other Oriental-themed movie palaces were found in Chicago (1926); Portland, Oregon (1927); and the Boston-area (specifically, Mattapan Square; 1930).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> William Paul, *When Movies Were Theater: Architecture, Exhibition, and the Evolution of American Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 113-117, 177 & 300-301 (Appendix 1).

<sup>26</sup> Wyatt, ed., "Performing Arts and Motion Pictures," *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*, Page 7; National Register of Historic Places, Orpheum Theater, Madison, Dane County, Wisconsin, National Register #07001460, Section 8, Pages 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*, 83.

<sup>28</sup> Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*, 83-86, 224 (index); Bruce Handy, "Watch Like an Egyptian," *Variety* (January 29, 2008), copy accessed online at [vanityfair.com](http://vanityfair.com). Egyptian architectural motifs were not unfamiliar in the United States with their first use dating to the early- to mid-nineteenth century.

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The period of movie palace architecture was short-lived, generally spanning the mid-1920s to early 1930s. Both the Great Depression and World War II constrained theater development after that point. Later trends in the mid-to-late-twentieth century led to a decline in metropolitan theaters and negatively impacted the movie palaces built earlier in the century. Specific to the motion picture industry, in 1948, the Supreme Court ruled that movie studios constituted a monopoly with their control of the production, distribution and exhibition of their films. No longer could studios distribute films primarily to theaters they owned and, as a result, studios had to divest their interest in their theater chains. At the same time, societal trends included the exodus of city populations to the suburbs and the expansion of television bringing entertainment directly into the home. Movie theater attendance reached its peak in 1946 and, thereafter, began a period of decline that was described as precipitous by the 1960s.<sup>29</sup>

The resulting effect on movie palaces was profound. Facing dwindling theater attendance and the lack of studio-owned financial backing, routine repairs on many theater buildings ended abruptly. Many were later razed as indicated by author David Naylor, “the list of theaters demolished during the 1960s is long and heartbreaking. It includes some of the best work the palace architects ever did.”<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that, as a property type, these demolished movie palaces were not replaced with newer examples of their form. While national architects such as John Eberson and Rapp & Rapp designed theaters into the 1940s and 1950s, these theaters lacked the financing and opulence of the movie palaces. That trend continued with suburban theater development in the later twentieth century. As noted in *Silver Screens*, “new theaters were built with different aims than the luxury and escapism of the movie palace: convenience and cost-effectiveness drove new theater construction to the suburbs.”<sup>31</sup> Beginning in the 1960s, while new theaters built by shopping malls and multiplex (i.e. multiple screen) theaters provided the latest in high-quality projection and sound, they were

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<sup>29</sup> Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee's Movie Theaters*, 104; Wyatt, ed., “Performing Arts and Motion Pictures,” *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*, Page 8; Paul, *When Movies Were Theater: Architecture, Exhibition, and the Evolution of American Film*, 279.

<sup>30</sup> Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*, 177.

<sup>31</sup> Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee's Movie Theaters*, 104.

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architecturally unremarkable.<sup>32</sup>

**Motion Picture & Movie Palace Development in Milwaukee**

As previously mentioned, Milwaukee was the twelfth largest city in the United States featuring 578,249 residents in 1929. At that time, city residents had ample recreational opportunities, including motion pictures, as described by John Gurda in his book, *The Making of Milwaukee*:<sup>33</sup>

The Twenties were the heyday of the “movie palace,” an outlandishly original form of architecture that survives in gems like the Oriental (1927), the Avalon (1929), the Riverside (1929), and the Modjeska (1924). The appeal was the same in every case: escape. “Come out of your humdrum experience,” coaxed a 1921 ad for the Butterfly Theater. “Live in the land of mystery and romance.”<sup>34</sup>

Built by Saxe Amusement Enterprises at a cost of two million dollars in 1924, the Wisconsin Theater has been identified as Milwaukee’s first movie palace. The late-1920s was a period of significant movie theater construction in the city. Specifically, the year 1927 is cited as the high-water mark when sixteen new theaters – consisting of 18,200 seats – were being designed, constructed, or opened in Milwaukee (it also represented the year the Oriental Theatre opened). *Silver Screens* notes, “these numbers would never again be equaled.”<sup>35</sup> Along with Saxe Amusement Enterprises, Universal Theatres and Fischer’s Paramount Theatres were the three major theater circuits within Wisconsin in the late 1920s. Competition between these theater chains was intense as described in *Motion Picture News*:

An unique situation presents itself at present in the Wisconsin territory with interest centered principally on three large circuits... competition grows more and more pronounced throughout the

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<sup>32</sup> Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*, 32, 174; Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee’s Movie Theaters*, 108.

<sup>33</sup> Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, 160-164, 241-243, 246, 255.

<sup>34</sup> Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, 255.

<sup>35</sup> Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee’s Movie Theaters*, 76.

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state, the announcement by one chain of a new house bringing forth, like an echo, the announcement of another new house by the competing circuit.<sup>36</sup>

The sixteen movie theaters constructed in Milwaukee in 1927 represented an investment of approximately seven million dollars. At that time, the Oriental Theatre reflected the trend of movie palace construction being focused outside the downtown area. Of these sixteen theaters, only the Majestic was located in downtown Milwaukee, while the others, including the Oriental, were neighborhood movie houses. This prolific period of movie theater construction was short-lived. Although one of Milwaukee's most notable movie palaces, the Warner Theater, opened in 1931 and the Tosa and Times Theaters opened in 1931 and 1935, respectively, the Great Depression effectively ended Milwaukee's seven-year theater construction boom.<sup>37</sup>

The 1930s were peak years for the exhibition of motion pictures in Milwaukee with eighty-nine theaters in operation. However, mirroring national trends, the decline from this peak by the mid-twentieth century was striking. Featuring eighty theaters in 1950, the number of movie theaters operating in the city was reduced by half ten years later (it is further notable that, of these eighty theaters in 1950, only three had been built following World War II). During the two-year period 1955-56, it was estimated that the city lost 13,594 theater seats due to closings. Theaters built later in the twentieth century were of the multiplex variety and no longer featured the grandeur of their movie palace antecedents. In 1970, Mill Road Cinemas, the first triplex in the Midwest, was built in Milwaukee. Similar movie theater complexes followed at Northridge and Southridge Malls. While some historic movie palaces were repurposed for uses including live performance venues or churches, many were ultimately razed. By the early twenty-first century, only the Oriental and three other theaters from the 1930s peak of eighty-nine theaters were still operating as movie houses.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> "Publix Takes 25 percent Interest in Saxe," *Motion Picture News*, April 15, 1927, Page 1359.

<sup>37</sup> "Milwaukee Theatre Projects for Year Total \$7,000,000," *Motion Picture News*, January 14, 1928, Page 126; Wyatt, ed., "Performing Arts and Motion Pictures," *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*, Page 7; Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee's Movie Theaters*, 66, 79, 87; "Capacity of Milwaukee's Theaters Greatly Expanded," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Annual Trade Review, December 31, 1927.

<sup>38</sup> Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee's Movie Theaters*, 104, 108, 117; Wyatt, ed., "Performing Arts and Motion Pictures," *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*, Page 8.

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**Resource-Specific History**

The Oriental Theatre was built by wealthy newspaper publisher Moses L. Annenberg (specifically, by The M. L. A. Investment Co.) and leased to Saxe Amusement Enterprises, which operated the theater. Established by Irish immigrant brothers John and Thomas Saxe, Saxe Amusement Enterprises (often referred to as ‘Saxe AE’) incorporated in 1908 and the firm ultimately developed and operated a number of movie theaters in Milwaukee and other cities in Wisconsin including Green Bay, Beloit, Wausau, Madison, Oshkosh and Racine. They are credited with developing the first movie palace in Milwaukee when they opened the Wisconsin Theater in 1924. In constant competition with Hollywood studios that sought to establish their own venues to exhibit their motion pictures, Saxe Amusement Enterprises made a significant investment, beginning in 1926, to construct theaters in neighborhood commercial districts outside of downtown. Within two years, the firm would open the Uptown, Plaza, Garfield, Oriental, and Tower movie palaces in Milwaukee with a campaign featuring the slogan, “there is a Saxe de luxe [*sic*] theatre within walking distance of every resident of Milwaukee.”<sup>39</sup> At that time, the firm accounted for more than two-thirds of the movie admission dollars in the city and their theater chain consisted of forty-five theaters throughout Wisconsin.<sup>40</sup>

Constructed during this Saxe Amusement Enterprises theater-building campaign, the Oriental Theatre opened on July 2, 1927. Built at a cost that exceeded one million dollars, the Oriental featured seating for 2,500 patrons and was Wisconsin’s second largest theater when completed. Designed by the Milwaukee architectural firm Dick & Bauer, their elaborate plans incorporated elements of East Indian, Moorish, Islamic, and Byzantine architecture to create a “temple of Oriental art” executed in ornamental plaster and decorative painting. Stylistically, *The Milwaukee Journal* noted, “its [the Oriental Theatre] architectural motif is taken from the art studies found in Buddhist temples in East India and is the result of research on the part of Dick & Bauer, Milwaukee architects.”<sup>41</sup> Saxe Amusement Enterprises described the theater thusly, “throughout, it is symbolical of the Far East. Its

<sup>39</sup> J. S. Dickerson, ed., “Middle-West Theatre Map Shows Decided Changes,” *Motion Picture News* 36, no. 26 (December 30, 1927): 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Dick & Bauer, Architects (Milwaukee), “Theatre, Store & Office Building for the M. L. A. Investment Co.,” June, 1926, Job No. 123; Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee’s Movie Theaters*, 38, 41 & 45; Larry Widen and Judi Anderson, *Milwaukee Movie Palaces* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1986), 68-69; “Three De Luxe Houses Recently Added to Saxe Chain,” *Motion Picture News* 37, no. 1 (January 7, 1928): 30-31.

<sup>41</sup> “Oriental Theater Opens Saturday,” *The Milwaukee Journal*, June 29, 1927, Page 18.



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entrance, lobby, staircases, balcony, auditorium, colonnades, mural paintings, lighting effects, stage – all embody the Oriental touch.”<sup>42</sup> While also noting its “oriental motif,” *Motion Picture News* succinctly described the Oriental as, “picturesque, colorful and exotic.”<sup>43</sup> The theater’s lavish and exotic-themed decorative features include false beams in the lobbies painted to resemble hewn timbers; tile floors; draperies; multifoil and oriental arches; seated mystical figures within decorative niches in the theater auditorium; ebony-colored lions lining the stairs to the balcony; and elaborate plaster work consisting of over one hundred elephants and other mythological creatures. Large murals with scenes depicting exotic palaces and intricately detailed eight-foot light fixtures add to the ornate nature of the lobby. As reported in *Motion Picture News*, the Oriental’s extravagance as a movie palace was as much of an attraction as the films it showed, “the Oriental, which opened on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, was crowded at every performance during the entire week. Crowds flocked to the theatre as much to see the picture as to view the much exploited splendor and beauty of the theatre.”<sup>44</sup>

In addition to movies, the entertainment experience at the Oriental Theatre included Billy Adair and his Arabian Knights orchestra for mid-week performances. As well, organist Bernard Cowham performed regularly on the theater’s Barton organ prior to shows including “popular community sing-songs Saturdays and Sundays.” Jack Plant, former manager of Milwaukee’s Modjeska Theater, was the first manager of the Oriental Theatre.<sup>45</sup>

Opening night on July 2, 1927 featured three performances at 6:30, 8:30 and 10:30pm. Each one included newsreels; a Felix the Cat cartoon; the screen novelty, “Flying Feet;” a stage production called “Mystic Araby” with orchestra accompaniment; organ music; and the feature movie, “Naughty

<sup>42</sup> “Gala Oriental Opening,” Saxe-O-Grams (a publication of Saxe Amusement Enterprises, Milwaukee), Volume 4, Number 23 (July 2, 1927).

<sup>43</sup> “Three De Luxe Houses Recently Added to Saxe Chain,” *Motion Picture News* 37, no. 1 (January 7, 1928): 30-31.

<sup>44</sup> “Ald. Greene Sees Show! Theater Is Too Handy,” *The Milwaukee Journal*, July 3, 1927, Page 8; Widen and Anderson, *Milwaukee Movie Palaces*, 73; David Naylor, *Great American Movie Theaters* (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1987), 178; “Milwaukee,” *Motion Picture News* 36, no. 3 (July 22, 1927): 219.

<sup>45</sup> “Gala Oriental Opening,” Saxe-O-Grams, Volume 4, Number 23 (July 2, 1927); “Oriental Theater Opens Saturday,” *The Milwaukee Journal*, June 29, 1927, Page 18; “Milwaukee,” *Motion Picture News* 35, no. 26 (July 1, 1927): 2575; “Bernard Cowham” (advertisement), *The Oshkosh (WI) Northwestern*, August 30, 1928, Page 6.

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but Nice” with silent film star, Colleen Moore.<sup>46</sup> Early in its history, the Oriental changed its programming thrice weekly every Sunday, Tuesday and Friday. Weekday admission prices were 25-cents for matinees and 40-cents for evening shows; children were admitted for 10-cents at all times.<sup>47</sup>

Serving as an additional revenue stream in tandem with the theater, the recreation venue in the basement of the building contained twenty billiard tables and sixteen bowling lanes:

From now on you and your friends, ladies and gentlemen, can round out your evenings of entertainment and recreation without leaving the attractive ORIENTAL THEATER building. Before or after the show you can get in a few strings of ten pins, or runs of three cushion, pocket or balkline billiards. Here is a real civic center, with a variety of refined entertainment unexcelled anywhere.<sup>48</sup>

Opened in September 1927 under the name Bensinger Recreation (operated by the firm L. A. Bensinger & Son with Carl Minkley, manager), the basement venue also contained a soda fountain, grill room and barber shop. Its grand opening featured an exhibition bowling match between Jimmy Smith (“considered by many the world’s best ten pin collector”) and Charles Daw (“the most popular Milwaukee exponent of the ancient art of toppling the maples”).<sup>49</sup>

The expansion and success of Saxe Amusement Enterprises made them an attractive acquisition target for theater chains seeking to establish a presence in Wisconsin. Less than six months after opening the Oriental, Saxe AE sold all of its theater leases to the Wesco Corporation for two million dollars effective January 1, 1928. By that time, Saxe had forty-five theaters in Wisconsin; approximately a quarter of which were located in the City of Milwaukee. Operating the former Saxe AE theaters under the name, “Midwesco Theatres, Inc.,” the deal gave Wesco an important position in the Midwest. Shortly thereafter, Wesco was acquired by the Fox Film Corporation (later, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox) and the

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<sup>46</sup> Colleen Moore and Thomas Saxe became good friends and she often visited the Saxe family at their summer home in Wisconsin (Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee’s Movie Theaters*, 40).

<sup>47</sup> “Gala Oriental Opening,” Saxe-O-Grams, Volume 4, Number 23 (July 2, 1927); Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee’s Movie Theaters*, 75.

<sup>48</sup> “Here’s Your Invitation to Attend the Formal Opening of Bensinger Recreation” (advertisement), *The Milwaukee Journal*, September 23, 1927, Part 2, Page 7.

<sup>49</sup> “Here’s Your Invitation to Attend the Formal Opening of Bensinger Recreation” (advertisement), *The Milwaukee Journal*, September 23, 1927, Part 2, Page 7.

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name was changed to, "Fox-Midwesco Theatres, Inc." which operated as a circuit within Fox's national chain of 1,250 theaters.<sup>50</sup>

Operationally, the Oriental Theatre had sound installed within a year of its opening. A Vitaphone system providing sound for motion pictures was in operation by May 1928 (the date of the first "talkie" in Milwaukee has been cited as September 3, 1927; two months following the opening of the Oriental). Milwaukee's Garfield, Uptown, Tower and Modjeska theaters received Vitaphone systems at the same time. By 1939, a new sound system – RCA Photophone – was installed at the Oriental.<sup>51</sup>

In order to increase theater attendance, especially during slower weekday screenings, a number of promotions were offered at the Oriental during the 1930s and 40s. In 1939, certificates were awarded to theater patrons on Mondays and Tuesdays toward a 15-volume encyclopedia. Two certificates plus a dime could be redeemed for a single volume of the set. A year later, the Oriental offered a 20-volume home library of great literature, as well as free comic magazines to children attending Saturday matinees. During this period, the Oriental Theatre also served as a neighborhood fixture hosting numerous events; especially events for children. These included Halloween, Christmas and 'back-to-school' parties. At the latter, children received notebooks and rulers. Halloween parties included stage contests, free masks, and a free "spooky" movie. In 1940, the Oriental Theatre held a WPA toy drive during the Christmas season where theater admission was a game or jigsaw puzzle. Events were not solely child-focused; a fur fashion revue was held on the Oriental stage in cooperation with a local furrier in 1939. Work within the Oriental Theatre during the mid-twentieth century included rearranging seats for greater leg room in 1940 and installing new carpeting in 1948.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee's Movie Theaters*, 41, 76; "Wesco Deal With Saxe Seems Certain," *Motion Picture News*, December 9, 1927, 1815; "Wesco Gets Actual Control of Saxe Circuit January 1<sup>st</sup>," *Moving Picture World* 89, no. 5 (December 3, 1927): 10; "Midwesco Chain Brings Business to Wisconsin," *The Post-Crescent* (Appleton, WI), November 15, 1929, Page 26.

<sup>51</sup> Robert K. Headley, Jr., "The Theatres of Milwaukee," *Marquee* 49, no. 1 (First Quarter 2017): 4-5; "Milwaukee," *Motion Picture News* 37, no. 21 (May 26, 1928): 1785; "S. C. Segelbaum at the Gateway," *Kenosha* (WI) *Evening News*, May 7, 1929, Page 7; *Boxoffice*, October-December, 1939.

<sup>52</sup> *Boxoffice*, October-December, 1938, January-March, 1940, July-September, 1940, October-December, 1940, October-December, 1948.

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Although the Oriental Theatre had a number of theater managers over the course of its history, Harold Mirisch is particularly notable considering his later contributions within the film industry. Harold became manager of the Oriental and Tower theaters in 1937 after he had served as head film buyer for the Warner-Saxe theater operations in Wisconsin (both theaters continued to be owned by Moses Annenberg at the time). During his tenure managing the Oriental, which lasted into 1942, he established the concession business: Theatres Candy Company. This enterprise supplied candy and popcorn to independent movie theaters. From the mid-1940s into the 1950s, the office and warehouse of Theatres Candy Company was located in the Oriental Theatre building within its one-story wing facing Kenilworth Place. Harold's family relocated to Milwaukee from New York City and his brothers joined him in his endeavors. Older brother, Irving became president of Theatres Candy Company and younger brother Marvin also worked in that concession business, which would grow to supply over eight hundred movie theaters throughout the Midwest. Another brother, Walter, worked as an usher and doorman at the Oriental Theatre in the summers of 1940 and 1941. Harold, Walter and Marvin later moved to Los Angeles forming the motion picture production company, The Mirisch Company in September 1957 supplying movies to United Artists studio. Meeting almost immediate success, they ultimately produced fifty-two feature films winning twenty-four Academy Awards including three Best Picture awards for *The Apartment*, *West Side Story*, and *In the Heat of the Night*. As president of The Mirisch Company, Harold Mirisch received the Pioneer of the Year award from the Motion Picture Pioneers in 1964. At the time of his death in 1968, The Mirisch Company was identified as the largest independent motion picture production firm.<sup>53</sup>

In 1948, the Oriental Theatre and Tower Theatre were sold by the Annenberg estate for \$1.35 million to Orto Corporation. Based in New York City, financier Harvey B. Newins was president of Orto Corporation, which also featured Robert E. Hannegan, president of the St. Louis Cardinals and former postmaster general of the United States, as a company officer and investor. The theaters were operated by St. Cloud Amusement, a corporation that also was headed by Harvey Newins. Based in New Jersey, where they operated seventeen motion picture theaters there and in Pennsylvania, St. Cloud Amusement sought to enter the Wisconsin market and provide competition to the entrenched Warner

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<sup>53</sup> Walter Mirisch, *I Thought We Were Making Movies, Not History* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), xiii, 13-17, 88-89, 271, 387; J. D. Spiro, "The Astonishing Mirisch Brothers," *The Milwaukee Journal*, October 16, 1960, Pages 16-17; "Colleagues Cite Harold Mirisch As Movie Pioneer of the Year," *The New York Times*, November 24, 1964; "Noted Film Maker Mirisch Dies," *The Milwaukee Journal*, December 6, 1968, Page 15; Gary Warth, "A life in film: Encinitas man's family produced long string of Oscar winners," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, March 5, 2006.

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Bros. and Fox-Wisconsin Amusement Corporation theater circuits. At that time, Warner operated twenty-three theaters in Wisconsin, seven of which were located in Milwaukee, while Fox operated sixty theaters in the state with approximately half of them in Milwaukee. By 1955, Orto Corporation had sold the Oriental and Tower to L. F. Gran, who formed Kent Theaters to operate them. Shortly thereafter, the Oriental Theatre became part of the Prudential Theatres circuit, which also included Milwaukee's Uptown, Modjeska, and Paradise theaters. Operating the Oriental into the 1960s, Prudential Theatres hosted a Fine Arts Film Festival, as well as a Children's Adventure Film Series sponsored by The Better Films Council of Milwaukee County during their ownership. Prudential also sought to combat the growing trend of losing customers to suburban movie theaters by opening a seventy-car parking lot for Oriental Theatre patrons (research did not reveal the location of this parking lot).<sup>54</sup>

The 1970s and 1980s saw the continued operation of the Oriental Theatre while many other Milwaukee movie palaces were closed and later razed. One of the factors given for the Oriental's longevity is the relative stability of the theater's East Side neighborhood; an advantage not shared by movie palaces in other areas of the city. However, this did not entirely shield the Oriental from broader trends and the theater suffered from deferred maintenance by the early 1970s. In 1972, the Oriental Theatre was sold to brothers Robert, Melvin, and Emmett Pritchett. Purchased to protect their investment in a neighboring building, the Pritchetts considered razing the theater in order to build a variety store; however, they quickly appreciated its ornate interior and became important stewards of the Oriental at a critical time. Trained electricians, the Pritchetts revitalized the building and invested in a new roof. As well, they installed a Kimball theater organ to replace the original Barton organ that had been removed. During the late twentieth century, the Oriental Theatre continued to show movies and host live stage performances. Competition from multiplex theaters led to the insertion of two smaller theaters in the space underneath the balcony in 1988. This delicate transformation from a single-screen movie theater to a tri-screen theater preserved the original architectural features within the auditorium and allowed the Oriental to compete in the changing movie-going environment. In recent years, the Oriental Theatre has been a primary venue for the Milwaukee Film Festival.

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<sup>54</sup> Milwaukee Public Library (MPL) staff, "90 Years of the Oriental Theatre From Saxe to Milwaukee Film," published June 24, 2017; *Boxoffice*, "St. Cloud Chain Gives Fox, WB Competition," July-September, 1948; *Boxoffice*, "Orto Corp. Closes Deal On Milwaukee Houses," October-December, 1948; *Boxoffice*, "Estimated \$1,350,000 Buys Two Second Runs," October-December, 1948; *Boxoffice*, January-March, 1962, April-June, 1962, January-March, 1963, April-June, 1963.

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Milwaukee Film, the organization that runs the festival, recently entered into a long-term lease with the building owner to renovate and operate the theater.<sup>55</sup>

**Architectural Significance**

The history and architecture of the movie palace is described in David Naylor's excellent book, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*. Naylor details the building type, as well as the general building program of motion picture palaces:

Aside from the skyscraper, no building type is more clearly representative of twentieth-century American architecture than the movie palace. The palace architects were faced with a building program almost unrivaled in their day in complexity, requiring a vast collection of rooms under one roof and often situated on ridiculously irregular plots of land. British architect Clifford Worthington wrote in 1931, "Of all buildings, none are more fascinating to design, nor more difficult to construct than the cinema." Nonetheless, the movie palaces went up all around the country, often at breakneck speed. During the peak construction years, 1925 through 1930, even the largest theaters were usually completed in well under a year... the theaters were spectacles in their own right. The movie palaces were built not just to express the romantic extremes of architectural design, but also to serve a purpose purely economic in nature; to draw patrons to the box office. The exteriors of the movie palaces helped to fulfill this end. While rarely as opulent or exotic as the interiors, the facades were still quite distinct from the surrounding cityscape.<sup>56</sup>

Built in 1927 during the peak of movie palace popularity, the Oriental Theatre is an outstanding and highly intact example of movie palace architecture. Its extravagantly ornate interior was notable the moment it opened with *The Milwaukee Journal* stating, "its lobby is probably the most beautiful of any in the state."<sup>57</sup> Saxe Amusement Enterprises considered the Oriental to be the crown jewel in their

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<sup>55</sup> Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee's Movie Theaters*, 118-119; "Street and Theater May Shine Again," *The Milwaukee Journal*, April 13, 1972; Marsha Weisiger and contributors, *Buildings of Wisconsin* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 143; Building permit (November 25, 1987), 2230 North Farwell Avenue, on file at the Department of City Development, City of Milwaukee, 809 N. Broadway (First Floor), Milwaukee, WI. Robert Pritchett passed away on February 13, 2012 and Melvin Pritchett died on January 5, 2019. Both of their death notices noted their ownership of the Oriental Theatre, which is, perhaps, an indication of how meaningful their association with the theater was in their professional lives.

<sup>56</sup> Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*, 32.

<sup>57</sup> "Ald. Greene Sees Show! Theater Is Too Handy," *The Milwaukee Journal*, July 3, 1927, Page 8.

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theater empire. Evidence of this is seen in the financial investment in the theater compared to their other venues. The Oriental Theatre opened a year after Saxe AE developed the Tower Theater in Milwaukee and cost three times as much as the Tower. It also should be noted that in the *Motion Picture News* article describing the concurrent opening of Saxe's Oriental, Garfield and Uptown theaters, the article leads with the Oriental, which is given the most detailed description of the three. This further suggests its local prominence as a movie palace at the time it was built.<sup>58</sup>

The Oriental's reputation has held up over time; in his book *Great American Movie Theaters*, author David Naylor characterizes the Oriental Theatre as, "... about as fine a neighborhood theater as one could want. Architect A. H. Bauer was probably within his rights to tell the *Milwaukee Sentinel* that it was 'the most beautiful, the most artistic temple of Oriental art to be found in America'."<sup>59</sup>

As an exotic theater, the Oriental is representative of a type of movie palace rather than being representative of a particular architectural style. In this regard, it is similar to Period Revival-style buildings, which referenced a wide range of past motifs and styles. Popular in Wisconsin during the early to mid-twentieth century, Period Revival buildings allowed architects to advertise their expertise in a broad stylistic range. Similarly, movie palaces often reflected a free-style approach to design defying specific stylistic labels.<sup>60</sup>

The Oriental Theatre is the only remaining exotic-themed movie palace in Milwaukee. Another exotic movie palace within the city was the Egyptian Theater at 3719 North Teutonia Avenue. Designed by the architectural firm Peacock & Frank, and built in 1927, interior detailing at the Egyptian included scarabs, sun disks, lotus buds, and male figures modeled after the Colossi of Osiris in the Temple of Luxor. Aisle end standards featured a pharaoh's head. The Egyptian closed as a theater by 1967 and

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<sup>58</sup> "Ald. Greene Sees Show! Theater Is Too Handy," *The Milwaukee Journal*, July 3, 1927, Page 8; Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee's Movie Theaters*, 74; "Three De Luxe Houses Recently Added to Saxe Chain," *Motion Picture News* 37, no. 1 (January 7, 1928): 30-31.

<sup>59</sup> Naylor, *Great American Movie Theaters*, 178.

<sup>60</sup> Barbara Wyatt, ed., *Cultural Resource Management in Wisconsin*, 3 vols. (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Historic Preservation Division, 1986), Vol. 2, Architecture, 2-17; Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*, 31.

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was razed in 1984. Although Egyptian-themed theaters do not encompass all exotics of the movie palace era, it is instructive that, of the forty-to-fifty Egyptian movie houses built nationally during the 1920s, only a few survive and some of those have had their integrity compromised with original decorative features removed, including at Grauman's Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood. Another exotic movie palace in Milwaukee, the Arabia, was planned in 1926 for North Third Street and, although ground was broken, financing fell through and the theater was never built.<sup>61</sup>

As a result, the Oriental Theatre derives significance as a rare surviving example of the movie palace property type; specifically, as a rare and highly intact example of an exotic movie palace. Similar to the national trend, Milwaukee has lost the great majority of its historic-period movie palaces. The list of theaters designed by prominent architects and built during the 1920s that are no longer extant within the city include the following (architects listed in parenthesis): Colonial (Dick & Bauer), Egyptian (Peacock & Frank), Garden (Kirchhoff & Rose), Milwaukee (Dick & Bauer), National (Dick & Bauer), Rialto (Kirchhoff & Rose), Uptown (Rapp & Rapp), Venetian (Peacock & Frank) and the Wisconsin (Rapp & Rapp).<sup>62</sup>

*Comparative Analysis:*

The Wisconsin Historic Preservation Database (WHPD) identifies thirty-seven theaters within the City of Milwaukee, although five have been demolished since they were surveyed. The majority of these surveyed theaters have shown motion pictures, although not necessarily exclusively. Of the surveyed theaters, seven are listed in the National Register of Historic Places; all of which are contributing buildings within historic districts. Two additional theaters have been identified by the Wisconsin Historical Society as potentially eligible for the National Register. Of these listed and potentially eligible theaters, two were built during the late nineteenth century for stage productions and, therefore, are not comparable to the Oriental Theatre. As well, while the World Theater (WHPD #107904, 830 South 6<sup>th</sup> Street) and State Theater (WHPD #110207, 2612 West State Street) date to the 1920s movie theater construction boom, both are examples of smaller theaters seating less than 1,000 and neither would be classified as a movie palace. Therefore, the best comparisons to the Oriental Theatre would

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<sup>61</sup> Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee's Movie Theaters*, 70-71, 110-111, 130, 134; Bruce Handy, "Watch Like an Egyptian," *Variety* (January 29, 2008), copy accessed online at vanityfair.com.

<sup>62</sup> Architect, construction year, and demolition information taken from Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee's Movie Theaters*.



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be the Warner (1931), Tower (1926), Avalon (1929) and Modjeska (1924) theaters; all of which are movie palaces dating to the height of popularity of this property type. It also should be noted that these comparative theater buildings are similar in composition to the Oriental; specifically, in addition to their theaters, they possess multiple storefronts above which are either offices or apartments. The exception to this is the Warner Theater building, which features a multi-story office tower. While the Avalon Theater was originally planned to include bowling alleys in the basement and a dance hall on the third floor, these amenities were dropped to decrease project cost. Therefore, none of these comparison movie palaces possess the basement-level recreation venue, or the one-story commercial addition, exhibited by the Oriental Theatre.

Designed by nationally renowned theater architects, C. W. Rapp and George L. Rapp, the Warner Theater (WHPD #41864, 212 West Wisconsin Avenue) has been categorized as, “the grandest of Milwaukee’s movie palaces.”<sup>63</sup> Containing 2,500 seats and built at a cost of \$2.5 million featuring an art deco-style lobby and French Renaissance-style auditorium, the Warner is as impressive a movie palace as the Oriental and continues to possess its lavish interior finishes (indeed, its lobby has been identified as, “one of the finest Art Deco interiors in Wisconsin.”<sup>64</sup>) A contributing building within the West Side Commercial Historic District (NRHP #78003462), the Warner Theater was recently rehabilitated under the federal historic preservation tax credit program (NPS #32,649) and converted to serve as the new concert hall for the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra as part of a \$90 million project.

The Tower Theater (WHPD #112265, 757 North 27<sup>th</sup> Street) is a contributing building within the 27<sup>th</sup> & Wells Streets Commercial Historic District (NRHP #16000767). Like the Oriental, the Tower was designed by the architectural firm, Dick & Bauer and included in the Saxe AE chain of theaters. Costing three times as much as the Tower, the Oriental was more lavishly appointed and also possesses a greater degree of integrity considering that the Tower Theater had its tower removed from above its octagonal base in the 1970s. The Avalon Theater (WHPD #27772, 2469-2483 South Kinnickinnic Avenue) has been identified as potentially eligible for the National Register and is a City of Milwaukee-designated historic landmark. Cited as the city’s best remaining example of an

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<sup>63</sup> Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee’s Movie Theaters*, 79.

<sup>64</sup> National Register of Historic Places, West Side Commercial Historic District, Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, National Register #78003462, Section 7, Page 7.

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atmospheric movie palace, the Avalon has been recently rehabilitated as a two-screen theater featuring a full kitchen and bar. Designed in the Mediterranean Revival style, the theater auditorium resembles a Mediterranean courtyard with stucco walls and twisted columns with decorative capitals. Wrought iron railings and hanging lanterns add to the overall composition. Although well-appointed, the Avalon Theater does not approach the level of decorative embellishment of the Oriental, which is unsurprising considering the financial constraints associated with the Avalon's construction (the local designation report states, "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."<sup>65</sup>) The Oriental Theatre also possesses a greater level of integrity given that a baldacchino with twisted columns originally situated at the apex of the Avalon Theater façade was removed decades ago. An additional comparative movie palace is the Modjeska Theater (WHPD #109442, 1122 West Historic Mitchell Street). Like the aforementioned Warner Theater, the Modjeska was designed by Rapp & Rapp. Built in 1924 as a 2,000-seat theater, it is a contributing building within the West Historic Mitchell Street Commercial Historic District (NRHP #100003103). The Modjeska is a fine example of the property type; however, recent photos reveal that it does not possess the level of ornamental detail of the Oriental Theatre (vacant since 2010, the owner of the Modjeska is currently seeking a tenant for the theater). Finally, although not historically designated, the Garfield Theater (WHPD #108869, 2947 North Dr. M.L.K., Jr. Drive) should be noted since it also dates to the movie palace era. Designed by the firm Dick & Bauer and built in 1927, the Garfield has been cited as one of the "most elegant" of the Saxe AE theaters.<sup>66</sup> The Oriental appears to retain greater integrity than the Garfield Theater. Although the interior of the Garfield was not accessed, its original chandelier light fixtures were reportedly removed. As well, historic exterior photographs of the theater reveal that its entrance has been remodeled and two large decorative urns formerly located atop the theater façade have been removed. Based on these comparative movie palaces, as well as its high degree of exterior and interior integrity, the Oriental Theatre is an excellent local example of a movie palace built during the height of popularity of this property type.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> "Avalon Theater," Final Historic Designation Study Report, Prepared by City of Milwaukee Department of City Development, Historic Preservation Office (January 2004), Page 7.

<sup>66</sup> Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee's Movie Theaters*, 74.

<sup>67</sup> Property records, Warner Building (WHPD #41864), Tower Theater (WHPD #112265), Avalon Theater (WHPD #27772), Modjeska Theater (WHPD #109442), Garfield Building (WHPD #108869), Wisconsin Historic Preservation Database (WHPD), Maintained by the Wisconsin Historical Society – Division of Historic Preservation, 816 State Street, Madison, WI.

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**Architects**

Comprised of partners Gustave A. Dick and Alexander H. Bauer, the architectural firm Dick & Bauer designed the Oriental Theatre. Gustave Dick was born in Milwaukee in 1873, the son of German immigrants. From 1888 to circa 1894, Gustave apprenticed with Milwaukee architect Henry C. Koch, after which he attended the University of Pennsylvania receiving his degree in architecture in 1896. Dick returned to Milwaukee and partnered with Herman W. Buemming from 1897 to 1908. From that point to circa 1920, Dick maintained his own architectural firm, while also working for the American Appraisal Company. For a short period in 1920, Dick partnered with Henry Maurer to form Dick & Maurer; however, by 1921, Dick joined with Milwaukee native Alexander Bauer establishing the firm Dick & Bauer.<sup>68</sup>

Alexander Bauer was born in Milwaukee in 1887. He attended North Division High School and later graduated from the University of Wisconsin's School of Engineering. Bauer joined Dick following employment as senior appraiser with the American Appraisal Company where Gustave Dick also was employed. During their partnership, they produced a significant amount of residential work, in addition to commercial and industrial commissions and, notably, movie theater designs. Alexander Bauer's obituary notes that Dick & Bauer "specialized in theater architecture."<sup>69</sup> It is estimated that their firm designed over sixteen theaters in Wisconsin. Following Dick's retirement in the early 1930s, Bauer continued the firm under his own name. Gustave Dick died on July 10, 1935, while Alexander Bauer died ten years later on December 12, 1945. Both men were members of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). Alexander Bauer served as president of the Wisconsin Chapter of the AIA for two terms and as its secretary for twelve years. At the time of his death, he was a member of its executive committee.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> "Gustave Dick, Builder, Dead," *The Milwaukee Journal*, July 10, 1935, Page 9; *Brick and Clay Record* (Chicago) 28, no. 6 (June 1908): 293.

<sup>69</sup> "Bauer, Theater Designer, Dies," *The Milwaukee Journal*, December 13, 1945, Page 9.

<sup>70</sup> "Gustave Dick, Builder, Dead," *The Milwaukee Journal*, July 10, 1935, Page 9; "Bauer, Theater Designer, Dies," *The Milwaukee Journal*, December 13, 1945, Page 9; "Alex Bauer, 58, Architect, Dies," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, December 13, 1945, Part 2, Page 6; National Register of Historic Places, North Grant Boulevard Historic District, Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, National Register #95000290, Section 8, Pages 20-21.

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In addition to the Oriental Theatre, Dick & Bauer also designed Milwaukee's Tower (1926), Garfield (1927), Colonial (1926), National (1928) and Milwaukee (1922) theaters. The Colonial, National and Milwaukee theaters are no longer extant. Statewide, they designed the Orpheum Theatre in Oshkosh, Sprague Theatre in Elkhorn (1928), and the Capitol Theatre in Racine (1928). Demonstrating their architectural versatility, Dick & Bauer executed the Tower Theater to feature a Mediterranean motif and the National Theater to evoke the feeling of an ancient Roman garden. The Garfield Theater has been alternatively described as being modeled after a Viennese opera house and reflecting a "Louis XV theme, semi-atmospheric in type."<sup>71</sup> Of the Dick & Bauer-designed Milwaukee movie palaces, the Oriental was their largest measured by seating capacity and it retains the greatest degree of integrity of their surviving commissions within the city by a considerable margin.<sup>72</sup>

**Conclusion**

The Oriental Theatre is significant under Criterion C: Architecture as an excellent and highly intact example of a movie palace. Built in 1927, the Oriental was constructed at the height of popularity of this property type. That same year, sixteen new movie theaters – consisting of 18,200 seats – were being designed, built, or opened in Milwaukee. Locally, movie palace development was initiated with construction of the Wisconsin Theater in 1924. The period of movie palace construction was short-lived ending with the Great Depression. Characteristics of the movie palace exhibited by the Oriental Theatre include its ornate and lavishly detailed interior spaces including its theater lobbies and auditorium with balcony. Designed by the Milwaukee architectural firm, Dick & Bauer, the Oriental specifically is an exotic-themed movie palace with an interior reflecting distant and foreign lands incorporating elements of East Indian, Moorish, Islamic, and Byzantine architecture to create a "temple of Oriental art" in ornamental plaster and decorative painting. Decorative features include false beams in the lobbies painted to resemble hewn timbers; tile floors; draperies; multifoil and oriental arches; seated mystical figures within decorative niches in the theater auditorium; ebony-colored lions lining the stairs to the balcony; and elaborate plaster work consisting of over one hundred elephants and other

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<sup>71</sup> "Three De Luxe Houses Recently Added to Saxe Chain," *Motion Picture News* 37, no. 1 (January 7, 1928): 31.

<sup>72</sup> "Dick & Bauer, Inc., Milwaukee, Architects for the Capitol Theatre," *The Journal Times* (Racine, Wisconsin), May 29, 1928, Page 16; Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee's Movie Theaters*, 73-74. Seating capacity numbers taken from Widen and Anderson, *Silver Screens: a Pictorial History of Milwaukee's Movie Theaters*.

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mythological creatures. Large murals with scenes depicting exotic palaces and intricately detailed eight-foot light fixtures add to the ornate nature of the lobby. The Oriental Theatre is further notable given its rarity as a movie palace within Milwaukee considering that the city has lost most of its historic-period examples of this property type. The 1930s were peak years for the exhibition of motion pictures in Milwaukee with eighty-nine theaters in operation. However, mirroring national trends, the drop from this peak by the mid-twentieth century was striking. Featuring eighty theaters in 1950, the number of movie theaters operating in the city was reduced by half ten years later. While some historic movie palaces were repurposed for uses including live performance venues or churches, many were razed. By the early twenty-first century, only the Oriental and three other theaters from the 1930s peak of eighty-nine theaters were still operating as movie houses in the city. The property is significant at the local level.

**Archaeological Potential**

Some prehistoric and late historic remains may be present on the site, as American Indian tribes and, later, European-Americans have inhabited the area for hundreds of years; however, archaeological potential was not assessed as part of this National Register nomination.

**Preservation Activities**

The City of Milwaukee has had a historic preservation ordinance and commission for many years. The Oriental Theatre is currently being rehabilitated under the federal historic preservation tax credit program as a phased project; a *Part 1 Historic Preservation Certification Application* (NPS Project #38,200) was approved by the National Park Service on March 27, 2018 and a *Part 2 Historic Preservation Certification Application* was conditionally approved on May 11, 2018.

End of Statement of Significance

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     **Insert Boundary Descriptions**

**Verbal Boundary Description:**

The historic boundary reflects the property's current lot lines, the parcel of which is otherwise known as: GLIDDEN & LOCKWOOD'S ADDITION IN NW ¼ SEC 22-7-22 BLOCK 27 LOTS 3-4-6-7-N W 25' (LOTS 9-10-11) EXC N W 10' LOT 9 BID #20. As well, the historic boundary incorporates the theater marquee extending over the sidewalk along North Farwell Avenue.

**Boundary Justification:**

The historic boundary of the Oriental Theatre coincides with the legal boundary of the property and includes all of the property historically associated with the building. Additionally, considering the theater marquee extends over the sidewalk, the boundary incorporates that portion of the sidewalk and, as a result, the City of Milwaukee has been listed as a second property owner within the nomination.

     **End of Boundary Descriptions**

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Oriental Theatre  
Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

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Insert Photo Descriptions

**Oriental Theatre**

**City of Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin**

**Exterior photos by Michael T. McQuillen, May 2021**

**Interior photos by Wayne Reckard, August 2021**

**Location of original digital files: State Historic Preservation Office, Madison, WI**

Photo 1 of 25

Primary (northwest) façade, context view of the Oriental Theatre on North Farwell Avenue, view looking south

**The information for the following photographs is the same as above, except as noted:**

Photo 2 of 25

View of entire building: primary (northwest) façade on North Farwell Avenue, large theater auditorium block behind, and one-story wing facing East Kenilworth Place, view looking northeast

Photo 3 of 25

Primary (northwest) façade, view looking northeast

Photo 4 of 25

Primary (northwest) façade, view looking southeast

Photo 5 of 25, June 2021

Southwest elevation (facing East Kenilworth Place) and rear (southeast) elevation, view looking north

Photo 6 of 25, June 2021

Rear (southeast) elevation, view looking north

Photo 7 of 25, June 2021

Rear (southeast) elevation, view looking southwest

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Oriental Theatre  
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Photo 8 of 25, June 2021  
Northeast elevation, view looking west

Photo 9 of 25  
Ticket booth

Photo 10 of 25  
Entrance lobby

Photo 11 of 25  
Theater lobby (view toward stairs to balcony)

Photo 12 of 25  
Theater lobby (view toward entrance lobby)

Photo 13 of 25  
Theater lobby (stairs to balcony)

Photo 14 of 25  
Theater lobby

Photo 15 of 25  
Theater auditorium (theater A)

Photo 16 of 25, April 2021, photo by Michael T. McQuillen  
Theater auditorium detail (theater A)

Photo 17 of 25  
Theater auditorium (theater A)

Photo 18 of 25  
Theater auditorium (theater A), view from balcony

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Photo 19 of 25, February 2021, photo by Michael T. McQuillen  
Theater auditorium detail (theater A)

Photo 20 of 25, February 2021, photo by Michael T. McQuillen  
Theater auditorium detail (theater A)

Photo 21 of 25, February 2021, photo by Michael T. McQuillen  
Balcony (theater A)

Photo 22 of 25  
Theater B (situated underneath the balcony)

Photo 23 of 25, August 2021, photo by Michael T. McQuillen  
Basement level recreation venue (currently, Landmark Lanes)

Photo 24 of 25, August 2021, photo by Michael T. McQuillen  
Interior of the one-story wing facing East Kenilworth Place (currently, Axe Bar)

Photo 25 of 25, August 2021, photo by Michael T. McQuillen  
Office area corridor (second floor)

End of Photo Descriptions

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Insert Figures

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- Figure 3: Oriental Theatre, interior, theater lobby (1927 photograph)
- Figure 4: Oriental Theatre, interior, theater auditorium (1927 photograph)
- Figure 5: Oriental Theatre, July 2, 1927 Saxe-O-Grams program
- Figure 6: Oriental Theatre, gala opening advertisement
- Figure 7: Oriental Theatre, opening program
- Figure 8: *Motion Picture News* "Three De Luxe Houses Recently Added to Saxe Chain" article
- Figure 9: Heywood-Wakefield advertisement showing Oriental Theatre seats (*Motion Picture News*)
- Figure 10: Bensinger Recreation opening advertisement
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- Figure 16: Existing first floor plan
- Figure 17: Existing balcony (second) floor plan
- Figure 18: Existing upper balcony floor plan
- Figure 19: Existing basement floor plan



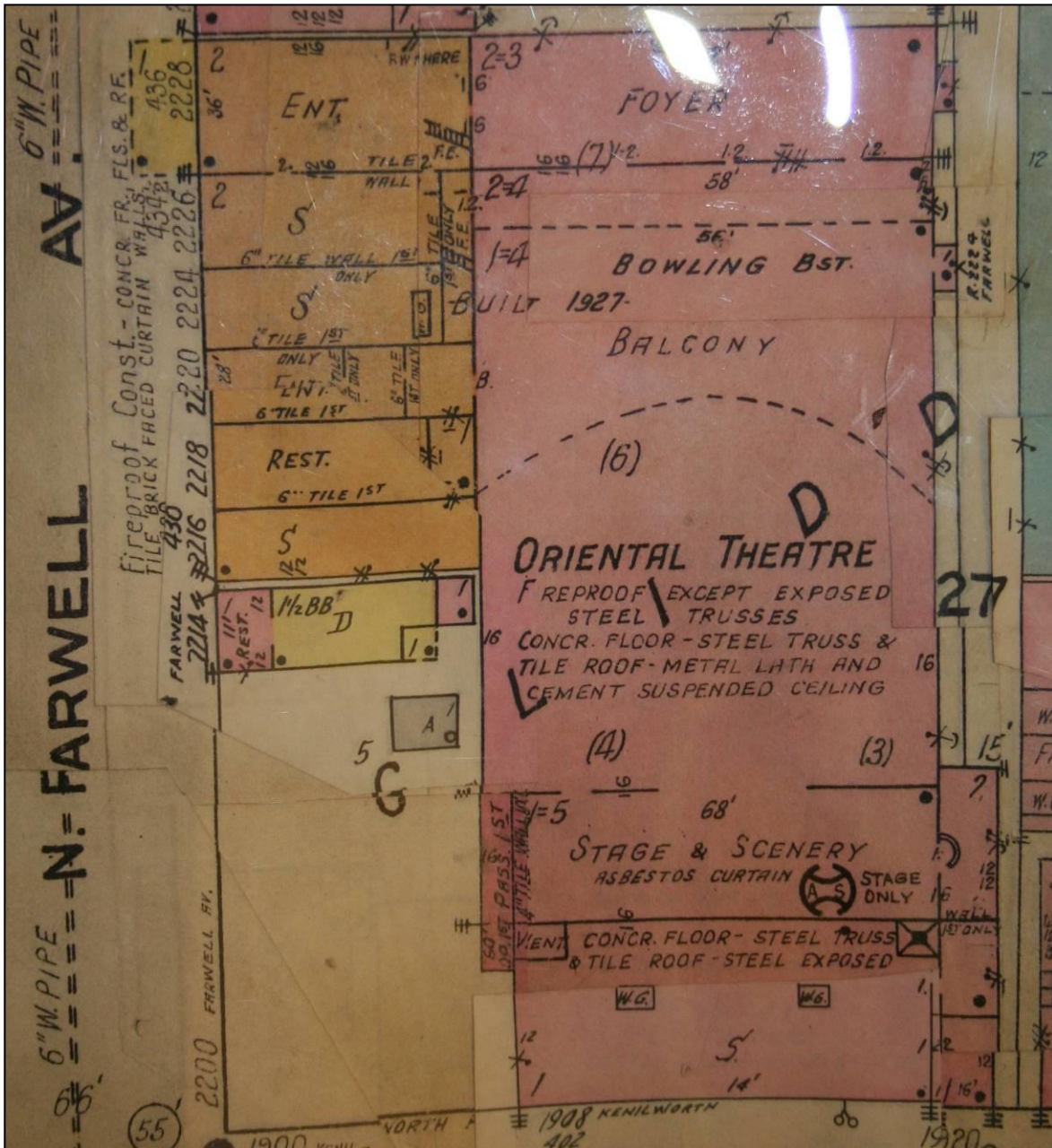
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Oriental Theatre  
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Section figures Page 2

Figure 1: Oriental Theatre, Sanborn Map Company image



Sanborn Map Company, Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Milwaukee, Wis., 1910 updated to 1961

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Oriental Theatre  
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Figure 2: Oriental Theatre, exterior



1929 exterior photograph of the Oriental Theatre (Milwaukee Public Library photograph collection)

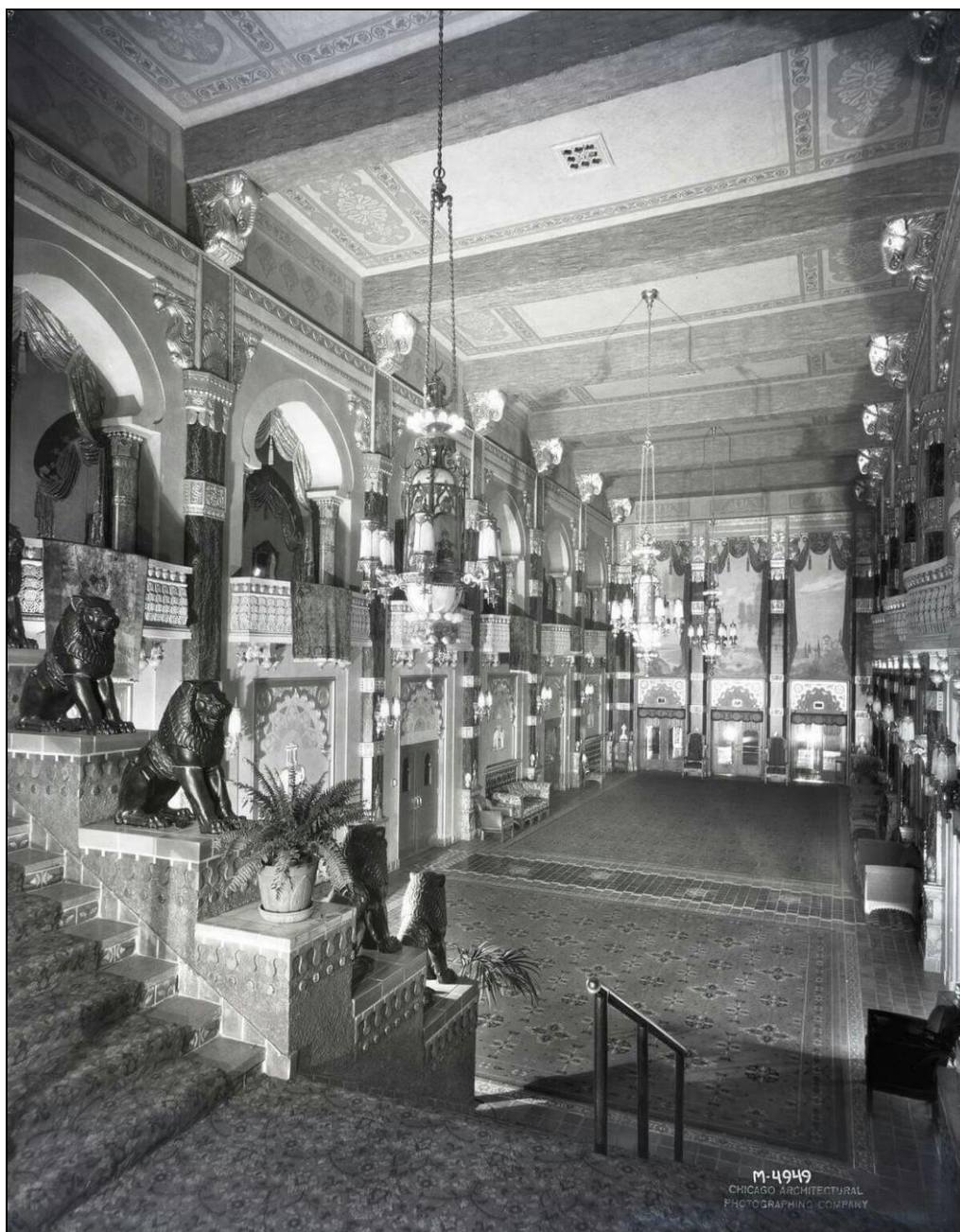
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Oriental Theatre  
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Figure 3: Oriental Theatre, interior, theater lobby



1927 interior photograph of the Oriental Theatre lobby (*Chicago Architectural Photographing Company*)

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Figure 4: Oriental Theatre, interior, theater auditorium (currently identified as theater A)



1927 interior photo of the Oriental Theatre auditorium (*Chicago Architectural Photographing Company*)

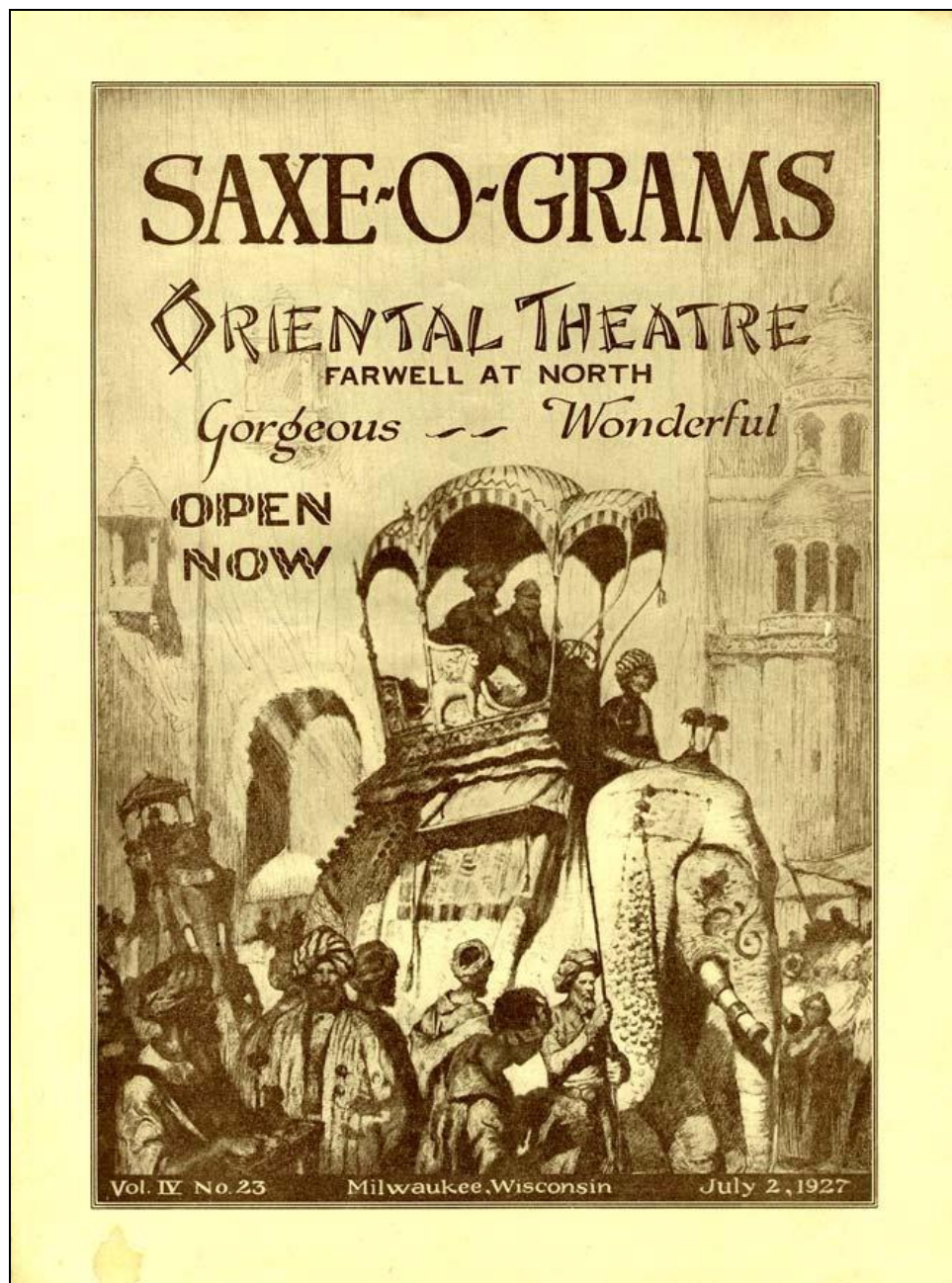
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Figure 5: Oriental Theatre, July 2, 1927 Saxe-O-Grams program



Oriental Theatre Saxe-O-Grams program, July 2, 1927

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Oriental Theatre  
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Figure 6: Oriental Theatre, gala opening advertisement

**SAXES**

**ORIENTAL**  
North & Farwell

Invites All Milwaukee  
to Celebrate Its

**Gala  
Opening**  
Sat. Eve., July 2

Mammoth Shows on  
Stage and Screen

Doors open at 6:00 with de  
luxe performances at 6:30  
—8:30—10:30 p. m.

Erected at  
a cost of  
\$1,500,000

2,500  
Seats

\$175,000  
Ventilating  
System

**Save**

*The Most Beautiful Theater of  
Oriental Design in All the World!*

Oriental Theatre gala opening advertisement, *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, July 1, 1927

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Figure 7: Oriental Theatre, opening program



Oriental Theatre opening night program

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Oriental Theatre  
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Figure 8: *Motion Picture News* “Three De Luxe Houses Recently Added to Saxe Chain” article



Oriental Theatre interior photographs from “Three De Luxe Houses Recently Added to Saxe Chain,” *Motion Picture News* 37, no. 1 (January 7, 1928): 30-31



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Oriental Theatre  
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Figure 9: Heywood-Wakefield advertisement showing Oriental Theatre seats (*Motion Picture News*)

August 5, 1927 345

101 YEARS OF  
MANUFACTURING  
EXPERIENCE

Interior of the new Oriental Theatre,  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin.  
Dick and Bauer, Architects.

A GOOD PAYING SEAT FOR  
THE SAXE ORIENTAL!

THE Saxe Amusement Enterprises sought a comfortable seat for their new Oriental Theatre in Milwaukee. They wanted a chair that would provide the kind of comfort that would build steady, profitable patronage. They found it in OC 431, the beautiful Heywood-Wakefield chair shown above. This practically designed seat is paying good box office dividends at the new, magnificent Oriental Theatre, one of the finest in the entire Saxe chain.

We will be glad to tell you more about this and other Heywood-Wakefield chairs which have been installed in Saxe, Publix, Orpheum and other circuit houses all over the country.

*Send for your copy of our new booklet "Heywood-Wakefield Seats the Roxy." This interesting pamphlet illustrates and describes in detail the Heywood-Wakefield seating in the Roxy Theatre, New York City.*

**Heywood-Wakefield**  
REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

Baltimore, Maryland	113 West Conway St.	Los Angeles, California	801 East 7th St.
Boston 45, Massachusetts	Winter Hill	New York, New York	516 West 34th St.
	Display Floor, 174 Portland St.	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	244 South 5th St.
Buffalo, New York	Wells and Carroll Sts.	Portland, Oregon	148 North 10th St.
Chicago, Illinois	2653 Arthington St.	San Francisco, California	737 Howard St.
	Display Floor, 439 Railway Exchange Bldg.	St. Louis, Missouri	6th and O'Fallon Sts.
Kansas City, Missouri	1310 West 8th St.		

Oriental Theatre seats shown in Heywood-Wakefield advertisement (*Motion Picture News*, August 5, 1927)

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Oriental Theatre  
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Figure 10: Bensinger Recreation opening advertisement

**HERE'S  
YOUR  
INVITATION**



*to Attend the Formal Opening of*

**BENSINGER  
RECREATION**

*Oriental Theater Bldg.  
434 Farwell Avenue*

**SATURDAY, SEPT. 24**  
8:00 P. M.

*Jimmy Smith  
to Meet  
Charles Daw  
in Exhibition  
Bowling  
Match*



**MANY OTHER  
ATTRACTIONS**

*One Flight Down  
from the Lobby  
of the New*

**ORIENTAL  
THEATER**

20 BILLIARD TABLES  
16 BOWLING ALLEYS



You and your friends, who find your entertainment and recreation in activity, participating in those social sports and games, bowling and billiards, may now enjoy the most modern equipment, pleasant atmosphere and artistic surroundings in the new BENSINGER RECREATION.

I. A. Bensinger & Son, an institution with more than fifty years of experience in serving seekers after healthful recreation, is opening the last word in pleasure resorts.

Just one flight down from the new ORIENTAL THEATER you will discover this new rendezvous. It offers refinement in bowling and billiards which is sure to prove as attractive to the ladies as to gentlemen.

Sixteen bowling drives and twenty billiard tables, with the latest improved accessories, are being placed at your pleasure at the BENSINGER RECREATION. The refreshment fountain, grill room, and barber shop make the service complete.

From now on you and your friends, ladies and gentlemen, can round out your evenings of entertainment and recreation without leaving the attractive ORIENTAL THEATER building. Before or after the show you can get in a few strings of ten pins, or runs of three-cushion, pocket or bankline billiards.

Here is a real civic center, with a variety of refined entertainment unequalled anywhere. You are invited to make the most of the BENSINGER RECREATION.

Saturday, September 24, has been set for the opening. Special headline events are being planned for the formal dedication. The feature will be an exhibition bowling match between Jimmy Smith, considered by many the world's best ten pin collector, and Charles Daw, the most popular Milwaukee exponent of the ancient art of toppling the maples. Bring your family and friends.

**BENSINGER  
RECREATION**

*Oriental Theater Bldg.  
434 FARWELL AVENUE  
CORNER OF NORTH AVENUE  
CARL MINKLEY, Manager*

Tel. Lakeside 797



Bensinger Recreation opening advertisement (*The Milwaukee Journal*, September 22, 1927, Page 20)

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Oriental Theatre  
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Figure 11: Bensinger Recreation advertisement

**A Christmas Present to the Public**

**5 NEW ALLEYS**  
*for Open Bowling ONLY*

In addition to the 16 new Brunswick Regulation Alleys, 10 Pocket and Carom Tables, a large Soda Fountain, Barber Shop, Ladies' and Gents' Restrooms and clean and up-to-date Checkroom, we are installing 5 new Regulation Brunswick Alleys to be used for open bowling exclusively, no reservations can be made for these alleys. We are also installing new booths in our Soda Grill, accommodating bowling parties, serving light lunches to bowling parties desiring to be private. Come in to see us Christmas Day or anytime thereafter.

**Bensinger Recreation**  
CARL MINKLEY, MGR.  
Oriental Theater Building  
434 Farwell Avenue Phone Lakeside 797

Bensinger Recreation advertisement, *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, December 23, 1927

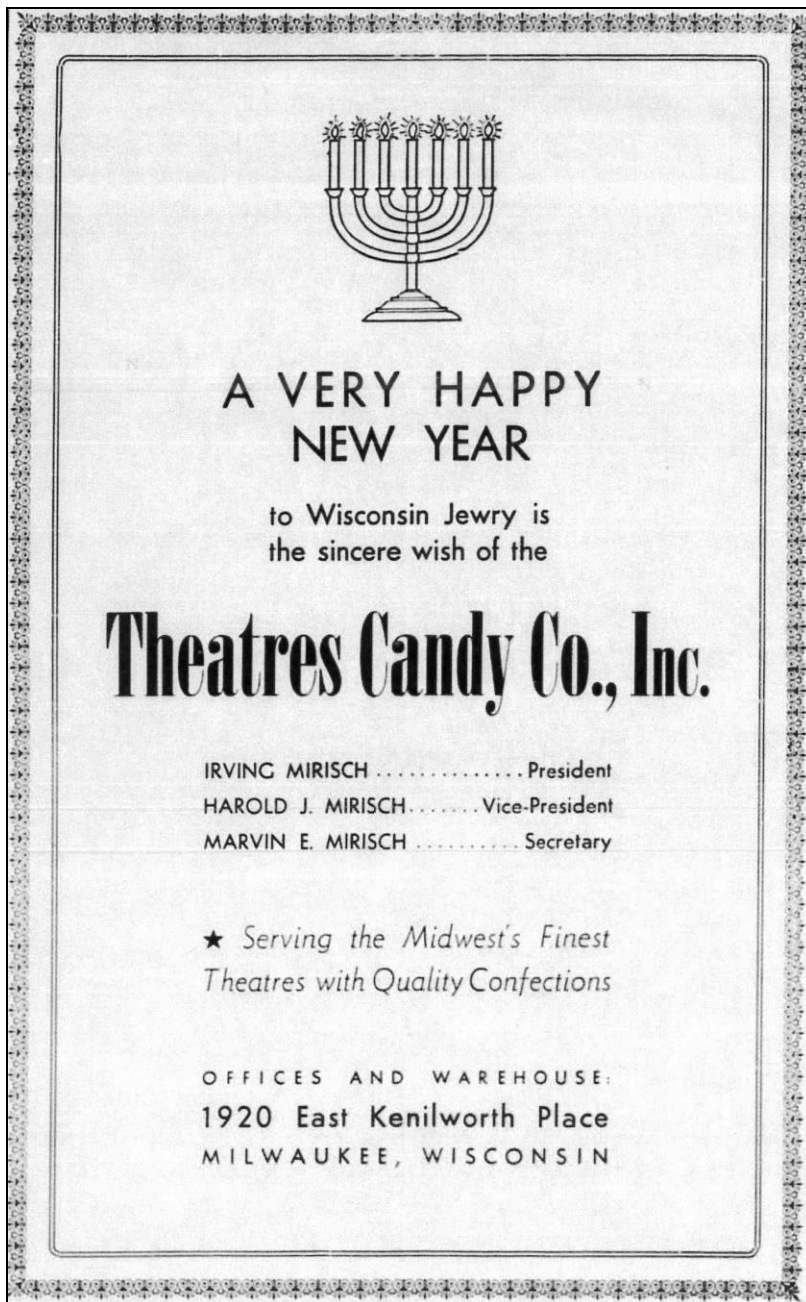
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Figure 12: Theatres Candy Company, Inc. advertisement



Theatres Candy Company, Inc. advertisement, *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, September 23, 1949

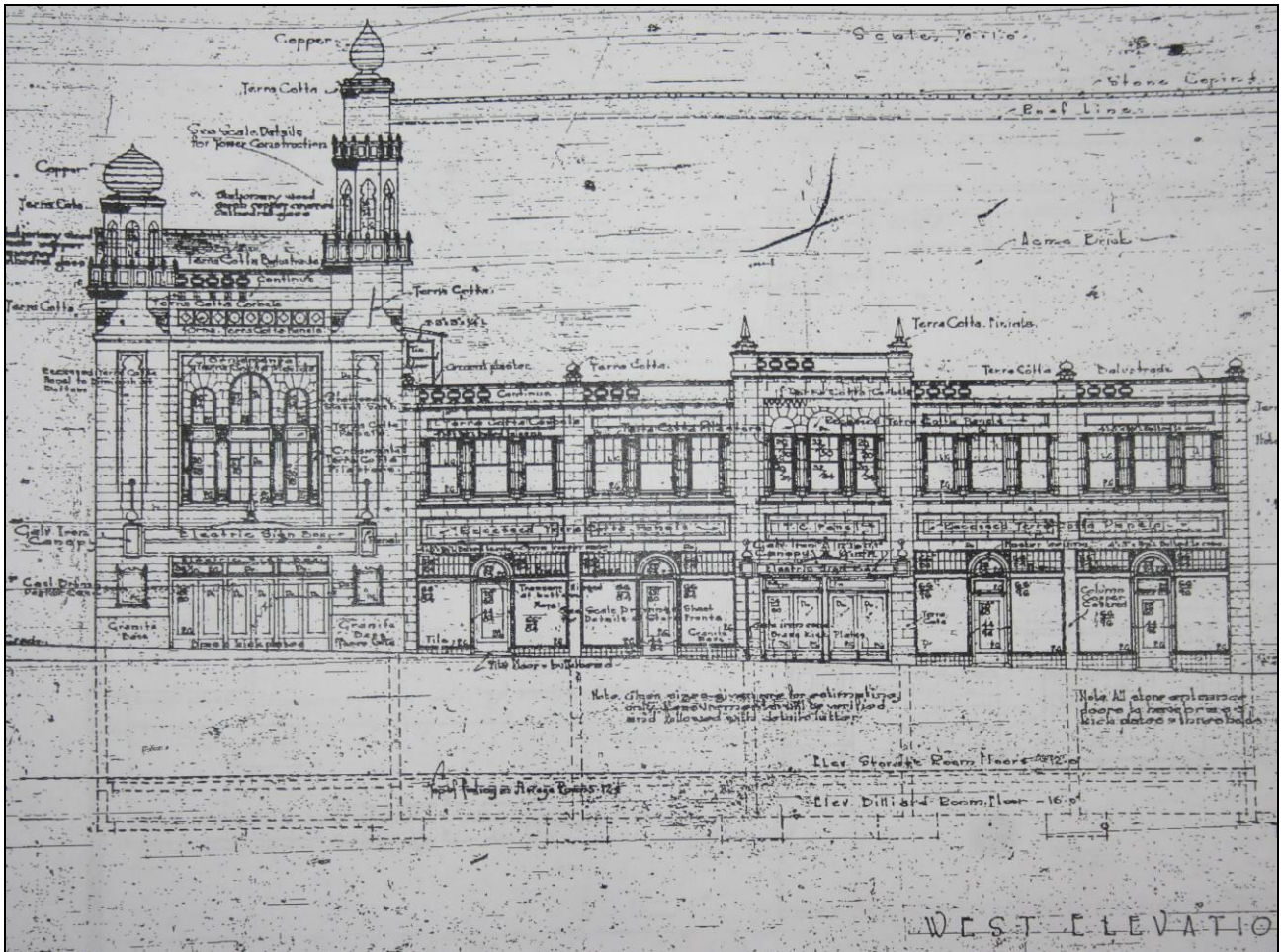
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Figure 13: Oriental Theatre, Dick & Bauer 1926 architectural plans (west elevation)



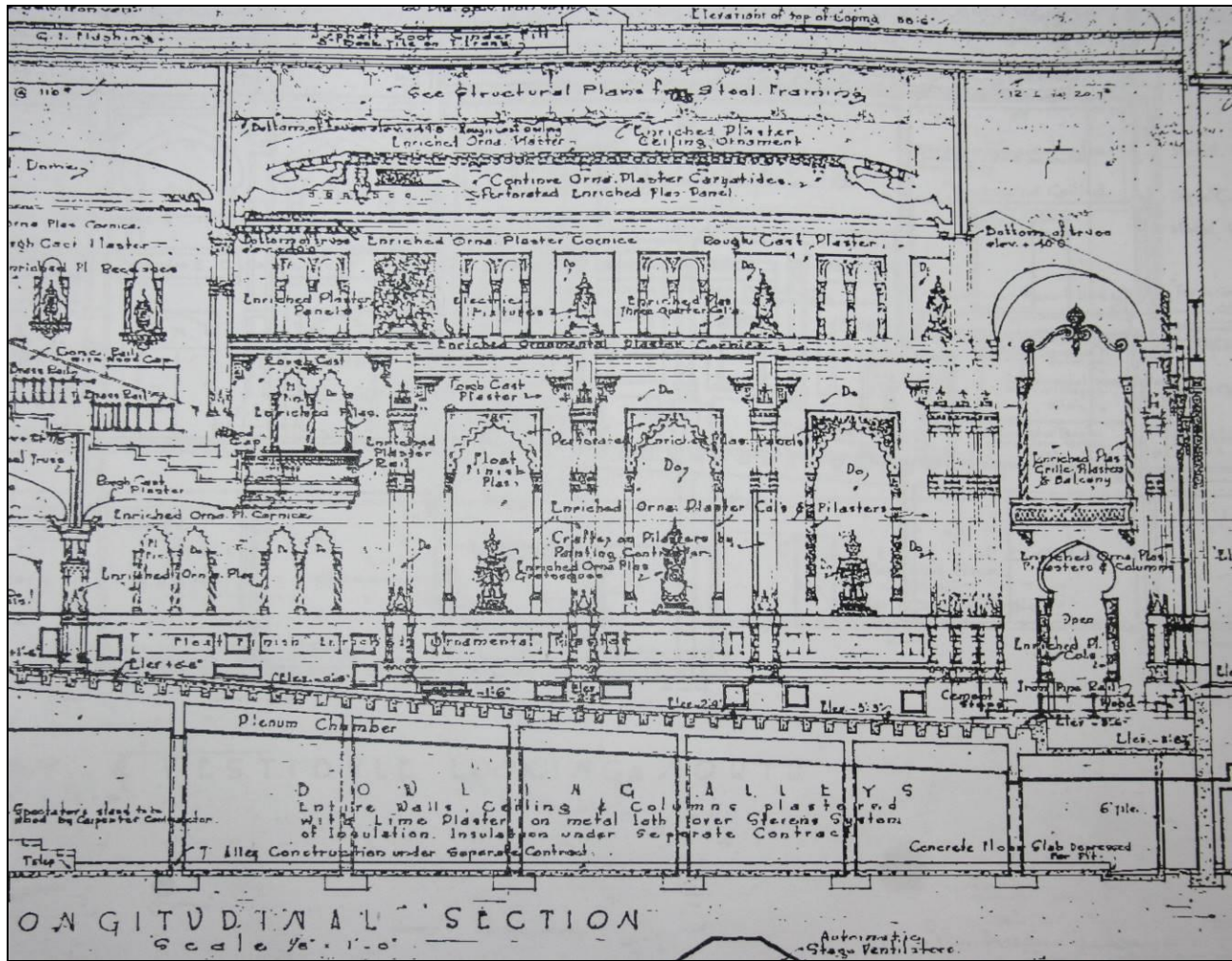
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Figure 14: Oriental Theatre, Dick & Bauer 1926 architectural plans (portion of longitudinal section)



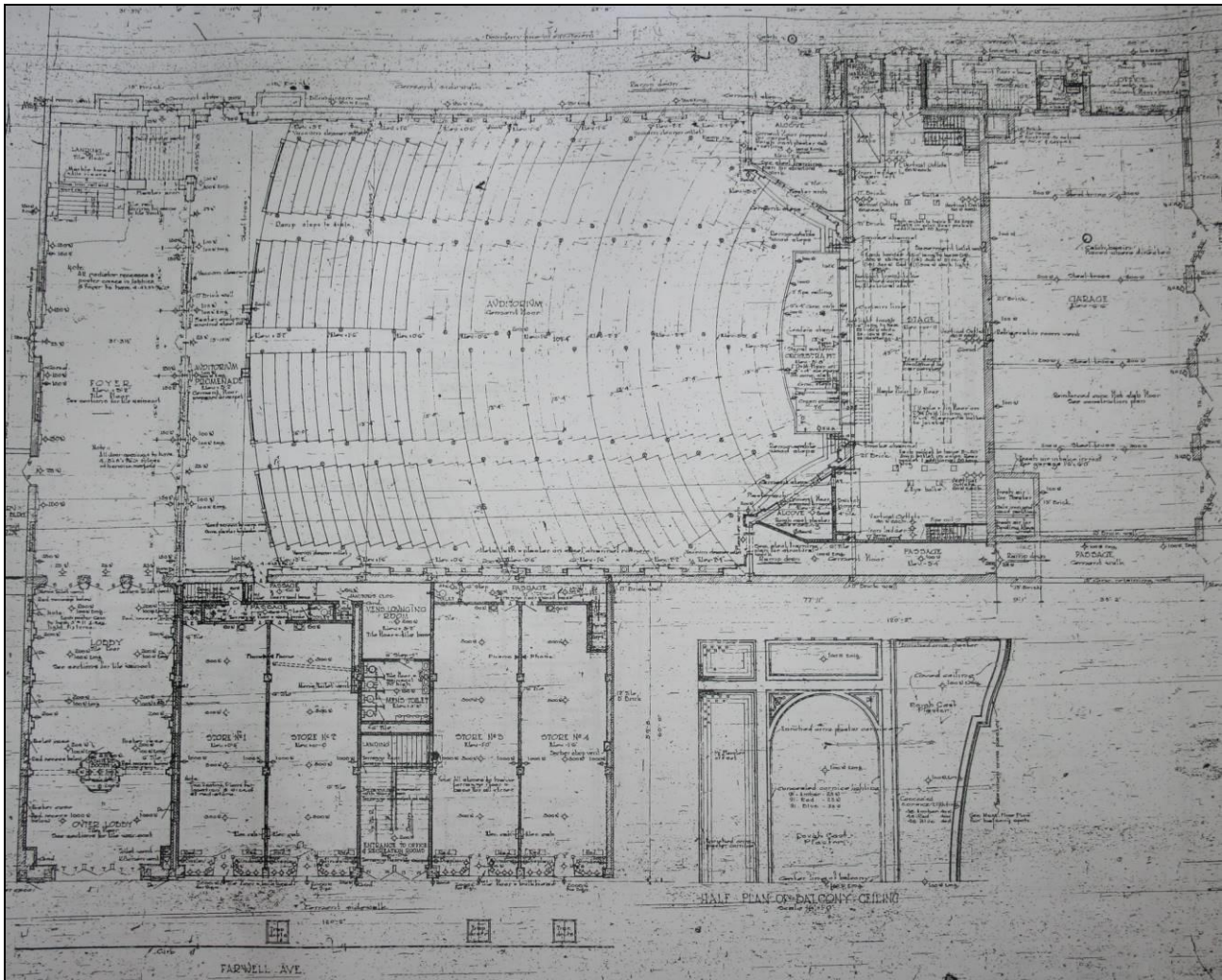
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Figure 15: Oriental Theatre, Dick & Bauer 1926 architectural plans (first floor plan)



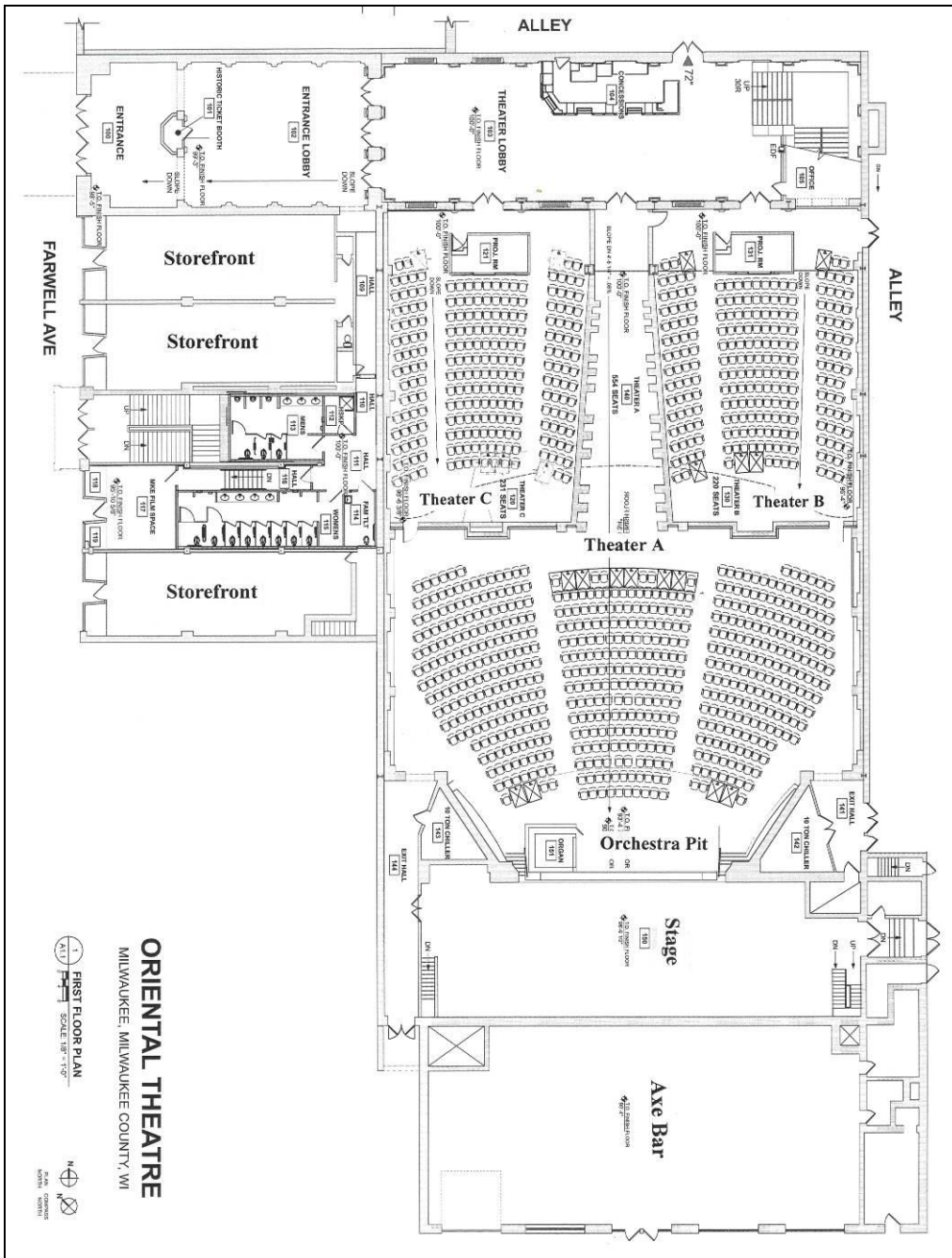
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Figure 16: Existing first floor plan





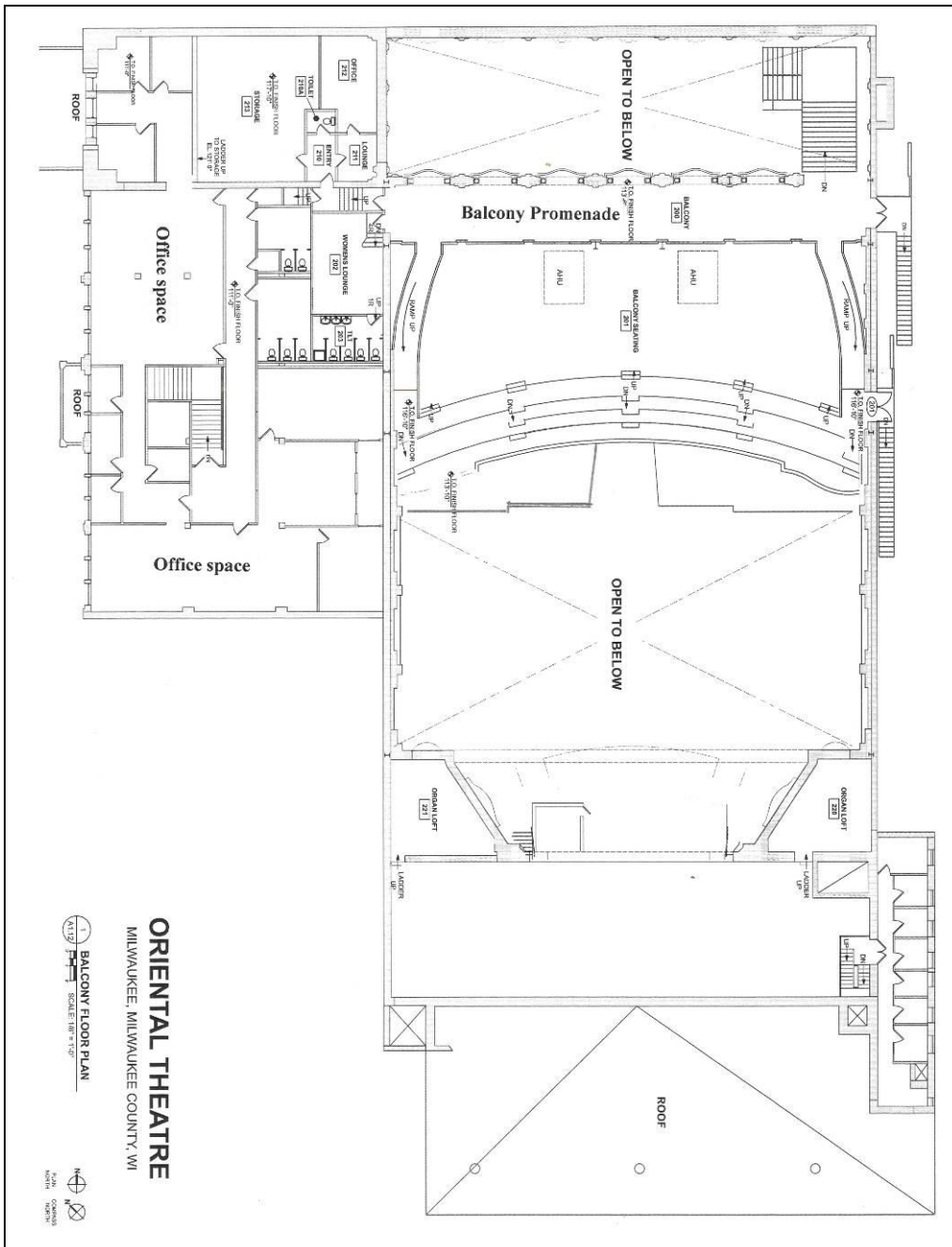
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Figure 17: Existing balcony (second) floor plan



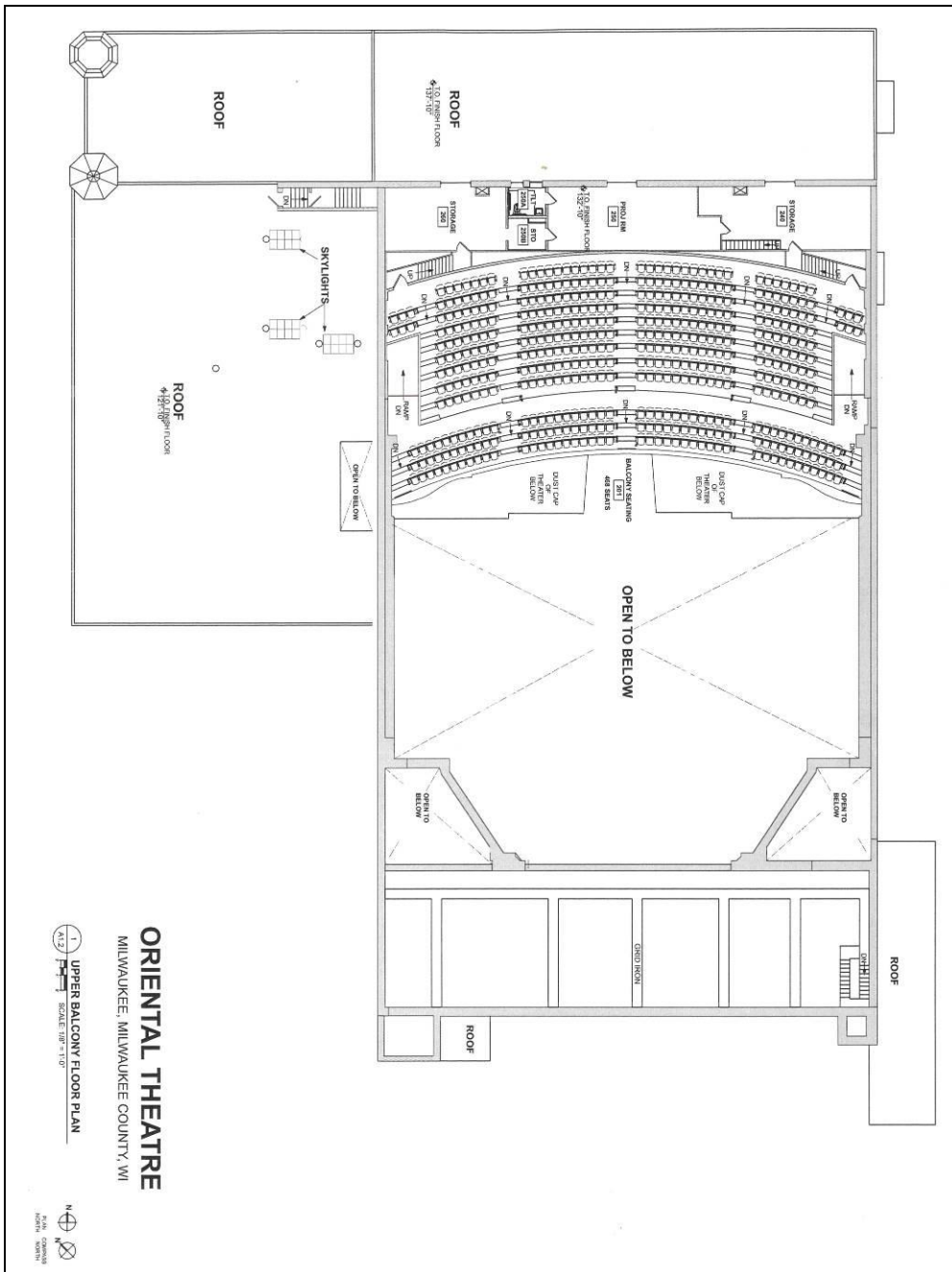
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Figure 18: Existing upper balcony floor plan



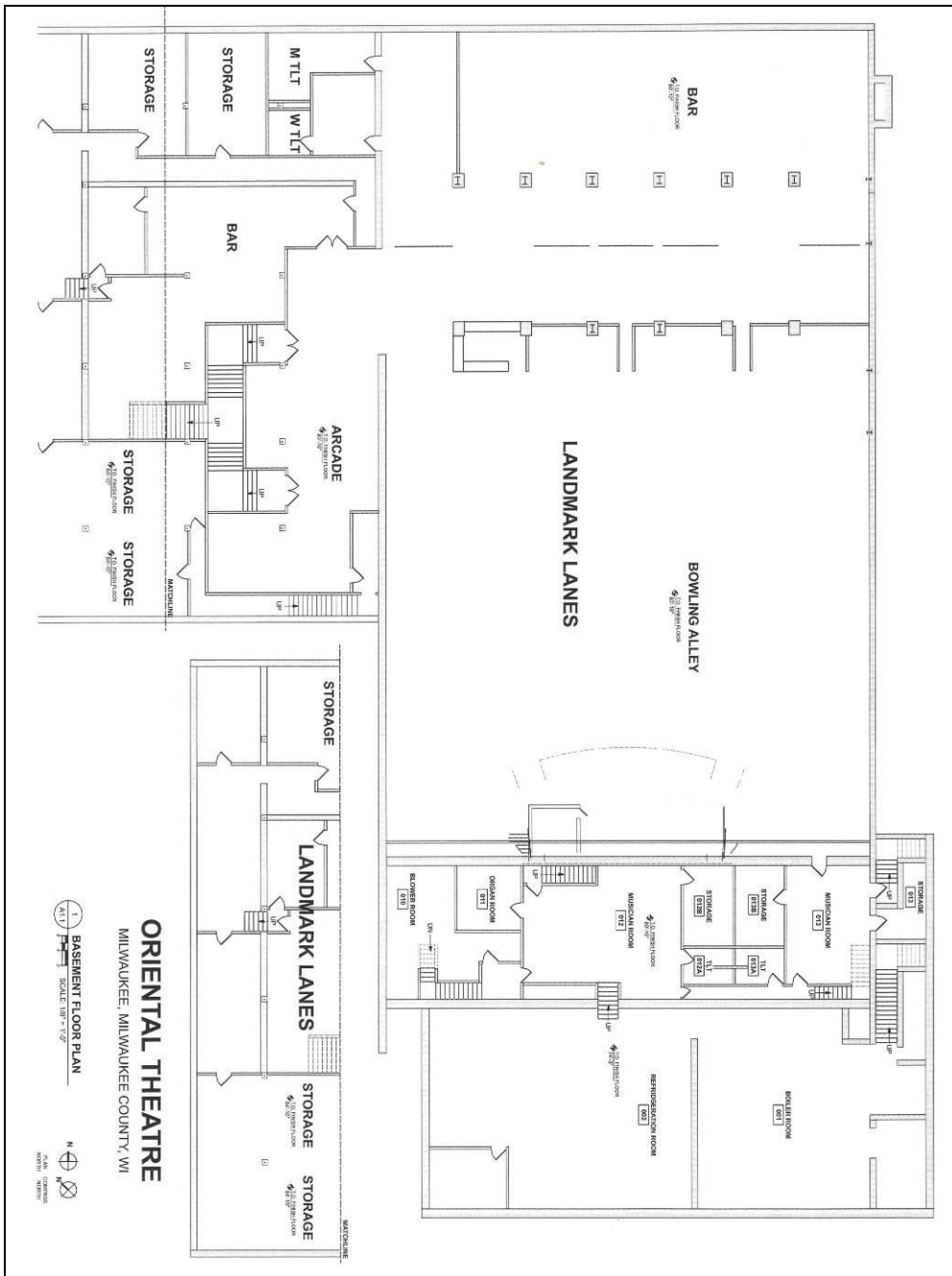
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Figure 19: Existing basement floor plan



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    End Figures