

CITY OF JERSEY CITY

Department of Housing, Economic Development & Commerce
Division of City Planning



Interdepartmental Memorandum

DATE: 7/19/2021
TO: Historic Preservation Commission
FROM: Daniel M. Wrieden, Historic Preservation Officer
Margaret A. O'Neill, Senior Historic Preservation Specialist
CC: Liz Barna, Esq., HPC Counsel
City of Jersey City, Applicant and Owner
/File
RE: Case #H21-349
54 Journal Square a/k/a Loew's Jersey Theater
Block: 10601/41
Zone: Journal Square 2060 – Zone 6 (Preservation Zone)
New Jersey State Register of Historic Places

I. PLANS AND DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

1. Historic Preservation Application, submitted June 28, 2021
2. *Loew's Jersey Theatre Redevelopment Project Description* by OTJ Architects, submitted June 28, 2021 and updated July 9th, 2021
3. *Loew's Theater Reference Photos*, submitted June 28, 2021 and updated July 9th 2021
4. *Loew's Jersey Theatre Redevelopment Building Envelope Schematic Design Narrative* by Thorton Tomasetti Building Solutions dated July 2, 2021
5. Structural Drawings entitled *Loew's Jersey Theater* by Thorton Tomasetti dated June 25, 2021
6. Architectural Plans entitled *Historic Preservation – Loew's Jersey Theater* by OTJ Architects, most recently revised July 9th 2021
7. Architectural Plans entitled *Loew's Jersey Theatre 54 Journal Square Jersey City, New Jersey 07306* by OTJ Architects, most recently revised July 9th 2021
8. Electrical Drawings entitled *Loew's Jersey Theater* by OTJ Architects, most recently revised June 25, 2021
9. Mechanical Drawings entitled *Loew's Jersey Theater* by OTJ Architects, most recently revised June 25, 2021
10. Plumbing Drawings entitled *Loew's Jersey Theater* by OTJ Architects, most recently revised June 25, 2021
11. Acoustics Report entitled *OTJ Architects Loew's Jersey Theatre 100% SD Acoustics Report* by ARUP, most recently revised July 9, 2021
12. Architectural Lighting Plans entitled *Loew's Jersey Theater* by OTJ Architects, most recently revised June 25, 2021
13. Theater Design Plans, entitled *Loew's Jersey Theater* by OTJ Architects, undated
14. *Loew's Jersey City Theater Plaster And Paint Survey Jersey City, New Jersey* by Evergreen Architectural Arts, dated July 9th 2021

15. Appendix A to *Loew's Jersey City Theater Plaster And Paint Survey Jersey City, New Jersey* by Evergreen Architectural Arts, undated

II. PROJECT & PROPOSAL BACKGROUND

54 Journal Square a/k/a the Loew's Jersey Theater (herein referred to as "site" or "theater"), an altered, Spanish Baroque-influenced "Wonder Theater", completed in 1929 and opened on 29th September of that year, a month before the collapse of the stock markets and the beginning of the Depression. The site been altered multiple times in its lifespan, most significantly in 1974 when it was divided into a triplex. The damage to the original, historic fabric in the building that was a result of this alteration is still evident today; however, much of the original interior spaces with their finishes and materials survive to this day. The Loew's Jersey Theater was formally closed to the public on August 21, 1986 and much of what remained of its moveable furnishings, including art and antiques from mansions of the gilded age were removed and sold. The site was listed on the New Jersey State Register of Historic Places on August 15, 1985 due to the concern that development pressures and changes in entertainment preferences would cause the building's demolition for office and or parking space. The Jersey City Loew's Theater was consequently identified as a historic site in the Historic Preservation Element of Jersey City's Master Plan due to the theater's listing on the State Register. The property has been owned by the City of Jersey City since April 5th, 1993 and has been managed and cared for by the friends of the Loews, a non profit volunteer organization which, under lease from the City, has maintained and painstakingly revived this important piece of Jersey City's architectural history.

The Jersey City Planning Board is seeking a recommendation from the Historic Preservation Commission following the submission of an application for a Section 31 review, which was submitted by the City of Jersey City by the newly designated leasee who will be working in partnership with the Friends of the Loew's . The applicant is proposing a full interior and exterior rehabilitation and restoration of the theater and the surrounding site which will preserve, repair and where necessary reconstruct important, character defining elements of the building while introducing new technology and mechanical systems as well as new code compliant amenities for the public's enjoyment.

The application and submitted plans were deemed sufficiently complete by HPC Staff on June 1, 2021.

III. HISTORIC DESCRIPTION AND BACKGROUND FOR CONTEXT

Featuring exceptionally elaborate Spanish Baroque details and an extraordinary terra cotta facade, the Loew's Jersey Theater is a major building in Jersey City. Its front elevation is a distinctive element of Journal Square, Jersey City's main entertainment center and bustling commercial area. The theater was designed by Rapp and Rapp, one of the major architectural firms active in the design of movie theaters in America, and is of importance as an early theater plan in America built specifically for talking pictures. It is one of five significant movie palaces built by Loew's in 1928-30 known as the "wonder theaters". In addition, the interior of the theater, which remains in very good condition, exemplifies the grandeur of movie palace design during the heyday of the silver screen. *(From the*

National Register Nomination Form, prepared by Dennis G. Doran Vice Chairman of the Jersey City Municipal Historic District Commission on November 20, 1984) the physical description, statement of significance and the historical background sections of the nomination form have been transcribed and appended to this Staff report for the convenience of the reader.

IV. PROPERTY LOCATION & JURISDICTION

The site is located in the Journal Square neighborhood. As defined in the City of Jersey City Zoning Ordinance, and as shown on the City's official zoning map the site is within the Journal Square 2060 Redevelopment Plan Zone 6 (Preservation Zone) which requires that buildings within this area "shall be rehabilitated in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for the Treatment of Historic Properties so that future generations can be delighted by the history and architecture of the Journal Square Neighborhood."

This application comes to the HPC as a referral from the Jersey City's Planning Board, who is requesting review and comment on a Section 31 Application.

The HPC's jurisdiction regarding the property is defined per 40:55D-109 of the New Jersey MLUL, entitled "Responsibilities of the Commission, "the historic preservation commission shall have the responsibility to: (d) advise the planning board ... on applications for development pursuant to section 24 of this amendatory and supplementary act." Additionally, 40-55D-110 states that "the planning board shall refer to the historic preservation commission every application for development submitted to either board for development ... identified in any component element of the master plan."

V. REQUIREMENTS AND STANDARDS FOR CONSIDERATION

Staff notes regarding the Powers and Duties of the Historic Preservation Commission:

Per § 345-9, entitled Historic Preservation Commission, Section (B) entitled Powers and Duties of the Historic Preservation Commission, the Commission has the following relevant powers and duties:

(4) To advise and assist City officers, employees, boards and other bodies, including those at County, regional, State and Federal levels, on all matters which have potential impact on the landmark buildings, sites, structures, object or landscape features in the City or on the ambience of a historic district.

(6) To recommend to the Zoning Board of Adjustment and the Planning Board the grant or denial of development applications where such are deemed to be within the intent and purposes of this Article.

The property is subject to following standards during the Board's consideration regarding the application seeking a Certificate of Appropriateness:

1. *Secretary of Interior Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*
2. Zone 6 (Preservation Zone) of the Journal Square 2060 Redevelopment Plan

The 2060 plan states that the buildings within Zone 6 are:

“... locally significant and that still possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, These buildings and streetscapes give the area a unique sense of place different not experienced elsewhere in the city... To respect the special character that the Journal Square area has acquired and retained over the past three and one half centuries, the buildings included in this Preservation Zone shall be rehabilitated in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for the Treatment of Historic Properties so that future generations can be delighted by the history and architecture of the Journal Square Neighborhood.”

The Standards noted within the redevelopment plan which are most relevant to this application appear to be the building design requirements:

5) Building Design Requirements

- (a) All visible façades must retain historic building fabric where practicable. Architectural elements must be fully retained, preserved, restored, or recreated as necessary, based on site, photographic, or period documentation.
- (b) Any rehabilitation is to be done in compliance with the Secretary of the Interiors Standards and Guidelines for the Treatment of Historic Properties
- (c) All building must comply with all State or national historic register regulations.
- (d) Parking is not permitted in this zone unless present at the time of adoption of this redevelopment plan.

The entirety of Zone 6, including the redevelopment plan map identifying the zones, is attached to this staff report.

VI. STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS AND COMMENTS

After years of neglect and then subsequent heroic efforts by the Friends of the Loews’ to preserve and maintain the only one of the famous Loew’s Wonder Theaters to be constructed outside of new York City it is an incredible achievement to be able to look forward to the full programmatic use of a rehabilitated and restored theatre. Staff appreciates the monumental effort taken to document the Loew’s Jersey City Theater as it currently stands, and to broadly show the scope of the planned rehabilitation of the theater with particular concern for the preservation of iconic spaces, materials, finishes; while modernizing the theater to allow for more modern modern technology to excite and entertain a new generation of the public in a architecturally distinguished and beautiful venue. Staff acknowledges the incredible amount of background work which has been undertaken to present the attached drawings and reports for the Commission’s reference. The development team of architects, engineers, historians, and conservators has made great strides to present the Jersey City Historic Preservation Commission with the most complete set of drawings, photographs, and reports for their review as part of a larger process, by participating in this Section 31 Review by the Jersey City Planning Board, a Project Authorization Review by the New Jersey State Historic Preservation Office and a review of Applications for Historic Preservation

Tax Credits administered by the National Parks Service and the State of New Jersey . All of these reviews will be undertaken with the goal returning the Loews Jersey City Theatre to its proper place in the life of the City and the metropolitan area at large in conformity with the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation*.

While staff acknowledges that due to the aggressive schedule laid out by the leasee, the drawings and reports presented to the Commission are at this point, incomplete. However, despite the relatively incomplete nature of the current submission, which is essentially conceptual, HPC staff feels confident in recommending the project for further review by the above-mentioned agencies. HPC staff will be continuously involved in future reviews on the project, cooperating with both the State Historic Preservation Office and the National Parks Service in their reviews and all participant in the project and subsequent reviews will necessarily be guided by the secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Failure to abide by these standards will most likely result in the finding of an encroachment (or an adverse effect) on a Project Authorization Application by the State Historic Preservation Office, a denial by the State's Historic Site's Council and the denial of Historic Preservation Tax Credits as well as federal and state grants which are usually a necessary source of funding for a project of this caliber.

In general, the proposal is to return the public spaces of the Jersey City Theatre to its former glory with the repair, restoration and reconstruction (where necessary) of important character defining features, finishes, and fixtures based on site and photographic evidence as well as thorough and professional research of other "wonder theatres" of the period, while introducing modern conveniences and systems, will enhance the public's appreciation of the space and will hopefully give the 21st century visitor the equivalent of the immersive experience of glamorous escape and entertainment engaging all of ones' senses so deeply enjoyed by patrons of the early and mid twentieth centuries.

To this end, Staff of the Historic Preservation Commission has the following recommendations:

1. The word "demolish," as found in the submitted drawings will be clearly defined in order to avoid the destruction of character defining fabric without allowing for the ability to salvage, store, catalogue, or display materials which may be redundant or unnecessary at this phase of the theatres' existence.
2. The Historic Preservation architectural set, along with all of its comments, notes, etc. shall be incorporated into the general architectural set for the ease of review by other agencies and to ensure that the work on site is executed in the most appropriate manner.
3. The Historic Preservation architectural set, along with all of its comments, notes, etc. shall be completely coordinated with the general architectural set for the ease of review by other agencies and to ensure that the proposed work on site is executed in the most appropriate manner without confusion between stakeholders, trades and all parties involved in the in the rehabilitation of the theater.
4. All preservation keynotes on the HPC Set shall be augmented with direct references to the specific reports which specify the material or finishes conditions and treatments to be undertaken during rehabilitation.
5. A fully detailed, noted, and dimensioned exterior set of drawings shall be submitted for review as soon as possible to HPC Staff for review and approval, prior to the submission to the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office.
6. On all sets of plans, any note specifying a shop drawing or further submission review shall be updated to include the Jersey City HPC or their Staff as a reviewing Authority.
7. The general notes listed within the Historic Preservation Architectural set shall be revised per HPC Staff's comments prior to submission to the New Jersey State Historic Preservation Office and any additional review agents.

8. Every effort shall be made to have any reconstructed elements of the building's façade or interior public spaces match the historic materials, dimensions, details, profiles, configuration, and finish.
9. All lighting shall respect the historic paradigm and original design intent of the architects. The use of can or recessed lights or other visually obtrusive fixtures which will diminish the decorative features of the theatre, especially at the decorative ceiling field are highly discouraged.
10. All HVAC related alterations, both interior and exterior shall rely on the existing, historic design paradigm and the original design intent of the architects and shall be as unobtrusive and non destructive as is possible.
11. All material shop drawings and mock ups shall be submitted to and reviewed by HPC Staff for approval after approval is granted by the architect of record and the Historic Preservation Consultant.
12. HPC Staff shall review and approve all changes, alterations, additions, etc. regarding any existing or proposed loading area configurations.
13. Any mechanical equipment or rooftop appurtenances shall be located on the rear roof and shall not be visible from any public right of way. In some instances where this may not be avoidable, all reasonable efforts shall be made to minimize the visibility from any public right of way.
14. Every effort shall be made to maintain the center aisle of the theater seating, as this is a pivotal, character-defining feature of the space that is necessary for the general public to fully experience the intended design features of the theater room as a whole.
15. The applicant shall revise the proposed plans to ensure that the currently historically intact women's lounge and especially the ladies' powder room maintains its entry and traffic pattern so that patrons may have an experience of the original layout and function of the elegant and classic lounge experience.
16. The proposed LED signage for the marquee, exterior "poster" location, and any interior signs shall not blink, flash, scroll, etc. in order to visually register in an historically appropriate manner for this building and its location.
17. All detail drawings for the rehabilitation of the marquis signage shall incorporate the proposed LED signage in an appropriate and proportionate manner, relative to the structure and decoration of the marquis, in order to reflect the marquis' historic visual and character defining nature.
18. A copy of the long term lease between the owner and the lessee shall be provided to HPC for review and comment; specifically the components of the lease pertaining to maintenance, repairs, etc.
19. The Commission and its staff reserves the right to make further recommendations based on testimony presented at the Commission's hearing of July 19th 2021 as well as on further submissions as they are updated and refined.

Additional comments and recommendations by the Commission and Chair may follow July 19th's meeting.

From the National Register Nomination Form, prepared by Dennis G. Doran Vice Chairman of the Jersey City Municipal Historic District Commission on November 20, 1984

Physical Description:

This 3300 seat richly decorated theater was constructed in 1928-29 from the designs of Rapp and Rapp who ranked with Thomas Lamb as among the most important palace theater architects of the 1920's. It features an elaborate terra cotta facade, a sumptuous Spanish Baroque interior and a large and complete stage designed for vaudeville and Broadway shows.

The structure occupied a long, narrow and curved site on the south side of the Pennsylvania (now Conrail) main line out through Journal Square. Its entrance is on the west side of Kennedy Memorial Boulevard in the heart of Jersey City's principal commercial district which it dominates. The eastern end of the structure housing the entrance is roughly in the form of a square about four stories high containing the lobby and galleries. Behind this, to the west, rises the larger bulk of the auditorium, about six stories high.

The west facade, fronting on Journal Square, houses a small gift shop on the south side ground level which partially extends out beyond the main building in a one story extension original to the structure. The entire facade is constructed of cream colored terra cotta heavily embellished with fine fluting, pilasters, garlands, and panels and capped with asymmetrical pinnacles at the north and south corners. In the center of the facade, at the roof line, is a large Seth Thomas clock surmounted by an arched cupola within which are mounted large movable statues of Saint George and the Dragon. The north elevation of the lobby portion, now partially obscured by the 1955 construction of a low rise department store over the railroad tracks, has at its eastern edge a wide vertical band of terra cotta running from the ground to the roof carrying around and matching the facade's design. The rest of the elevation is buff colored brick decorated with vertical arched and round headed panels of terra cotta mouldings. The south elevation is similarly constructed and decorated. Both elevations have a terra cotta frieze running beneath the cornice, which matches the facade frieze.

The auditorium section of the building is built of buff colored brick mostly without ornamentation except for the north elevation which continues the arched and pointed terra cotta panelling of the lobby section. The east and west walls of the auditorium are built up in a stepped design to conceal the prominent curve of the roof. The walls are capped with a terra cotta cornice.

The original curved marquee has been rebuilt in a larger rectangular form with neon lighting replacing some of the incandescent bulbs except on the underside where the incandescent lighting has been retained unaltered. An immense vertical sign, taller than the entire facade on which it had been mounted has been removed from the north corner and its elimination has enhanced the carved beauty of the terra cotta which it partially obscured.

A bronze ticket booth flanked by four bronze doors on each side leads from the street into a vestibule panelled in black and white marble from floor to ceiling. At the north and south sides of this vestibule are two Additional ticket booths, also of marble, with bronze gates. The ceiling is panelled with mirrors. A bronze plaque set into the north wall bears the likeness of Marcus Loew, founder of Loew's Theaters, and is dated 1927, the year of Loew's death at age 57.

The lobby, entered through another series of bronze doors, rises three stories to a rotunda-like rococo ceiling still decorated in its original color scheme of grey and gold with touches of pale blue and rose. Around the oval shaped lobby rise columns of jade green on Roman bronze bases which support the dome and a mezzanine gallery that encircles the lobby. Most of this gallery is now closed off so that the ornate music room, located at its

western end over the main entrance, is no longer accessible to the public. Featuring mirrored and brocaded walls, elaborate plaster panelling and crystal chandeliers, this room originally held art works, lounge chairs and a piano for the diversion of patrons waiting for the next show.

Hanging from the center of the lobby is a high ornate crystal and bronze chandelier with ten tiers of lights. The center chain of this chandelier is still wrapped in a sleeve of red velvet and some of the arches and openings of the lobby are still draped in fringed red royal silk plush. This style and color are repeated in the draperies still existing in the corridors and theater auditorium.

Approaching the foyer to the theater auditorium two grand staircases rise from the right and left of the lobby floor to the mezzanine. These asymmetrical staircases, with handsome railings of marble and bronze, skillfully turn through the mid-section of the building as it curves to the right to accommodate its crescent shape. At the top of the staircases is the mezzanine lounge off which open suites of restrooms, telephone and coat checkrooms and manager's office. The brocade wall coverings in panels along the staircase walls have been removed because of deterioration and the plaster is now painted a mottled rose color in an attempt to imitate the original treatment. Likewise, the plush red carpeting has been removed from each staircase and replaced with red vinyl tiles.

The lounge room of the women's suite was originally furnished in French period style with decoration to match, including apple green walls, gold mouldings and mulberry and brocade panels while the cosmetic room has black marble pilasters and wainscot. The men's lounge is panelled in wood with a large wood and tile mantelpiece.

The auditorium has been divided into three theaters. has been divided into three theaters. A wall has been built from the middle of the orchestra floor to the leading edge of the balcony across the entire width of the theater. The area underneath the balcony has been further divided in half by another partition, perpendicular to the first, creating two equal size rooms under the balcony ceiling. Each of these is used as a separate theater with its own projection booth newly built against the rear wall and a screen mounted on the wall extending down from the balcony edge. The seating used in these theaters is the original orchestra floor chairs. The seating area in front of the screens, extending to the proscenium and stage, has been abandoned. Virtually none of the original plaster and paint decorations were disturbed when this conversion was made in 1973 and efforts were made to paint and decorate the new partitions in compatible colors so as to minimize the intrusion. [This work was later dismantled and the entire auditorium has since been re-unified as one grand space]

From the upstairs mezzanine floor the lofty auditorium is entered at the lower end of the single balcony which rises up in a great sweep to the top rear of the house. From this balcony the entire auditorium and original proscenium and stage is visible and this constitutes the third theater with movies being shown on the original stage screen from the projection booth.

The entire auditorium is decorated in intricate Spanish Baroque. Overhead is an opulent dome covered in gold leaf and surrounded by an ornamental cornice of ivory, gold, soft grey and rose. The vaulted ceiling has an all over coffered surface in gold, ivory and blue and is penetrated at the sides by six large arches in which elaborately carved walnut and gold canopies are draped with festoons of red velvet trimmed with gold applique tassels and fringe. Concealed multi-colored lights were designed to delicately illuminate these arches through sheets of gold silk gauze and silver cloth hung behind the drapery.

The organ fronts, adjoining the proscenium, consist of four ornamented and fluted columns supporting a lavishly carved cornice, surmounted by a shell canopy. From the cornices hang velvet valences and drapes embroidered in gold and a crystal trimmed gauze curtain backed with silver cloth. The proscenium arch forms a beautifully carved framework over the stage and is set off by scrolled and moulded cartouches and veined marble panels. The lighting fixtures are crystal and bronze with illumination mainly indirect. The original decoration of the auditorium, done by Battisti Studios of New York, is almost entirely preserved and in good condition except for dirt and some minor chipping.

The Robert Morton organ, which cost \$100,000 when new, was removed from the theater several years ago and reportedly donated to a Texas charity. The proscenium opening, one of the largest in any theater at the time of construction, was designed to accommodate the lavish stage spectacles. The organ console, the piano and the entire orchestra floor are mounted on separate lifts which can be worked independently or together.

The organ lift revolves. Under the stage are large rehearsal rooms, mostly unused since stage shows were largely discontinued in the late 1930s. The stage lighting system is automatic. Switches are eliminated and lighting effects can be arranged ten seats in advance, a complete change for each set requiring only the touch of a button. Among other notable features was a complete telephone system of use by ushers so seating could be handled efficiently.

At the time of its opening and for many years the showplace was filled with a costly collection of European antiques and art objects, some of them from the Vanderbilt mansion on New York's Fifth Avenue, demolished in the mid-1920's, and from which the Loew's corporation purchased many items for its theaters. Most notable was the display of silver and bronze figures, Dresden china, marble statuary and oil paintings that lined the mezzanine gallery, music room and lounges. An 18th century French Buhl clock, eight feet tall stood in the lobby foyer until recent years [c. 1980] but has been removed along with most of the other art objects, gold console tables, sofas and lounge chairs.

Significance:

Featuring exceptionally elaborate Spanish Baroque details and an extraordinary terra cotta facade, the Loew's Jersey Theater is a major building in Jersey City. Its front elevation is a distinctive element of Journal Square, Jersey City's main entertainment center and bustling commercial area. The theater was designed by Rapp and Rapp, one of the major architectural firms active in the design of movie theaters in America, and is of importance as an early theater plan in America built specifically for talking pictures. It is one of five significant movie palaces built by Loew's in 1928-30 known as the "wonder theaters". In addition, the interior of the theater, which remains in very good condition, exemplifies the grandeur of movie palace design during the heyday of the silver screen.

The Loew's Jersey opened in 1929, just a month before the stock market crashed. It was one of the famed "Loew's wonder theaters". The wonder theaters were a group of five sumptuous movie palaces built by Marcus Loew in 1928-30. The Jersey Theater is the only one of these five to have been built outside of New York City. It was built to be among the outstanding entertainment structures of New Jersey; it is significant that Jersey City was chosen as a location to rival those in New York City and the theater stands proudly on Journal Square (often referred to as the Times Square of Jersey City), the equal of its four great New York City cousins.

The importance of the Jersey is magnified by the fact that it is considered to have been an early first movie palace built specifically for talking pictures. It has been stated that "the opening of the Jersey City Loew's Theater on September 28, 1929, was of national as well as local significance....It was the very first theater to be built expressly for the talking picture. Conceived before the passing of the Silent era, its design was changed during the course of production to meet the demands of the new sound film industry."

Designs for the five wonder theaters were divided among the three leading movie palace architects of the period. The Jersey was one of two wonder theaters designed by the Chicago-based firm of Rapp & Rapp. George, and C.W. Rapp began their careers designing grand theaters in Chicago, notably the Chicago Theater. Their fame soon spread and they designed theaters for Paramount and others for the Loew's chain. Rapp & Rapp theaters were located all across the country. The wonder theater commissions among the most important that they received.

The striking facade of the Loew's Jersey is clad in terra cotta. Movie palace historian David Tylor has noted that this facade "has a powerful severity of expression." Although not exceptionally wide, the theater is strategically placed on busy Journal Square. As one left the old Journal Square train station (now the Path train) one originally entered a narrow alley that exited onto the square, directly across from the Jersey Theater. Its tawny-colored terra-cotta facade ornamented with fluted pilasters and areas of dense neo-Classical ornament easily attracted the eye of the commuter. The striking asymmetry of the corner pinnacles adds to the drama of the facade. In addition, the central clock was a landmark to commuters who not only could tell if they were on time for a movie, but if they were late for work or for a train. The St. George and the Dragon sculpture (St. George slew the dragon every hour), set in a niche above the clock, adds a final touch of whimsy to the facade of the palace of entertainment.

The extremely sumptuous Baroque interiors of the Jersey Theater remain in very good condition despite the fact that the auditorium has been divided into three theaters and the original furniture and artwork of the lobby and foyers has been removed. A comparison of the 33 period photographs in the collection of the New York Public Library-Theater Collection and the present condition of the building shows that most of the original ornament remains. One enters the Jersey by an inner lobby. From this the moviegoer passes through bronze doors into a richly detailed three-story oval lobby supported by "jade-green colonnades with Roman bronze bases." Between the columns are observation balconies on the mezzanine level, each guarded by an ornate bronze rail. Gold mosaic niches and panels are located on the ground level, arches into which are set broken pediments topped by putti (in a form based on Michelangelo's Medici Tomb, Florence) articulate the walls, and the ceiling is a complex plaster extravaganza of coffers, cartouches (some with female heads), and other forms. Stairways with bronze railings and marble newels lead to the mezzanine with its heavily detailed promenade foyer. On this level is an Elizabethan style men's room with original linen-fold paneling and a fireplace.

The auditorium retains [1985] its character although the addition of a ceiling and an orchestra-level wall have divided it into three spaces. These additions have been accomplished without damaging the ornamental features that give the auditorium its special character. The ceiling of the theater has shallow coffers in unusual shapes including Greek crosses and squares with curved sides. The ceiling culminates in a dome decorated with Neo-Classical details.

Elsewhere are boxes set within arches and decorated with putti, cartouches, paired brackets, tapered piers, etc. The original theater seats with lights on the iron end panels are in place. The entire interior décor continues to exude the aura of a grand European palace.

The Loew's Jersey Theater is a major building in Jersey City; it is one of the finest movie palaces of its period; it was designed by architects of national renown; and it is a building of historical importance since it was an early movie palace built specifically for talking pictures. The theater is a major survivor of a building type that is rapidly disappearing.

Historical Background

In the mid--1920's the Paramount Pictures Corporation conceived plans to erect five huge picture palaces in the outlying boroughs of New York City to tap the large audiences living in these areas. When Paramount ran into financial difficulties, it sold the project for these "wonder" theaters to the Loew's corporation complete with four sets of blueprints, two by atmospheric theater designer John Eberson, and two by the brothers George and C.W. Rapp who had designed the Paramount Theater (1926) at Times Square and other monumental movie palaces throughout the country, especially in Chicago and the mid-west. Thomas Lamb, who had received many Loew's commissions, was hired to design the fifth theater, the 175th St. in Manhattan, now a church. Besides the Jersey Rapp and Rapp's other wonder theater was the Kings in Brooklyn (closed [but recently rehabilitated and reopened to the public]) while Eberson designed the Valencia in Queens, now turned into a church and the Paradise in the Bronx, converted to a quadruplex [but recently rehabilitated and reopened to the public] and the only other wonder theater still showing pictures.

At the 3300 seat Loew's Jersey opening on September 28, 1929 it was advertised as "the most lavish temple of entertainment in the state of New Jersey". Loew's president at the time, Nicholas Schenck, said the showplace had been conceived before the passing of silent pictures and was subject to a change in design during its erection to meet the new demands of sound. He said the texture of the walls and ceilings was specially prepared by Loew's engineers to reflect sound to the farthest reaches of the house and, as such, was the one of the first theaters designed expressly for talking pictures.

The theater was the third and last playhouse to be constructed in the new Journal Square, a commercial and civic center carved out of a residential area in the 1920's in order to give Jersey City a center focal point. Prior to that, the city had only a collection of small neighborhood centers reflecting its origins as a merger of four or more communities. The Loew's theater was the last major building to be constructed as part of the initial plan for Journal Square and was located at its center where Hudson County's main street, Hudson Boulevard, crossed the Pennsylvania and Hudson and Manhattan railroad tracks. Its site was, and still is, adjacent to a vast network of bus and streetcar routes which converged on the transfer point.

For a decade after its completion the house provided feature motion pictures, vaudeville and stage shows, many imported from the Capitol Theater on Broadway. The Ritz Brothers comedy team, which appeared at the 1929 opening, was the first of many headliners to appear on the stage. The extravaganzas were mostly discontinued by World War 2 but the theater continued to attract a million or more patrons annually for many years with the organists, especially the popular and locally well known Ted Heyn, providing the live entertainment. Radio broadcasts, beauty and talent contests and civic gatherings were frequent.