
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 21-06

Uptown Theater

3426 Connecticut Avenue NW
Square 2069, Lot 816

Meeting Date: May 26, 2022
Applicant: D.C. Preservation League

Affected ANC: 3C

The Historic Preservation Office recommends the Board designate the Uptown Theater a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites, and further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places for listing as of local significance, with a period of significance of 1936, the date of its construction.

The Uptown Theater was conceived in 1931, as former movie-circuit owner and native Washingtonian Harry Crandall was making a comeback after the merger of his properties into the Stanley Corporation and then Warner Brothers. The agreement had contained a multi-year noncompete clause, and Crandall had been harmed by the stock-market crash of 1929. He announced an intention to rebuild his chain, on the cornerstone of a new, modern theater in Cleveland Park. The site had at least two advantages. It lay along a Connecticut Avenue corridor that was becoming a major commuter arterial and the commercial center for the adjoining Cleveland Park neighborhood and its several new apartment buildings. The area was also wide open in terms of competition. In the mid 1920s, the only businesses in the vicinity were a couple of gas stations, a cleaners, and the first storefronts in one of the apartment houses. A turning point was the upzoning of the area, followed by another, the 1930-1931 Shannon & Luchs development of the Park and Shop nearly opposite Crandall's preferred site.

Crandall had envisioned an imposing classical edifice and hired the already notable theater architect John J. Zink to carry it out. The Baltimore-based Zink had designed the 1923 Takoma Theatre in the District. Unfortunately, Crandall could not raise the necessary funds during the Depression, and despondent about his failure to rebuild his chain, he committed suicide in 1937. By that time, however, Warner Brothers had again bought out his interest and proceeded with Zink to erect the Uptown and, almost simultaneously, the John Eberson-designed Penn Theater in Capitol Hill. By the mid 30s, American architectural styles had shifted toward the modern, following the 1925 International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris and its subsequent reflection in European and North American popular culture.

Completed in 1936, Zink's Uptown was Art Deco in style, a geometry of steps and right angles with vertical reeding applied as decoration.¹ A projecting limestone frontispiece houses the

¹ We would quibble with the nomination's use of the term "Waterfall Moderne." "Waterfall" is a term borrowed from collectors of furniture of this period and has made only modest inroads into architectural description. If one is

entrance, flanking commercial spaces, and the projection room. The auditorium is behind a brick façade with raised banding. A massive canopy or marquee is outdone only by the massive sign above it that constitutes a visual landmark in itself.

At 1,300 seats, the completed Uptown was considerably smaller than the largest downtown theater, yet it was thoroughly modern and proved very popular in an era where convenient and reasonably priced entertainment was sought by a population swollen by the Depression- and war-era expansion of the federal government and dispersed throughout the suburbs. Sized for a large neighborhood, it proved more easily operated and maintained than the earlier, huge movie palaces. It was favored by the automobile age, completed after the Connecticut Avenue bus line and, with its rear parking lot, a destination for cars from upper Northwest.

Integrity and boundary

The exterior of the theater remains largely intact. The nomination does not propose designation of the rear parking—located on its own assessment and taxation lot. While the retention of the parking lot is reflective of the property’s use, the lot is not especially character-defining and has been reconfigured. As stated in the nomination, the “theater interior retains its original division into lobby with mezzanine, single auditorium with balcony, and mechanical areas. However, alterations over many years have removed virtually all traces of its original décor. In the 1950s and 1960s a wraparound screen and multiple projection equipment were added, resulting in modifications to rear wall, proscenium, and the seating area.” Consequently, no interior designation is proposed.

Significance

The Uptown Theater is an excellent example of an Art Deco motion-picture palace with high historic integrity and remarkable longevity. It was designed by a master architect of movie houses, acknowledged in his time and since. It thus merits designation under National Register Criterion C and District of Columbia designation Criteria D (architecture and urbanism), embodying the distinguishing characteristics of the Art Deco style in the form of a movie house, and F (creative masters), for its design by John J. Zink.

The theater remains in its original use—rare for any sort of theater of the era, and the last of the D.C. movie palaces—which is partly responsible for its exterior preservation. It was an anchor of the Cleveland Park commercial district from the beginning, and a prominent visual landmark of the Connecticut Avenue corridor. It represented a trend of shopping and entertainment moving away from downtown areas to thriving suburbs, close to affluent consumers and accessible by automobile on heavily trafficked commuter thoroughfares. For these reasons, it merits designation under National Register Criterion A and D.C. Criterion B (history), as associated with suburbanization, the spread of neighborhood movie houses, and the development of Cleveland Park and the Connecticut Avenue corridor, in particular.

familiar with the similarity of the massing of such furniture, however, the term is evocative. Art Moderne is typically applied to buildings with a horizontal emphasis, characterized by curves and streamlining to suggest movement. Deco has a more vertical orientation with right-angle geometry. It is true that Deco and Moderne were often combined in a single edifice, just as the Uptown canopy has rounded corners, as do the clerestories of the storefronts. It is debatable whether the projecting brick stripes suggest streamlining or are just an elaboration of typical reeding/fluting common on Deco buildings.

Period of significance

The proposed period of significance is 1936, the date of completion and of opening of the theater. A property that is significant for history beyond a single event typically has a longer period of significance reflecting a period of use. In this case, the property remains in its original use, and any other terminal date would be arbitrary. One could opt for fifty years before present, but settling on the date of construction places emphasis on respecting the original features in future treatment.