

United States Department of the 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 any 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 St. Louis Theatre

other names/site number Powell Symphony Hall

2. Location

street & number 718 N. Grand Boulevard not for publication N/A
city or town St. Louis vicinity N/A
state Missouri code MO county St. Louis [Independent City] code 510
zip code 63103

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X 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 X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide X locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Claire Blackwell 9 April 2001
Signature of certifying official (Claire Blackwell, Deputy SHPO) Date

Missouri Department of Natural Resources
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 or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this 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
 removed from the National Register
 other (explain):

Signature of Keeper 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
 site
 structure
 object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u> </u>	buildings
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	sites
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	structures
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 1

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

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE : theater

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE : music facility

7. Description

Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

French Renaissance

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation	<u>TERRA COTTA</u>
roof	<u>ASPHALT</u>
walls	<u>BRICK</u>
	<u>TERRA COTTA</u>
other	_____

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

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

- 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.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a 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
ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

Period of Significance 1925-1951

Significant Dates 1925

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above) N/A

Cultural Affiliation N/A

Architect/Builder Rapp & Rapp
Koplar Construction Co.

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

9. Major Bibliographical References

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

- 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: Landmarks Association of St. Louis, Inc.

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre

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

	Zone Easting	Northing	Zone Easting	Northing
1	<u>15 741 070</u>	<u>4280 500</u>	3	_____
2	_____	_____	4	_____

____ 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 Lynn Josse

organization Landmarks Association of St. Louis date November 22, 2000

street & number 917 Locust 7th Floor telephone (314) 421-6474

city or town St. Louis state MO zip code 63101-1413

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 the SHPO or FPO.)

name St. Louis Symphony Society (attn: Susan Lim)

street & number 718 N. Grand Ave. telephone (314) 286-4118

city or town St. Louis state MO zip code 63103

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
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St. Louis Theatre
St. Louis [Independent City], Missouri

Description

The St. Louis Theatre (1925), located at 718 N. Grand Boulevard, is a well-preserved "movie palace" at the northern end of what was once the "Broadway of St. Louis." Chicago theater architects Rapp & Rapp designed the building in as a movie palace fantasy version of the French Renaissance. The steel-framed building is roughly rectangular in footprint, measuring approximately 150 by 180 feet. Its primary exterior materials are buff-colored brick and cream terra cotta; the terra cotta is used most extensively on the elaborate six-bay facade which faces west on Grand Boulevard. The primary entrance is in the southernmost bay beneath a monumental window which features a stained glass image of King Louis IX (St. Louis). The public spaces of the building immerse the patron in an environment of gilded splendor. The three-story foyer is dominated by a grand staircase at the north end and four enormous chandeliers. The auditorium, which seats approximately 2600 (reduced from an original capacity of approximately 4100), includes a box level and balcony. The interior decoration, executed in plaster, includes a deep dome and an extensive program of floral and other patterns. The St. Louis Symphony Society maintains the building, now known as Powell Symphony Hall, in excellent condition. Most of the alterations to the building were completed in the 1967 renovation for the symphony's use; these include covering over the organ screens, removing the curtain apparatus and installing a permanent sound shell at the stage, removing the brightly lit theater sign, and painting the interior white with gold leaf highlights.

Exterior

The St. Louis Theatre is located in the Midtown neighborhood of St. Louis, Missouri at the northern end of what is often referred to as the arts district. Delmar Boulevard, a busy east-west thoroughfare, is to the north, and Grand Boulevard, one of the city's leading north-south arteries, is to the west. The St. Louis Theatre is at the northern end of the Midtown Historic District (NR 1978).

The building's footprint is roughly rectangular, with a one-story addition at the east end of the north elevation and a rectangular notch in the southeast corner. At its highest point (at the rear of the building), the St. Louis Theatre accommodates nine stories of office and dressing space. A steel frame supports the building.

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The six-bay facade faces west on Grand Boulevard. The main entrance is in the elaborate right bay; the remaining five bays form a symmetrical group. Primary materials, as on the other elevations, are blond brick and cream-colored terra cotta. The foundation is a dark brown terra cotta which imitates granite. Counted from left to right, the ground floor has pairs of double doors at every bay except for the second, which is filled in with matching brick (non-historic). At the first bay, half of the door opening is filled in with brick, and a pair of doors under an awning use the rest of the bay. The primary material at the first floor is rusticated cream terra cotta below a decorative course of a Greek key motif wrapping square flowers.

Above the door openings, each of the left five bays place a two-story window against a wall of blond brick with a slightly raised diaper pattern. Terra cotta window surrounds are arched at the center three bays with heraldic emblems in the tympanums. The smaller rectangular frames at bays one and five have thin broken pediments below a terra cotta roundel embedded in the wall. The first and fifth bays are slightly recessed. A terra cotta entablature runs across all five bays (and is continued at the sixth); it features a frieze of acanthus scrolls and shields below a dentilled cornice. At bays two through four, "Powell Symphony Hall" is carved into the frieze course. A brick parapet wall completes the first five bays.

The sixth bay houses the historic main entrance; it is set apart from the other five in scale, materials, and its slight projection from the building. Cream colored terra cotta arabesques frame an arched three-story window which features a stained glass center image of King Louis IX (Saint Louis). At night, the figure is illuminated from behind. The cornice is continued from the northern bays but the parapet wall above is terra cotta. The canopy above the ticket office doors continues the Greek key pattern from the north. This is a modern (1967) replacement of the original theater marquee. A lighted vertical sign once projected from the terra cotta arabesques south of the great window, but the only remaining evidence of this are two patched spots where the sign was attached.

The north elevation is less ornate than the facade, but its position facing a busy boulevard merited special attention to design and materials. It is treated in a similar manner to the facade, with diaper-patterned brick over a terra cotta first story. At the western end, a blind window matches the round-arched windows at the facade. Historic photos indicate that it once imitated a real window, but there is no corresponding window on the interior. (The mirror in that location is original.) It now serves as an elaborate two-story poster frame. Above and below the blind window are several openings - former doors and windows - which are filled in with blond brick (from the 1967 remodeling). The fire

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escape which steps across the elevation is original. Parts have been removed at the top and bottom, however, and the openings filled in with compatible brick. Three sets of fire doors at the first story are non-historic, added to comply with modern codes. At the eastern end of the building is a projection from the first story which includes the staff entrance. Rectangular window openings at four stories above this el are original; the fire escape on the center windows was apparently added when the former flyspace was converted to offices.

At the south elevation, the westernmost bay repeats motifs from the front of the building and includes a blind rectangular two-story window (now filled in with a poster as at the north elevation). Its two former fire escape openings are bricked in, as is a former first story window. The rest of the elevation is plain brick punctuated only by the fire escape and fire exits. At the eastern end of the building, an L-shaped bite out of the plan separates a one-story room for mechanical systems which is topped by HVAC equipment.

The east elevation was historically the back of the building, location of the stage and flyspace. The former flyspace rises about a floor higher than the rest of the building. Converted to offices in 1967, this space now has six sets of paired casement windows at floors six, seven and eight. Except for vent openings, the brick wall is otherwise blank.

Interior

The main entrance to the building is in the facade's right bay. It leads to a small ticket lobby, from which patrons are released into the magnificent three-story, four-bay-wide foyer. As in the other public spaces, white walls and ceilings are highlighted with plaster ornament picked out in gold leaf. At the first story, the original terrazzo floor was replaced with white marble in the 1967 conversion from movie palace to symphony hall. Ornament at the first story (on the walls, and between the double doors at each bay which open to the street after concerts) is generally light and shallow, featuring such patterns as garlands, hawk and dove pairings, and flowers. A two-sided bar (not original) stretches along the eastern end of the foyer, separating the space from the single-story hall which runs around the perimeter of the auditorium floor. An open bay at either end of the bar allows access. The grand staircase runs along the north end of the room, leading to the upper halls. A two-story mirror above the staircase is reflected in a matching mirror opposite, in a two-story club area which overlooks the south end of the foyer (above the ticket lobby). At the upper two stories, the front windows, both mirrors, and west and south balconies are framed with fluted Corinthian members - columns at the open walls,

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St. Louis [Independent City], Missouri

pilasters at the south wall, and engaged columns at the other elevations. Vertical panels between the windows and next to the mirrors include reliefs of musical instruments (violin, horns, and tambourine). The ceiling of the foyer is a shallow vault adorned with plaster cherubs, fleurs de lys, and garlands. In the foyer as well as the auditorium, most of the human figures are not highlighted in gold leaf. The cherubs' wings are accented but stand out as abstract patterns as the white-painted bodies blend into the ceiling. Four massive chandeliers are original, but underwent significant rebuilding in 1967.

Hallways throughout the public areas are carpeted in red. Plaster relief, mostly near the ceiling, is selectively highlighted in gold leaf against the white painted walls. The first floor hall forms a horseshoe shape around the auditorium, sloping down to follow the incline of the auditorium floor. Red lockers for patrons are built into the side walls (not original). At the first level above the ground floor, the back hall along the rear of the box level has been built out and the rear wall of the auditorium moved in to provide small coat rooms between the hall and the boxes. This replaces the original rear wall of the auditorium; historic photographs show that this level once had long curtained windows forming most of the barrier between the auditorium and hallway. Rosettes from the original lighting fixtures remain at the ceiling, but the fixtures themselves are gone. Instead, ceiling lights hung with crystal dot the ceiling. Wall sconces are either total replacements or may retain the original wall brackets with total replacement of the lights and globes.

A stair from this level leads down to an alternate front entrance located in the far north bay of the front elevation. Stairs continue up at the north and south end of the front of the theater. Original iron railings are intact and in good condition. At the front of the theater at the equivalent of the fourth floor is a dressing room space for ushers; above this, at the center rear of the house against the front of the building, is a booth for lighting equipment (in the location of the original projection booth).

The auditorium itself is divided into three levels of seating: the floor, a box level, and the balcony. At the time of renovation, 2689 seats were installed to replace the original capacity of almost 4100. Seats are plush red. The parquet floor at all levels was installed during the renovation to improve acoustics. Walls and ceiling of the auditorium are, like the other public spaces, painted white with gold leaf highlights. The floor of the house is divided into three sections, each separated by red carpeted aisles which emanate from triple sets of paired fire doors at the back of the house. (Before renovation, seats fanned out from the stage in five sections.)

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Sections of the side walls are defined with fluted pilasters crowned with fleurs de lys. The pilasters define wall bays which form vaults as they meet the ceiling. The farthest forward of these bays on either side of the auditorium were once recessed organ screens featuring free-standing Gothic arches before a painted field of fleurs de lys. In 1967, these elaborate housings were replaced with very simple convex panel structures which feature an urn in an oval recess near the top. This echoes the treatment of the other side bays, where it is original. At the base of the organ screens, former arched openings to the halls have been replaced with paired fire doors. The changes to the forward bays were described as necessary for the acoustic perfection of the auditorium.

The magnificent ceiling of the auditorium is divided into sumptuously curved panels featuring, in relief, baskets of fruit, shell motifs, and extensive foliation. The crowning feature is a deep interior dome with three courses of rounded quatrefoil coffers surrounding a large openwork medallion. Newspaper accounts dating from the theater's opening describe the dome as polychrome; it is now white and gold like the rest of the theater. An additional deeply recessed area between the dome and the stage echoes the curve of the ceiling in this section, resulting in an elongated fan shape. In the renovation, lights were added in the ceiling; microphones on wires, suspended from several points in the ceiling, are also a permanent fixture now.

The front of the auditorium is entirely occupied by the stage. Its proscenium is divided into three courses. Closest into the stage a quatrefoil theme prevails, while the outer course depicts bundles of flowers, leaves, wheat and fruit. Between the two, recessed arabesques of urns and winged figures run up the sides, replaced by foliated panels across the top of the stage. An additional panel is added beneath in place of the original curtain valance; it echoes the motifs of the panels above. A modest curtain extends down from this to hide the lowered stage ceiling. The stage itself was completely remodeled for the Symphony in 1967 with modifications in 1975. Gently curving wall panels and large square coffers on the stage ceiling were designed with superior acoustics in mind.

Typical of vaudeville and movie houses, there is no significant backstage area in the historic St. Louis Theatre. Irregularly shaped areas offstage left and right are used for loading and unloading, but only a narrow space exists between the stage and the rear wall of the building. The primary staff entrance is just past the north end of the stage in the one-story el at the building's northeast corner. The entrance opens into a security area. Just past this is a hall which opens to a Green Room for small gatherings and for the use of visiting artists as well as a restroom. This area is noted on original plans as a shop. Next to the stage at the south side of the building, extending eight stories high along the

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stage and former flyspace, are dressing rooms and office spaces. These were somewhat reconfigured when the elevator was moved but are still in use: concertmasters and guest artists on the second story, female artists on levels three through five, and the maestro on the sixth floor. Access to the space between the auditorium ceiling and the roof is actually gained through the maestro's room.

With the installation of a permanent stage ceiling in 1967, the former flyspace above the stage was converted into offices and storage. Floors six through eight accommodate offices stretched across the east end of the building, accessed by the elevator and stair to the north as well as a fire stair to the south. A ninth floor which was formerly used for storage has recently been converted to offices wrapped around an enclosed skylit service/mechanical area. The ninth floor is accessible from the stairs and also via a lift from the eighth floor.

The only publicly accessible area in the basement of the theater is a special events room in the northwest corner. Remnants of a historic men's lounge area are visible in the music library against the center of the basement's west wall. Ceiling moldings still indicate the public use of the room, as does the fireplace in the west wall. The central area of the basement and the southeast corner are used for mechanical systems. The air conditioning, according to staff, was installed in 1955. The two original boilers are still in use, bearing the stamp "Kewanee Boiler Co. 1924." The northwestern section of the basement is used for the men's locker room and the musician's lounge, neither of which retains any historic features.

Alterations

The St. Louis Symphony Society bought the theater in 1966 and renamed it Powell Symphony Hall. Although the Symphony purchased the theater for its resplendent interiors and fine acoustics, several key changes were made. Perhaps the most striking was the total alteration of the paint scheme - from a polychrome medley to white with gold highlights. In the course of the conversion other changes were made to the public spaces: the elaborate organ screens were covered with a more classical paneling to improve acoustics; a permanent music shell was installed on the stage, lowering its ceiling; fire doors were installed; the rear wall of the box level was replaced; lockers were added in the halls; and lighting was altered throughout (including a complete remodeling of the chandeliers and wall fixtures). Four stories of office space were added in the former flyspace, and basement lounges were converted to other uses. At the

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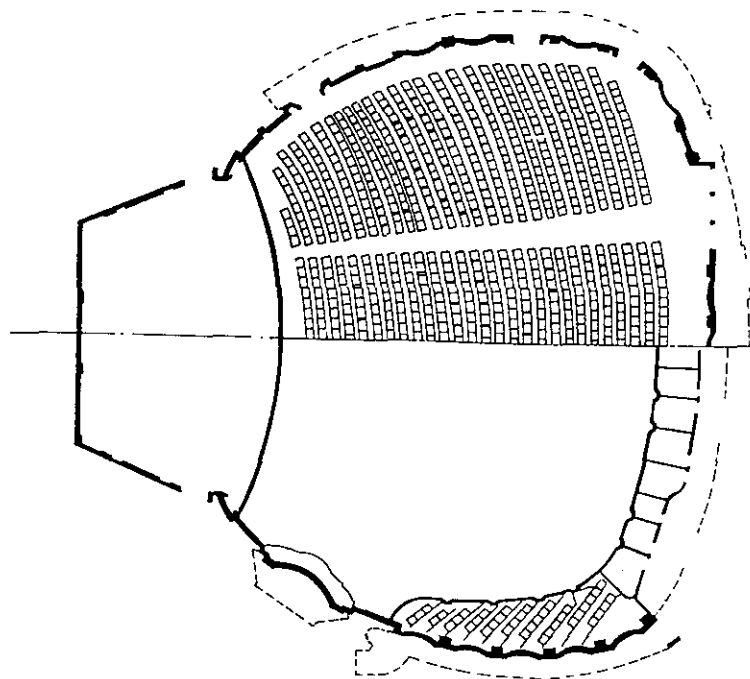
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exterior, some openings were blocked with compatible blond brick; doors have been replaced; modern fire doors installed; and the former "St. Louis Theatre" inscribed at the west and north friezes has been replaced with "Powell Symphony Hall." The exterior changes are relatively insignificant. The interior changes have altered the character of the building somewhat, but do not in any way distort its architectural merit or historic associations as a vaudeville and movie theater.

Figure 1: Auditorium plan from 1967 remodeling. Source: St. Louis Symphony Society.



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St. Louis Theatre
St. Louis [Independent City], Missouri

Significance

The St. Louis Theatre (718 N. Grand Boulevard, St. Louis) is locally significant under Criteria A (Entertainment/Recreation) and C (Architecture). In the area of Entertainment/Recreation, the theater is an important northern anchor of what was once considered the Broadway of St. Louis, the theater district of North Grand Boulevard. The St. Louis was the city's largest theater when it opened in 1925, and its history illustrates prevailing trends in the motion picture and entertainment industries. It was constructed to fulfill the Orpheum Circuit's new policy of providing nonstop rotations of live vaudeville acts and featured pictures during afternoon and evening hours for a public which was hungry for entertainment. One of the last local theaters to offer vaudeville-style entertainment, the theater operated as a motion picture house through 1966. In the area of Architecture, the St. Louis is an intact example of the work of Rapp & Rapp, a Chicago architectural firm which designed opulent theaters across the nation. It illustrates the architecture of fantasy which predominated in American movie palaces (in this case, a version of a French Renaissance palace). The period of significance is from the year of its opening, 1925, until an arbitrary 50-year cutoff (1975). The building, operated as the home of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra since 1968, is highly intact and is in excellent condition. It is a contributing building in the Midtown Historic District (NR 1978) and was recognized as a City Landmark in 1975.

Entertainment/Recreation

The St. Louis Theatre is significant in the area of Entertainment/Recreation for both its association with the final days of vaudeville in St. Louis as well as its long-standing reign as one of the city's largest movie palaces. In 1925, when the St. Louis was constructed, traveling vaudeville shows were still very popular. Instead of promoting rivalry with the upstart motion picture entertainments, vaudeville had hesitantly included movies on its stagebills. As the single reels of the 1910s were supplanted by feature-length films, the movies assumed a larger and larger place on the bill. The St. Louis was constructed during this period of uneasy equilibrium between films and live stage shows.

In 1925, little more than a decade after the first purpose-built movie theaters were constructed in St. Louis, filmgoing had become an immensely popular pastime. Just prior to the opening of the St. Louis Theatre, the city's building commissioner counted 102 "motion picture shows" in St. Louis with a total of 96,362 seats. (The St. Louis Theatre would push the total to over 100,000.) Based on the number of show times and an

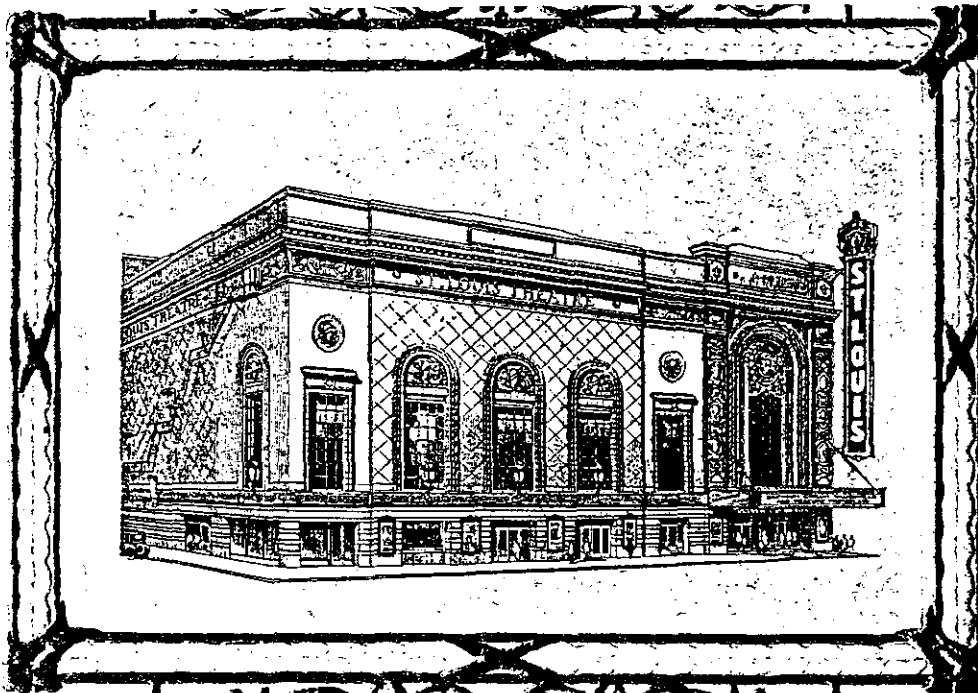
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Figure 2: from the Opening Day Program for the St. Louis Theatre, 1925.



estimate of the sold out seats, the *Globe-Democrat* declared that over 192,000 St. Louisans went to the movies every day.¹

The competition between theaters for this entertainment-hungry audience was based on the design of the theater itself, price of the product, and of course on the quality of the motion pictures and accompanying live program on the bill. The quality of the St. Louis Theatre product was assured even before construction began by an agreement with the Orpheum vaudeville circuit, one of the country's two largest "big-time" vaudeville circuits. The original San Francisco Orpheum Theatre opened in 1887, and a Los Angeles Orpheum followed soon afterwards. The chain moved off the West Coast in 1898 with a new theater in Kansas City, eventually to cover the entire territory between the West Coast and the Great Lakes. Orpheum became the dominant vaudeville promoter

¹ "Daily Attendance at Movies Here Put at 222,900," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, November 20, 1925. The 222,900 figure in the article's title actually refers to a combined total of patrons at both film and stage shows.

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in the West; along with the east coast's Keith (later Keith-Albee) Circuit, it enjoyed a virtual monopoly on "big time" vaudeville booking for many years.

The circuit came to St. Louis in 1917 with the opening of the Orpheum Theatre (now known as the American, NR 1985). When the St. Louis Theatre debuted in 1925, it was the third in town to feature entertainment from the circuit (actually taking over that role from the Rialto Theater). Only Chicago boasted more Orpheum venues (with nine); Los Angeles also claimed three. The aim of the Orpheum Circuit was to "provide clean, wholesome entertainment so varied in its appeal that every man and woman, boy and girl, will find enjoyment in each program."²

The new theater opened on November 23, 1925. At nearly 4100 seats, it was the largest in the city as well as in the Orpheum Circuit; its Kimball organ was also touted as the largest in America. The building was able to operate year-round thanks to an air-conditioning system which kept the air cool and "cleansed" (many theaters closed for the summer months). The opening day program notes that Orpheum's prototype of a larger theater featuring more shows was the State-Lake in Chicago, opened in 1919. Earlier theaters would generally offer one or two shows a day, but the circuit's expansions of the 1920s focused on larger theaters which could accommodate continuous entertainment. The St. Louis Theatre was more than twice the size of St. Louis' original Orpheum.

Opening day was celebrated by a crowd of 5,000 which came to see the luxurious new theater and its entertainments. Mayor Victor Miller took the stage to offer "the gratitude of the city administration to the men responsible for this enterprise." He explained further: "Theaters are semipublic institutions, although conducted for profit. Any institution which adds to the joy and happiness of the public is a worthy endeavor."³ The evening's program included an organ performance with a light show highlighting the many special features of the auditorium; films of the theater under construction; the featured motion picture ("Drusilla with a Million"); orchestra numbers; and a seven act vaudeville program including Allen White's Collegians, comedians, dancers, and a romantic scene. The "World Famous Singer's Midgets" concluded the program with a "spectacle" of twenty midgets in an all-new revue.

The new theater prospered even while the Orpheum Circuit underwent great changes. In 1927, Orpheum merged with its East Coast ally and became part of the Keith-Albee-

² New Orpheum Theatre (Sioux City, Iowa) opening night program.

³ Francis Feldkamp, "Huge Crowd Jams St. Louis Theater for Formal Opening," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, November 24, 1925.

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Orpheum Corporation. A year later, the new company struck a deal with the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) to form the Radio-Keith-Orpheum Corporation (RKO). RKO retained its interest in vaudeville programming but became best known for producing films with some of Hollywood's top box office stars of the 1930s.

According to newspaper accounts, Orpheum's arrangement with the St. Louis Theatre was a ten-year lease with an option to buy. RKO exercised that option in 1929, but its timing was unfortunate. The Great Depression forced theaters to reduce ticket prices, but promotion stunts and production remained major expenses. In 1932, for example, promotion for an aviator film brought an actual airplane into the St. Louis lobby while all of the ushers assumed pilot costumes.

The Depression finally shuttered the theater in 1932. Metropolitan Theatre Corporation (the original owners) re-acquired the St. Louis after foreclosure and turned over management to Fanchon & Marco, a stage show producer which would eventually control almost all of the city's major first-run houses and many of the neighborhood theaters.

Although the Depression caused havoc to payrolls and performances, the St. Louis continued its program of live performances longer than any theater in the city other than the Ambassador. Finally in March, 1934, Fanchon & Marco announced that all of the stage hands, musicians and chorus girls were given two weeks notice.⁴ Even with this cost-cutting measure, the theater closed a few months later. It remained closed until 1936.

The theater continued to show crowd-pleasing films for the next three decades. In 1950, management rekindled the vaudeville spirit with a run of the film "Square Dance Katy" accompanied by a program entertainers from the Grand Ole Opry (including Hank Williams).⁵ The fortunes of the theater took a turn for the worse, though, revealed through a Fanchon & Marco application to turn the theater into a television station in 1951⁶ (apparently not granted) and a five-month closure in 1952. This parallels a general decline in the theater district. Nonetheless, in 1965 the theater was doing well enough to install special 70 millimeter equipment for *The Sound of Music*, which would run for over a year and a half.

⁴ "St. Louis Theater Quits Stage Shows March 23," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, March 10, 1934.

⁵ "Radio Entertainers Please at St. Louis," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, June 13, 1950.

⁶ "Fanchon & Marco Asks TV Permit for St. Louis Theater," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 28, 1951.

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St. Louis Theatre
St. Louis [Independent City], Missouri

Meanwhile, in 1961 the St. Louis Symphony Society had received a \$500,000 gift, which was to be withdrawn if the Symphony did not purchase a permanent theater space for itself within five years. On a Friday afternoon in 1964, the Symphony was forced out of its regular performance space at Kiel Opera House by a visiting convention and ended up playing the St. Louis. Critics praised the temporary venue for its acoustics: "Inner voices that are often lost in the opera house sounded clearly and pianissimos were pleasantly heard. The members of the Symphony were unanimously pleased with the acoustical qualities as they achieved the sound of a truly first rate orchestra."⁷

By early 1966, reports reached the press that the Symphony was interested in purchasing the St. Louis. The deal was closed by the end of the year, and an ambitious \$2 million renovation began. The design team included architects Wedemeyer, Cernik & Corrubia (St. Louis) and acoustical consultant Cyril Harris of Columbia University. After reopening in 1968, the newly renamed Powell Symphony Hall earned universal praise from critics and fans of both music and architecture. Soloist Henryk Szeryng stated, "There is no doubt about this: Powell Hall is every single performer's dream."⁸ The Symphony Society continues to operate Powell Hall as the permanent home of the world-class St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

Architecture

While the programs presented at a vaudeville and movie house were critical to its success, the theater itself was a major selling point to audiences eager for escapism. In the words of promoter Marcus Loew, "We sell tickets to theatres, not movies."⁹ Author Barbara Stokes explains the appeal:

Deliberately-overdone, the purpose of these theatres was to attract and entertain large audiences. The theatre was part of the show – and every bit as entertaining as whatever appeared on stage or screen. . . . The advent of the lavish picture palaces guaranteed that patrons would be transported into fantasy realms and far-off exotic locales, regardless of what film was playing. Movie palaces showcased an astonishing world of art and luxury to a public eager to embrace it. Day after day, week after week, audiences

⁷ "Symphony Performs at St. Louis Theater," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, October 24 1964.

⁸ " 'Beautiful, Beautiful,' Says Guest Violinist of Powell Hall Here," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, November 13 1970.

⁹ Quoted in Barbara Stokes, *America Goes to the Movies* (Hollywood: National Association of Theatre Owners, 1993). 35.

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St. Louis Theatre
St. Louis [Independent City], Missouri

returned to experience these privileged realms of wealth and grandeur for the modest price of a movie ticket.¹⁰

The building constructed by David Sommers' Metropolitan Theatre Corporation was calculated to appeal to audiences seeking glamour in their surroundings as well as their entertainment. Incorporated in 1924, the Metropolitan Theatre Corporation included as one of its large shareholders Sam Koplal, president of the Koplal Construction Company (Sommers was also a partner in this company). Koplal already had experience building local theaters when he built the St. Louis, and would go on to construct the Ambassador Theatre the following year (NR 1983, demolished 1996). Sommers brought art treasures and antiques from Europe to furnish the theater. Most importantly, the prolific and prestigious Chicago firm Rapp & Rapp was hired to be the architect.

The Chicago partnership of brothers C. W. and George Rapp was one of the best-known designers of theaters in the nation. Their work was concentrated in Chicago, including the Uptown, Chicago, Tivoli, Picadilly, Oriental, and the Palace Theatres. Other examples of their designs include the Paramount Theaters in New York and Brooklyn, the Michigan Theatre in Detroit, Shea's Buffalo, and the Al Ringling Memorial Theatre in Baraboo, Wisconsin. George Rapp summarized the idea behind his lavish designs:

Watch the eyes of a child as it enters the portals of our great theatres and treads the pathway into fairyland. Watch the bright light in the eyes of the tired shopgirl who hurries noiselessly over carpets and sighs with satisfaction as she walks amid furnishings that once delighted the hearts of queens. See the toil-worn father whose dreams have never come true, and look inside his heart as he finds strength and rest within the theatre. There you have the answer to why motion picture theatres are so palatial. . . . Do not wonder, then, at the touches of Italian Renaissance, executed in glazed polychrome terra-cotta, or at the lobbies and foyers adorned with replicas of the precious masterpieces of another world, or at the imported marble wainscoting or the richly ornamented ceilings with motifs copied from master touches of Germany, France and Italy, or at the carved niches, the cloistered arcades, the depthless mirrors, and the great sweeping staircases. These are not impractical attempts at showing off. These are part of a celestial city – a cavern of many-colored jewels, where iridescent

¹⁰ Ibid. 36.

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St. Louis Theatre
St. Louis [Independent City], Missouri

lights and luxurious fittings heighten the expectation of pleasure. It is richness unabashed, but richness with a reason.¹¹

Depthless mirrors, a sweeping staircase, richly ornamented ceilings, and carved niches are indeed all part of the program of the St. Louis Theatre. The Rapps used a straightforward European decorative vocabulary to evoke French palaces and opera houses. The columns are classical, and the lavish relief sculpture confines itself to time-honored themes of the Western tradition (no elephants or dragons here!) According to the opening day program, inspiration for the theater was found in the opera house at Versailles and other models. The result was immodestly described by Orpheum as "the world's most beautiful theatre."

Even if this statement was corporate hyperbole, the St. Louis remains a theater of indisputable magnificence. It is also one of only a few local survivors of its type. At the close of the age of vaudeville and during the heyday of the movie palace, St. Louis boasted a number of palatial venues for the entertainment-minded public. Of these, only two remain: the Fox and the St. Louis. (The Orpheum also stands as a testament to the age of vaudeville prior to the ascendancy of the motion picture on the bill.) Many more theaters - the Missouri, Loews' State, the Rialto, the Grand Central, and most recently the Ambassador - have been demolished. The architectural significance of the St. Louis is enhanced by the relative rarity of its type.

Integrity

As described in Section 7, a number of changes accompanied the conversion of the St. Louis from movie palace to symphony hall. This change in use, however, required the essential preservation of most of the public spaces of the building. Most character-defining features remain intact. The most important features which remain are an almost completely intact exterior, auditorium and lobby. Removal of the "St. Louis" exterior sign, original marquee, and organ screens are the most significant changes, but none of these prevents the building from clearly conveying its historic significance. The St. Louis Theatre still boasts "richness with a reason," delighting new generations of concertgoers with its power to excite the imagination.

¹¹ Quoted in Ben Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats* (New York: Bramhall House, 1961). 136.

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St. Louis Theatre
St. Louis [Independent City], Missouri

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St. Louis Theatre
St. Louis [Independent City], Missouri

New Orpheum Theatre (Sioux City, Iowa) opening night program, 1927 ?

Rapp & Rapp. Original Plans for the St. Louis Theatre, 1924. Collection of Wedemeyer, Cernik & Corrubia, architects, St. Louis.

St. Louis Theatre opening night program, 1925. (Collection of St. Louis Public Library).

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- And -

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Including the following cited articles:

“ ‘Beautiful, Beautiful,’ Says Guest Violinist of Powell Hall Here.” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, November 13, 1970.

“Fanchon & Marco Asks TV Permit for St. Louis Theater.” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 28, 1951.

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St. Louis Theatre
St. Louis [Independent City], Missouri

Verbal Boundary Description

The St. Louis Theatre is located in the City of St. Louis, Missouri on an irregular lot at the southeast corner of Grand Boulevard and Delmar Boulevard in City Block 1062. Within the land division known as the Grand Prairie Common Fields, the lot measures 146 feet, 4 5/8 inches along Grand Boulevard, 183 feet, 10 7/8 inches along Delmar Boulevard, 185 feet, 7/8 inches along the east-west alley in City Block 1062, and 162 feet, 2 3/4 inches along a line parallel to and 124 feet west of the surveyed east line of the Grand Prairie Common Fields. Please see footprint map.

Boundary Justification

This is the property purchased by David Sommers in 1924 in order to construct the St. Louis Theatre. The building footprint occupies almost all of the lot.

St. Louis
Theatre

St. Louis
Theatre District
MO 63101
(IL WEST)

Eastings
741 070

Northings
4280 500

Zone 15



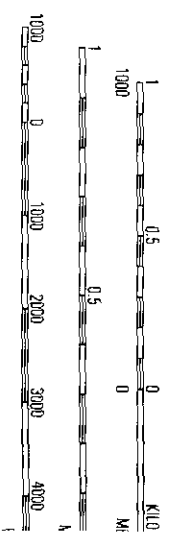
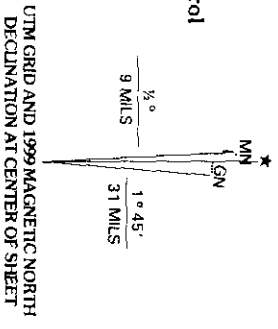
Produced by the United States Geological Survey

Topography compiled 1952. Planimetry derived from imagery taken 1993 and other sources. Photinspected using imagery dated 1998; no major culture or drainage changes observed. PLSS and survey control current as of 1954. Boundaries, other than corporate, verified 1999

North American Datum of 1983 (NAD 83). Projection and 1000-meter grid: Universal Transverse Mercator, zone 15
10 000-foot ticks: Illinois (west zone) and Missouri (east zone)
Coordinate Systems of 1983

North American Datum of 1927 (NAD 27) is shown by dashed corner ticks. The values of the shift between NAD 83 and NAD 27 for 7.5-minute intersections are obtainable from National Geodetic Survey NADCON software

Contours that conflict with revised planimetry are dashed
There may be private inholdings within the boundaries of the National or State reservations shown on this map



SCALE



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St. Louis Theatre
St Louis (Independent City), MO
L. J. 44C
11/2000
Landmarks Assoc. of St Louis
Camera facing NE
Photo 1



St Louis Theatre

St Louis (Independent City), MO

L. Josse

11/2000

Landmarks Assoc. of St. Louis

Camera facing SE

Photo 2



St Louis Theatre
St Louis (Independent City), MO

L. Josse

11/2000

Landmarks Assoc. of St. Louis

camera facing **E**

Photo 3



St Louis Theatre
St Louis (Independent City), Mo

L. Jesse

11/2000

Landmarks Assoc of St. Louis
Camera facing SE

Photo 4



St Louis Theatre

St. Louis (Independent City), MO

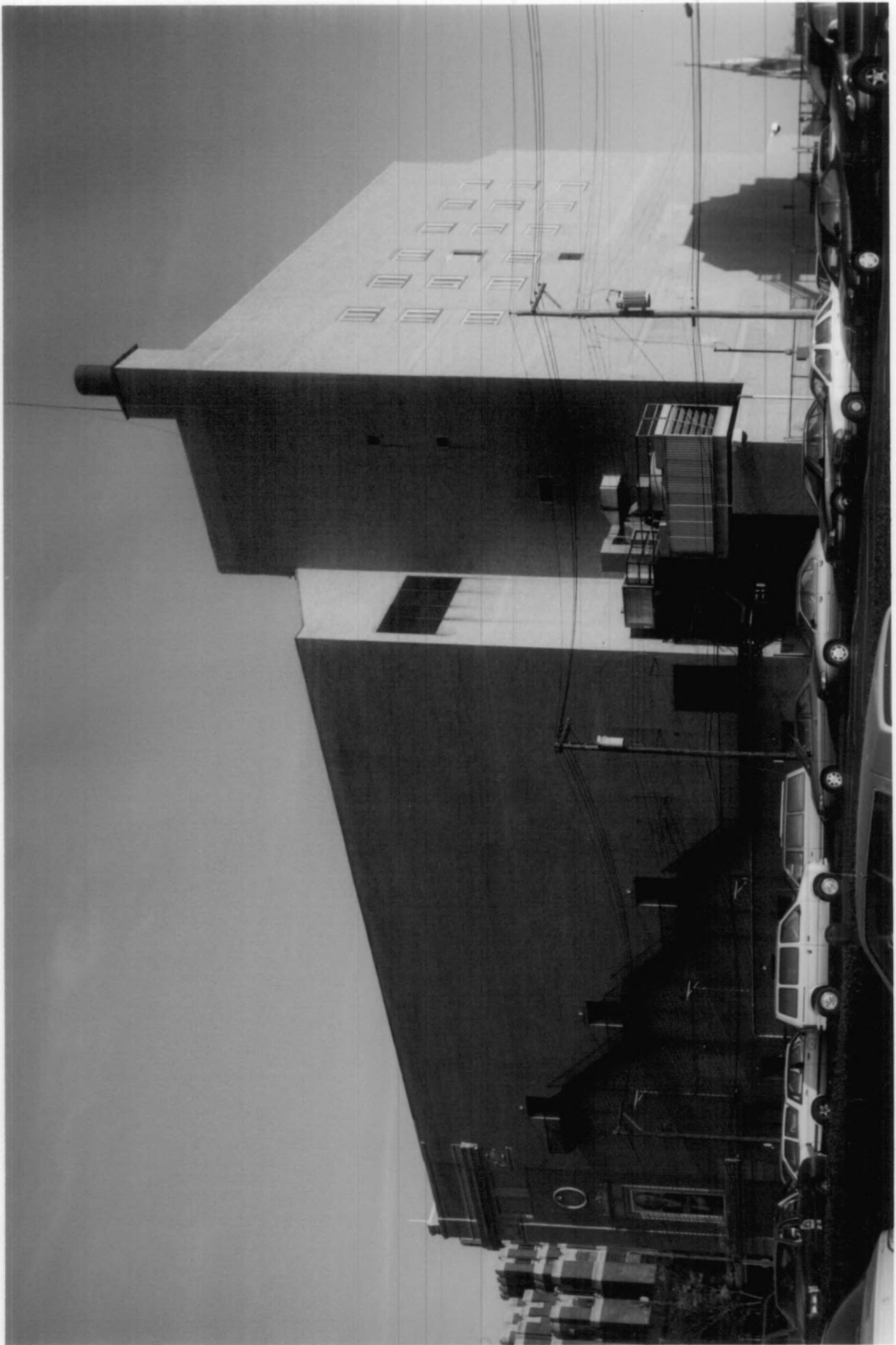
Lynn Josse

1/2000

Landmarks Assoc. of St. Louis

camera facing NW

Photo 5



St. Louis Theatre

St. Louis Bridge Club - City of St. Louis

© Sam Fertler 1998

St. Louis Symphony Society

Lobby camera footage

Photo 6



St. Louis Theatre
St. Louis Independent: CHY MD

© Sam Ferriter,

1/1/2000

St. Louis Symphony Society
Auditorium (see photo of
Photo #



St. Louis Theatre

St. Louis [Independent City], MO

© Sam Fentress, 11/2000

St. Louis Symphony Society

Auditorium, camera location

Photo 8



St Louis Theatre

St Louis [Independent City], MO

W. C. Persons

1933

Missouri Historical Society (used with permission)

Camera facing SE

Plate #9



St. Louis Theatre

St. Louis [Independent City]

photographer unknown.

date unknown (likely 1940s - pre-renovation)

St. Louis Symphony Society

Lobby, camera facing N

Photo 10



St. Louis Theatre

St. Louis [Independent City], MO

photographer unknown

date unknown (1925-1966 period)

St. Louis Symphony Society

Auditorium, camera facing SE

Photo 11

