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DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The architectural concepts of the Warnor (Pantages) Fresno Theatre, designed by theatre architect, Marcus Pritieca, are basically refinements of earlier theatres designed for Pantages, which provided for maximum flexibility in types of presentations.

Warnor's Theatre is an eclectic blend of Spanish Colonial Revival and Italian Renaissance Revival elements. A base-like proportion begins at the ground level with terra cotta detail at the store fronts along both sidewalk elevations. Terra Cotta is used for fluted pilasters which support the two-story window arcade above the base portion. Above the window arcade is a facade of variegated colored brick from the spring line of the arches resting on the terra cotta pilasters. Above the brick rests a terra cotta entablature which includes a red tile roof. A sectional view through the entablature reveals an approximate two-foot overhang supported by several ogee sections which terminate in a dental course and bead molding. Each flanking elevation along the main streets radiates from the corner, the location of a partial octagonal rusticated tower. The original margue was suspended at soffit height about ten feet out from the corner tower. For emphasis, the tower incorporated rustication in terra cotta to simulate cut stonework with mitered masonry joints. Further rustication in the tower includes arch shaped windows emphasized with a spandrel and side panels heavily enriched with Spanish geometric cartwheel motifs and organic ornament. The basic classical proportion also is incorporated in the tower which includes the base (servy ing as the theatre entrance), the shaft which includes the windows and entablature consisting of additional organic ornamentation delineated into a frieze between a heavy molding above the windows and the typical roof overhang described above. The tower is finally terminated with a lantern and cupola each roofed in the same red tile as above the walls of the main elevations.

A primary difficulty in theatre design involves proportioning the rather tall and "heavy" looking enclosure around the main auditorium into a treatment in scale and sympathetic to the neighboring environment while also displaying a sense of elegance appropriate to performing arts. This aspect is marvelously handled with the Warnor due to the two-story window arcade which is set out in front of the main auditorium construction. The envelope of the theatre rises over 30 feet above the arcade and is set back sufficiently as to appear like an elegant Spanish villa set into a courtyard outlined by the arcade mentioned above. The villa type composition of the main auditorium involves corners articulated by the use of terra cotta quoins. Similarly pilasters outset from the wall surface in terra cotta portray rustication through use of the mitered masonry effects which strongly contrasts with the walls between in a sand stucco finish. The entirety of the villa effect is made consonant with the remaining composition of the complex through use of red terra cotta tile roof lines and arch type windows supported from bassastrated balconies.

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Because of the talents and artistry of the individuals involved in the construction and operation of the Warnors Theatre and the respect this building has gained from the community of Fresno, we wish to nominate it to the National Register.

Unlike Europe, so few of the structures built decades age and devoted to cultural advancement here in the United States are preserved for the future. The private enterprise purchase of Warnors was a contribution to the reversal of this trend. An artist once performing at the theatre stopped during his act and urged the audience to take care of the building and not let it be leveled like the Fox Theatre in San Francisco where he lived. His sentiment is the most important factor in registering the building which is to insure its preservation.

Warnors defines a period of time in the early 1900's. It is a surviving example of the Vaudeville Era; -- a span of 20 years that touched the lives of people from the metropolitan cities to the smallest of farm towns. The architecture, the management and the performers connected with these theatre palaces all contributed to the social and historical evolution of entertainment in the United States.

"Vaudeville was a highly developed entertainment as well as a remarkable training ground for the theatre. Comedians, singers, jugglers, all sorts of performers who achieved distinction as actors in comedy, farce, musicals and even tragedy learned how to catch the attention of an audience, how to pace themselves, how to adapt themselves to crisis in this exigent school of the stage. Their stars formed a pool of talent from which the new mediums of radio and television drank thirstily." (Dimeglio, p. 15)

Alexander Pantages, one of the more prominent managers of vaudeville, was the theatre magnate who constructed the Warnors. Helping to set the tempo and tone of vaudeville, his profile played a significant role in Washington State history. An immigrant from Greece, he came to the U.S. and spent time in the Yukon. A legend goes that Klondike Kate loaned him \$24.00 to start a saloon. The money he earned working as a bartender and providing entertainment for the miners was brought back to Seattle where he purchased his first theatre. Before he retired, he owned 16 large theatres outright and controlled 40 more. All of the houses owned or operated by Pantages were designed by architect, B. Marcus Priteca.

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Throughout the composition, the basic classical architectural scale of Priteca is strongly apparent through use of a base, shaft, and entabliture type proportioning. No wall surfaces exist without proportioning between moldings and pilasters or termination into a larger mass.

The interior of the main auditorium is approximately a square plan with the volume of the room captured under a single ceiling dome. For acoustical reflection, the dome is flattened and supported on intersecting flattened arch ribs which in turn support a center octagon from which festive lighting from a wrought iron chandelier is suspended. All beams as well as the edge of the flattened dome are highlighted through cove lighting around the dome.

Interior wall compositions are created through the vertical and horizontal division of the wall into panels, Pilasters define the main division between the anti-proscenium and main auditorium walls. Basic classical proportion is created from the base, the travertine wall effect, and high wall frieze which surrounds the auditorium.

The painted high wall frieze was treated as an upper limit of the wall. It matches the ceiling ornamentation colors and establishes the ceiling as an element resting on the top of the wall above the frieze. The highly colorful frieze consists of painted stencil work bearing geometric diaper patterns between relief enrichment in the plaster at the center of the diaper patterns. A bead mold and smaller scaled molding terminate the frieze against the ceiling surface.

Between the perimeter of the main ceiling and the spring of the center dome, plaster enrichment highlighted in gold leaf provides panels from which are suspended small lighting fixtures.

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Other interest in the interior composition includes the balcony fron rail, the aisle arcade at the orchestra level and the proscenium arch. The railing at the balcony front row is located to allow both the distance from the curtain line, radius of curvature, and sectional profile to regulate acoustical reflections in a way that does not "bounce" the sound back to the performer. In addition to these requirements, ornamentation of the fascia is accomplished through break up into enriched plaster panel compositions which include bundle-swag ornaments.

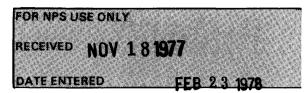
Visually supporting the balcony and side exits, while creating a side aisle arcade are a series of arches executed in plaster on the inside edge of the aisle adjacent to the ends of the seat rows. This "side aisle effect" is a stylistic element with Spanish architecture.

The proscenium arch frames the opening with a rope molding and wrought iron grating effect. Flanking the arch on each side are large "travertine-effect" pilasters which support a braid corbeled arch. The anti-proscenium is proportioned as a travertine wall with an ornamental portal as the fron side exit and a lavishly ornamented balcony in the Churrigueresque style as inspired by the Palace of St. Elmo, Seville, (1700).

The general balcony configuration is the result of an effort to avoid patrons climbing a greater distance than necessary prior to reaching their particular balcony seat location. The system utilized a wide balcony crossover (or "wide aisle") which serves aisles both above and below the crossover. The total climb by patrons therefore, from the entrance foyer is divided between two types of stairways: first, from the entrance lobby to the mezzanine lobby where restrooms and other public facilities are located and where the elevation matched the above mentioned crossover aisle and second, stairs from the wide aisle up or down to the desired seat location on the balcony. It is notable that the balcony steepness in the Warnors thetre is reduced considerably under balconies of other theatres built in the same period of design.

With the exception of the addition of a new marque, the Theatre retains its original appearance to a remarkable degree.

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These two men, Pantages and Priteca, came to Fresno when it was still essentially a desert and invested money into one of the finest of the 17 theatres they built. Their plans were for the theatre to be equal to any other in the state. The Fresno house was # 42 in the chain with the Hollywood Pantages being the last.

Alexander personally directed the entire chain in all its complexities, including acquisition, building construction and operation of amusements presented. He was familiar with every act booked on the entire circuit, securing the best of unequalled vaudeville to play in all his houses.

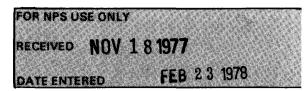
From the time he borrowed from Klondike Kate in Dawson, Mr. Pantages was noted for dealing fairly with others. He was viewed by his head usher as "a fine man to work for." One who commanded loyalty because he was "absolutely square and a true friend." His word was bond. Pantages sat in a box and studied the audience reaction to the acts and made a point of mingling with the crowd after the show. One writer pronounced him best showman in the theatre because of his study of crowds and his use of psychology. (Dimegliop, 27)

Personal architect to Mr. Pantages was Mr. Benjamin Marcus Priteca. "Mr. Architect" of Seattle is what Robert Durham, former national president of the American Institute of Architects called him. Represented for sound theatre inventions including historical engineering inventions, 'Uncle Benny' (another affectionate nickname), considered himself "just an old vaudeville architect." Many regarded him one of the great theatre architects in this country. Born and raised in Scotland, like Pantages he left his home at an early age. He moved to Seattle after becoming an architect. The old Palomar theatre in downtown Seattle where his offices were for 50 years was aimed, he said, at the clientel Pantages wanted to reach,:"Those who were hungry for entertainment but who lacked the money." He stayed in Seattle until he died at the age of 81.

As a "Vaudeville Architect" Benny was a devotee of the old style theatre interior -- complete with graceful curving balconies, sloping floors and good sight lines to see the stage from every seat in the house. "Seeing is hearing", he said, in partial explanation of his accoustical talents.

In all, Benny had designed 60 major theatres and done 160 minor theatre jobs from Vancouver B.C. to Winnepeg, Manitoba and Memphis, Tennessee to Los Angeles, California. Such buildings were the Orpheum, Coliseum, Palomar and Paramount theatres in Washington and the Hollywood Pantages in Los Angeles, where the Academy Awards were held for years. Many of his most striking theatres still stand today. In addition, he once designed a body for the locomotive automobile. And he created an angled grille and the first angled windshield for the Paige car, forerunner to the more famous Graham Paige. He also worked on Long Acres racetrack in Washington. Marcus is a Fellow in the American Institute of Architects. He loved students of architecture and he left a lot of friends whose professional practices have geen greatly influenced by him.

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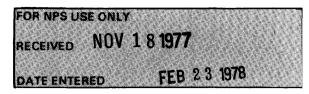
Marcus Priteca is survived by a legacy of his lifetimes work. At the Warnors in Fresno, he utilized many of his engineering inventions in design and layout of the building. He and Alex Pantages employed the skills of other artists and engineers. With them were, Pantages' son Rodney, General Manager; S.E. Sonnischen, assistant to Mr. Priteca; Ears B. Newcomb, engineer in charge of construction; Cass P. Hayes, chief electrical expert for the Pantages circuit; Leo Cavanaugh, assistant engineer in charge of the cooling plant installation; G.O. Davis in charge of house lighting; J.B. Smeraldi, in charge of the interior decorations; and Matt Summers of Fresno, in charge of ornamental plaster work. These men a ded the excellency of detail work to the theatre. Central vacuuming, central heating and cooling, central fire with sprinklers and hydraulic water elevators were all a luxury in the late 20's, yet they were part of the initial construction. Acoustically, there is not a dead spot in the entire house. Artists came even from Italy to handpaint the ceiling.

Other outstanding individuals associated with the theatre were the Warner Brothers. They purchased the theatre a year after it opened in 1929 and operated it until the early 1960's. They chose Fresno, in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley as the second city on the entire coast in which to establish a Warner Brothers theatre to expand their exhibition motion picture industry. (The theatre was originally the Pantages, in 1928. When the Warners bought it in 1929 it was changed to Warners. And later in the 1960's to again signify a turnover in management, the "E" in Warners was changed to "O". The present owner will retain the Warnors name.)

Warner Brothers opened the theatre on the third anniversary of Vitaphone, the pioneer talking and singing motion picture system launched by them in 1926. On August 31, 1929 they staged one of the most elaborate of their premiere showings in the Fresno house. The largest number of screen celebrities that ever left Hollywood in that age to participate in celebrating a new brand of entertainment.

Introduction of Vitaphone to the motion picture industry then, marked the most prominent landmark in the entire history of films. Since a large part of their sound audience was captured by network radio, the Warner industry worked to investigate and develop color, the third dimension and enlarged screen screen, steps increasing the quality and ramifications of screen entertainment. They advanced many more techniques in the movie industry and successfully operated theatres all over the U.S. Because of all the new processes needed to make films, they generated a wealth of new business talent and employ within the industry; sound engineers, directors, artists, writers, mechanical geniuses and executive, marketing and management talent. They also brought Cinemascope to the screen, a three dimensional film process installed at the Fresno theatre in the early 60's..It was removed when the present owners moved into the building in 1973.

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As in vaudeville, the Warners were gratified that they could bring the greatest artists of the day to large cities and small hamlets for everyone to enjoy. The presence of sound films, television and radio however, jointly affected the decline and fall of vaudeville.

Another product of the dignity and worth of the Fresno Warnors is the unique installation of the house theatre pipe organ. It was built by Morgan Organ Company of Van Nuys, California. They were a major builder of theatrical organs. Installed when the theatre was built in 1929, the historic 14 rank, 1,035 pipe organ was the last one built by the company. The 4 board console contains 720 keys, pedals and combination pistons. Only a few of its kind were made, so it is actually the only one with its particular specifications and outstanding voicings in existence today. A duplicate organ burned in the Los Angeles theatre in which it was housed.

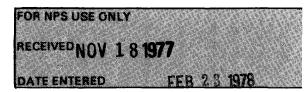
Originally installed for the purpose of sound accompaniment to the silent movies, this instrument includes all sound effects, all percussion instruments, bells, sirens, bird calls, etc. Most theatre pipe organ installations have the pipes mounted to the left and right of the front stage but, the original owner Alex Pantages' idea was to locate the pipes under the stage and have the tone emanate from the orchestra pit. Pantages wanted to cut the cost and the worry of an entire orchestra employ. This single design feature however, characterizes the unique sensation in listening afforded by the organ. Like a symphony orchestra, it also reproduces wind and string instruments. A great deal of the organ's majestic quality is due to not only the installation procedure, but to the superior acoustics of the building as well.

The organ has been used intermittently over they years. For awhile, it was used for late night radio shows when organ concerts were presented from the theatre. It was also used during intermission at the movies. It has been completely restored and put in its original condition. Recently, it has been used in musical performances, special guest showings and benefits for local groups.

There are an estimated 400 pipe organs which still remain of the 8,000 that were once built. Purists interested in these organs feel that such wind instruments should be kept only in theatres. But there are fewer and fewer theatres that want to bear the expense of maintaining an organ.

Warnors theatre is very much a part of downtown Fresno. It is located at the north end of the Mall. (See picture #2.) Since most development in Fresno until recently has been in the direction of spreading out, our mayor Dan Whitehurst and the council are concerned in redirecting the flow into renewal of the downtown area. The city isn't merely a building complex but a result of a mosaic of human activity. Current planning is focused on the revitalization of central Fresno. Guidelines for preservation are being used for the maintenance of existing structures.

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The City of Fresno was going to purchase the Warnors for use as a performing arts center but, there were not enough public funds. The attainment of this goal has been left to the present owners. The concern of the city and the private sector are for saving the building not only for its historic value but also for its use in cultural events.

The Warnors theatre is a tribute to the theatre mogul and the architect who both made significant contributions to the theatres in design and utility of space for public use. It is devoted to the preservation of artistry unmatched by few buildings constructed today.

Restoration, preservation and maintenance of the site will always be active concerns for the owners. The entire property of Warnors will be kept up for the benefit of the existing community of Fresno and for future generations. The adjoining office spaces are being leased out to local business people. Future plans for the ballroom include a restaurant and a small scale entertainment facility.

Because of its aesthetic merit and superb acoustical surroundings, Warnors will promise many heightened cultural experiences. Activity in the building will also provide a stimulus for the downtown economy, support for the redevelopment of central Fresno and enrichment for cultural arts.

Programs to date and for the future have listed musical and theatrical performances, lectures and educational series, tours and a program for local school children and special event fundraising for charitable causes. Live entertainment ... is scheduled in the building every month. The owners and the management will be ever increasingly dedicated to the presentation of the finest in performing arts.

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