

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

440

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 National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. 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.

RECEIVED 2280

JUN - 5 2015

Nat. Register of Historic Places
National Park Service

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Ely State Theater
Other names/site number: _____
Name of related multiple property listing:
N/A
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. Location

Street & number: 234 East Sheridan Street
City or town: Ely State: MN County: 137 Saint Louis
Not For Publication: N/A Vicinity: N/A

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

national statewide local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

A B C D

| | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| <u>Barbara Howard</u> Signature of certifying official/Title: Barbara Mitchell Howard, Deputy SHPO, MNHS | <u>May 26, 2015</u> Date |
| _____ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government | |

| | |
|---|----------------------|
| In my opinion, the property <input type="checkbox"/> meets <input type="checkbox"/> does not meet the National Register criteria. | |
| _____ Signature of commenting official: | _____ Date |
| _____ Title : | |
| _____ State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government | |

Ely State Theater
Name of Property

Saint Louis County, MN
County and State

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:)

for Edson H. Beall *7.21.15*
Signature of the 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

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

| Contributing | Noncontributing | |
|-----------------|-----------------|------------|
| <u>1</u> | <u>0</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 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/Theater

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

VACANT/NOT IN USE

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

MODERN MOVEMENT/Moderne

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: foundation: CONCRETE
walls: BRICK; STONE/Limestone
other: METAL

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

See continuation sheet.

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Narrative Description

See continuation sheet.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

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

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

Criteria Considerations

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

- A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B. Removed from its original location
- C. A birthplace or grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions.)

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1936

Significant Dates

1936

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

LIEBENBERG AND KAPLAN (architect)
J. N. RAUTIO BUILDERS (contractor)

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

See continuation sheet.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

See continuation sheet.

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9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)

See continuation sheet.

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 # _____
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository: Northwestern Architectural Archives, Elmer L. Andersen Library,
University of Minnesota-Minneapolis

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): SL-ELC-007

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

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Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 47.903139° | Longitude: -91.862881° |
| 2. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 3. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 4. Latitude: | Longitude: |

Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or NAD 1983

- | | | |
|----------|----------|-----------|
| 1. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 2. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 3. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 4. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

Lots Nine (9) and Ten (10), Block Nine (9), Ely, Saint Louis County, Minnesota.

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Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

These boundaries encompass the property with which the building has historically been associated since the time of its construction.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Charlene Roise, President and Architectural Historian
organization: Hess, Roise and Company
street & number: 100 North First Street
city or town: Minneapolis state: MN zip code: 55401
e-mail roise@hessroise.com
telephone: 612-338-1987
date: March 9, 2015

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

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Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

See continuation sheet.

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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DESCRIPTION

Summary

The State Theater in Ely, Minnesota, opened in 1936 on Sheridan Street, one of the community's primary transportation corridors. The two-story structure exemplifies the work of Minneapolis architects Liebenberg and Kaplan, the region's premiere theater designers during that period. A well-preserved example of the Streamline Moderne style, the theater displays very good integrity on the exterior, retaining a classic projecting marquee. The architectural character is reinforced on the interior by the zigzag motif of the lobby's terrazzo floor and the distinctive light fixtures in the auditorium. The lobby, foyer, auditorium, and stage exhibit good integrity, despite water infiltration that has deteriorated the ceiling and acoustic-tile wall cladding in the auditorium.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

Exterior

The State Theater in Ely, Minnesota, is a well-preserved example of the Streamline Moderne style, a form of Art Deco popular in the 1930s. The theater is located on the south side of East Sheridan, one lot west of the corner of Third Avenue. The two-story, 50-foot by 110-foot theater is abutted by two-story buildings on the corner lot and the lot to the west, creating a solid streetscape that is characteristic of Ely's commercial district (Photographs 2 and 4).

Unlike its neighbors, which are vernacular in design, the theater is a stylish exemplar of the Streamline Moderne. The tripartite front facade (Photographs 1–4, 15) is essentially symmetrical, with the two side sections faced with light-brown brick and the center section clad with Bedford limestone. The stepped parapet of the center section holds three windows and stands higher than the adjacent parapet, serving as a backdrop for a vertical blade sign rising from the canopy of the marquee above the central entrance. Both faces of the blade sign have metal channel letters, once outfitted with neon, that read "State." Metal trim projecting from the base of the blade is scalloped on the sides and stepped in the front.

The front of the canopy also has channel letters reading "State." This section of the canopy was damaged by a truck at some point. It was probably at this time that ornamentation on the corners of the canopy were removed. Most of the cladding on the underside of the canopy is no longer extant, exposing the structure. Letter boards are on the slightly angled sides of the canopy. Horizontal bands of metal and perhaps wood extend from the letter boards to the edges of the facade. Courses of stone cross the brick sections of the second floor near the sills and lintels of the two windows on each side. Panels of chevron brick ornament the parapet above the windows, which is capped with concrete coping. Similar chevron panels are below the windows. All seven of the second-floor windows are single pane; the original windows were double-hung sash.

Another letter board is tucked beneath the base of the marquee, just above the main entrance. The original entry comprised a central ticket booth with a pair of doors with porthole windows on each side. Today, three doors with porthole windows are beneath the marquee. Two appear to be the originals to the right (west) of the ticket booth, with one in the ticket booth's former location in the middle of the entry bay; the area to the east has been filled in with wood paneling and a window. Poster displays

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flank the entryway. Two more displays were in openings in the brick facade east of the entry and one was to the west; all now hold wood panels. These openings, along with a doorway near the west edge of the facade, are connected by three bands of slightly projecting brick.

Adjacent buildings cover much of the theater's east and west exterior walls (Photographs 5 and 6). Visible sections, as well as the rear (south) facade, are a mix of light orange and light red brick. There are several doors and utility conduits on the rear facade, which edges an alley. Improper roof drainage had greatly damaged the brick on the southeast and southwest corners, exposing the building's clay-tile structure; this area was recently repaired. The lower section of the southeast corner has been patched with concrete blocks.

The roof over the auditorium has a flat section at its apex with sloped edges to the east and west. The roof had been in very poor condition for a number of years, resulting in substantial leakage on the interior, but it was recently replaced. The roof over the apartment at the front of the building is flat.

Interior

On the interior, the space progresses from the lobby to the foyer to the auditorium. The theater's front doors open into the lobby. The slightly sloped terrazzo floor features a zigzag pattern (Photograph 7). Display panels that appear to be original are on the east and west walls (Photographs 7, 8, and 16). A concession stand is not original. One of the original brushed aluminum light fixtures remains (Photograph 8). A door to a manager's office is in the east wall.

Two openings in the south wall—one now blocked by the concession stand—connect with a shallow foyer (Photograph 9). A rectilinear cove in the ceiling provided indirect lighting. Doors at the east and west ends of the foyer's north wall access restrooms, and a stairway accessed from an opening in the west wall leads to the projection room above the foyer. The walls and ceilings in the lobby and foyer are plastered.

In the foyer's south wall, original double doors, each with a single porthole, lead into the auditorium (Photographs 10–13, 17). The two slightly recessed aisles in the sloped concrete floor once held carpet runners. Some of the original seating with Art Moderne endcaps is extant, but it has been removed to facilitate the building's rehabilitation. The owner plans to return at least some of this seating to the auditorium. Other modern seating that had been installed has been removed. A series of large, geometrical light fixtures at the top of the east and west walls extend to the ceiling (Photograph 13). Light fixtures of a different design are in angled bays flanking the stage at the south end of the auditorium (Photograph 11). Each of the bays holds an opening to a corridor that leads to an exit at the rear of the building. The corridors also provide access to the stage and to stairs to a partial basement with a mechanical room. A movie screen fills the stage opening.

The auditorium's walls and ceiling were originally covered with Celotex tile. Because of the water infiltration due to the failing roof, however, many of the tiles, as well as the ceiling insulation, became dislodged and fell to the floor. These tiles, insulation, seating upholstery, and most surfaces on the interior were covered with mold and have been removed. Regardless, the space retains good design integrity, and the tiles will be replaced when the building is renovated.

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The westernmost doorway on the front facade holds a recessed door to a stairway that provides access to a second-floor apartment (Photograph 14). The apartment has a living room, dining room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and a bathroom, with a corridor connecting most of the rooms. The configuration of the space appears to be essentially the original and some original doors remain, but historic finishes in the apartment and stair hall have been covered or replaced by modern paneling, dropped ceilings, carpeting, tile, and other non-historic materials.

INTEGRITY

Because the Ely State Theater has not been moved, it retains integrity of **location**. The marquee and decorative brickwork have been maintained on the exterior, and the interior, despite water damage, retains many original finishes and ornamentation as well as its original spatial configuration. The retention of all these features gives the building integrity of **materials, design, and workmanship**.

Sheridan Street remains one of Ely's primary commercial streets, and the theater's marquee is a prominent landmark on that corridor. The facades of the neighboring buildings have been altered, but their scale is intact, maintaining the early twentieth-century small-town commercial setting. Serving as a theater for more than seven decades, the building still has the marquee and interior spaces that provide an association with its original design and use. While the theater is currently vacant, a new owner has plans to renovate and reopen it. As a result, the Ely State Theater has integrity of **setting, feeling, and association**.

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Ely State Theater is locally significant under **Criterion C** in the area of **Architecture** as an important small-town example of the work of Liebenberg and Kaplan, the most prominent theater architects of the Upper Midwest during the golden age of movies prior to World War II. The firm began designing theaters in the 1920s, going through an experimental period utilizing a variety of styles until the mid-1930s. At that point, Art Deco/Streamline Moderne became the single style of choice, and Liebenberg and Kaplan produced a delightful collection of theaters using this form in a multitude of creative iterations. Designed in 1935-1936 and opened in September of the latter year, the Ely State Theater dates from the apex of that era. Displaying very good integrity, the State epitomizes the firm's small-town theater commissions. Its period of significance is 1936, the year that the theater opened.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least one paragraph for each area of significance.)

Ely, "Capital of the Vermilion Range"

The State Theater is located in the city of Ely in northeastern Minnesota. With a population of about 3,500, the community is associated with the Vermilion Range, one of three major iron ore deposits that catalyzed the settlement of northern Minnesota in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Collectively with the Mesabi and Cuyuna ranges, which are to the west and south, the region is known simply as the Iron Range. The Vermilion ore was the first to be exploited, with a mine opening in Tower, about twenty miles from Ely, in the 1880s. Tower and Ely became the earliest towns on that range. Logging of the valuable pine forests brought more people to the area. The land, both before and after it was cleared, was also sought by immigrant farmers, particularly those coming from northern and central Europe.¹

Like other fledgling towns in the area, Ely attracted businesses to support local needs. Three long, parallel, commercial streets were on an east-west alignment, connected by avenues running north-south. Camp Street, the northernmost, was the least developed. Chapman Street, the southernmost, had more commercial activity and had attracted a string of government buildings by the early twentieth century, but it was truncated to the east by Whiteside Park. Between Camp and Chapman was Sheridan Street, which carried the main route through town and was the most commercialized.²

The economy of the community was subject to the vagaries of the mining industry and advances in mining technology. As one study noted, "From 1889 to 1902, ore production in the area increased by nearly 250 percent with almost no change in the number of mine employees. . . . From 1917 to 1929 output remained relatively constant but the number of miners declined by more than half." At least the industry remained strong, with Minnesota providing about half the iron ore produced in the United States from the mid-1910s through the 1920s, some 60 to 70 million tons per year. The Great Depression struck a significant blow, with production plummeting in 1932 to under 10 million tons. After

¹ Timothy L. Smith, "Factors Affecting the Social Development of Iron Range Communities," typescript. n.d., 1. http://www.ihrc.umn.edu/research/projects/07-12/IHRChistory/Timothy%20Smith-Factors/TSmith_Factors.pdf.

² Ibid., 16-17.

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that low point, it began to recover throughout most of that decade.³

To survive the swings of the ore industry, as well as the virtual disappearance of the lumber industry after the virgin forest was cut over, communities had to diversify. The citizens of Ely turned to a more sustainable way to exploit the surrounding natural resources: tourism. By the mid-twentieth century, the lumbering industry had moved on and Ely had diversified to reduce the impact of the economic cycles of the mining industry. The *WPA Guide to the Minnesota Arrowhead Country*, published in 1941, called it the "Gate to the Sportman's Eden." The guide noted that "iron-ore mining is still the main industry," but "Ely in recent years has developed an extensive tourist trade. Fishermen, hunters, and canoeists, starting into the Superior National Forest, use Ely as a base of supplies. Its many resorts offer accommodations at a wide range of prices."⁴

Movies Move In

Wilderness recreation was one way that Americans spent their growing leisure time as the twentieth century progressed. They also sought out more passive entertainment, including movies. The movie industry and the technology that supported it went through rapid transformation beginning in the late nineteenth century with the introduction of commercially viable motion picture systems. Movies quickly became ingrained in American culture. One source estimated that by 1910-1911, some 10 million people were attending movies, and "going to movies became a weekly habit for many families." By 1926, "there were an estimated twenty thousand theaters with a total seating capacity of eighteen million and annual box office revenue calculated at \$750 million."⁵ The introduction of sound in the late 1920s further propelled the popularity of movies. The industry rushed to embrace talkies, and silent films were no longer produced by the end of 1930.⁶

There were a couple of movie venues in Ely in the first decades of the twentieth century: a silent movie theater and the Opera House, which offered movies in a facility not originally designed for that function. On April 12, 1935, a headline in the *Ely Miner* announced: "Two Theaters to Be Built Here; Work on One Will Start Now." The first project to break ground was an ambitious mixed-use development on Chapman Street: "A four-story structure, the building will house a 900-seat motion picture theatre, two ground floor stores, six apartments and 15 office rooms." The newspaper added: "Blueprints of the building call for a front in modernistic design of black and white art stone. An electrically lighted canopy will run the full width of the front with provisions for the advertising of the theatre's program in light. A huge three-sided neon sign with 'Ely,' which will be the new theater's name, [will be] on both sides and the front." The auditorium apparently featured an "atmospheric" design, which was popular at the time:

³ Joseph Stipanovich, "The Report of the Iron Range Historical-Cultural Survey," 1979, 14, available at Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, Saint Paul; Chester Jay Proshan, "Eastern European Jewish Immigrants and Their Children on the Minnesota Iron Range, 1890s-1980s" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1998), 1:37, 52.

⁴ *The WPA Guide to the Minnesota Arrowhead Country* (1941; repr., Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 120-121.

⁵ Suzanne Mary Donahue, *American Film Distribution: The Changing Marketplace* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1987), 5-10, 21.

⁶ Douglas Gomery, "The Coming of Sound: Technological Change in the American Film Industry," in *The American Film Industry*, rev. ed., ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 229.

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"Modernistic decorations and lighting in the theatre will be climaxed with a design patterned after the sky." The identity of the architect was not mentioned, but it was apparently Liebenberg and Kaplan. The developers were E. J. and E. W. Baehr, brothers living in Minneapolis and Bemidji, respectively. The men had experience in the industry, with existing theater operations in Bemidji and International Falls. They hoped to open the theater in mid-June, before construction on the rest of the building was entirely completed.⁷

The start on construction of the other theater, which was being developed by Archie Swanson, was unknown. Swanson was the manager of the Opera House, and the new facility was proposed for a nearby site on First Avenue. The newspaper reported that "Mr. Swanson and his associates have been planning the new building for some time to accommodate the growing popularity of motion pictures," with seating for at least six hundred, larger than the Opera House. Swanson said that "the new building will house only the theatre . . . since there is no apparent need of additional office [or] store space here." Construction was anticipated to start as soon as the plans were completed.⁸

Movie Theater Mavens: Liebenberg and Kaplan

Anticipating that the new Ely Theater would be tough competition, Swanson hired the state's most prominent theater architects, Liebenberg and Kaplan, to design the State Theater. Jack Liebenberg was the firm's creative genius. Of German-Jewish heritage, Liebenberg was born in Milwaukee in 1893. In 1913, he enrolled in the first class of a new architectural program at the University of Minnesota, graduating in 1916. He went on to pursue graduate studies at Harvard with the support of a McKim fellowship. Thanks to his talent, he received the Prix de Rome, which should have brought him to Europe to study, but World War I thwarted those plans. Instead, he served in the Army Air Force, then returned to teach at the University of Minnesota. He had soon set up a private architectural practice with a former student—and then brother-in-law—Seeman Kaplan, who managed the engineering and financial side of the business.⁹

Seeman Kaplan's brother, Abe, was in the theater business with partner Louis Rubenstein. In 1923, the theater operators hired Liebenberg and Kaplan to design the Arion Theater in Northeast Minneapolis, which launched the firm's career in theater design. Their business grew rapidly after the introduction of talking pictures in the late 1920s, which brought many commissions for new and remodeled theaters. In 1928, the firm designed Minneapolis's first theater specifically designed for movies with sound, the Granada (known more recently as the Suburban World). An "Atmospheric" theater, the interior evoked the setting of an exotic courtyard in a Spanish city, complete with a night sky.¹⁰

⁷ "Two Theaters to Be Built Here; Work on One Will Start Now," *Ely Miner*, April 12, 1935. The Baehr brothers apparently continued to expand their holdings, opening the Brainerd Theater in 1938. Like the Ely Theater, it included stores, office space, and apartment. Designed by Liebenberg and Kaplan, it was demolished in 1999. (Cinema Treasures website, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/14801>, accessed October 12, 2014).

⁸ "Two Theaters to Be Built Here."

⁹ Herbert Scherer, "Tickets to Fantasy: The Little Theater around the Corner," *Hennepin County History*, Fall 1987, 11-15; David Wood, "He Designed Cathedrals for the Cinema," *Minnesota* (published by the University of Minnesota), April 1982, 13-17; Alan Lathrop, "Liebenberg and Kaplan," *Architecture Minnesota*, November-December 1992, 46-47.

¹⁰ Wood, "He Designed Cathedrals"; Dave Kinney, *Twin Cities Picture Show: A Century of Moviegoing* (Saint Paul:

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A study of the firm's work notes that "the period between 1928 and 1934 was a transitional one for Liebenberg, as it was for theater design in general. Elements from eclectic theater design of the twenties and newer Deco motifs of the early thirties were combined." Soon, however, a new trend was firmly ensconced: "It was during the latter half of the 1930s that structures designed by Liebenberg and Kaplan took on the form that most people think of when they visualize a movie theater."¹¹

Liebenberg and Kaplan designed over two hundred theaters throughout the Midwest. Each was a community icon during the heyday of movies prior to World War II.¹² As art history scholar Lyndel King observed: "In the Upper Midwest, it was often Jack Liebenberg's movie theater designs that represented the most up-to-date architecture in town. His energetic inventiveness provided images that molded the consciousness of people living not only in large cities, but also in small towns everywhere. Liebenberg's 'Marquee on Main Street' often served as a focal point for the town, both visually and socially."¹³

Historian Herbert Scherer added: "Remembered as the golden age of motion pictures, the 1930s are equally important as the period of greatest achievement in Art Deco theater design. The dynamic cohesiveness that characterized the style at its best is epitomized in the imaginative designs of Jack Liebenberg. His sketches and renderings, while serving to document a fascinating era in the history of movie theater design, are capable of standing on their own as a continuing source of visual delight."¹⁴

State of the Art

By April 1935, Swanson had traveled to Minneapolis to discuss the plans with Liebenberg and Kaplan. "Every feature of the building is being planned with the one aim of providing Ely motion picture fans with the best entertainment in the most comfortable manner," the *Daily Miner* reported. Liebenberg and Kaplan apparently started working on plans for the Ely "Rio" Theater in March 1935. A color-pencil sketch from that month showed the prototype of what became the State. While the general proportions of the building and the porthole windows on the front doors are similar to what was built, the first concept appears to have black and white tile cladding and no fenestration. Floor plans, sections, and another front elevation are dated May 31, 1935. In this version, there is not an apartment above the lobby, and the capacity of the auditorium was 450. By October and November 1935, renderings and plans closely resembled what was built, although revisions continued through at least June 1936. In a revised detail of the sign dated September 14, 1936, the theater is finally called the State.¹⁵

Thus despite the developer's hope to begin construction on the State Theater as soon as possible after

Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), 74.

¹¹ Herbert Scherer, *Marquee on Main Street: Jack Liebenberg's Movie Theaters, 1928-1941*, catalog for exhibit at the University Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, March 22-April 25, 1982, pages 13-29.

¹² Liebenberg and Kaplan's papers are at the Northwest Architectural Archives, Elmer L. Andersen Library, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. They are hereafter cited as Liebenberg and Kaplan Collection.

¹³ Lyndel King, introduction to *Marquee on Main Street: Jack Liebenberg's Movie Theaters, 1928-1941*, catalog for exhibit at the University Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, March 22-April 25, 1982, page 4.

¹⁴ Scherer, *Marquee on Main Street*, 29.

¹⁵ Liebenberg and Kaplan Collection. See also "Two Theaters to Be Built Here."

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Ely State Theater

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the announcement in April 1935, its opening night did not occur for more than a year. The reason for the delay is not known. In the meantime, the Opera House continued to screen films, offering competition to the newly minted Ely Theater. Advertisements in the *Ely Miner* document the variety and number of films that these establishments offered. As was typical during the period, the length of a run for a movie was very short. In the first week of January 1936, for example, the Ely Theater had *Folies Bergere* (Maurice Chevalier, Merele Oberon, and Ann Sothern, 1935) on Friday and Saturday; a midnight showing of *Love Me Forever* (Grace Moore, 1935) on Saturday, repeated in the evening on Sunday and Monday; *The Cowboy Millionaire* (George O'Brien, 1935) on Tuesday, with a "bargain day" admission of 15 cents; and *Charlie Chan in Shanghai* (Warner Oland, 1935) on Wednesday and Thursday. While the Ely Theater touted its "courteous, efficient attendants" and ran advertisements on page 1 of the *Miner*, the ads for the Opera House were on page 5 and seemed to target a more budget-conscious audience, featuring two tiers of tickets, presumably based on seat location, priced as low as 10 cents. At the beginning of 1936, a week's rotation included *Another Face* (Wallace Ford, Allan Hale, and Phyllis Brooks, 1935), *The Last Outpost* (Cary Grant and Claude Rains, and Gertrude Michael, 1935), and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Fredric March, 1931). While both theaters probably presented newsreels, serials, and other short features, only the Opera House advertised information on these short films.¹⁶

It was not until June 25, 1936, that the *Ely Miner* announced: "Swanson Brothers Launch Construction of New Theater." Some progress had already been made by the contractor, J. N. Rautio Builders, by the time the article was written: "The trenches for the foundations have been completed and work has begun on the excavation for the basement at the rear of the building." The partial basement would "house the heating plant [and] the air changing and purifying machinery." The article described the design of the two-story, 50-foot by 110-foot building based on a review of Liebenberg and Kaplan's drawings:

They show a modern structure of a prepossessing outside appearance and a commodious interior. The front of the building will be of cut stone, similar to that used on the City Hall building.

In addition to the neon sign on the front, the space between stories will be arranged for changeable letters in lights. The lower front also will contain display boxes. The front entrance is into a 20-foot lobby equipped with a ticket office.

The lobby has one side arranged for men's rest rooms and the other for a lounge and rest rooms for ladies equipped with modern conveniences and the latest in furnishings. From the lobby two entrances are provided for a curved foyer, 32 by 10 feet in size. Two entrances are also provided to the auditorium.

The plans show the auditorium to have two aisles heavily carpeted and three tiers of opera seats with a seating capacity of 500. A 14-foot stage is shown. No provisions have so far been made for drops or wings for the stage.

The article mentioned that a neon sign would be centered in the facade "reaching up 36 feet with 'RIO'

¹⁶ Advertisements for Ely Theater and Opera House, *Ely Miner*, January 2, 1936.

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Ely State Theater

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in large letters." The name was apparently a placeholder until the owner decided on the theater's name. The article included a sketch that was supposed to be of the building, with the "Rio" sign in place—but the illustration showed a three-story building that looked more like the Ely Theater than the State. No retail space or offices, however, were planned for the State, with only a small apartment included on the second story, above the lobby.¹⁷

The report noted that the theater would be equipped with "the latest in picture and sound projection machinery," and an article in September was devoted to the new audio system. "Arrangements for the installation of a remarkable new RCA photophone 'High Fidelity' sound reproducing system, which promises to revolutionize all previous conceptions of realism in sound motion picture reproduction, have been completed by Mr. Swanson. The article claimed that the system was "similar to that recently installed in the two new super-theatres at Rockefeller Centre in New York," the Centre Theater and Radio City Music Hall. Also, "photophone reproducing equipment has been chosen by many of the leading steamship companies for installation on their palatial ocean liners."¹⁸

As of September, the theater was still being called the Rio. By opening night in mid-October, it was christened the State. The theater was filled for the first shows, featuring *My American Wife* with Francis Lederer and Ann Southern. The newspaper account of the new theater repeated much of the description from the June article, but documented a few changes and added details. "A handsome ticket window adorns the front with swinging door entrances painted in harmonizing shades and trimmed with silver strips. . . . The auditorium is lighted with the latest in indirect subdued light along the inside walls. . . . Three tiers of opera seats will accommodate 630 comfortably." In the front of the auditorium, "a 19-foot silver screen with sound boxes is located on a 14-foot curved stage. The stage is large enough to accommodate vaudeville entertainments in addition to the screen and sound machine. Heavy silk curtains, electrically operated from the operator's box over the front entrance, grace the stage."¹⁹

According to one source, "In 1940 brothers Ralph and Jesse Swanson lived in the apartment above the theater with Jesse's wife and children, Jesse, Barbara and John. Later, son Jesse ran the business." After World War II, however, the golden era of movie theaters was eroded by television and, later, videos. Families no longer went to the theater on a weekly basis. Business at most theaters, including the State and the Ely, declined. The State retained a loyal following, however, long outlasting the Ely Theater, which closed in the late 1970s.²⁰

A local movie enthusiast, Ron Forsman, bought both the State and the Ely in 1983. A newspaper reported that "Forsman never re-opened the Ely Theater. It was turned into a small office building. . . . The upstairs was made into nine apartment units." He later sold the Ely. In the mid-1990s, he sold the State to some entrepreneurs who "built a video arcade inside the auditorium and put a brown coat of paint over the tiles on the wall, which had been painted in a pattern." Forsman regained ownership of the property in 1998 and returned it to use as a movie theater in the following year. In 2008, however,

¹⁷ "Swanson Brothers Launch Construction of New Theater," *Ely Miner*, June 25, 1936.

¹⁸ Ibid.; "Rio Theater Installs New Sound System," *Ely Miner*, September 3, 1936.

¹⁹ "Modern Entertainment Unit Launched with New Theater Opening," *Ely Miner*, October 15, 1936.

²⁰ Angie Riebe, "The Largest Screen North of the Cities," *Mesabi Daily News*, August 15, 1999; historic walking tour sign posted on the building.

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the lights went dark.²¹

Preservationists worried that the fate of the Ely State Theater would be similar to that of the two theaters that were its contemporaries—the Opera House and the Ely Theater. Both buildings still stand, but their appearance and function have been altered, destroying character-defining features. The Opera House is now a bowling alley. While the Ely Theater retains retail space on the first level, the storefronts are not the original design and the theater has been converted into other uses. Both buildings are sheathed in modern materials and their rooflines and fenestration have had major alterations.

The Ely State Theater’s future, however, began looking brighter after October 2014, when it was purchased by the The Ely State Theater LLC for rehabilitation by the Ott Historic Rehab LLC. The Ott family gained experience renovating historic buildings in their hometown of Columbia, Missouri, and have vacationed in Ely for decades. They plan to renovate and reopen the theater with the assistance of historic tax credits. The National Park Service has approved Part 1 and the first phase of Part 2 of the tax credit application.

²¹ Riebe, “The Largest Screen North of the Cities.”

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Ely State Theater

Name of Property

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Ely State Theater

Name of Property

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N/A

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Riebe, Angie. "The Largest Screen North of the Cities." *Mesabi Daily News*, August 15, 1999.

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"Swanson Brothers Launch Construction of New Theater." *Ely Miner*, June 25, 1936.

"Two Theaters to Be Built Here; Work on One Will Start Now." *Ely Miner*, April 12, 1935.

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Ely State Theater

Name of Property
Saint Louis County, MN

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N/A

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Photographs Page 1

Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: Saint Louis County
State: Minnesota
Name of Photographer: Charlene Roise
Date of Photograph: August 2014

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0001
North (front) facade on East Sheridan Street, looking south.

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: Saint Louis County
State: Minnesota
Name of Photographer: Charlene Roise
Date of Photograph: August 2014

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0002
North facade of theater and adjacent commercial buildings, looking southeast.

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: Saint Louis County
State: Minnesota
Name of Photographer: Charlene Roise
Date of Photograph: August 2014

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0003
Close-up view of theater's north facade and west side of marquee, looking east.

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: Saint Louis County
State: Minnesota
Name of Photographer: Charlene Roise
Date of Photograph: August 2014

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0004

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Ely State Theater

Name of Property
Saint Louis County, MN

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N/A

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Photographs Page 2

North facade of theater and adjacent commercial buildings, looking southwest.

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: Saint Louis County
State: Minnesota
Name of Photographer: Charlene Roise
Date of Photograph: August 2014

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0005
Rear (south; left) and east (right) walls of theater, looking northwest.

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: Saint Louis County
State: Minnesota
Name of Photographer: Charlene Roise
Date of Photograph: August 2014

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0006
Rear (south) wall of theater, looking northeast. The west wall is visible above the roof of the adjacent building (left).

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: Saint Louis County
State: Minnesota
Name of Photographer: Roy Misonznick
Date of Photograph: March 2015

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0007
Lobby, looking north towards entry doors. Note zigzag terrazzo floor and display panel.

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: Saint Louis County
State: Minnesota
Name of Photographer: Charlene Roise
Date of Photograph: September 2014

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0008
Lobby, looking southeast to concessions area, which is not original. An original brushed aluminum light fixture still hangs from the ceiling, and a display panel that might be original is on the east wall.

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N/A

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Name of Property: Ely State Theater
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: Saint Louis County
State: Minnesota
Name of Photographer: Charlene Roise
Date of Photograph: September 2014

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0009

Foyer between lobby (right) and auditorium (left), looking west. Auditorium door with porthole window is in background.

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: Saint Louis County
State: Minnesota
Name of Photographer: Roy Misonznick
Date of Photograph: March 2015

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0010

Auditorium, looking south. The original stage and light fixtures are intact.

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: Saint Louis County
State: Minnesota
Name of Photographer: Roy Misonznick
Date of Photograph: March 2015

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0011

Close-up of stage at south end of auditorium, looking southwest.

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: Saint Louis County
State: Minnesota
Name of Photographer: Roy Misonznick
Date of Photograph: March 2015

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0012

Looking northwest from the front of the auditorium.

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| Ely State Theater |
| Name of Property Saint Louis County, MN |
| County and State N/A |
| Name of multiple listing (if applicable) |

Photographs Page 4

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
 City or Vicinity: Ely
 County: Saint Louis County
 State: Minnesota
 Name of Photographer: Roy Misonznick
 Date of Photograph: March 2015

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0013
 Detail of Moderne light fixture along the east wall of the auditorium, looking east.

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
 City or Vicinity: Ely
 County: Saint Louis County
 State: Minnesota
 Name of Photographer: Charlene Roise
 Date of Photograph: September 2014

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0014
 Living room (foreground), dining room (middle), and kitchen (through door in background) in second-floor apartment, looking east-southeast.

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
 City or Vicinity: Ely
 County: Saint Louis County
 State: Minnesota
 Name of Photographer: Unknown
 Date of Photograph: Circa 1936

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0015
 Historic view of front facade of theater, probably from around the time it opened. Source: Liebenberg and Kaplan Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, Elmer L. Andersen Library, University of Minnesota-Minneapolis.

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
 City or Vicinity: Ely
 County: Saint Louis County
 State: Minnesota
 Name of Photographer: Unknown
 Date of Photograph: Circa 1936

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0016
 Historic view of theater lobby, probably from around the time it opened. Source: Liebenberg and

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Photographs Page 5

Kaplan Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, Elmer L. Andersen Library, University of Minnesota-Minneapolis.

Name of Property: Ely State Theater
City or Vicinity: Ely
County: Saint Louis County
State: Minnesota
Name of Photographer: Unknown
Date of Photograph: Circa 1936

MN_SaintLouisCounty_Ely State Theater_0017

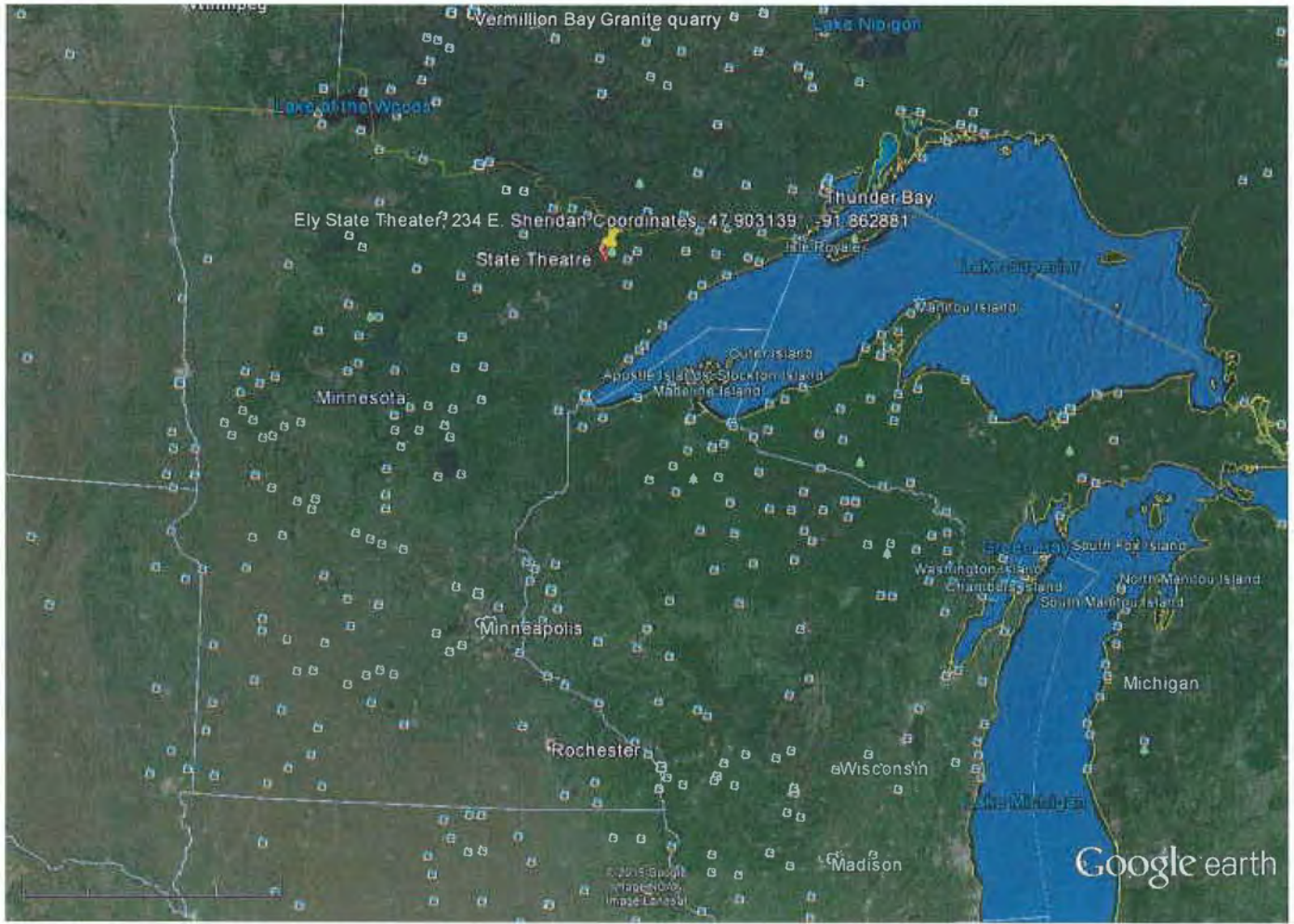
Historic view of theater auditorium, probably from around the time it opened. Source: Liebenberg and Kaplan Papers, Northwest Architectural Archives, Elmer L. Andersen Library, University of Minnesota-Minneapolis.



Google earth

feet
meters





Google earth

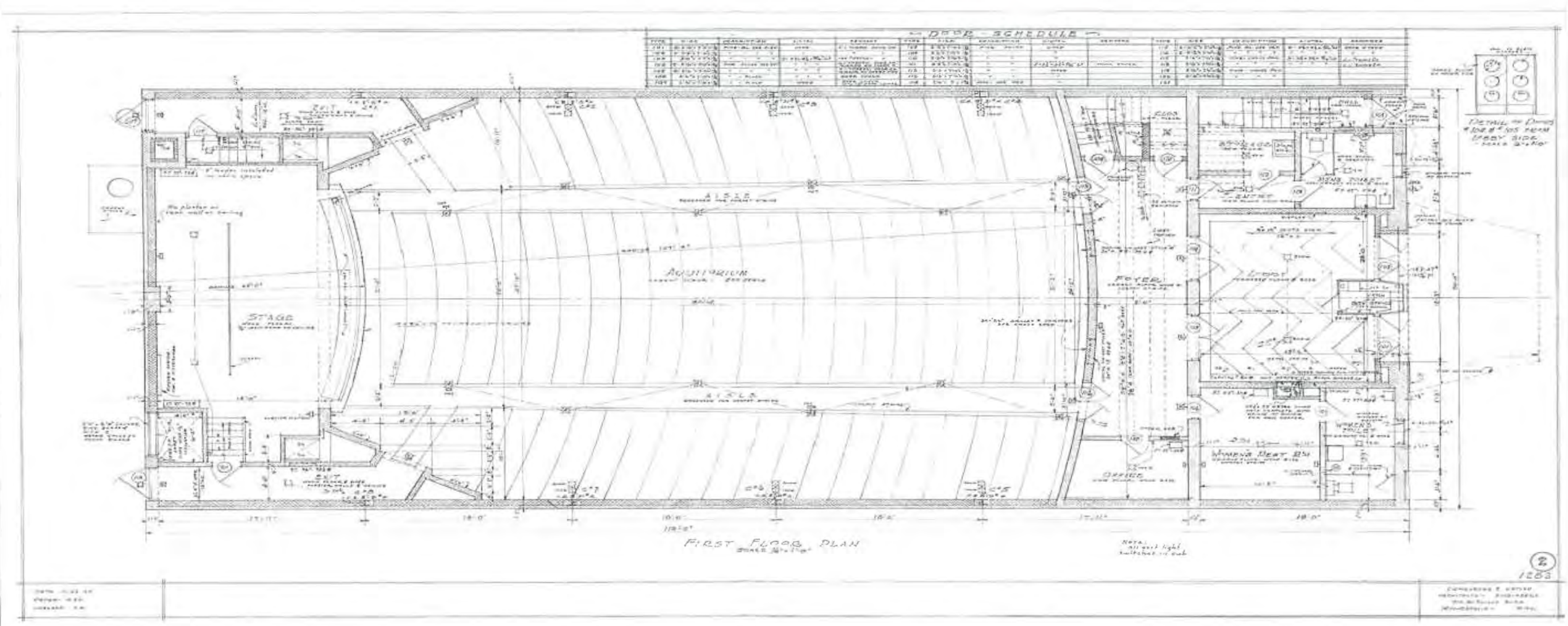


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Additional Documentation Page 1

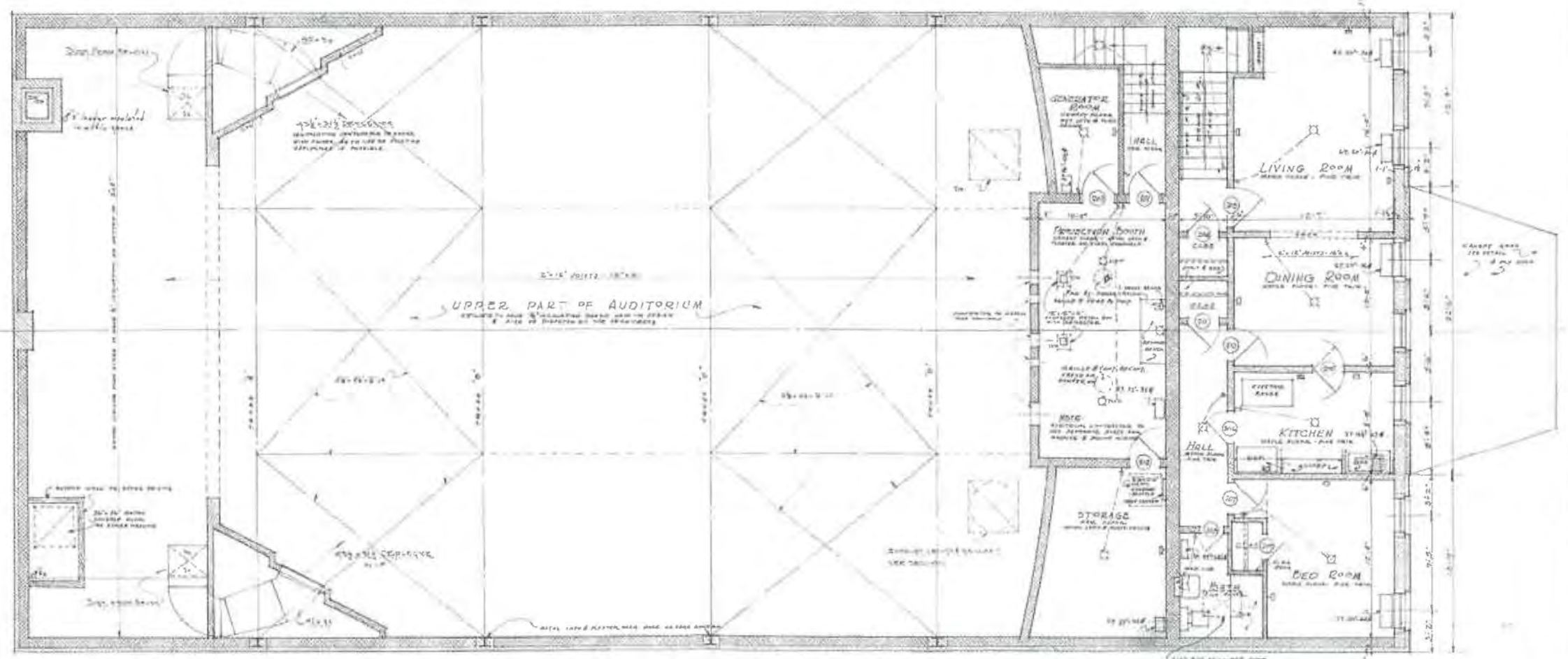


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| TYPE | SIZE | DESCRIPTION | NOTES | MARK | TYPE | SIZE | DESCRIPTION | NOTES | MARK |
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| 202 | 2'-0" x 8'-0" | RECEPTION SOUTH | | | 202 | 2'-0" x 8'-0" | RECEPTION SOUTH | | |
| 203 | 2'-0" x 8'-0" | LIVING ROOM | | | 203 | 2'-0" x 8'-0" | LIVING ROOM | | |
| 204 | 2'-0" x 8'-0" | DINING ROOM | | | 204 | 2'-0" x 8'-0" | DINING ROOM | | |
| 205 | 2'-0" x 8'-0" | KITCHEN | | | 205 | 2'-0" x 8'-0" | KITCHEN | | |
| 206 | 2'-0" x 8'-0" | BED ROOM | | | 206 | 2'-0" x 8'-0" | BED ROOM | | |
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1282

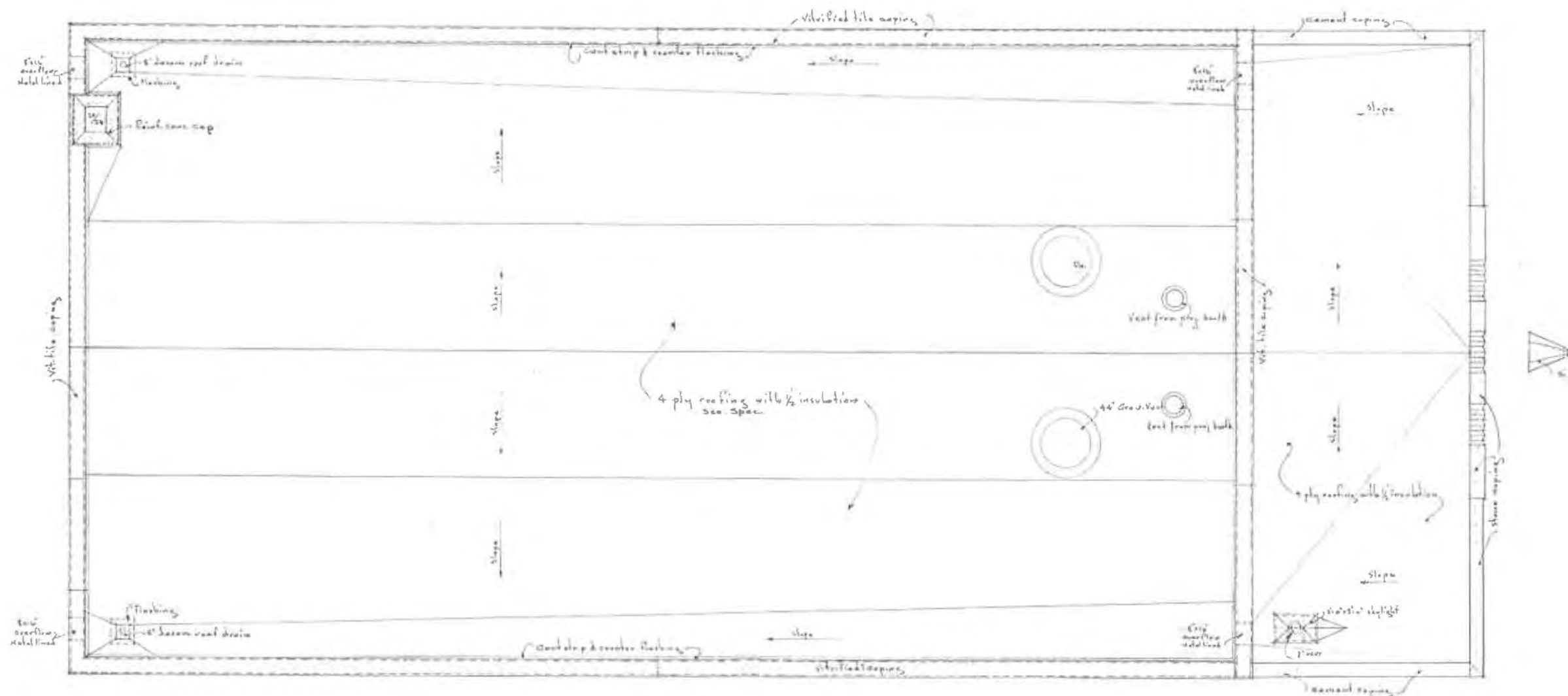
UNIVERSITY MICROFILMS
SERIALS ACQUISITION
300 N ZEEB RD
ANN ARBOR MI 48106

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| Name of Property |
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Checked: J.C.H.

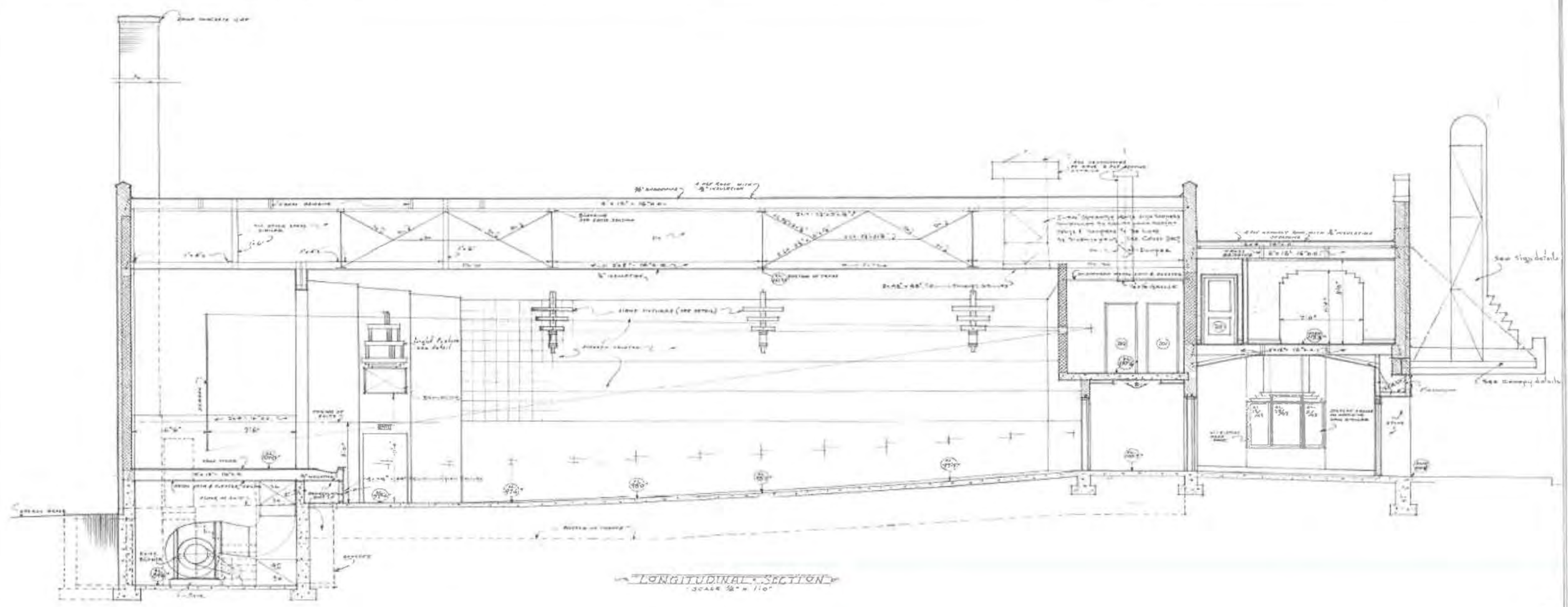
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Lester H. & Elaine
Architects & Engineers
310 McMillan St.
Minneapolis, MN 55401

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| Ely State Theater |
| Name of Property |
| Saint Louis County, Minnesota |
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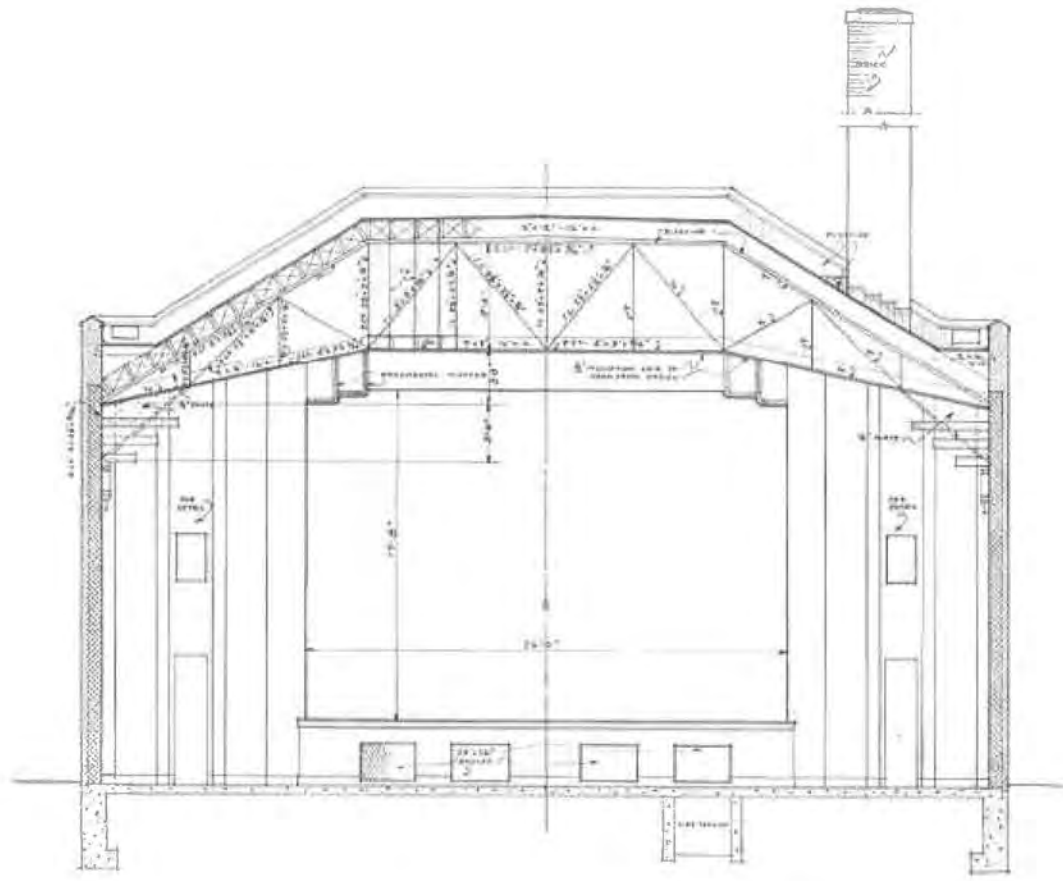
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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

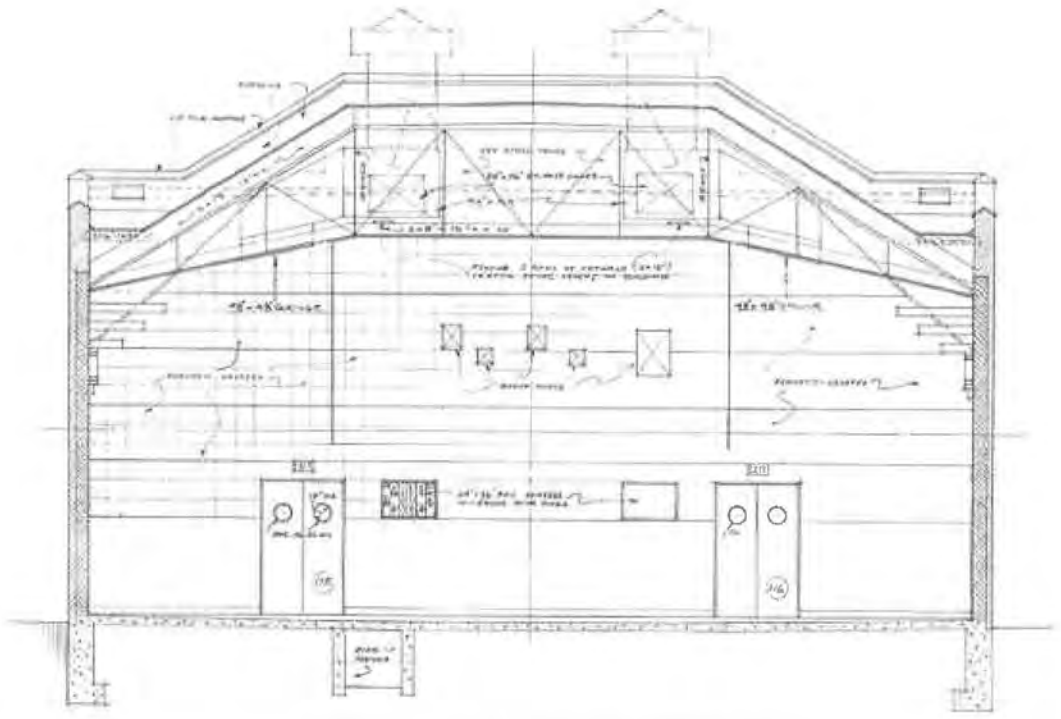
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| Ely State Theater |
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| Saint Louis County, Minnesota |
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← CROSS SECTION TOWARD PROCENIUM ARCH →



← CROSS SECTION TOWARDS FOYER →

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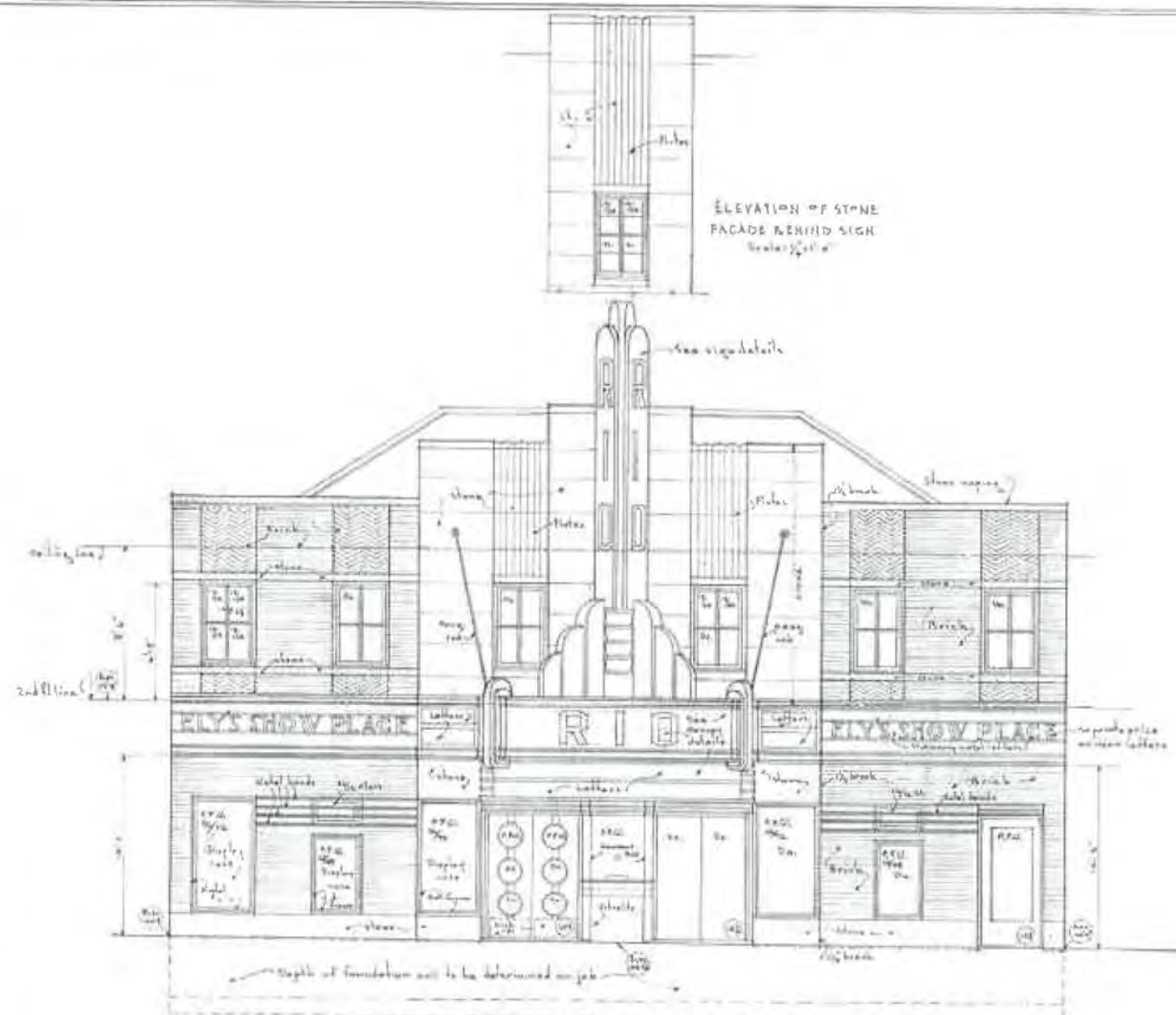
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 1000 W. WASHINGTON ST.
 MINNEAPOLIS, MN 55402

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National Park Service

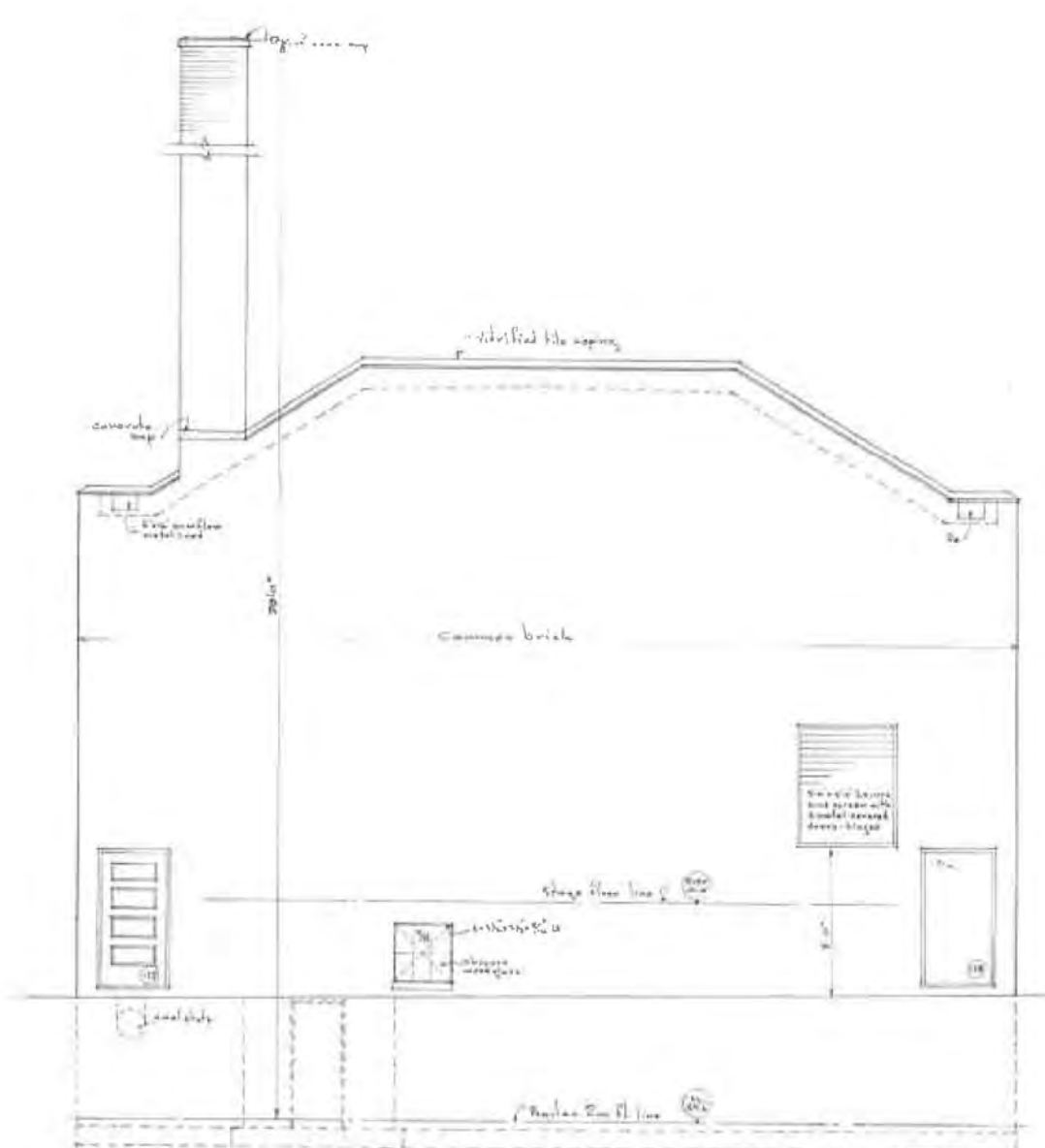
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| Ely State Theater |
| Name of Property |
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FRONT ELEVATION
Scale: 1/4" = 1'-0"



REAR ELEVATION
Scale: 1/4" = 1'-0"

Dates
Drawn by GDC
Checked

7
 Lichtenberg & Kaplan
 Architects & Engineers
 Two McLaughlin Bldg.
 Minneapolis, Minn.

Ely State Theater

National Register Nomination Photo Key

6



DB02 - SCHEDULE

| NO. | QTY | DESCRIPTION | UNIT | REMARKS | TYPE | CLASS | AMOUNT | DATE | BY |
|-----|-----|-------------|-------|---------|------|-------|--------|------|----|
| 101 | 1 | WOOD | sq ft | WOOD | WOOD | WOOD | 100 | | |
| 102 | 1 | WOOD | sq ft | WOOD | WOOD | WOOD | 100 | | |
| 103 | 1 | WOOD | sq ft | WOOD | WOOD | WOOD | 100 | | |
| 104 | 1 | WOOD | sq ft | WOOD | WOOD | WOOD | 100 | | |
| 105 | 1 | WOOD | sq ft | WOOD | WOOD | WOOD | 100 | | |
| 106 | 1 | WOOD | sq ft | WOOD | WOOD | WOOD | 100 | | |
| 107 | 1 | WOOD | sq ft | WOOD | WOOD | WOOD | 100 | | |

2
3



FIRST FLOOR PLAN
SCALE 1/4" = 1'-0"

DETAIL OF DOOR
404 & 105 FROM
Lobby SIDE
SCALE 1/4" = 1'-0"

DATE: 11-25-37
BY: MRS. J. W. BROWN

ENGINEERS & ARCHITECTS
THE ELY STATE THEATER
MUNICIPALITY - ELY, MINN.

5



4
2





STATE

STATE

Tuesday Night
LIVE
8 to 9 PM
LIVE MUSIC

HARVEST MOON
THEATRE
WHERE WILL YOU BE
WHEN THE MOON RISES

234



STATE

STATE

The J.D. M...

The J.D. Mill
COMPAN
EST. 190...

Thursday Night
LIVE
8:00 PM
LIVE MUSIC

HARVEST MOON
FESTIVAL
Where Will You Be
When The Moon Rises
Contributors and 15 artists and local vendors
Don't miss it! OCTOBER 18th
6:00 PM - 10:00 PM
110 LPP

SUMMER
SALE

NO PARKING
HERE
ANYTIME

BE A PART
OF IT!

FOR SALE

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NO PARKING
HERE TO
CROSS
ST. CATHY

HARVEST MOON
WHAT WILL YOU BE
WHAT WILL YOU BE
WHAT WILL YOU BE

35% OFF
SUMMER
CLEARANCE!













Concession Stand

Roll of cardboard with shipping labels













LIEBENBERG & KAPLAN
Architects & Engineers

JOAN BENNETT RANDOLPH SCOTT
TIT TEXANS
with ROBERT CUMMINGS



COMING

JOAN BENNETT
RANDOLPH SCOTT
TIT TEXANS
with ROBERT CUMMINGS
LUCIEN HUBBARD



LIEBENBERG & KOHN
Architects & Engineers



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY Ely State Theater
NAME:

MULTIPLE
NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: MINNESOTA, St. Louis

DATE RECEIVED: 6/05/15 DATE OF PENDING LIST: 7/07/15
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 7/22/15 DATE OF 45TH DAY: 7/21/15
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 15000440

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS: N
OTHER: N PDIL: N PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N
REQUEST: N SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: N NATIONAL: N

COMMENT WAIVER: N

ACCEPT RETURN REJECT 7.21.15 DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

Entered in
The National Register
of
Historic Places

RECOM./CRITERIA _____

REVIEWER _____ DISCIPLINE _____

TELEPHONE _____ DATE _____

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N

If a nomination is returned to the nominating authority, the nomination is no longer under consideration by the NPS.

CITY OF ELY

209 E. Chapman St.
Ely, Minnesota 55731
218-365-3224

May 11, 2015

State Historic Preservation Office
Minnesota Historical Society
345 Kellogg Boulevard West
St. Paul, MN 55102

Members of the State Review Board,

The City of Ely council has passed a resolution in support of the Ely State Theater application for inclusion in the National Register of Historical Places, a copy of which is attached to this letter.

I and others that grew up in Ely remember the great times going to this theater for matinees and evening showings are ecstatic that a developer has acquired this property fully intending to restore the facility to its original configuration. The Ely State Theater sits atop the hill on Ely's main street and business district making its location a centerpiece exemplifying the city's image of progress while maintaining the city's history.

The city's resolution indicates how strong the people's representatives feel about this application.

Please give the application of the Ely State Theater a serious consideration and support by forwarding the application resulting in the Ely State Theater being placed on the National Register.

Sincerely,


Chuck Novak

Mayor

(218) 235-8995



RECEIVED 2280

JUN - 5 2015

Minnesota Historical Society
State Historic Preservation Office
345 Kellogg Blvd West, St. Paul, Minnesota 55102
651-259-3451

Nat. Register of Historic Places
National Park Service

TO: Stephanie Toothman, Keeper
National Register of Historic Places

FROM: Denis P. Gardner

DATE: May 27, 2015

NAME OF PROPERTY: Ely State Theater

COUNTY AND STATE: St. Louis County, Minnesota

SUBJECT: National Register:
 Nomination
 Multiple Property Documentation Form
 Request for determination of eligibility
 Request for removal (Reference No.)
 Nomination resubmission
 Boundary increase/decrease (Reference No.)
 Additional documentation (Reference No.)

DOCUMENTATION:

- Original National Register of Historic Places Registration Form
 - Multiple Property Documentation Form
 - Continuation Sheets
 - Removal Documentation
 - Photographs
 - CD w/ image files
 - Original USGS Map
 - Sketch map(s)
 - Correspondence
 - Owner Objection
- The enclosed owner objections
Do Do not constitute a majority of property owners

STAFF COMMENTS:

Maps enclosed with the nomination are from Google Earth.