

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 of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

### 1. Name of Property

historic name Fox Theatre Building  
other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

### 2. Location

street & number 2111 Woodward Avenue  not for publication  
city, town Detroit  vicinity  
state Michigan code MI county Wayne code 163 zip code 48201

### 3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	_____ buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	_____	_____ sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	_____	_____ structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	_____	_____ objects
		<u>1</u>	_____ Total

Name of related multiple property listing: \_\_\_\_\_  
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 1

### 4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 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.  See continuation sheet.

Signature of certifying official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

### 5. 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 the Keeper \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Action \_\_\_\_\_

## 6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Recreation and Culture

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Theater

## 7. Description

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete

walls steel frame with brick and

terra-cotta cladding

roof theater: single ply bitumen

office: tar & felt built up,

topped with tar rock ballast

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The following building description is quoted from the National Register of Historic Places nomination written by Ken Caldwell and Brian Conway:

The Fox Theatre Building is a ten-story steel-frame, terra-cotta-sheathed building occupying an entire city block on Woodward Avenue at the northern tip of Detroit's central business district. The office building section is designed in a U-shaped plan which wraps around the theater lobby with the brick-sheathed auditorium section located behind the office section. The office building section is ten stories incorporating the six-story lobby. The auditorium section behind the office section is approximately eight stories. The exterior of the office building section is sheathed in beige terra cotta with elaborately molded terra-cotta which forms window hoods above the second-floor Chicago-style windows and a cornice line crowning the vertical bands of double-hung windows. Some of the storefronts have been altered and the marquee was replaced in the 1940s; otherwise the exterior is unchanged. The auditorium section is sheathed in brick. The interior of the Fox Theatre is an eclectic collection of Far East Modes. It is described in a contemporary newspaper clipping as an ultra-modern American adaptation of the old Hindu temples and deftly combines the Burmese, Indian, Chinese, Persian and Hindu motifs. The ornate five-story main lobby space is dominated by a grand staircase leading to the auditorium. The elaborately detailed auditorium is oval in shape and seats 5,042 patrons.

The exterior of the office building is clad on the north, south and east walls in light tan terra cotta. There are decorative window lintels above the second and tenth floor windows, the upper section forming the cornice line. Between each of the floors, from the third to the ninth floor, are black terra-cotta panels, two designs alternating at each floor level. The windows from the third to the tenth floor are oversized double-hung sash. The second floor windows are Chicago school style and the first floor is lined with storefronts. All metal work (casements, bulkheads, doors, etc.) on the ground floor on Woodward Avenue are of either brass or bronze. On the north and south sides of the building there are decorative wrought-iron canopies above the doorways. The theatre marquee dates from the 1940s and replaced the original.

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally     statewide     locally

Applicable National Register Criteria     A     B     C     D    NHL Criteria #4

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)     A     B     C     D     E     F     G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Period of Significance

Significant Dates

Architecture  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

1928 to present  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

1928  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Affiliation

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Significant Person

Architect/Builder

Crane, C. Howard  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The "motion picture" architectural style reached its peak in Detroit in 1928 with Howard Crane's Fox Theater. It is the culmination of a flamboyant, inventive era. As Detroit flourished with the burgeoning automobile industry, the entertainment world changed radically with the rise of the motion picture industry. Movies provided entertainment to a much larger audience than the legitimate theater and much larger theaters were needed. In Detroit, the movie palaces were built in the then new shopping area near Circus Park and soon that area was crowded with palaces of plaster, each more exotic than the last, offering motion pictures and stage productions to the passerby.

The Fox was praised by the Detroit Free Press in 1928 thus:

Detroit's Fox Theatre has the largest clear span balcony in the world. The stage proper is larger than the Roxy Theatre in New York, and it has the largest and finest projection room and equipment of any theatre in the world.<sup>1</sup>

C. Howard Crane was internationally known as a theater architect and executed 250 of these wonders during his working career. Crane was also based in Detroit, having begun his apprenticeship in the office of Albert Kahn and Smith, Hinchman and Grylls. In 1909 he established his own office specializing in theater buildings.

By the twenties the motion picture had become an indispensable part of the life of the average American. The movie theater had become the citadel of refuge from the humdrum routine of daily living. The gilded carving, the crystal chandelier, and the mirrors that had heretofore been the exclusive property of the very rich now belonged to anyone who could forfeit fifty cents or so for an admission ticket. In short, the movie theater became the movie palace.

Their lobbies, resplendent with imported marble columns and staircases, served merely as preludes to the glories that lay beyond. It was still

See continuation sheet

## 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 # \_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet

### Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: \_\_\_\_\_

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property Less than 1 acre

### UTM References

A 

1	7	3	3	0	9	1	0	4	6	8	9	1	8	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

B 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

C 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

D 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

See continuation sheet

### Verbal Boundary Description

Lots 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and east 22 feet of Lot 7, Lothrop's Subdivision of Park Lot 83 and part of Park Lot 82. Rec'd L. 39, P. 430 Deeds, W.C.R. Lots 9, 10, 43, 44, 45, 46, and 47 and the alley adjacent as vacated by the City of Detroit, Common Council, May 4, 1926. Includes only the property on which the building is located.

See continuation sheet

### Boundary Justification

The boundary encompasses the original property on which the building stands.

See continuation sheet

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Carolyn Pitts, Historian

organization History Division, NPS date 2/9/89

street & number 1100 L Street, NW telephone (202) 343-8166

city or town Washington state DC zip code 20013

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The west wall of the office section and the remainder of the theater section is faced in brick. The brickwork on the theatre's north and south sides has a repeating arch pattern and other decorative brickwork. The brick is laid in a common bond. Also, on both the north and south sides of the theatre are decorative wrought iron fire escapes.

The main entrance to the office and commercial areas was off Columbia and consisted of two bronze revolving doors, since removed and replaced with stainless steel (the bronze doors are in storage). Inside the lobby are travertine marble floors and walls and the ceiling is rich in plaster detail. The metal fixtures such as elevator doors, clocks, mail boxes, door frames, etc. are either bronze or brass. The lobby also has a smaller entrance onto Woodward. The lobby is designed in an "L" shape which wraps around three of the five Otis elevators that service the office building.

On the interior the first two stories were designed to be used as commercial space with an original plan of twenty shops on each floor. Ground floor shops each had street entrances and some had entry to the lobby as well.

The second floor has wide corridors with marble floors. The walls between the corridor and the commercial space are made of glass display windows. Also the windows on the second floor are large, allowing for more display space. From the third to the sixth floor the character of the office building changes with the use of wide corridors with marble floors and wainscotting. The doors leading onto the corridors have full size glass inserts and transoms above. This helps allow natural light to filter into the corridor. On the sixth floor (west side) there is a series of skylights. From the seventh to the tenth floor four sides of the building are exposed to daylight and the building lives up to its name as "Detroit's Daylight Building."

The office building is much as it was when it opened in 1928. The only alterations are the entrance floor replacement, removal of light fixtures in the lobby and the gutting of the seventh floor for the Social Security Administration office.

As you enter the theatre, the main ticket booth, clad in brass and black marble with curved side windows, is centered among four sets of four brass doors. These doors lead into the storm lobby (or foyer) and boast push bars incorporating a griffin and floral design. The foyer floor surface is a black and white tile with a rust-brown tile and black marble border. The walls are clad in the same black marble as the ticket booth.

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Brass display cases line the north and south end walls. The foyer has two smaller ticket booths which are half-oval shaped and faced in brass with black marble inserts. The ceiling is a dark red color with three recessed air grills with dropped light fixtures.

The foyer is separated from the grand lobby by brass doors with textured glass. As you enter the lobby you are aware of three things immediately; the grand staircase which is approximately seventy feet in front of you, the height of the lobby, which is five stories tall, and the enormous vermillion (red) corinthian columns. The grand lobby has a terrazzo floor which has an eight-pointed, compass-like design. However, this floor has always been covered with carpeting and, at one time, had a chenille rug measuring 46' by 64' woven in a single piece (the largest rug of its day). Pieces of this rug are still in use in the upper balcony area.

Both the north and the south sides of the lobby are adorned with vermillion scagliola columns. These columns have an octagonal shaped base and the first story height of the column shaft is decorated with eagles, floral patterns and red glass jewels in a silver leaf covered relief. The capital is of a corinthian type but in place of the usual caulicolis are geese with shields between them. Behind the first two sets of columns are colored plate glass mirrors of blue, green, yellow and orange, designed with caning like leaded glass work. From this point back there are ten balconettes between the columns at the mezzanine level. The capitals of the columns support brackets with large plaster details.

The lobby ceiling is painted in dark blue to simulate the sky with a symmetrical sunburst and winged griffins in reds, yellows and tan colors in the ceiling center. The east side of the grand lobby (facing Woodward) has large plaster organ pipes which are only decorative. There is, however, a three-manual, twelve-rank, Moller pipe organ located in one of the balconettes, which provides continuous recitals in the lobby.

The grand staircase has lions at its base and carp-like sea creatures on the stringers up the stairs. The elephant and floral designed carpeting on the steps in reds, oranges and greens is original to the theatre. The lobby is illuminated by hanging lamp fixtures with yellow glass and lights concealed within many of the plaster details.

The doors at the west end of the lobby lead either to the main floor or the mezzanine. To the north end of the lobby are a pair of elevators which can take thirty persons to any of the five levels.

In the auditorium itself, decorative plaster work covers practically

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every square foot in real or mythical animal forms, floral designs, geometric shapes and Far Eastern motifs. The ceiling has mirrored glass panels with yellow glass light fixtures suspended in them. There is an abundance of plaster detailing which occurs repeatedly.

On both sides of the main floor at the rear of the auditorium are two elliptical stairways which lead up to the higher levels and also down to the ladies' and gentlemen's lounges. The stairway has scagliola wainscoating on one side and a wood handrail with wrought iron panel supports which have a floral, elephant and deity motif.

The main floor seats (2,898) are original with wooden backs and cast iron end standards. These standards have a doric column, floral design and aisle light cast in them. On the bottom of the projecting mezzanine and balcony are inset light wells and leaded-glass light panels. The walls on the main floor are covered with plaster figures such as monkeys, serpents, lions and snakes plus geometric patterns. There are a series of six Moorish fluted arches which lead off to an aisleway which wraps around the auditorium. These arches are illuminated by hanging lamps which have yellow glass panels and red and green glass jewel decorations. On the walls of the aisle are urns, and dragons decorate the pilasters along the wall.

The proscenium arch is seventy-eight feet wide and thirty-one feet high and is decorated with plaster butterflies, peacocks, lions, horses and deities. Grillwork conceals the organ chambers and a large bust of an elephant with a raised trunk serves as the keystone. Hanging below the arch is a large incense burning basket originally for sound transmission.

The sides of the auditorium at mezzanine level have a colonnade. The columns have the same details as the ones in the lobby and also have colored glass mirrors behind them. Above these is a lighting cove incorporating alternating human faces and large lion busts below.

The ceiling is made to look like a large tent-like canopy structure supported by sets of spears. The center opens to a simulated sky. This part of the ceiling is actually stenciled acoustical felt. In the center of the ceiling, 104 feet above the auditorium, is a ventilation grill disguised as a giant sunburst pattern. Suspended from the center is a magnificent chandelier, which weighs 2,000 pounds, containing more than 1,200 pieces of stained glass. It is nearly thirteen feet tall, thirty-four feet in circumference and illuminated by more than 20,000 watts of power.

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The projection booth is perhaps the largest booth of its kind today. It originally had four projectors, three spot lights and one brenograph (special effects machine).

The working stage is seventy-eight feet by thirty-two feet. There are two stage lifts, an arbor which has a capacity of fifty lines, a cyclorama (a backdrop that is painted blue and can be illuminated with different colors and also has the capacity to simulate twinkling stars) and two scenery docks. On the house right of the stage there is an automatic elevator which leads to eight floors which originally contained eighteen dressing rooms, a broadcasting booth, and offices.

The auditorium boasts the giant four manual, thirty-six-ranked Wurlitzer pipe organ, one of only five such instruments constructed especially for the largest Fox theatres in the country. The organ requires seven chambers to house some 2,700 pipes, percussions and effects; one room for the relays and another room housing two fifty horsepower Spencer blowers. As the building rose around it, the organ took more than four months to install, at a cost of over \$100,000. There is also a slave console which is under the house right side of the proscenium arch.

The basement has the support areas for the theatre such as the engine room, the carpenter shop, a twenty seat screening room, and a staff office, as well as usher, stagehand, and maintenance staff changing areas and showers, an infirmary and the contents of a musical library said to be worth over \$100,000.

The interior of the theater and lobby remains unaltered. The Wurlitzer pipe organ has been restored to full operation and is used for performances.



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the day of the silent film. The mighty Wurlitzer organs thundered when the hero led the cavalry charges and warbled when he won the hand of the heroine. ... The Detroit Free Press could have been describing the Fox when it rhapsodized: "It is beyond the human dreams of loveliness -- Entering it, you pass into another world. ... Your spirit rises and soars along the climbing pillars and mirrored walls that ascend five stories to the domed ceiling of the great lobby. It becomes gay and light under the spell of the warm coloring that plays across the heavily carved and ornamented walls as myriads of unseen lights steal out from mysteriously hidden coves to illumine the interior with romantic sundown colors."<sup>2</sup>

The crowning achievement of Crane's career in Detroit was the Fox Theatre on Woodward Avenue. Seating over five thousand people, it outdistanced all other movie palaces in the city in the magnitude of its proportions. The vast auditorium, unobstructed by columns, was a marvel of engineering, but the aspect that elicited the most unbridled panegyrics from the press at the time of the opening in 1928 was the fantastic magnificence of the decor. A columnist for the Detroit Free Press wrote:

Few specimens of architectural splendor, either ancient or modern, surpass the new Fox Theatre. Temples to gods and palaces for kings, through long years were the only outlets for architectural dreamings -- until the significance of art in daily life became manifest and pervaded the buildings of intimate use.

This tendency, entering the field of motion picture exhibition, has resulted in the creation of palatial buildings, an outstanding example of which is the Fox, newest addition to the William Fox circuit of theaters reaching from coast to coast.

The theater itself is a wonderland of continental treasure, embracing, as it does, the salient features of Burmese, Hindu, Persian, Indian, and Chinese architecture all deftly blended into an ultra-modern American adaptation of the Hindu temples of old. This radical departure in theater design, the first of its kind in the world, will reverberate around the architectural world.<sup>3</sup>

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Another writer waxed even more eloquent:

There is a sweep and a flourish, a fullness and a splendid promise to the whole conception of the new Fox that is awe-inspiring. One feels that he is in the midst of nobility, treading among treasures of the mind and of the subtler senses, as ancient and immortal as the exquisite Hindu art that has been modernized in the new drama-temple.<sup>4</sup>

The authority on Detroit architecture has written:

In the afterglow of such fervent eulogies it is perhaps only fair to point out that the architects of movie palaces invariably called to their assistance professional theater decorators, and C. Howard Crane was no exception. Twenty artists worked for months on the clay models of ornamental details that were later reproduced in plaster in the Fox Theater. The contract was handled by the Lennox-Haldeman Company of Cleveland, and the Chicago office of the Interstate Decorating Company of Rockford, Illinois, was responsible for executing all the decorations and color effects throughout the building. Even today the overall effect is dazzling. A host of strange deities, basilisks, chimeras, butterflies, peacocks, and lions is immobilized in the architectural decoration, and the chandeliers and walls gleam with clusters of glass jewels.<sup>5</sup>

While eclectic in decoration, the Fox was well equipped with every modern convenience from large elevators to a central vacuum cleaner system for efficient cleaning of the building. It had a fully equipped emergency hospital with two graduate nurses and a house physician on duty during theater hours. A summer refrigeration system of 600 ton capacity and power transformers for the theater were large enough to operate all the street cars in Detroit. This theatre was an example of what money could buy at a reported price of \$12 million for the entire building.

The theater seating capacity is 5,042 making it Detroit's largest movie palace and accounts for 20% of the total theater seats within a half-mile radius of Grand Circus Park.

In the 1930s the Detroit Fox sponsored a variety of well known entertainers such as Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, and Frank Sinatra; in the '50s, Elvis Presley; and in the 1960s the Motown Reviews with acts such as The Temptations, The Supremes and Little Stevie Wonder.

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As television replaced motion pictures as the primary entertainment of the American public many of these bizarre and picturesque movie houses fell into disuse. The Fox is presently being restored to its former glory, and that particular kind of exotic American architecture, the "Movie Palace," will be seen again as it was on opening night in 1928.

Footnotes

1. Detroit Free Press, January 29, 1928.
2. W. Hawkins Ferry, The Buildings of Detroit (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980), p. 324.
3. Detroit Free Press, March 3, 1928.
4. Ibid., March 5, 1928.
5. Ferry, op. cit., p. 325.

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Detroit Free Press. Fox Theatre Dedicatory Edition, September 23, 1928.

Ferry, W. Hawkins. The Buildings of Detroit. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980.

Friends of the Fox. "Fiftieth Anniversary Booklet." 1978. (Pamphlet.)

Hall, Ben. The Best Remaining Seats, The Golden Age of the Movie Palace. New York: C.N. Potter, Inc., 1961.