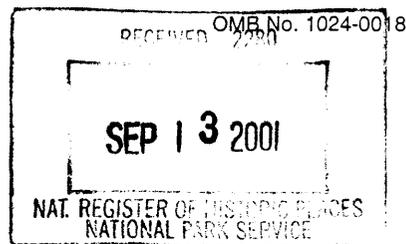


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register Of Historic Places  
Registration Form



1179

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Lee, Don, Building

other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

2. Location

street & number 1000 Van Ness Avenue NA  not for publication

city or town San Francisco NA  vicinity

state California code CA county San Francisco code 075 zip code 94109

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, 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  nationally  statewide  locally. (  See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

K M Ellison 9/5/01  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

California Office of Historic Preservation  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. (  See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

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

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

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register  See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register  See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper  
**Entered in the National Register**

Date of Action

10/28/01

**Lee, Don, Building**  
Name of Property

**San Francisco County, CA**  
County and State

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

**Number of Resources within Property**  
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1		Total

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

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

**Commerce/Trade: specialty store**

**Industry/Processing: communications facility**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

**Recreation and Culture: theater**

**Domestic: multiple dwelling**

**Recreation and Culture: sports facility**

**Commerce/Trade: restaurant**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

**Italian Renaissance**

**Commercial Style**

**Spanish Colonial Revival**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation **concrete**

roof **concrete, asphalt**

walls **stucco, terra cotta, concrete**

other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Narrative Description**

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

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(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.)

Property is:

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

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

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary Location of Additional Data**

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

Name of repository:

**San Francisco History Room, Main Library**\_\_\_\_\_

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

**Architecture**

---



---



---



---



---



---

**Period of Significance**

**1921**

---



---

**Significant Dates**

**1921**

---



---

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

**NA**

**Cultural Affiliation**

**NA**

---



---

**Architect/Builder**

**Weeks and Day**

---

Lee, Don, Building  
Name of Property

San Francisco County, CA  
County and State

**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreeage of Property** Less than one acre

**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1	10	551100	4181900	3	___	___	___
2	___	___	___	4	___	___	___

See continuation sheet.

**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification**

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Christopher VerPlank/Architectural Historian

organization Page & Turnbull, Inc. Architects date July 2, 2001

street & number 724 Pine Street telephone 415-362-5154

city or town San Francisco state CA zip code 94108

**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps**

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs**

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

**Additional items**

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

**Property Owner**

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Tom Ohlson, Principal, Burnham Pacific Properties

street & number 100 Bush Street, 26<sup>th</sup> Floor telephone 415-352-1700

city or town San Francisco state CA zip code 94104

**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. 470 *et seq.*).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the 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 Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 1 Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

---

**Exterior**

**General Description**

The Don Lee Building is a historic automobile showroom located on the east side of Van Ness Avenue in San Francisco, on Assessor's Block 715, Lot 005. Van Ness Avenue is a major six-lane arterial boulevard running north-south from the San Francisco Civic Center to Ghirardelli Square. The Don Lee Building and its 1998 addition, occupy an entire city block bounded by Van Ness Avenue to the west, O'Farrell Street to the south, Polk Street to the east and Myrtle Street to the north. The Don Lee Building, without its addition, is an eight-story, flat-roofed, reinforced-concrete building with a square plan. The exterior is articulated by a grid of large, double-height openings, with large storefronts on the first floor and wood, double-hung windows on the upper floors. The Van Ness Avenue façade, which is five bays wide, and the O'Farrell Street elevation, which is eight bays wide, are the two principle elevations. Both are designed in the Renaissance Revival style and are finished with stucco and terra cotta ornament. Detailing includes an elaborate entry flanked by pairs of Tuscan columns, a rusticated base, quoins and a frieze. The elevations are capped by a fiberglass cornice, which replaced the original sheet metal cornice removed in the 1950s. The Van Ness Avenue elevation displays the highest degree of architectural elaboration due to its prominent position and as the location of the main entry. The O'Farrell Street elevation is secondary to the Van Ness Avenue elevation but the three westernmost bays are identical to the façade and the remaining bays are only slightly less elaborate. The three westernmost bays of the north elevation, which faces Myrtle Street, are also identical to the façade. The remaining five bays on the north elevation assume a more industrial appearance, as befitting its location on a service alley. The original east elevation was removed in 1998 to construct the eight-story addition, which now contains a modern motion picture theater. The addition, which occupies the eastern half of the parcel, shares the same height and proportions as the original Don Lee Building but it is clearly differentiated in terms of materials and detailing.

**Façade**

The west, or facade elevation of the Don Lee Building, is the most architecturally significant of the four original elevations as it faces heavily traveled Van Ness Avenue and features the main pedestrian entry. The west elevation is divided into three horizontal bands, conforming to the classic Renaissance composition of a base, shaft and capital. The lowest band (the base) encompasses the first and mezzanine levels. It is clad entirely in rusticated terra cotta blocks with chamfered joints designed to replicate dressed stone. The recessed entry, located in the center bay, is the most notably elaborate feature of the façade. The entry is an arched opening containing a pair of brass double doors that once provided access to the auto showroom and now access the main lobby of the theater. Flanking the entrance are two pairs of terra cotta Tuscan Order columns. The shafts of the columns are covered with molded shallow-relief ornament depicting vegetal motifs. The columns support a broken entablature which returns to the main wall of the building and wraps around part of the north and south elevations. Centered over the Van Ness entrance is the inscription "CADILLAC" and above this is a terra cotta crest depicting the Cadillac logo. The crest is flanked on either side by large terra cotta male figures. The figure on the left holds tools in his left hand and balances a large wheel with his right and the figure on the right holds a wrench in his right hand and balances an automobile wheel with his left. The first

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 2 Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

floor window bays are demarcated by pairs of Tuscan pilasters and fitted with large three-light plate-glass windows, with bands of translucent prism lights above. The plate glass windows are bracketed by narrow twisted colonettes and surmounted by bands of prism lights above. Between the two outermost bays are large Ionic Order columns with Solomonic fluting, atop which sit large grinning bears, also made of terra cotta. The middle band of the façade (shaft) comprises the third through the eighth floors. This section is demarcated from the base by the terra cotta entablature and from the cornice by a prominent terra cotta frieze. The middle band is divided into two levels by a terra cotta belt course with a prominent cartouche and flagpole mounted in the center bay. The middle band is articulated by a grid of fifteen double-height window openings fitted with wood, double-hung sash, decorative metal spandrel panels and twisted metal colonettes. The rest of the middle band is finished with light-colored stucco and bracketed at the corners by brown terra cotta quoins. The facade terminates in a prominent fiberglass cornice which projects seven feet from the building's face and duplicates the original sheet metal cornice removed in 1955. Permanent signage is confined to two large neon blade signs at the north and south corners, one reading "AMC THEATRES" and the other reading "Venture Frogs."

**O'Farrell Street Elevation**

The O'Farrell Street elevation encompasses the original Don Lee Building on the west and the 1998 addition on the east. The western three bays of the O'Farrell Street are essentially the same as the Van Ness Avenue elevation. This segment of the south elevation is bracketed by brown terra cotta quoins. The remaining five bays to the east are distinguished from the rest of the elevation by a slightly simplified terra cotta frieze and cornice and the substitution of multi-light window units for large plate glass windows at the first floor level. A new roll-up garage door was installed in the easternmost bay in 1998. The garage door was installed in an original opening which had been closed off at an unknown point in time. Also taking place during the 1998 rehabilitation, three basement level windows on the south elevation were replaced by doors to meet fire and life safety regulations. The south elevation of the 1998 addition picks up at the east end of the original building, where it is separated from the original Don Lee Building by a vertical band of metal panels. As it houses fourteen theater auditoriums, the addition is largely not fenestrated, with the exception of a vertical band of aluminum window units in the second bay to the east of the juncture. The first floor of the addition is clad in face brick and punctured by three vehicular entrances, three pedestrian entrances and a band of aluminum poster cases. The upper portion of the addition is articulated by a grid of recessed panels corresponding with the fenestration pattern on the Don Lee Building and made of glass fiber reinforced concrete (GFRC). The walls of the addition are further embellished with small decorative ceramic tiles in the corners.

**Polk Street Elevation**

The original east elevation of the Don Lee Building was removed in order to construct the 1998 addition. Originally it was five bays in width but it was finished very simply due to the fact that it faced a parking lot and that the entire building was designed to be extended eastward to Polk Street. A contemporary article in the California Automobile Association magazine *Motor Land* stated "The property adjacent to the building to the east is owned by Don Lee and ultimately the building will cover the entire block." The east wall differed in construction from the other three exterior walls in order to make the physical expansion of the building possible. Whereas the

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 3 Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

---

columns in the other perimeter walls are engaged, the columns on the east wall were not engaged in the wall itself, but were instead connected to it by brick infill, in order to make the anticipated demolition easier. The Polk Street elevation of the 1998 addition is detailed similarly to its south elevation, with the first floor clad in face brick and the upper floors finished in GFRC, with decorative tile accents at the corners. The Polk Street elevation is six bays in width, with the three southernmost bays punctuated by three vertical bands of aluminum window units.

**Myrtle Street Elevation**

Similar to the O'Farrell Street elevation, the Myrtle Street elevation encompasses the eight bays of the original Don Lee Building on the west and the six bays of the 1998 addition on the east. The westernmost three bays on the Myrtle Street are identical to the corresponding bays on the O'Farrell Street elevation. The easternmost five bays are similar to the now-demolished east elevation in terms of their industrial appearance, although they are concrete instead of brick infill. The north elevation of the 1998 addition is clad in GFRC with decorative ceramic tiles identical to the east and south elevations.

**Interior**

**General**

Originally, the eight-story-over-basement interior of the Don Lee Building contained only a small section of highly finished space: primarily the showroom and the mezzanine offices. The rest of the interior was unfinished, as it was used for storing a large number of automobiles. The highly ornamented, double-height automobile showroom at the front of the building was retained and preserved in the 1998 rehabilitation. The showroom is the most highly significant interior space, displaying the highest quality materials and workmanship. The mezzanine level above the showroom originally housed the offices and more display space. Most of the high quality materials and features of this space have been retained and preserved. Floors three through eight were originally garage space with concrete floors and walls and exposed concrete columns with mushroom capitals. At the north wall there was a core of storage rooms, stairs and a large car elevator. This space has been altered to accommodate residential units, although various features have been retained.

**Basement**

Originally the basement contained mechanical equipment and storage; it was extremely utilitarian in terms of materials and finishes. In 1998 the basement was demolished and divided between garage space and mechanical equipment, including a boiler and air compressors with a loading dock along the north wall.

**Showroom**

The primary interior space is the double-height Cadillac showroom and offices, which occupy the entire first floor and mezzanine levels along the Van Ness Avenue frontage. Although the building's exterior detailing reflects an emphasis upon Renaissance Revival styling, the interior displays a strong Spanish Colonial Revival theme. The showroom floor is covered in hand-painted Mexican tiles, as are the treads and risers of the ornate double stair leading to the mezzanine. The staircase, modeled after one in Burgos Cathedral in Spain, features carved

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 4 Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

---

hardwood railings and solid wood side panels with carved shields and foliate ornament. The walls and columns of the showroom have similar carved wood wainscoting and detailing. The ceiling is an ornate composition of polychrome box beams and coffering. There were originally two fountains with ornate carved wood surrounds on the east wall of the showroom; one of these has been replaced by a wood door. Prior to 1998 there was additional display space, which was distinguished from the standard garage space by colored concrete flooring with a tooled joint pattern. During the 1998 rehabilitation, the showroom was converted into the main theater entrance and lobby. A ticket office was installed along the north wall and a restaurant was built in the south side of the space. The new construction was all built partial height and mounted in a reversible fashion. Partitions are largely glass and metal, thereby helping to mitigate the visual intrusion into the space and preserving the spatial characteristics of the showroom ceiling.

**Mezzanine**

The mezzanine is reached by the ornate staircase (described above) in the center of the showroom. Originally, at the top of the stairs there was a small lobby, with offices flanking it to either side. In 1998 the mezzanine level was converted into office use with retention of some of the original space's historic materials, namely the wood panel wainscot. The open garage space behind the mezzanine has been converted into a health club, with concrete floors and columns remaining exposed in most areas.

**Third through Eighth Floors**

Originally the third through the eighth floors were nearly identical, consisting simply of a large open volume with exposed concrete floors and walls, as well as concrete structural columns of the drop-panel/mushroom-capital variety. These spaces, originally used for storing and servicing automobiles, have been converted for use as residential units. In most of these spaces the original concrete floors, columns and exterior walls remain exposed, although new gypsum board partition walls have been installed. Each floor originally had a service/circulation core containing two passenger elevators, a freight elevator for cars, a dumbwaiter, a stair core, a trash chute, an incinerator flue, a toilet room or locker room, and a vertical shaft for building systems. The current core is located near the center of the north wall, in the same location as the original elevator/stair core.

**Penthouse**

There is a large two-story penthouse on the roof which originally contained elevator machinery, mechanical equipment, stair and storerooms. The original penthouse remains, housing new equipment and supplemented with a new residential unit.

**Alterations**

Alterations made to the building during the 1998 rehabilitation have been generally described above. The most significant alterations that warrant highlighting include the removal of the sheet metal cornice in 1955. In 1998 when the building was being rehabilitated, the original cornice was replicated in fiberglass. Alterations to the terra cotta cladding have also occurred. Below the Cadillac crest at the building's main entrance, the name of Don Lee was originally inscribed in the terra cotta entablature. In the 1950s, these blocks were replaced by terra cotta blocks inscribed "CADILLAC." These were later painted over and finally cleaned during the 1998 rehabilitation

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   7   Page   5   Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

---

work. A number of changes have occurred to the exterior signage. By 1921, the building had a sign above the vehicular entrance on O'Farrell Street, indicating the garage entrance. This sign has been changed numerous times; the most recent one read "Van Ness Auto Plaza." During the 1940s, the building had a large vertical blade sign reading "OLDSMOBILE" attached to the terra cotta quoins at the northwest corner of the building. By 1964, this sign had been replaced by a similar one at the building's southwest corner which read "CADILLAC." This sign was replaced in the 1970s with one reading "MERCURY-LINCOLN," which remained in place until the early 1990s. Currently, a vertical blade sign, reading "AMC THEATRES" is secured to the southwest corner of the facade. A smaller vertical blade sign reading "Venture Frogs" is attached to the northwest corner of the building. Undoubtedly, the most substantial change to the building is the large, eight-story rear addition, described above, that occupies the eastern half of the parcel. Minor interior alterations occurred prior to 1998, mostly in the form of offices throughout the building; these were removed during the 1998 rehabilitation.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   8   Page   1   Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

---

**Statement of Significance**

The Don Lee Building, located at 1000 Van Ness Avenue in San Francisco, is the largest and one of the three most architecturally significant automobile showrooms on San Francisco's historic "Auto Row." The Don Lee Building is significant on the local level under *National Register* Criterion C as a building that "embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction." Although automobile showrooms have been around in San Francisco since at least the turn-of-the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Don Lee was the first local automobile agent to commission a large-scale "object lesson" showroom for his Cadillac dealership, when he hired the firm Weeks & Day in 1921. Automobile distribution had become an increasingly competitive business during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century throughout the nation. As the private automobile became a standard commodity of middle-class American life, hundreds of manufacturers rose to meet the demand. Within this increasingly competitive field, manufacturers quickly learned the value of the showroom in marketing their products to consumers. Larger companies such as Ford, Oldsmobile and Packard commissioned "object lesson" showrooms in major cities to serve as examples for their agents to follow. They understood that the architecture of the showroom was at least as important as its primary functional role: as a place to display, store and repair automobiles. In an era in which smaller automobile manufacturers were being weeded out, larger manufacturers aimed to reinforce customer confidence by designing automobile dealerships that, like banks, conveyed a sense of stability and permanency. Also important, early automobile showrooms constructed during the "Roaring Twenties" were designed to catch the eye of potential customers. In San Francisco Don Lee was the first to commission such an elaborate showroom for his prominent corner lot on Van Ness Avenue. The completion of the Don Lee Building in 1921 led to increasing rivalries between local dealers, as each tried to outdo each other by commissioning prominent architectural firms to design increasingly elaborate showrooms. The Don Lee Building is a good example of a commercial building of its period. Although in essence a utilitarian concrete loft structure, the architecture of the building embodied popular historicist imagery derived from a multitude of sources including Renaissance Italy and idealized Spanish Colonial architecture. In addition to embodying the distinctive and eclectic stylistic characteristics of the period, the Don Lee Building displays a relatively early example of an important innovation in the construction of commercial loft structures: the drop-panel/mushroom-column system.

**Criterion C**

The Don Lee Building is significant on the local level under Criterion C as an excellent example of an automobile showroom embodying "the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction." Weeks & Day's design reveals the influence of current theories of automobile retailing described above. Prior to the completion of the Don Lee Building in 1921, Van Ness Avenue's Automobile Row was well on its way to becoming the primary center for automobile distribution in Northern California. Nevertheless, the buildings used by agents to store, display and repair automobiles were either not built for the purpose (many were converted livery stables) or not immediately recognizable as a new building type. The Don Lee Building was the first major "object lesson" showroom to adhere to the guidelines developed by major automobile manufacturers such as Packard and General Motors. As the sole Northern California representative of the top-of-the-line Cadillac Motor Car Company, Don Lee was undoubtedly

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 2 Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

expected to display and store his large inventory of luxury cars in a suitable venue. Today the Don Lee Building joins a short and distinguished list of three very architecturally significant automobile showrooms on Van Ness Avenue. These three buildings are all located within a block of each other and include: Earle C. Anthony's Packard Showroom at 901-25 Van Ness (designed by Bernard Maybeck in 1926), the Ernest Ingold Automobile Display and Service Building at 945-99 Van Ness (designed by John Dinwiddie in 1937) and the Don Lee Building at 1000 Van Ness.

**History of Van Ness Avenue Before 1906**

San Francisco's Auto Row is a thirteen-block section of Van Ness Avenue, bounded on the south by Turk Street and on the north by Jackson Street. Van Ness Avenue is a major north-south arterial, located about a mile and a half west of downtown, which connects the Mission District and the Civic Center with the Marina District and the Golden Gate Bridge. Van Ness Avenue was originally platted as part of the 1858 Van Ness Ordinance. Laid out in a sand and scrub-filled valley between Nob and Russian Hills to the east and the Western Addition to the west, speculators envisioned Van Ness Avenue as becoming a grand residential boulevard, akin to New York's Fifth Avenue. Despite these heady ambitions, Van Ness Avenue actually developed very slowly, largely due to its remote location. Nonetheless, residential development gradually crept westward toward Van Ness, in advance of the expansion of the city's commercial and retail core. By the 1870s the lower part of Van Ness Avenue and Polk Street had evolved into a working-class residential district composed of two-family, wood-frame flats and single-family cottages. Meanwhile, the central and upper portions of Van Ness were in the process of developing into a district of mansions built by wealthy families pushed out of San Francisco's first elite neighborhood, Rincon Hill. By the 1890s, members of San Francisco's elite, including the Spreckels, Crocker and Giannini families, had all commissioned large and sumptuous residences along Van Ness Avenue. The few non-residential buildings on the avenue existed to serve local residents and included churches, hotels and social clubs, such as St. Luke's Church, the Concordia Club and St. Dunstan's Hotel. Livery stables and workshops were clustered along the alleys and back streets intersecting Van Ness. Polk Street, located one block to the east, served as the primary commercial corridor for the neighborhood.

**Van Ness Avenue After the 1906 Earthquake and Fire**

The 1906 earthquake and fire was a watershed event for Van Ness Avenue. Broken gas lines caused an outbreak of several fires that consumed virtually all of downtown and the South of Market District within the first two days. As the fires spread toward the Western Addition, firemen established several firebreaks but the flames breached each one. At Van Ness Avenue the firemen decided to make a final stand and dynamited all structures on the east side of the avenue from Filbert Street to Market. Due to the width of Van Ness and more important, a sudden change in winds, this tactic was successful and the Western Addition was mostly spared. Van Ness Avenue did not recover its pre-1906 role as a prestigious residential boulevard. Immediately after the catastrophe, owners of burned-out downtown department stores, such as the City of Paris and the White House, relocated to temporary quarters along Van Ness Avenue while Union Square was reconstructed. Department store owners converted mansions on the west side of Van Ness Avenue into shops and cafes and erected temporary buildings of steel and wood on the east side. After two to three years the department stores began moving back to Union Square but Van Ness Avenue still did not recover its quiet and genteel atmosphere that had existed before the earthquake. The reasons are complex, but can mostly be attributed to the fact that as

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   8   Page   3   Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

development pushed westward during the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the most desirable residential zone of the city was migrating westward as well. Second, the expansion of downtown to the west increased the commercial value of property on Van Ness Avenue. In response to these conditions, wealthy families who had lived on Van Ness Avenue before the earthquake sold their large and hard-to-maintain residences to developers and moved westward to newer residential districts such as western Pacific Heights, Presidio Heights and Seacliff Terrace. The earthquake only hastened the transition and speculators gradually remade Van Ness Avenue into a mixed-use commercial district consisting of commercial buildings, large middle-class and upper middle-class apartment houses, churches and civic buildings.

**Development of the American Auto Showroom**

Despite the legions of naysayers, many of whom believed that the automobile was simply a fad or a toy of the very rich, the popularity of the "horseless carriage" grew year by year after commercial production began in 1898. Initially, automobiles were constructed by a myriad of local independent workshops, many of which had previously built horse-drawn buggies and carriages. However, as with most lucrative enterprises requiring substantial capital, only the strong prospered and survived, mostly by taking over smaller operations, and in the process expanding their distribution networks to far-flung locales. In order to save the expense of having to build showrooms throughout the nation, larger automobile manufactures, increasingly concentrated in and around Detroit, Michigan, began contracting with local entrepreneurs called "agents" to sell their products. Businessmen owning businesses such as carriage shops or livery stables, often acquired the first franchises. After 1900 the sale of automobiles boomed and agents responded by dropping their previous product lines to concentrate on selling only "horseless carriages." Nevertheless, buildings constructed to house livery stables or carriage shops were usually much too small to effectively display, store and service a sufficiently large inventory of automobiles. In response, agents began building new structures to house and service automobiles. Typically located on the fringes of downtown, these new buildings did not usually stand out as a distinct building type. Often they resembled contemporary multi-story commercial blocks, the only major difference being the addition of large hinged or rolling doors to allow vehicles to be driven in and out.

**"Object Lesson Showrooms"**

As competition between automobile manufacturers increased after the First World War, Detroit became less inclined to leave the design of showrooms to the whim of the independent agents. In response, manufacturers began commissioning "object lesson" showrooms in major cities such as New York, Detroit and Chicago. The object lesson showrooms represented the polar opposite of the converted livery stables of the past. For the design of these object lesson showrooms, automobile manufacturers hired prominent architects such as Detroit's Albert Kahn, famous for designing large concrete-frame automobile plants and mansions for Detroit's elite. Kahn's object lesson showrooms were designed to be impressive structures, more closely resembling prominent civic building types such as banks, rather than utilitarian warehouses. In 1907, Albert Kahn designed the first company-built showroom for Packard Motor Car Company, to be located at Broadway and 61<sup>st</sup> Street in Manhattan. The three-story concrete building was given a bold terra cotta facade designed in the Renaissance Revival style. The salesroom was two stories high and illuminated by huge pendant-shaped chandeliers. The sales offices were every bit as sumptuous, recreating the atmosphere of a plush hotel lobby. However, behind the salesroom

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEETSection 8 Page 4 Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

and offices, the character of the Packard showroom was purely functional. Here amongst massive concrete columns, the automobiles were stored and serviced. These grand and opulent showrooms were intended to instill confidence in their potential buyers, increasingly necessary in an era in which consumers were justifiably concerned about widespread attrition in the realm of automobile manufacturing. Although possessing sumptuously decorated exteriors and showroom interiors, the object lesson showrooms were undeniably functional buildings, making use of modern construction techniques, particularly the drop-panel/mushroom-capital system, necessary to withstand the weight of dozens of cars, engines, repair equipment and parts. It was not long before the object lesson showrooms began to have their desired effect on local agents. Even before the First World War, agents began putting their own money into lavish new showrooms on the growing Auto Rows.

**Development of the American Auto Row**

Between 1900 to 1910, automobile production increased nearly fifty-fold in the United States to 186,000 units annually. No longer a luxury of the wealthy, overproduction made automobiles affordable to the middle classes. Following the advice of Detroit automobile manufacturers, agents not only constructed object lesson showrooms but also began moving out of the cramped central city to major arterial boulevards leading to outlying residential areas. Particularly desirable were heavily traveled streetcar lines, where a captive audience of commuters would be tempted by the shiny automobiles on display. Even before the First World War, several cities began to experience the formation of distinct new commercial districts dedicated exclusively to the sale and servicing of automobiles. Frequently several blocks in length, these corridors were developed in a consistent pattern with the large showrooms on prominent corners and smaller, one-story garages and parts shops located mid-block and on intersecting alleys. Some of the earliest and most well-known showrooms of this era include: Chicago's Michigan Avenue, Boston's Commonwealth Avenue, New York's Broadway and San Francisco's Van Ness Avenue.

**Development of San Francisco's Auto Row**

As the oldest and most important metropolis in the West until the rise of Los Angeles in the 1920s, San Francisco was the natural distribution point for automobiles in the fast-growing West Coast market. Automobile showrooms and service facilities initially appeared in San Francisco before the 1906 earthquake, on a three-block stretch of Golden Gate Avenue, bounded by Hyde Street on the east and Van Ness Avenue on the west. The 1907 *San Francisco City Directory* listed thirty-one different businesses under the heading "automobile" clustered on this corridor. From Sanborn maps it can be determined that most automobile-related businesses were housed in small commercial structures that had previously been used as livery stables or carriage-making shops. As the sale of automobiles in San Francisco grew, agents found themselves challenged by the need to find the space for storing inventory and servicing cars. Meanwhile, business-owners along this stretch of Golden Gate Avenue were beginning to encounter growing pressure from the expanding Civic Center. In response, automobile-related businesses began abandoning Golden Gate Avenue for more desirable sites along Van Ness Avenue.

The rapid transformation of Van Ness Avenue into San Francisco's own Auto Row did not escape the notice of observers who welcomed what they interpreted to be the ultimate sign of progress. In 1919 Edward A. Murphy, writing in the *San Francisco Chronicle* boasted:

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 5 Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

---

Van Ness Avenue is now so broad and so imposing a boulevard, and so beautifully graded withal, that it requires an effort of imagination to imagine it could ever have been anything else. The elite of the automobile aristocracy now have their showrooms there. It is the last cry in modernity.

Early automobile retailers certainly appreciated the advantages of relocating to Van Ness Avenue. Many of the blocks between the Civic Center and Pine Street are bisected into smaller blocks by a series of intersecting alleys. This particular condition allowed agents to build showrooms on lots with two frontages—one facing Van Ness for the showroom and another on an alley, where the service bays and car elevator would be located. The high visibility of Van Ness Avenue was another attraction. Even before the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937, Van Ness Avenue was the widest artery in the city and the most heavily traveled corridor after Market Street. Streetcars traveled up and down the avenue and along cross streets, carrying commuters from the Western Addition, Pacific Heights and other neighborhoods to their jobs downtown, creating a captive audience for automobile dealers. Taking advantage of these siting advantages, automobile agents hired prominent architects to design showrooms that, similar to contemporary movie palaces, would be sure to grab the attention of passers-by.

**Evolution of the Automobile Showroom in San Francisco**

Mirroring national trends, the first automobile showrooms and service facilities in San Francisco were usually modest structures, frequently converted livery stables. Following the transfer of automobile-related businesses to Van Ness Avenue after 1906, the automobile showroom gradually evolved into an identifiable building type. The showroom, which usually occupied the entire street frontage, was typically finished with high quality materials and ornate finishes. Office space was usually located behind the showroom or on the mezzanine level; these spaces were only slightly less elaborate than the showrooms. Garage areas, service bays and parts departments were located behind the offices and on the upper floors. One of the earliest surviving showrooms on Van Ness Avenue is the Roos Brothers Building at 1415 Van Ness. A two-story, wood-frame structure, this bracketed Renaissance Revival-style showroom was built in 1909 and represents the earliest generation of showroom architecture in San Francisco. By 1920 the typical automobile showroom had progressed in terms of size and elaboration, with concrete construction, higher quality materials and more sophisticated design influences evident. Some of the prominent San Francisco architecture firms who designed early showrooms on Van Ness included: Charles A. Meussdorfer, Sylvain Schnaittacher, Rousseau & Rousseau, the O'Brien Brothers and Willis Polk & Company.

Nevertheless, the Golden Age of San Francisco's Auto Row did not truly arrive until the early 1920s, when the booming stock market inspired millions of Americans to purchase automobiles, creating unprecedented opportunities for automobile retailers. The Don Lee Building was the first of this new generation of important showrooms to be built on San Francisco's Auto Row. The Don Lee Building inspired the design of most subsequent showrooms in terms of scale and elaboration, including: the Paige Motor Car Company Showroom at 1699 Van Ness, designed in 1922 by Sylvain Schnaittacher; and the Earle C. Anthony Packard Showroom at 901 Van Ness, designed in 1926 by Bernard Maybeck.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 6 Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

---

**Decline of the American Auto Row**

The two decades following the Stock Market Crash of 1929 would not be kind to either automobile manufacturers or their agents, leading to a gradual halt in the construction of major showrooms. The onset of the Depression caused a sharp drop in new car sales nationally and manufacturers and agents suddenly found themselves overburdened by large inventories they could not sell. In addition, wartime production during the 1940s completely halted new car production for almost five years. With few new cars being sold, automobile agents concentrated upon servicing existing vehicles and selling used cars. The post-war period ushered in the now-famous mass-suburbanization of the American public. In response, many automobile dealers (no longer called "agents") followed their customers away from the traditional Auto Rows to large sites near highway interchanges and sprouting subdivisions. In their new locations, suburban auto dealers did not typically commission elaborate showrooms. As the automobile became an almost universally standard commodity like food or clothes, it became less necessary to spend resources to market them through architecture. Television and radio advertising now informed public tastes and ended the need for on-site marketing. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the automobile showroom had become a vestigial component of the modern "auto mall." In the new method of automobile retailing, the showroom became a prefabricated shed, housing the business office, several service bays and maybe a small utilitarian showroom.

**Decline of San Francisco's Auto Row**

Following the designation of Van Ness Avenue as U.S. Highway 101 and the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge in 1937, Van Ness became the primary vehicular north-south thoroughfare in the eastern half of San Francisco, linking San Francisco and the Peninsula to Marin County and points north. Auto Row continued to prosper for some time after the opening of the bridge but it also found itself faced with increasing competition from other businesses vying for space along the heavily traveled thoroughfare. Even before the Second World War, Van Ness Avenue (along with Lombard Street) began to undergo an influx of non auto-related businesses geared toward the thousands of locals, suburbanites and tourists who traveled the avenue every day. Movie theaters, restaurants, furniture stores and roadside motels and motor courts (oriented toward the growing tourist trade) began opening alongside the historic Van Ness Avenue automobile showrooms. Due to the Depression and World War II, only a handful of new automobile showrooms were constructed on Auto Row after 1929, although several were remodeled in the Moderne style during the 1940s. The only new showroom of consequence constructed after the Stock Market Crash was the Ernest Ingold Building, a unique Streamline-Moderne style showroom and repair facility designed by Bay Region architect John E. Dinwiddie and constructed in 1937. Although somewhat diminished in importance, Van Ness Avenue continued as the Bay Area's primary automobile retail destination until the early 1970s, when major suburban auto malls lured away suburban customers, who increasingly had little reason to come to San Francisco anymore.

**Cadillac Motor Company**

The position of Cadillac as one of America's top prestige automobile manufacturers during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century led in part to the distinctive architecture and innovative technology employed in the design of the Don Lee Building. During this era, the American automobile industry was characterized by a sense of excitement generated by the automobiles themselves as well as by the money to be made from manufacturing and selling them. From 1898 until the

---

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   8   Page   7   Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

end of the First World War, the American automobile industry boomed and gave birth to a variety of competing automobile manufacturers. Before consolidation and competition began to weed out the weaker companies, the automobile industry was made up not only of major corporations such as Ford, General Motors or Chrysler, but also a plethora of smaller companies with names like Duryea, Stutz, National, Mitchell, Saxon and Peerless. Cadillac Motor Cars, founded in 1903, was initially one of the smaller companies. A year later, the entrepreneur Henry Leland bought the company and made it a viable concern by firmly establishing the company's reputation for quality, luxury and innovative engineering. In 1909, Leland sold Cadillac to the newly formed General Motors Corporation of Detroit, headed by William C. Durant. Leland remained as the division head of Cadillac, which was now marketed as General Motors' luxury car line. Cadillac continued to maintain its reputation for quality, luxury and innovation throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Under the leadership of Leland, Cadillac introduced the V-8 engine, the electric starter, the synchro-mesh transmission and in 1930, the first V-16 engine! The design of Cadillac showrooms was a high priority of Leland's and he made sure that the regional company agents had the wherewithal to build showrooms that would suit the prestige of the company.

**Don Lee**

By 1920, Henry Leland appointed longtime Cadillac agent Don Lee to be the exclusive distributor of Cadillac motor cars in the entire state of California. Don Lee, a prominent California businessman, was the perfect choice to represent Cadillac in the growing California/West Coast market. Lee was born in Lansing, Michigan in 1880. Soon after coming to Los Angeles in 1904 he established a successful independent automobile coach factory. In 1905, Henry Leland made Lee the exclusive distributor for Cadillac motor cars in Southern California. In 1912 Lee moved north to San Francisco to expand his Cadillac franchise into Northern California. In 1915 the *Chronicle* noted that Lee had opened the "world's largest" automobile showroom at the corner of California and Van Ness, six blocks north of the Don Lee Building. By 1920 Lee owned six dealerships throughout the state and earned the exclusive right to distribute Cadillac motor cars throughout California. By the terms of his agreement with Leland, Lee took delivery of all Cadillacs sent to California from the factory in Michigan. He could then sell them in one of his own showrooms or apply his own markup and resell them to independent dealers. According to an article in the March 8, 1926 article of the *Examiner*, Don Lee sold the second-highest number of cars of any Cadillac agent in the United States.

**Don Lee Builds 1000 Van Ness**

Not willing to be outshone by Stutz, Duesenberg or other prestige auto manufacturers, Henry Leland expected Don Lee to build a showroom that would reflect the prestige of the brand. The Don Lee Building, as it would be known, conformed to the historical patterns discussed in the sections above. It was the first major "object lesson" showroom constructed on San Francisco's Auto Row and influenced the design of subsequent showrooms in terms of scale and elaboration. In 1920 Don Lee commissioned the prominent San Francisco firm of Weeks & Day to design a new showroom and service facility on a large vacant block on the east side of Van Ness Avenue. According to the building permit application, the showroom was to be an eight-story, concrete-frame structure with a footprint measuring 120' x 206'-6." Lindgren & Company, a major San Francisco construction firm, built the \$600,000 building and it was ready for occupancy on November 20, 1921.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section  8  Page  8  Name of Property  Lee, Don, Building   
County and State  San Francisco Co., CA

**Press Response to the Don Lee Building**

Upon completion, the Don Lee Building attracted favorable comment from the local and national press. It was featured twice in the *Architect and Engineer of California* (October 1921 and July 1923 editions) and once in the April 1921 edition of *Motor Land*, the official journal of the California Chapter of the American Automobile Association. According to the *Motor Land* article, Don Lee had fulfilled his stated ambition "to build the most modern structure of its kind in the United States." The article stated that the building was "declared by all who have seen it to be by far the finest automobile service building in the United States." This was not necessarily a hyperbolic statement as the American Automobile Association was the most well respected voice of the influential automobile industry in California. Highlighted in *Architect & Engineer of California*, the new Don Lee Building attracted the enthusiastic praise of Irving F. Morrow, the designer of the Golden Gate Bridge and a regular contributor to the journal. He wrote:

Anyone disposed to be dispirited by the ruthlessness of the machine in ousting humanity from human affairs is inclined to sit up and take notice at the sight of a building such as this one. It is a direct challenge to the generally assumed competency of facts and figures to exclusive dominance in practical matters.

Although Morrow conceded that the Don Lee Building was built to display "cars of the highest class," and not lowly Chevrolets, he lauded the owner for investing considerable effort and expense into the design of what was in reality "a garage, loft building, and automobile sales room." He commended Weeks & Day and Lee for tacitly admitting in the design of the building: "that even on the commercial and industrial plan man shall not live by bread alone...Obvious expenditure has been made for elements and features which contribute solely to the agreeableness of the building over and above its physical efficiency."

**Type**

Like the airport, the subway station, the automobile showroom was an architectural response to advances in transportation technology during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The Don Lee Building is the best example of an "object lesson" showroom design in San Francisco. When most people think of a modern car dealership, they most likely envision a low-slung utilitarian structure located on a suburban commercial strip, with a large backlit plastic sign looming over a sea of parked cars. During the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century nobody knew exactly what an automobile showroom should look like or how it should function. The resulting object lesson prototype was a vastly different response to the problem of storing and marketing automobiles than what is typically seen today. Architects and agents argued back and forth over whether the auto showroom should be a utilitarian structure more akin to a warehouse, or a highly ornamented commercial building similar to a downtown department store. Initially designed as functional storage buildings with large display windows, the automobile showroom rapidly evolved toward greater elaboration and more sumptuous ornamentation. Before the dispersal of automobile showrooms to the suburbs after-the Second World War, urban showrooms along Van Ness Avenue and other Auto Rows across the country were usually multi-story, concrete-frame loft buildings with fanciful architectural detailing and eye-catching neon signs. The Don Lee Building was one of the first showrooms to manifest this trend in San Francisco when completed in 1921. It remained the largest and most extravagant showroom on Van Ness Avenue and became the yardstick by

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 9 Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

---

which later showrooms, such as the Earle C. Anthony Packard and Ernest Ingold Showrooms would be measured.

**Period**

The Don Lee Building is an interesting blend of both functional articulation and eclectic stylistic influences characteristic of many commercial buildings designed in America during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This eclecticism was a situation that would not change until the arrival of the 1925 Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels in Paris and the founding of the Modern Movement. The application of abundant Renaissance Revival and Spanish Colonial Revival ornament to a simple concrete loft structure on the Don Lee Building is characteristic of the pre-Modernist era in architecture. While the building displays a grid-like geometry that expresses its underlying structural organization, its Renaissance-inspired façade organization, consisting of a rusticated base, a shaft articulated by vertical bands of windows, and an elaborate cornice, are all indicative of the architect's classical training at the prestigious Ecole des Beaux Arts. Meanwhile, the abundant Spanish Colonial Revival ornamentation of the showroom interior as well as some exterior detailing, reflects an increasing interest in regional Spanish Colonial architecture. Initially popularized during the 1916 Panama California International Exposition in San Diego, the Spanish Colonial Revival style became an important idiom for California architects seeking to incorporate regional architectural forms into modern building types during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. During the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s and 1940s automobile showrooms, both new and remodeled (in addition to many other building types), increasingly adopted a much more stripped-down appearance that reflected the growing interest in functionalism and "honesty" in expression of modern materials.

**Weeks & Day**

Don Lee's choice of the San Francisco firm of Weeks & Day for the design of the Don Lee Building could not have been more appropriate. The partnership consisted of Charles Peter Weeks, a talented Ecole-trained architect and William Payton Day, a very well respected structural engineer. Born in 1870 in Chicago, Illinois, Weeks graduated from the architecture program at Buchtel College (now Ohio State University at Akron) in 1895. He went on to Paris to complete his studies at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the most desirable position that an American architect in training could ever aspire to. After completing his studies, Weeks returned to the United States to work, first in Cleveland and later in New York City in the office of John Galen Howard. In 1901 Howard was appointed Supervising Architect of the University of California and Weeks moved to San Francisco to work in Howard's West Coast office. However, Weeks soon left and for a while he practiced in a firm called Sutton & Weeks. In 1916 he established a new partnership with consulting engineer William Payton Day. Weeks & Day designed a number of important buildings in San Francisco and Northern California, including the Union Iron Works Power House in 1916; the California State Capitol Extension in 1918; the Steil Building in 1921; the Huntington Hotel in 1924; the Fireman's Fund Insurance Company in 1924 and 1929; the Mark Hopkins Hotel in 1927 and the Sir Francis Drake Hotel in 1928. Interestingly, in 1924 the Office of the Department of Works and Railways in Australia awarded Weeks & Day first place for their preliminary design of the House of Parliament at Canberra. Weeks & Day's early body of work demonstrates the strength of Weeks' Beaux-Arts training. Meanwhile, the skill with which the firm could utilize revolutionary structural techniques, namely the drop-panel/mushroom-capital frame, indicates the engineering abilities of William Payton Day.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 10 Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

---

**Method of Construction**

Despite its exuberant ornamentation, the Don Lee Building is also an excellent example of a utilitarian commercial building of the period, utilizing modern building techniques pioneered in the United States during the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. As the exclusive distributor of Cadillacs in California, Don Lee had to maintain a large inventory of automobiles on the premises, not to mention heavy equipment, hence his need to build a multi-story loft structure, capable of sustaining heavy loads. Additionally, in order to move cars up and down, he needed to puncture the floor plate with large openings for ramps and elevators. The Don Lee Building makes use of a pioneering concrete-based construction technique known as the drop-panel/mushroom column system. This "girderless" system allows loads to be transferred directly from the floor slab to the column, thereby eliminating the necessity for beams or girders. The mushroom capital increases the effective area through which the load is transferred to the column and the drop-panel resists shear forces. Combined with each other, the dropped-panel/mushroom-capital system helped to prevent structural failure through puncture, a problem in early girderless construction. Advantageous for buildings needing large floor openings such as factories, warehouses, or garages, the drop-panel/mushroom-capital system enabled large areas of floor slab to be removed without having to provide additional cross-girders. The first national patent for a so-called "mushroom capital" is dated to 1914, seven years before the construction of the Don Lee Building. In San Francisco, the earliest known example of drop-panel/mushroom-capital construction is the Pacific Coast Envelope Company Building located at 400 2<sup>nd</sup> Street. Constructed in 1917 by Palmer & Petersen, a design-build company, the building was finished only four years before the Don Lee Building.

**Conclusion**

The Don Lee Building is the largest and one of three most architecturally significant historic automobile showrooms on San Francisco's historic Auto Row. The building is significant on the local level under *National Register* Criterion C as a building that "embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction." Don Lee, the exclusive distributor of Cadillac Motor Cars in California from 1920 until his death in 1934, sought to build the biggest and most splendid showroom for his prominent lot on the corner of Van Ness Avenue and O'Farrell Street. His selection of Weeks & Day was a good one. Weeks' classical training at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, combined with Day's engineering expertise made the Don Lee Building what it is today: an architecturally significant reinforced-concrete loft building. Although there are many of this type in San Francisco, the Don Lee Building is one of the finest. It is also an excellent example of a "object lesson" automobile showroom, pioneered by the manufacturers prior to the First World War. The Don Lee Building is comparable to automobile showrooms commissioned by the likes of Packard or Oldsmobile on other major Auto Rows in Detroit, Chicago and New York. Auto manufacturers and agents understood alike that the attractiveness of the showroom was at least as important as its primary functional roles: as a place to display, store and repair automobiles.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEETSection 8 Page 11 Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA**Appendix A: List of Extant Historic Automobile Showrooms on Van Ness Avenue**

<b>Address</b>	<b>Original Use</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Architect</b>	<b>Rating</b>
700-10 Van Ness	auto sales/business college	1915	William Knowles	C
714 Van Ness	service garage	1913	H. Barth	C
722-32 Van Ness	auto sales	1917	Matthew O'Brien	D
731-99 Van Ness	service garage	1916	Willis Polk & Co.	B
800-06 Van Ness	auto sales/manufacturing	1920	W. L. Schmolle	C
901-25 Van Ness	Earle Anthony Packard	1926	Bernard Maybeck	A
928 Van Ness	auto sales/service	1920	? Ettler	C
945-99 Van Ness	Ernest Ingold Showroom	1937	John E. Dinwiddie	A
950 Van Ness	auto sales	1919	Joseph L. Stewart	C
*1000 Van Ness	Don Lee Cadillac	1921	Weeks & Day	A
1100-22 Van Ness	Reo Motor Company	1912	Charles A. Meussdorfer	D
1200 Van Ness	auto sales/manufacturing	1911	MacDonald & Applegarth	B
1301-45 Van Ness	Goodyear Tire	1911	Cunningham & Politeo	B
1346-50 Van Ness	Stutz Automobile Showroom	1912	George Applegarth	C
1355-75 Van Ness	Willys-Overland Showroom	1916/49	Bellmany Nordhoff	N/R
1400 Van Ness	auto sales	1912	H. Barth	B
1414 Van Ness	Firestone Tires	1912	Oser Brothers	C
1415-25 Van Ness	Roos Brothers Showroom	1906	Julius Krafft	B
1430-50 Van Ness	Stearns Auto Showroom	1912	Sylvain Schnaittacher	C

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 12 Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

Address	Original Use	Date	Architect	Rating
1600 Van Ness	Larkins & Co., Auto Bodies	1913	O'Brien Brothers	C
1625-45 Van Ness	L. Dallen Inc.	1919	?	B
1647-99 Van Ness	Paige Motor Car Company	1919/22	Sylvain Schaittacher	B
1701 Van Ness	Leavitt Auto Sales	1917/45	?	N/R
1835-49 Van Ness	Nash Motor Car Company	1920/26	Howard Schulz	C
1900 Van Ness	Stutz Auto Sales	1919	Rousseau & Rousseau	C
2000 Van Ness	Cuyler-Lee Auto Sales	1908/28	Willis Polk & Co.	C
2050 Van Ness	auto sales	1913	H. Barth	C

Note: The architectural ratings were assigned by the San Francisco Department of City Planning when the Van Ness Corridor was surveyed in the 1980s. The Ratings are based upon the Kalman Methodology, formerly used by the Planning Department to evaluate historic resources. Using this system, a rating of "A" is a building of "highest importance" and individually eligible for listing in the *National Register of Historic Places* or as a San Francisco City Landmark. Buildings with ratings of "B" are buildings of "major importance" and may be eligible for listing in the *National Register*. Buildings assigned a rating of "C" are of "contextual importance." Buildings given a rating of "D" are of "minor or no importance" and include buildings that have been heavily altered. Buildings with a designation of N/R were not rated, largely due to having been heavily altered after the end of the period of significance.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   9   Page   1   Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

---

**Bibliography**

- Andreini, Donald and Lauren Bricker. "Historic Automobile Row Confronts Change," *San Francisco Architectural Heritage Newsletter* (Fall 1998), pp. 7-10.
- "Auto and Radio Magnate Victim of Heart Attack," *San Francisco Examiner* (1934).
- Crocker-Langley Company. *San Francisco City Directories: 1899-1980*.
- "Don Lee Ranks Second in U.S.," *San Francisco Examiner* (March 8, 1926).
- Hamilton, Edward H. "Mystery of Staircase Out," *San Francisco Examiner* (December 12, 1921).
- "Here and There in Motordom," *Motor Land* (April 1921).
- "If I Were Broke, What?," *Los Angeles Examiner* (April 15, 1923).
- "KFRC to Move, Have New Set," *San Francisco Examiner* (February 10, 1927).
- Liebs, Chester H. *Main Street to Miracle Mile*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985.
- Morrow, Irving R. "The Don Lee Building, San Francisco," *The Architect & Engineer*, Volume 67, Number 1 (October 1921).
- , "Some Contrasts of Romantic and Classic," *The Architect & Engineer*, Volume 74, Number 1 (July 1923).
- "New Building Will Be Ready First of Year," *San Francisco Examiner* (date illegible).
- "New Partnership," *The Architect & Engineer*, Volume 47, Number 1 (October 1916).
- "Obituary: Weeks, Charles Peter," *The Architect & Engineer*, Volume 145 (June 1941).
- San Francisco Architectural Heritage. Architect file for Weeks & Day.
- San Francisco Department of Building Inspection. Plans and permits for 1000 Van Ness.
- San Francisco Department of City Planning. *San Francisco Master Plan: Van Ness Area Plan*. San Francisco: 1983.
- San Francisco Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board. *Final Case Report: The Don Lee Building*. (December 10, 1981).
- San Francisco Assessor's Office. Deeds associated with 1000 Van Ness.
-

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section   9   Page   2   Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

---

Sanborn Fire Insurance Company. *Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps: 1899, 1905, 1913, 1928, 1948, 1990.*

Sloan, Alfred P. *My Years at GM.* 1965.

Soberanis, Pat. "The Grandest Auto Row," *Motor Land* (July/August 1990).

Withey, Henry F., ed. *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects.* New York: New Age Publishing, 1956.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
CONTINUATION SHEET

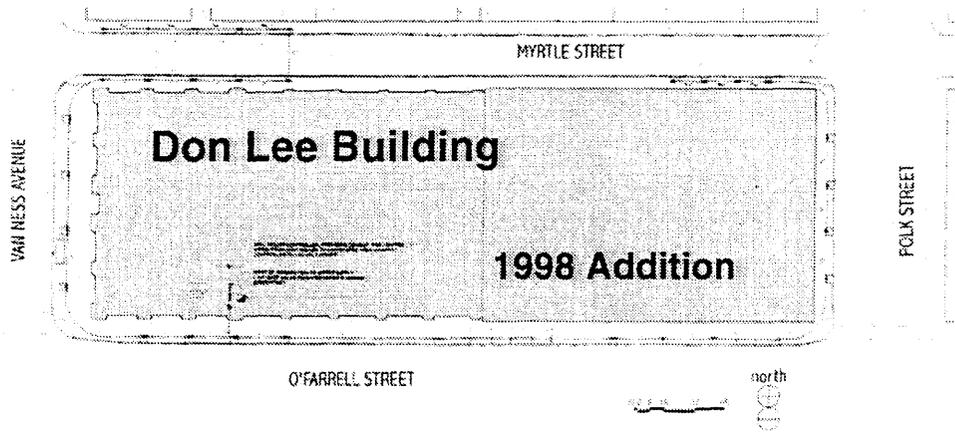
Section 10 Page 1 Name of Property Lee, Don, Building  
County and State San Francisco Co., CA

**Boundary Description**

The Don Lee Building is located on Block 715/Lot 5 in San Francisco's Van Ness Corridor Planning Area. The parcel is coterminous with a block bounded on the west by Van Ness Avenue, O'Farrell Street to the south, Polk Street to the east and Myrtle Street to the north. The Don Lee Building occupies the western portion of the lot and the addition occupies the eastern portion of the block. The entire Don Lee Building and the 1998 addition are being included within the National Register nomination.

**Boundary Justification**

The boundaries were chosen to correspond with the historic exterior walls of the Don Lee Building. The modern addition was excluded from the boundaries.



**Sketch map showing site of Don Lee Building**