NPS Form 10-900
(Oct.1990)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register Of Historic Places Registration Form

Sub Rer Paul L per 1206

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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 **New Mission Theater**

other names/site number **Evermax Furniture**

2. Location

street & number **2550 Mission Street** NA ☐ not for publication

city or town **San Francisco** NA ☐ vicinity

state **California** code **CA** county **San Francisco** code **075** zip code **94110**

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.)

Signature of certifying official/Title — Date: 9/19/01

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): _____

for Edson H. Beall — Signature of the Keeper — Date of Action: 11.9.01

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	0	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)

Recreation/Culture: theater

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce/Trade: specialty store

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Art Deco

Classical Revival

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete

roof steel truss and concrete

walls concrete and brick

other plaster, wood, steel, glass

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.

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Period of Significance

1916-1917

1932

Significant Dates

1916

1917

1932

Significant Person
(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

NA

Cultural Affiliation

NA

Architect/Builder

Reid Brothers, Architects

Miller & Pflueger, Architects

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 Main Library, History Room

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

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

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1	10	~~551260~~	~~4178660~~	3			
2		551175	4178890	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**

organization **San Francisco Architectural Heritage** date **May 13, 2001**

street & number **2007 Franklin Street** telephone **415-441-3000**

city or town **San Francisco** state **CA** zip code **94109**

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 **Peter Goldstein, CFO, City College of San Francisco**

street & number **33 Gough Street** telephone **415-239-3000**

city or town **San Francisco** state **CA** zip code **94103**

Introduction

The New Mission Theater is a 2,800-seat motion picture house located at 2550 Mission Street in the heart of San Francisco's Mission District. The 2500 block of Mission Street, where the New Mission Theater is located, is dominated by a mixture of one-and two-story commercial buildings constructed during the first quarter of the 20th Century. The New Mission Theater is an interesting juxtaposition of two building campaigns. It is composed of an Art Deco façade and promenade lobby, both designed in 1932 by architect Timothy Pflueger, and a large Renaissance/Neoclassical Revival auditorium, designed in 1916-17 by the Reid Brothers. The theater has an "L" shaped plan; the promenade lobby is 30' wide and it extends 142' to the middle of the block, where it meets the 102' x 108' auditorium. The auditorium is the foot of the "L" and extends over 100' along Bartlett Street. Today the theater's prominent pylon sign is one of the most recognizable architectural landmarks in the Mission District. Pflueger's façade and promenade lobby embody the architect's own imaginative use of Art Deco and Mayan imagery as rendered in plaster wall relief, murals, etched glass and ornamental metalwork. Meanwhile, the 1917 auditorium is one of the largest surviving movie palace interiors in San Francisco with a seating capacity of almost 3,000. Designed by San Francisco's famed Reid Brothers, the auditorium is less heavily altered than the promenade lobby and retains most of its original architectural detailing. The interior of the auditorium is characterized by an abundance of imaginative, over-scaled Neoclassical and Renaissance architectural elements, such as the tremendous gilded Corinthian Order columns and pilasters, flood lights hidden within plaster urns, elaborate Neoclassical Revival cornice moldings and fanciful murals. Unfortunately, the New Mission Theater has suffered from years of deferred maintenance and some unsympathetic, but mostly reversible, alterations. The theater currently houses a furniture store.

The theater is located on a large, irregularly shaped parcel which also includes the historic but heavily altered Giant Value Store, a separate but adjoining structure on the same parcel. The Giant Value Store was once a neighborhood branch of Hales Brother Department Store, a major downtown San Francisco institution throughout much of the 20th Century. Originally a three-story, Renaissance Revival commercial block, the existing structure displays none of its original character-defining features; the cornice and storefront have been removed and the rest of the façade has been covered with fiberglass paneling.

Context

The towering sheet metal façade of the New Mission Theater can be seen for several blocks from multiple directions. It is located on one of the busiest blocks of Mission Street, a busy shopping area in the heart of San Francisco's working-class Mission District. The theater is one of the best-preserved structures on this particular block of heavily modernized commercial buildings, most of which date from the first quarter of the 20th Century. To the north is a heavily altered, two-story brick commercial building. To the south is the Giant Value Store and directly across the street from the theater is the decaying and abandoned Wigwam/Rialto Theater, a historic Vaudeville house. The New Mission Theater is one of the lynchpins of what was once one of the city's most important theater districts, rivaled only by the Downtown Market Street theater district. Formerly known as the "Mission Miracle Mile," this district comprised roughly eight blocks of Mission Street between 16th and 24th Streets and in addition to a selection of downtown department stores, it included at least a dozen nickelodeons, Vaudeville houses and movie palaces.

Exterior Description

Mission Street Elevation

The Mission Street elevation was designed by Timothy Pflueger in 1932 to replace the Reid Brothers'1916 façade. The Reid Brothers' brick-and-stucco facade had been one-story in height and designed in a fanciful blend of Mission Revival and Neoclassical elements. Mission Revival elements included the scalloped parapet with lobed arches and quatrefoil niches and Neoclassical details included urns, Corinthian pilasters and acanthus leaf brackets. The original vestibule and ticket booth was sheltered beneath an ornamental metal-and-glass canopy. Pflueger designed several movie palaces throughout Northern California in a variety of styles, ranging from Churrigueresque to Streamline/Moderne and his 1932 façade for the New Mission Theater is the only surviving example of a theater façade designed in the Art Deco style by the architect in San Francisco. The manner in which Pflueger's facade combines architecture and signage is unprecedented in San Francisco.

The 70'-tall Art Deco sign is one of the most prominent architectural features in the Mission District (Photo 1). The tripartite facade arrangement consists of a large vestibule with a terrazzo floor and ticket booth at street-level; a cantilevered sheet metal marquee and a streamlined parapet in the center, and a large freestanding pylon sign which extends upward from the marquee 70' (Photo 2). Designed during the early years of the Automobile Age, Pflueger's New Mission Theater facade was scaled to arrest the attention of both passing motorists and streetcar passengers, as well as pedestrians. The sign is fabricated of ten, sculpted sheet metal sections painted International Orange. Originally the sign was illuminated at night by neon tubes spelling out "NEW MISSION." Pflueger's façade design, with its pylon-shaped sign and heavy projecting parapet, was inspired by Mayan temples on the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico (Photo 3), reflecting the architect's longstanding interest in Pre-Columbian Mexican architecture. The facade also displays European-derived Art Deco detailing such as low-relief ornament, volutes and upturned lines at regular intervals suggesting upward motion and speed. The vertical tripartite composition and exterior details recall Pflueger's better-known and contemporary Paramount Theater in Oakland. Aside from peeling paint and broken neon tubes, the façade of the theater retains a remarkably high degree of integrity, unusual for theater facades which were typically remodeled.

Bartlett Street Elevation

The rear elevation of the New Mission Theater faces west onto an alley called Bartlett Street. This elevation, which dates from the Reid Brothers' 1916-17 design, is modest and utilitarian in comparison with their original Mission Street elevation. The Bartlett Street elevation is 110' wide and is divided into seven bays by raised concrete pilasters and into horizontal sections by three concrete belt courses. As it faced a little-used service alley, the Reid Brothers did not feel that it necessary to add ornament to a wall seldom seen by passers-by. This elevation does not depart significantly from its 1917 appearance (Photo 17).

Interior Description

Vestibule

The vestibule is today the most heavily altered component of the New Mission Theater (Photo 18). The original Reid Brothers' design for the vestibule featured recessed panels, pilasters, pedimented niches (which doubled as movie poster display cases) and a coffered ceiling. The Reid Brothers vestibule walls were covered over by large ceramic panels in 1961 and the coffered ceiling was concealed behind a dropped acoustic panel ceiling. In addition, Pflueger's ticket booth was removed and replaced by a modern ticket booth placed on the

north wall of the vestibule. Nevertheless, most of the other historic fabric survives behind the more modern materials. The alterations to the vestibule have been additive in nature and appear to be entirely reversible.

Promenade Lobby

The promenade lobby is located immediately beyond the vestibule. Although Pflueger did not alter the Reid Brothers' vestibule, he completely redesigned the 142' long promenade lobby in his trademark Art Deco style to match the façade. The carpeted floor of the promenade lobby inclines gently upward toward the doors opening into the auditorium. The promenade lobby is almost two stories in height, except for the rear of the space where a stair and mezzanine is located. Now used as the sales floor of the furniture store and consequently cluttered with merchandise, the original purpose and arrangement of the promenade lobby is difficult to discern (Photo 4). A photograph taken in 1943 conveys the original function of the space more effectively (Photo 5). The mezzanine, which is accessed by a staircase with an elaborate Art Deco-style balustrade, occupies the rear portion of the promenade lobby (Photo 6). The rest of the promenade lobby is decorated with decorative plaster detailing (Photo 7). The north and south walls are divided into five bays; plaster moldings, imprinted with a Greek Key motif, frame the outer bays and lozenge-shaped mirrors, embellished with zigzag moldings, bracket the inner bays (Photo 8). The panels contain murals depicting dancing female figures but these have been covered with whitewash within the past few years. The promenade lobby ceiling is illuminated by three recessed "light coves" embellished with decorative plaster moldings (Photo 9). The light coves still contain ambient lighting fixtures, producing a diffused lighting that contrasted with the dramatic spot lighting originally provided by sconces and torchieres. The plaster cornice moldings feature a series of different patterns including floral motifs and Greek muses. The plaster ceiling ornament depicts stylized tulips, pineapples and daisies (Photo 10). The stair and mezzanine balustrade at the rear of the promenade lobby provide one means of accessing the balcony in the auditorium. The stair and mezzanine both feature chrome-plated steel balusters shaped into sinuous patterns and a handrail made of extruded aluminum (Photo 11). The ceiling of the mezzanine contains a Mayan-inspired medallion with concentric zig-zag plaster moldings surrounding it. Six glazed doors in the west wall of the promenade lobby provide access to the auditorium. Two doors remain in place and four others have been discovered elsewhere in the building. The doors each feature frosted glass panels inscribed with Art Deco designs.

Auditorium

The monumental 2,800-seat auditorium opens up as a tremendous box behind the much smaller promenade lobby. The floor-plate of the entire auditorium measures 102' (from west to east) x 108' (north to south) and 50' from orchestra floor to ceiling. Unlike the façade and the promenade lobby, Timothy Pflueger did not make any substantial changes to the Reid Brothers' 1916-17 auditorium aside from installing new bathrooms, ventilation ducts, seats and carpeting. The proscenium, which is located along the south wall of the auditorium, is the centerpiece of the space. The proscenium is dominated by large gilded and fluted Corinthian Order columns which flank the screen on either side (Photo 12). Similarly massive gilded pilasters, with elaborately ornamented shafts, flank the columns. The east and west walls, just beyond the proscenium, feature large niches containing urn-shaped floodlights and cast-plaster medallions depicting trumpet-playing centaurs. The east and west walls are otherwise articulated by rectangular panels demarcated by ornamental plaster moldings. The panels contain pastoral murals which have been painted over. The uppermost section of the east and west walls carries an elaborate frieze of urns and garlands and a gilded denticulate cornice. The auditorium ceiling is articulated by a grid of deep coffers. The floor of the auditorium retains seating and carpeting from Pflueger's 1932 remodel. Aside from inappropriate paint treatments, the auditorium retains a very high degree of integrity.

Patrons' Lounge

The patrons' lounge is located on the north side of the auditorium, immediately behind the promenade lobby. This section of the building, which was added in 1917 after an additional lot was acquired to the north of the building, contains the patrons' lounge itself, as well as the projection room, smoking lounges, bathrooms, the ushers' lounge and stairs to the balcony. The projection room separates the patron's lounge from the auditorium. It is a narrow rectangular room clad in ceramic tile. The south wall of the projection room is punctuated by several square openings that originally accommodated the projection equipment, some of which still exists in the room. The elaborately finished patrons' lounge to the north of the projection room, accommodated crowds of guests during intermission. Surrounding it on all sides were the passages to the auditorium, men's and women's restrooms, the smoking lounge, the ushers' lounge, storage and the stairs to the balcony. The walls of the patrons' lounge are divided into bays by large Corinthian pilasters which carry an elaborate classical frieze and a denticulate cornice (Photo 13). A historic photograph shows the patrons' lounge during the New Mission Theater's heyday in 1943 (Photo 14). Similar to the auditorium, the patrons' lounge features a coffered ceiling. One of the most notable details of the patrons' lounge is a Venetian Renaissance Revival arcade along the north wall. The arcade articulates the north wall of the patrons' lounge and provides views of the stairs that lead up to the balcony. Continuing in the Venetian Renaissance theme, the Reid Brothers design features two doors in the patrons' lounge framed by "Serliana" or "Palladian" motifs (Photo 15). The bathrooms were the only spaces in this part of the building altered by Pflueger in 1932 and they retain their ceramic tile wainscot, marble partitions and plumbing fixtures.

Balcony

The 1,000-seat balcony, reached by stairs along the north wall of the patrons' lounge, continues the Neoclassical/Renaissance themes established downstairs but in a more restrained mode (Photo 16). An undulating parapet, adorned with a frieze consisting of garlands and urns, frames the southern edge of the balcony. The other three walls of the balcony are divided into panels by plaster moldings. The centers of each panel contain murals which have been covered by a layer of whitewash. The most impressive feature of the balcony is the oblong dome suspended over this immense space. The dome is divided into three sections by heavy plaster ornament molded into floral motifs. The dome contains decorative cast metal grilles that conceal the theater's state-of-the-art mechanical ventilation system.

Integrity

In order to qualify for listing in the *National Register of Historical Places*, resources must not only meet one of the criteria listed above; they *must* "retain enough of their historic character or appearance to be recognizable as historical resources and to convey the reasons for their significance." According to the California Office of Historic Preservation, integrity is "the authenticity of an historical resource's physical identity evidenced by the survival of characteristics that existed during the resources' period of significance." Integrity is evaluated with regard to seven variables: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association.

"Location" refers to the place where the historic property was constructed. The New Mission Theater maintains its historic location.

"Design" is the combination of elements that create the form, plan, structure, and style of a property. Virtually all of Timothy Pflueger's façade, which has gained significance in its own right, is present to convey the appearance of the exterior of the building from 1932 until the end of the period of significance in 1950. The interior of the theater, particularly the vestibule, has undergone more change than the exterior but virtually all

of the changes are additive in nature and should they be removed, the appearance of the Reid Brothers' 1916-17 vestibule, auditorium, patrons' lounge and balcony, as well as Pflueger's 1932 promenade lobby, would be restored.

"Setting" is the physical environment of a historic property. Since the end of the period of significance in 1950, the appearance of the Mission District's Miracle Mile, has changed substantially, more as a result of the removal and modernization of historic facades than through demolition. Many of the historic theaters in the district have been demolished, heavily altered or converted into new uses, although some of the historic blade signs still remain, hinting at the appearance of Mission Street during the first half of the 20th century.

"Materials" are the physical elements that were combined or deposited during a particular period of time and in a particular pattern to form an historic property. The materials of the core and shell of the New Mission Theater: poured-in-place concrete and brick walls, steel roof trusses and decorative finishes such as plaster, glass, stainless steel and wood remain largely intact. Many light fixtures have been removed, as with the 1932-era ticket booth and the original entrance doors. Aside from those changes everything from the ornate 1916-17 plaster moldings to the 1932 carpeting and seating remains in place and intact.

"Workmanship" is the physical evidence of the crafts of a particular culture or people during any given period. The New Mission Theater retains abundant examples of craftsmanship from both of its building campaigns. The ornate plaster and woodwork of the 1916-17 auditorium remains in evidence. The plasterwork in particular is especially fine and essentially not duplicable today. Pflueger's 1932 remodel left behind many examples of high-quality workmanship as well, including the sophisticated plasterwork and ornamental metalwork of the promenade lobby, as well as the sheet metalwork and neon signage of theater marquee craftsman Alexander Aimwell Cantin.

"Feeling" is a property's expression of the aesthetic or historic sense of a particular period of time. The design of the New Mission Theater is unusual in that quite consciously embodies the feeling and culture of two separate eras. The Neoclassical auditorium and patrons' lounge embodies the traditional appearance of early movie palace architecture and live performance theaters, while Pflueger's Art Deco façade and promenade lobby displays the modern yet still grand aesthetic of Depression-era movie houses.

"Association" is the direct link between an important historic event or person and an historic property. The New Mission Theater cannot be compellingly linked with any significant individual or event beyond the local level.

The photographs submitted with this application were taken in 1999. The building has not undergone any alterations or appreciable deterioration since they were taken. An additional photograph (Photo 18) is being submitted with this revised application of April 15, 2001 to document the existing conditions of the vestibule.

Statement of Significance

The New Mission Theater is significant at the local level under *National Register* Criterion C (Architecture). ~~The period of significance is 1916 to 1950. The beginning date marks the original construction of the building and 1950 is the approximate year in which the decline of the Mission District's Miracle Mile began to result in the diminished importance of the New Mission Theater as a destination for working-class San Franciscans~~. The theater is significant under Criterion C as an excellent example of a building period and type: an early 20th century movie palace, and as a work of two masters: San Francisco's Reid Brothers and Miller & Pflueger, Architects. The existing auditorium of the New Mission Theater was the first designed by the Reid Brothers and it remains the firm's best-preserved theater interior. Miller & Pflueger's remodel has gained its own level of significance and although not the most comprehensive example of the firm's work, the Mayan-inspired Art Deco elements, particularly the façade, crafted by famed marquee fabricator Alexander Aimwell Cantin, are extremely unique and illustrate Timothy Pflueger's interest in Pre-Columbian Mexican architecture. The New Mission Theater was a centerpiece of the "Mission Miracle Mile" during the first half of the 20th century. Between the 1906 Earthquake and 1940 almost a dozen motion picture houses opened along Mission Street in an eight-block section between 16th and 24th Streets. Initially designed in 1916-17 by the Reid Brothers, the 2,800-seat New Mission Theater was the first "downtown" movie palace constructed in the Mission District. Although many predicted that the New Mission Theater would never survive, the theater opened to much fanfare, including a speech by Mission-born mayor James "Sunny Jim" Rolph. Rolph extolled the opening of the theater as a symbol of the growing political and economic power of the then-predominantly working-class Irish neighborhood. From 1917 until the El Capitan Theater opened in 1928, the original New Mission Theater prospered and dominated the theater trade of Mission Street. After moviegoers began deserting the New Mission for newer theaters, the second owner Abraham Nasser retained Timothy Pflueger to remodel the building in a more up-to-date style. Pflueger's modish Art Deco façade and promenade lobby re-popularized the theater in the middle of the Depression and it quickly resumed its position until the end of the Second World War.

Historical Background

Mission District

The Mission District has traditionally been San Francisco's largest and most self-contained working-class neighborhood. The origins of the neighborhood trace back to the founding of Mission Dolores (originally San Francisco de Assisi) in 1776, by Father Francisco Palou. Under Spanish, Mexican and the early years of American rule, the Mission remained a rural district dominated by several important Californio families. In 1850 a financier and speculator named Charles L. Wilson built a plank toll road, which followed the route of present-day Mission Street, from 4th to 16th Street. By 1867, horse-drawn car lines and a steam railroad line operating along Harrison Street made the district even more accessible. Between 1870 and 1900, the Mission District developed as a middle-class residential neighborhood attracting thousands of native-born American and some German immigrants. After the 1906 Earthquake and Fire destroyed the South of Market district, the Mission District, which remained relatively untouched south of 20th Street, attracted many of the predominantly Irish, working-class refugees. Within a few years, the Mission had been transformed by this migration into San Francisco's largest and most populous working-class neighborhood. "The Mission," as it became known, developed as a city within a city, with its own industrial base and workers' housing districts. The Mission also developed its own "downtown" along Mission Street, between 16th and 24th Streets, where "downtown" department stores and banks opened neighborhood branches. This eight-block stretch of Mission Street also played host to the neighborhood's nascent entertainment district, which was primarily composed of taverns, Vaudeville theaters and other establishments catering to factory workers, mechanics, draymen and laborers and their families.

Development of the Mission Street Miracle Mile

The large-scale development of theaters in San Francisco's Mission District began after the 1906 Catastrophe leveled San Francisco's Market Street district, including all of the early Vaudeville houses.[1] Responding to the destruction downtown, some entrepreneurs moved their businesses to the relatively undamaged sections of the Mission and Fillmore Districts, where business could resume quickly. Initially nickelodeon operators and Vaudeville directors converted existing commercial buildings into venues but by 1910 they were constructing theater buildings built specifically for the purpose. The Wigwam Theater, located directly across the street from the New Mission, is a good example of the early post-quake era of theater construction in the Mission. The Wigwam was originally constructed as a Vaudeville hall in 1907 but in 1913 it was demolished and replaced by a larger and more ornate theater designed in the Renaissance Revival style by the firm of Crim & Scott.[2] When it reopened, both Vaudeville productions and silent films were featured there. Theater construction in the Mission District accelerated during the early 1920s, mirroring national trends. By 1925, at least a dozen motion picture theaters were operating on or adjacent to Mission Street. The 1927 City Directory listed the following Mission District theaters: El Capitan, the Excelsior, the Gem, the Majestic, the New Lyceum, the New Mission, the Roosevelt, the Shamrock, the State, The Victoria, the Wigwam and the York. The majority of these were located in the neighborhood's busy commercial heart, on Mission Street between 16th and 24th Streets. Even after the downtown Market Street theater district was reconstructed, the Mission Miracle Mile continued to thrive and prosper with the working-class neighborhood trade. The construction of the New Mission, and later the El Capitan confirmed the position of the Mission Street Miracle Mile as a major neighborhood rival to the Market Street theater district.

Site History

Sanborn maps indicate that before 1910, several wood-frame dwellings occupied the site of the New Mission Theater. The first non-residential structure on the site was a theater named the Premium Theater. Not much is known about this theater beyond the fact that it was designed by an architect named E.B. Johnston and commissioned by a local businessman named Franklin B. Ross, who paid $7,000 to erect the small brick building at 2550 Mission Street. The Premium opened for business June 1910 and it remained under the ownership of Franklin Ross for three years. In 1913, he sold the Premium and two other theaters in other parts of town to a partnership consisting of two immigrant entrepreneurs: Louis R. Greenfield and Leon I. Kahn. Greenfield & Kahn renamed the theater the Idle Hour and operated it until 1916 when they decided to reconstruct the small theater into the New Mission Theater.

Greenfield & Kahn

Between 1910 and 1930, Louis Greenfield built a theater empire that extended as far as Hawaii.[3] Before he took his own life in 1931 at the age of 42, Greenfield had attained (and then lost) a similar level of success in the theater business as San Francisco's two other major movie theater dynasties: the Nasser and the Levin families. By 1922 Greenfield owned at least nine theaters. Seven of these were in San Francisco: the Quality, the Progress, two Premium Theaters, the New Mission, the New Fillmore and Realart Cinemas. Outside of San Francisco he owned the Santa Cruz, in Santa Cruz, California and the Princess in Honolulu, Hawaii. Louis Greenfield was born in Russia in 1889 to Russian Jewish parents who immigrated to New York City soon after his birth. With little formal education, Greenfield worked as a peddler in New York before getting a job in a nickelodeon. Immediately realizing the potential of this new entertainment medium, Greenfield began to seek a more congenial climate and a new market for his newfound avocation and in 1907 he moved to San Francisco. Within a year he joined forces with fellow Russian Jewish immigrant Leon Kahn and launched his first theater, the Quality, at the corner of Eddy and Fillmore Streets in the Western Addition. After the resounding success of

[1] San Francisco Directory, 1905.
[2] San Francisco Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board, "Draft Case Report, Wigwam (Cine Latino) Theater," February 24, 1993.
[3] San Francisco Department of City Planning document.

the Quality, Greenfield & Kahn purchased the Premium Theater chain from Franklin Ross in 1913, which included the small theater at 2550 Mission Street. Greenfield & Kahn made a conscious choice to concentrate upon the emerging neighborhood trade and studiously avoided competing with the rebuilt Market Street theater district.[4]

Design

Facing increased competition from newer Mission District theaters such as the Poppy on 16th Street, Greenfield & Kahn decided in 1915 to redesign and expand the small Idle Hour at 2550 Mission Street and make it the largest and most opulent movie palace in the growing neighborhood entertainment district. A shrewd entrepreneur, Greenfield believed that the theater business was like any other in terms of marketing strategy. Greenfield knew that an impressive theater building was just as critical an element in attracting audiences as the movie itself. In a 1922 interview with the *Chronicle* he stated: "I am not a showman…I am a business man merchandising his wares."[5] Nonetheless until 1916, Greenfield had not had the opportunity to build his own movie palace. Greenfield later told the *Chronicle* reporter in 1922, that when he decided to redevelop the Idle Hour in 1915 he wanted "to do something big." The original New Mission Theater was the result of Greenfield's vision and in every detail it reflected his ideas of what a first-class theater should be. In 1915 Greenfield & Kahn hired the Reid Brothers, Architects, one of San Francisco's most prominent architectural firms, to design his magnus opus. Greenfield had grown to admire the firm through their work on San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel, where he had had his wedding reception. According to Greenfield, he also chose the Reid Brothers because they had never designed a movie theater before. Greenfield believed that it was preferable to hire a competent firm inexperienced in the realm of movie theater design because he would be in a better position to control the outcome. In 1922 he said:

> I had ideas about the sort of house I wanted. And I knew the screen perfectly. It was my business.[6]

Construction

The Reid Brothers' design for the New Mission Theater, as the new theater was to be called, was a drastic reconstruction of the humble Idle Hour. The permit and plans were filed with the San Francisco Bureau of Building Inspection in November 1915. For the parcel of land to the rear of the Idle Hour on Bartlett Street, the Reid Brothers designed a colossal new auditorium with a floorplate measuring 102' x 108'. The actual Idle Hour Theater was to be gutted and incorporated in its entirety into the New Mission Theater. With only the outer walls left intact, the interior of the Idle Hour was converted into the promenade lobby and concession area for the new theater. The Mission Street façade of the former Idle Hour would receive a new eye-catching façade which was designed to compete with the increasingly ornate façades and signage of newer Mission District theaters. According to Greenfield, for quite some time the construction of the tremendous auditorium escaped the notice of Mission residents. When the concrete walls of the massive auditorium began to emerge above the surrounding buildings in early 1916 there was a fair amount of skepticism that a movie theater this large would succeed in the Mission District. According to Greenfield, theater experts believed that the distance between the projectors and the screen was too great.[7] Others believed that it was not wise to construct a major "downtown theater" in the Mission, especially as the Market Street theater district was almost fully reconstructed. At almost 3,000 seats, the New Mission would be much larger than any of the new downtown theaters and it wouldn't be surpassed until the construction of the Fox Theater, on Market Street, in 1928.

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[4] "Good-Luck Fairy's Magic Wand; Nothing but Hard Work, San Francisco-Honolulu Theater Builder Proves This," *San Francisco Chronicle*, (December 10, 1922), p. 1.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

New Mission Theater Opens

None of the dire predictions of failure dissuaded Greenfield & Kahn and the New Mission Theater opened with great fanfare six months later, in May 1916. Mayor "Sunny Jim" Rolph, the Mission Merchants Association and "several thousand residents of the Mission" attended the opening of the New Mission. Progressive Mayor Rolph, a native son of the Mission and a continual booster of his home district, spoke at the opening and congratulated Greenfield & Kahn "on their enterprise" and the people of the Mission "on having such a splendid photoplay theater."[8] Within the year Greenfield & Kahn decided to expand the new theater by enlarging the balcony and building a large patrons' lounge.

Balcony Enlarged and Patrons' Lounge Added

In early 1917 Greenfield & Kahn bought out a property owner who owned a parcel of land north of the theater on Bartlett Street and demolished the structures on it. Six months later they hired the Reid Brothers again to design a 1,000-seat enlarged balcony for the New Mission Theater, bringing the seating capacity up to 2,800 and making it "San Francisco's largest uptown theater."[9] When the New Mission Theater reopened on November 15, 1917, Greenfield & Kahn and the Mission Merchants Association staged another gala celebration. Christened with a showing of "Poor Little Peppina," a silent film starring Mary Pickford, the program also featured speeches by Samuel Rosenkrantz, president of the Mission Merchants Association, A. W. Allen of Paramount Pictures Corporation and Mayor Rolph. The celebration ended on a patriotic note with a flag-raising ceremony performed by a Boy Scout troop and the Second Field Artillery from the Presidio.[10] Aside from the patriotic revelry (the theater reopened during the height of American involvement in the First World War), the speeches and celebratory activities held in honor of the re-opening of the New Mission Theater attested to the growing influence of the Mission District and confidence of its residents. Twenty years earlier, the thought of the Mission District hosting the West's largest and most elegant "uptown" movie palace and having a Mayor born in the neighborhood give the opening speech, would have been unthinkable.

New Mission Becomes the Dominant Mission District Theater: 1917-1928

Louis Greenfield (the partnership with Kahn ended in the early 1920s) operated The New Mission Theater successfully throughout much of the Roaring Twenties as the largest and most popular Mission District theater. Advertisements in the local San Francisco papers reveal that the New Mission continually attracted the first-run films released by Paramount Studios in Hollywood. Amenities such as the twelve-piece orchestra, smoking lounges, heating and child care attracted thousands of local movie-goers as well as residents of Potrero Hill, the Outer Mission and Noe Valley to escape reality for an hour or two in the plush interior of the New Mission. Seeking to duplicate his success in the Western Addition Greenfield hired the Reid Brothers in 1919 to design the New Fillmore Theater for a large parcel on Fillmore Street. However by the late 1920s Greenfield's run of prosperity began to erode as larger and more lavish theaters were opened both downtown and along the Mission Miracle Mile. Already by the mid-1920s the Market Street theater district had recovered its pre-quake grandeur with the 3,000-seat Fox Warfield Theater (1921), designed by G. Albert Lansburgh. Nonetheless, the New Mission continued to be the dominant theater in the Mission until 1928 when Ackerman, Harris and Oppenheim built the El Capitan Theater, two blocks north of the New Mission. The El Capitan, a huge 3,000-seat theater designed by Arthur Crim in the trendy Spanish Colonial/Churrigueresque, began to draw audiences away from the older Mission District theaters like the New Mission. To make matters worse, the Stock Market Crash occurred the next year. The combination of increased competition and growing indebtedness took their toll on Greenfield's movie palace empire and in October 1931 he killed himself over mounting debts. Over $400,000 in debt, Greenfield was on the verge of losing the New Mission Theater and the rest of his empire to bankruptcy.[11]

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[8] "Mission Theater Formally Opened," *San Francisco Chronicle*, (May 5, 1916), p. 4.
[9] "New Mission Theatre Has Big Capacity," *San Francisco Examiner*, (November 18, 1917), p. 56.
[10] "New Mission Opened with Eclat," *San Francisco Examiner*, (November 16, 1917), p. 8.
[11] "Theater Owner Found Hanged in S.F. Office," *San Francisco Chronicle*, (October 26, 1931).

The Nasser Family Buys the New Mission Theater

Compelled by the need to pay off Greenfield's substantial debts, his estate sold off his theaters. In 1932, Abraham Nasser, the founder of what was to become the most famous and the longest-lived theater dynasty in San Francisco, purchased the New Mission Theater. Nasser was a native of what is now Lebanon and he immigrated to San Francisco in 1900. Nasser's first taste of the theater business occurred in 1908 when he opened a nickelodeon in his confectioner's shop at 18th and Collingwood Streets in Eureka Valley. By 1910 Nasser was earning more money from movies than from candy and in that year he constructed a new 600-seat theater at 485 Castro. Twelve years later, in 1922, Nasser hired the then relatively unknown architect Timothy Pflueger, of Miller & Pflueger, to design a new theater for the site. The 1,550-seat, Spanish Colonial style Castro Theater was Pflueger's first major movie palace.[12] As Nasser continued to expand his theater empire he repeatedly hired Pflueger, now recognized, along with G. Albert Lansburgh, as an expert in theater design, to design new theaters and to renovate others. In 1926 Nasser commissioned Pflueger to design the Moorish Revival Alhambra Theater on Polk Street and in 1931 to design the Art Deco masterpiece Paramount Theater in Oakland. In 1932 and 1935 Nasser hired Pflueger to remodel the New Mission and the Royal Theaters, respectively.[13] By the late 1940s, the Nasser family had built up a chain of twelve movie theaters throughout the Bay Area. In 1949 they even branched out into television production after purchasing General Service Studios in Hollywood, where they eventually produced television programs such as "I Love Lucy," "The Lone Ranger," "Mr. Ed" and "The Beverly Hillbillies."[14]

Timothy Pflueger Hired to Renovate the New Mission Theater

In order to compete in the cutthroat atmosphere of the Depression, the Nassers embarked upon a campaign to update the appearance of their older theaters, especially the stylistically obsolete New Mission Theater. In early 1932, the Nassers hired Miller & Pflueger of San Francisco to remodel the New Mission in a more modern style. Due to the Depression new construction was usually not a viable option. With materials being expensive but labor cheap, theater entrepreneurs frequently decided to renovate their older theaters rather than replace them. In San Francisco only four new movie theaters opened during the 1930s: the Bridge (1939), Timothy Pflueger's El Rey (1931), the Noe (1937), and the Presidio (1937). All four of these theaters were designed in the Art Deco style.[15] Timothy Pflueger, one of the foremost West Coast architects to work in the Art Deco style, was the primary designer in the firm of Miller & Pflueger and he did much of the work on the New Mission Theater project.[16] Pflueger left much of the original Reid Brothers' work untouched, especially the auditorium. The auditorium, although relatively old, was still very impressive in terms of scale and ornamental effect and would have been too expensive to radically alter. Instead, Pflueger concentrated his efforts on the parts of the theater that were most easily visible such as the façade and the promenade lobby. He removed the Reid Brothers' elaborate 1916 façade and marquee and replaced it with the Art Deco marquee and pylon sign that exist today. Pflueger hired Alexander Aimwell Cantin to fabricate the sign and install the neon for the New Mission façade, as he had done with the Paramount and the Castro Theaters. Pflueger retained the Reid Brothers' Neoclassical style vestibule, with its pedimented niches but he replaced the 1916 promenade lobby interior with Art Deco plaster ornament, mirrors, sinewy metal balustrades, sconces and other light fixtures and carpets. When the New Mission Theater reopened in late 1932, its appearance from Mission Street had been radically transformed and it became the most modern looking theater in the Mission District until Albert Lansburgh's Grand Theater opened in 1940. The theater again regained its popularity and continued, in the words of local residents, to be the most popular destination

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[12] "Obituary, Emily Nasser," *San Francisco Chronicle*, (December 15, 1952), p. 23.
[13] Building files: San Francisco Architectural Heritage.
[14] Tim Kelley, "The Nasser Brothers," *Castro Star*, (July 1997).
[15] Information derived from Heritage building files.
[16] San Francisco Department of Building Inspection, "Application of Mission/Fillmore Theatre Co. to Make Alterations to New Mission Theatre," filed July 1, 1932.

for neighborhood moviegoers during the war and for several years afterward. On this basis, the year of 1950 has been selected as the end of the period of significance.

Post War Decline

Despite the gradual post-war decline of the Mission Miracle Mile and the closing of most of the Mission District theaters, the New Mission Theater continued to operate as a neighborhood movie theater until 1993, leaving the Roxie Theater as the last movie theater in the Mission District. The Mission District underwent a gradual demographic and socio-economic transformation during the post-war period, as the predominantly Irish-American residents moved onward to the rapidly growing suburbs of the Sunset District and San Mateo and Marin Counties. The vacant flats and apartments of the Mission filled up with immigrants from Mexico and Central America, transforming the area into San Francisco's largest Latino neighborhood. The Nasser family continued to operate the New Mission Theater throughout the 1950s and 1960s but they did not see fit to perform any significant improvements to an aging theater. The only changes of any significance occurred in 1961, when they furred out the vestibule walls and added a layer of white ceramic panels.[17] The post-war era was an especially tough time for older urban single-screen theaters in America. A 1948 anti-trust suit heard by the United States Supreme Court forced the major movie studios to divest themselves of their theater houses. Frequently, the movie studios that sold their older inner-city theaters could not find buyers who could maintain them properly.[18] Concurrently, suburbanization lured potential audiences away from the older residential neighborhoods. Finally, the increasing popularity of television diverted even more people away from the act of theater going. Urban theaters found themselves confronted with deteriorating neighborhoods and dwindling audiences. While many theaters survived the 1950s and 1960s, few escaped without some degree of modernization or removal of deteriorating ornament. Others closed or deteriorated beyond repair. An anachronism, the New Mission Theater survived as an unaltered movie palace much longer than many of its contemporaries. The New Fillmore, the New Mission's twin, was demolished as were many other San Francisco theaters, including some of the most spectacular downtown theaters, such as the Neo-Baroque Fox Theater on Market Street. Nonetheless, as an independent movie theater, the New Mission Theater did not have access to the expensive, first-run productions available to the suburban multiplex chains. In addition the occurrence of gang-related violence in and around the theater scared away increasing numbers of nighttime moviegoers. In May 1993, Cinema Cal, the last operator of the New Mission, decided to close the curtains for good. Since then, the New Mission has been leased to a furniture retailer and in 1998, City College of San Francisco purchased the theater.

Criterion C:

The New Mission Theater is significant under Criterion C on the local level as an excellent example of an early 20th Century movie palace embodying "the distinctive characteristics of a type, (and) period," as well as representing "the work of a master" and "high artistic values." The New Mission Theater is the best surviving example of an early 20th Century movie palace in the Mission District and one of only a handful surviving in San Francisco with any degree of integrity. Furthermore, the building is an important work of two regionally significant architectural firms: the Reid Brothers and Miller & Pflueger.[19] Both firms were recognized as being "masters" within the architectural profession when hired to work on the New Mission Theater. The New Mission auditorium was the first movie theater interior

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[17] San Francisco Department of Building Inspection, "Application of The Keil Company to Make Alterations to 2550 Mission Street," application filed June 28, 1961.

[18] National Trust for Historic Preservation, Information Series, No. 72: "Curtain Up: New Life for Historic Theaters," (Washington, D.C.: 1993), p. 2.

[19] San Francisco Architectural Heritage has evaluated and rated the significance of San Francisco's architecture firms as a part of our 1978 Downtown Survey. Firms were given ratings of A, B or C.

designed by the Reid Brothers and today it remains the most intact theater interior designed by the firm that exists.[20] Timothy Pflueger, the designer of some of San Francisco's most important buildings, designed movie houses in a variety of styles. As a remodel, Pflueger's contribution to the New Mission is an example of Mayan architectural themes, an important element of his work as evidence by the contemporary Paramount Theater in Oakland (also commissioned by the Nassers) as well as the Medico-Dental Building at 450 Sutter in San Francisco. His work on the New Mission Theater is the earliest, the most intact and only surviving example of the architect's work in theater design, in the Art Deco style, in San Francisco. Finally, with its soaring Art Deco façade and lobby, as well as its excellently preserved Renaissance/Neoclassical Revival auditorium, the New Mission Theater displays a very high level of artistic value and craftsman ship that is unrealizable today.

Type/Period: American Movie Palace Design: 1900-1940

The New Mission Theater is an excellent example of a type and period of construction: an early 20th century movie palace. The first motion picture in the United States was registered with the copyright office in 1893. By the end of the 19th Century most American cities began to witness the proliferation of small nickelodeons, where short silent "photo-plays" were shown. Nickelodeons were usually housed in existing commercial buildings with flat floors and few architectural features to distinguish them as new building types. The movie craze intensified during the 1910s and by 1915 there were almost 25,000 "picture theaters" operating throughout the United States. By the late 1910s and early 1920s, the modest nickelodeons were being replaced by extravagant movie palaces displaying the "Baroque-roguery" of professional theater designers such as John Eberson, W. W. Ahlschlager and the Rapp Brothers.[21] Initially, inspiration for movie theater design came from traditional live-performance theaters. By the early 1920s, the movie palace construction boom was in full swing. Movie studios such as Paramount began to open larger and more ornate movie theaters that would exclusively show pictures produced in their studios. Architecture was deliberately used by big studios and individual theater owners as a means to attract audiences in a cutthroat business characterized by intense competition. Prominent signs and marquees and elaborate façades illuminated by neon blade signs and marquees were designed to attract movie-goers inside, where they would be confronted with even more ornate lobbies and auditoriums. During the 1920s, Neoclassical, Renaissance and Baroque motifs gave way to more exotic styles such Moorish, Spanish, Mayan, Egyptian, Chinese and even more strange hybrid styles.

San Francisco's New Mission Theater is a rare and excellent example of an early 20th Century movie palace in San Francisco, and more important, the Mission District. Until after the Second World War Mission Street was lined with several large movie palaces such as the New Mission, the El Capitan, the Granada and smaller theaters like the Grand and the Tower. Early pictures of Mission Street depict a busy commercial streetscape punctuated by the sleek blade signs of movie theaters, where tired factory workers and shoppers could escape their daily routines. With its 2,800-seat auditorium and ornate and sophisticated plaster ornament, the New Mission Theater was the first movie palace in the Mission and today it is the only surviving example. The El Capitan had its auditorium demolished and replaced with a parking lot. Other theaters have been extensively remodeled as discount stores or churches. The New Mission survived as a neighborhood theater until 1993 and aside from some unfortunate painting schemes, very few changes have been made to accommodate a furniture store; even the seats remain in place.

Work of a Master: Reid Brothers

The auditorium of the New Mission Theater is an example of the "work of a master," in this case the Reid Brothers. The brothers James and Merritt Reid constituted one of the best-known and most well respected architecture firms in San

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[20] "Good-Luck Fairy's Magic Wand Nothing But Hard Work San Francisco-Honolulu Theater Builder Proves This, *San Francisco Chronicle*, (December 10, 1922), p. D1.

[21] National Trust for Historic Preservation, Information Sheet Number 16: "Preservation of Concert Halls, Opera Houses and Movies Palaces," (Washington, D.C.: 1981), p. 16.

Francisco around the turn of the last century. James Reid, the principal designer in the partnership, was born November 25, 1851 in St. John, New Brunswick. He studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and then at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. James Reid first came to California in 1888 after being commissioned to design the Hotel del Coronado in San Diego. The following year, James moved to San Francisco where he joined his brother Merritt who was already there. The brothers formed a tremendously important firm that would last half a century, until Merritt's death in 1932.[22] Much of their work took place during the reconstruction of San Francisco after the 1906 Earthquake and Fire. An extremely capable and versatile firm, the Reid Brothers designed hotels, office buildings, churches, single-family residences and theaters. Some of their most important works include the Fairmont Hotel (1906), the Call Office Building (1914), the First Congregational Church (1914), the Cliff House (1908) and many other prominent San Francisco landmarks.

The New Mission Theater's auditorium is significant the largest and the first of many Reid Brothers'-designed movie houses. It also has the highest degree of integrity. A year after the New Mission was completed, Greenfield & Kahn hired the Reid Brothers to design a second major theater for them: the New Fillmore Theater in the Western Addition. During the 1920s, when the theater construction boom reached its climax in San Francisco, the Reid Brothers designed and supervised the construction of at least five other major movie houses in the city, including the Coliseum, at 745 Clement Street (1918); the Alexandria, at 18th Avenue and Geary (1923); the Balboa, at 3626 Balboa Street (1925); the York, at 2795 24th Street (1926) and the Metropolitan (now the Metro), at 2047-65 Union Street (1923). Of the remaining Reid Brothers' theater interiors, the New Mission retains the greatest degree of integrity, with its 1917 auditorium remaining almost entirely intact. The auditorium of the New Mission embodies the earliest phase of the Reid Brothers' work in theater design. Their earliest theater designs, such as the New Mission and the New Fillmore, were designed in a more traditional mode reminiscent of earlier live-performance theaters. As their career progressed throughout the 1910s and 1920s the Reid Brothers designed theaters in a variety of exotic styles, such as Egyptian for the Alexandria and Secessionist for the Coliseum. Nevertheless, most of the Reid Brothers' theaters have either been demolished or heavily altered. The New Fillmore was demolished in the 1950s and the Coliseum was gutted in the 1960s. Other Reid Brothers' theaters such as the Alexandria, the Balboa and the York have undergone interior alterations that have affected their integrity. The Metropolitan was heavily altered by Timothy Pflueger in 1942, who did not spare the auditorium of a Reid Brothers' theater this time.

The local press gave extensive coverage to the re-opening of San Francisco's grandest movie palace in 1917, illustrating its important role as the centerpiece of the Mission Miracle Mile and high-lighting the auditorium's architectural detailing and amenities. A reporter from the *San Francisco Examiner* wrote: "The theatre, one of the finest film houses in the West, has a seating capacity of 2,800 and represents an investment of $300,000."[23] The Press was clearly impressed with the amenities and architecture of the New Mission Theater. Much emphasis was placed on the theater's efficient circulation, the large number of "well-placed restrooms" and the elaborate architectural detail. The dome over the balcony provided the biggest thrill to observers. The reporter for the *Examiner* wrote: "Elaborately grilled, the vaulted dome over the balcony, with its intricate design, is an architectural feature that adds grace and beauty to the huge auditorium."[24] The new theater featured many sophisticated technological advances, such as a heating and cooling system and amenities such as a 12-piece orchestra, a pipe organ, several smoking rooms and lounges, as well as "a free child care area in the adjoining garden playground."

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[22] Henry F. Withey, AIA, Biographical Dictionary of American Architects, (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1970), p. 500.
[23] "New Mission Theatre has Big Capacity," *San Francisco Examiner*, (November 18, 1917), p. 56.
[24] Ibid.

The interior of the New Mission Theater was designed by the Reid Brothers in the Neoclassical/Renaissance Revival style, with many classical architectural details, such as the pedimented poster display cases, an arcaded staircase enclosure and the colossal gilded Corinthian columns flanking the proscenium. The interior ornament, like many theaters of its era, was purposefully designed in an overwrought manner, with gilded, over-scaled architectural elements, murals depicting classical mythological subjects and imaginative sculptural relief. Unlike most other Reid Brothers' theaters, the interior of the New Mission's auditorium is amazingly intact, requiring very little beside paint removal and patching to bring it back to its original luster. The interior of the New Mission Theater brought myth and luxury to the lives of working people for the price of a movie ticket and its current appearance completely reflects its original role in the life of the Mission District during the first half of the 20th Century.

Work of a Master: Timothy Pflueger

The New Mission is also significant under Criterion C as an important work of Timothy Pflueger of Miller & Pflueger. Remodeled in 1932, by Timothy Pflueger, a partner in the firm of Miller & Pflueger, the façade and promenade lobby of the theater represent the distinctive work of one of the most widely acclaimed architects to work in San Francisco and Northern California from the 1920s to the 1940s. Pflueger was born in 1892 in Stockton, California. He studied architecture at San Francisco's Beaux Arts Institute of Design and worked in several offices until the conclusion of the First World War. After the War he formed a partnership with his mentor and former employer, J. R. Miller, formerly of Miller & Colmesnil. Pflueger, the primary designer of the partnership, was responsible for the design of many important San Francisco landmarks including: the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Building (1925), the Pacific Coast Stock Exchange (1930), The Medico-Dental Building at 450 Sutter Street (1929); the Oakland-Bay Bridge (1936) (in collaboration with Arthur Brown, Jr.) and San Francisco City College's Phelan Campus in 1942. Pflueger was also responsible for the design and remodel of nine motion picture theaters throughout the Bay Area and Northern California during his short career (he died at the age of 54 in 1946). Several of these theaters have attained national significance, including the Castro Theater of 1922 (San Francisco Landmark #100), the Alhambra Theater of 1928 (San Francisco Landmark #217) and the Paramount Theater in Oakland, a National Historic Landmark.

The movie palaces designed or renovated by Timothy Pflueger were part of a larger body of important movie palaces being erected throughout California during the 1920s and 1930s, which included such prominent theaters as the Wiltern in Los Angeles and the El Capitan in Hollywood, by Pflueger's contemporary, G. Albert Lansburgh. Pflueger was one of the most prolific and innovative theater architects in Northern California during the 1920s and 1930s. Pflueger's imaginative and exuberant design sensibilities were perfect for this building. Kevin Starr, California's State Historian writes:

> Pflueger's architecture was at once romantic, rational, high-tech and festive. He had a genius for communicating well being to the people who used his buildings or sat over drinks on a magic evening in one of his lounges. Pflueger designed buildings for people who liked cities and who liked themselves.[25]

Pflueger's work on the New Mission went above and beyond the scope of most theater remodels of the 1930s. With the Depression in full-swing owners of older theaters found it more economical to hire prominent architects at bargain-basement rates to update the appearance of their stylistically dated movie houses. The Art Deco style was frequently chosen by owners and architects as a fashionable, yet relatively inexpensive way to update the image of an older theater. Much of the relief ornament could be executed in stucco and did not require as much skilled labor. Often the renovation work would be limited to the most visible components of the theater, such as the sign, marquee and the entrance

[25] Butterfield & Butterfield, The John Pflueger Collection, (San Francisco: 1989).

lobby.[26] There were several other older theaters in San Francisco, such as the Midway Theater on Haight Street, that received inexpensive face-lifts. Pflueger's partial remodel of the New Mission Theater was certainly one of the most expensive and competent movie palace renovations in San Francisco, equaled only by Pflueger's later remodel of the Metro Theater. Pflueger wisely left the Reid Brothers' spectacular auditorium alone aside from updating the carpet and bathrooms. Instead the architect concentrated on radically redesigning the façade and promenade lobby. Pflueger used elements employed in the design of his contemporary masterpiece, the Paramount, in the reconstruction of the New Mission, including the towering sheet metal Art Deco sign/façade, the aluminum balustrades and fixtures, the Mayan-inspired plaster treatments and the figural murals painted by Pflueger's artist collaborators. Pflueger believed in the alliance of architecture and art and he hired Hollywood set painters to paint interior murals for his theater commissions, such as the Metro Theater.

High Artistic Values and Craftsmanship

As a surviving movie palace that embodies "high artistic values" and craftsmanship, the New Mission Theater is unmatched in the Mission District and matched by few other theaters in the City, with the possible exception of the Metro Theater (another theater originally designed by the Reid Brothers and remodeled by Pflueger). The Reid Brothers' auditorium displays an incredible level of design sensibility, detailing and craftsmanship. Trained in the Beaux-Arts tradition, James Reid had an able grasp on how to handle classical ornament, creating a fantasy world of 50' high gilded columns and pilasters, coffered ceilings and latticework domes. The interior detailing of the New Mission's auditorium is unmatched in San Francisco in terms of scale, quality and integrity. Its only major competitors aside from the Metro include live-performance theaters such as the San Francisco Opera House, designed by Arthur Brown, Jr. and G. Albert Lansburgh in 1931, the Fox Warfield Theater, designed by G. Albert Lansburgh in 1921 and the Geary Theater, designed in 1909 by the firm of Bliss & Faville. The plasterwork and metalwork in the Reid Brothers' auditorium is very elaborate, of good quality and in excellent condition. Aside from inappropriate paint treatments and some water infiltration, the auditorium of the New Mission Theater survives completely intact, having been spared the almost inevitable periodic remodeling undergone by most other theaters in San Francisco. Although less elaborate than the original Reid Brothers' interior, Pflueger's promenade lobby and façade are important examples of artistry and craftsmanship representing the changed circumstances imposed by the Depression and the influence of international Modernism. Pflueger's ongoing collaboration with artists such as muralist Diego Rivera and sculptor Robert Stackpole, was legendary. In the New Mission Theater Pflueger hired set painters to paint the murals in the promenade lobby, which survive beneath a thin layer of whitewash. Finally, Pflueger's Mayan-inspired Art Deco façade, a collaboration with sign fabricator and neon specialist Alexander Aimwell Cantin (who also worked on the Paramount) displays a high level of craftsmanship and artistry.

Conclusion

Since the early years of this century, movie going has continually been one of America's favorite pastimes. Movies have long been entrenched in American culture as a vehicle for disseminating information. They have played a critical role in determining trends in style, recreation, language and even thoughts and social mores. The history of this medium is inextricably linked to the history of the United States during the 20th Century. The association of going to the movies with notions of fantasy and escape from the mundane realities of everyday life greatly influenced the design of early movie palace architecture. Like the movies themselves, the fanciful and opulent architecture of early movie palaces transported the audience to exotic realms before the movie even started. The New Mission Theater is especially interesting, embodying as it does the work of two important architectural firms. The New Mission Theater briefly

[26] National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Information Series, No. 72, Curtain Up: New Life for Historic Theaters," (Washington, D.C.: 1993), p. 2.

enjoyed the limelight as the West's largest and grandest theater. Although that title was quickly eclipsed, the theater continued to serve as a cornerstone in the Mission District's Miracle Mile until the movie houses began to go silent, one after another, in the postwar period. After Mission Dolores, the New Mission Theater is probably the best known visual landmark in the neighborhood with its 70' sign spelling out the name of the theater and the neighborhood simultaneously. In a similar fashion as the Castro Theater, the New Mission Theater has become an icon of the neighborhood.

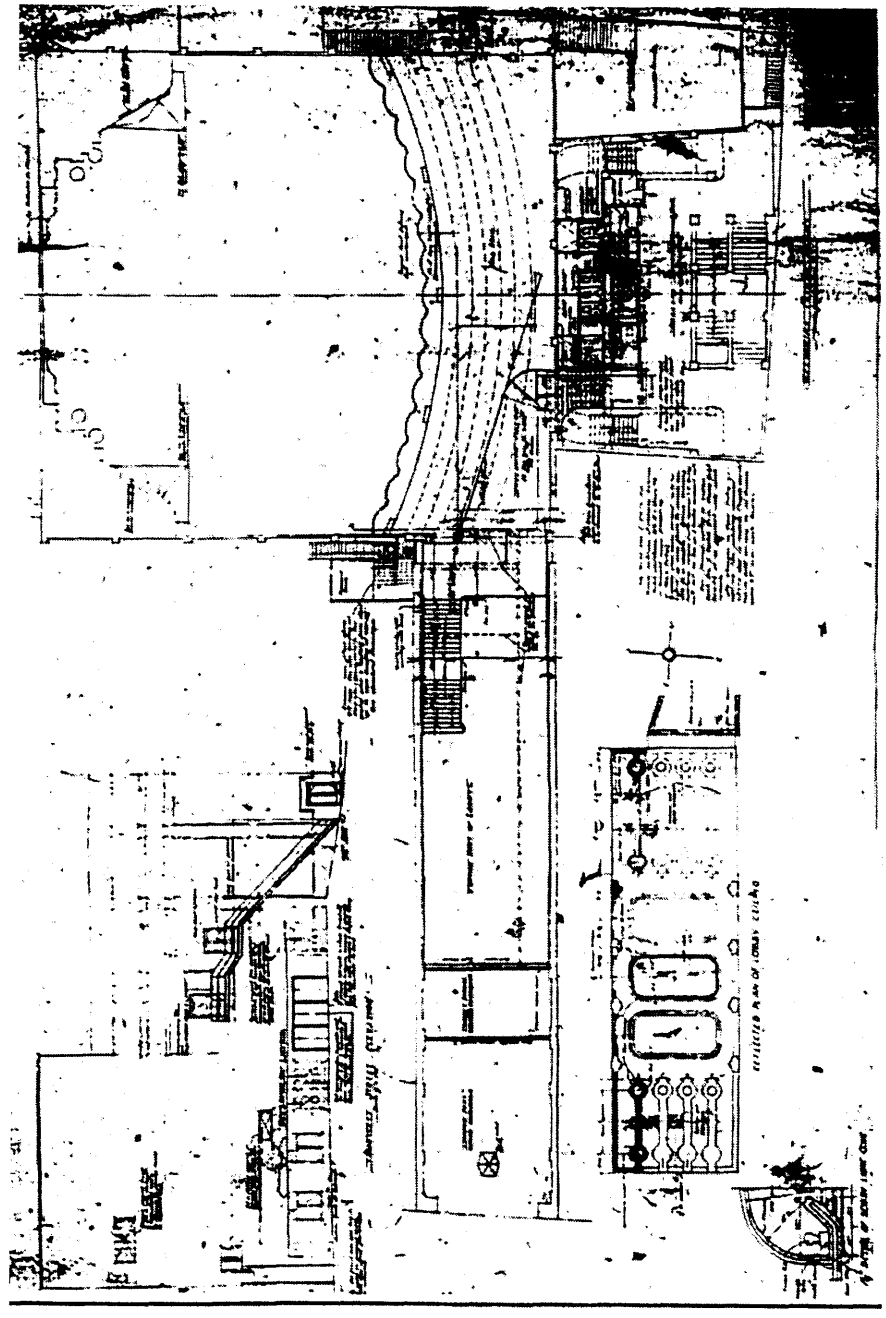

Figure 1: First Floor Plan of New Mission Theater, Drawings by T. Pflueger, 1932

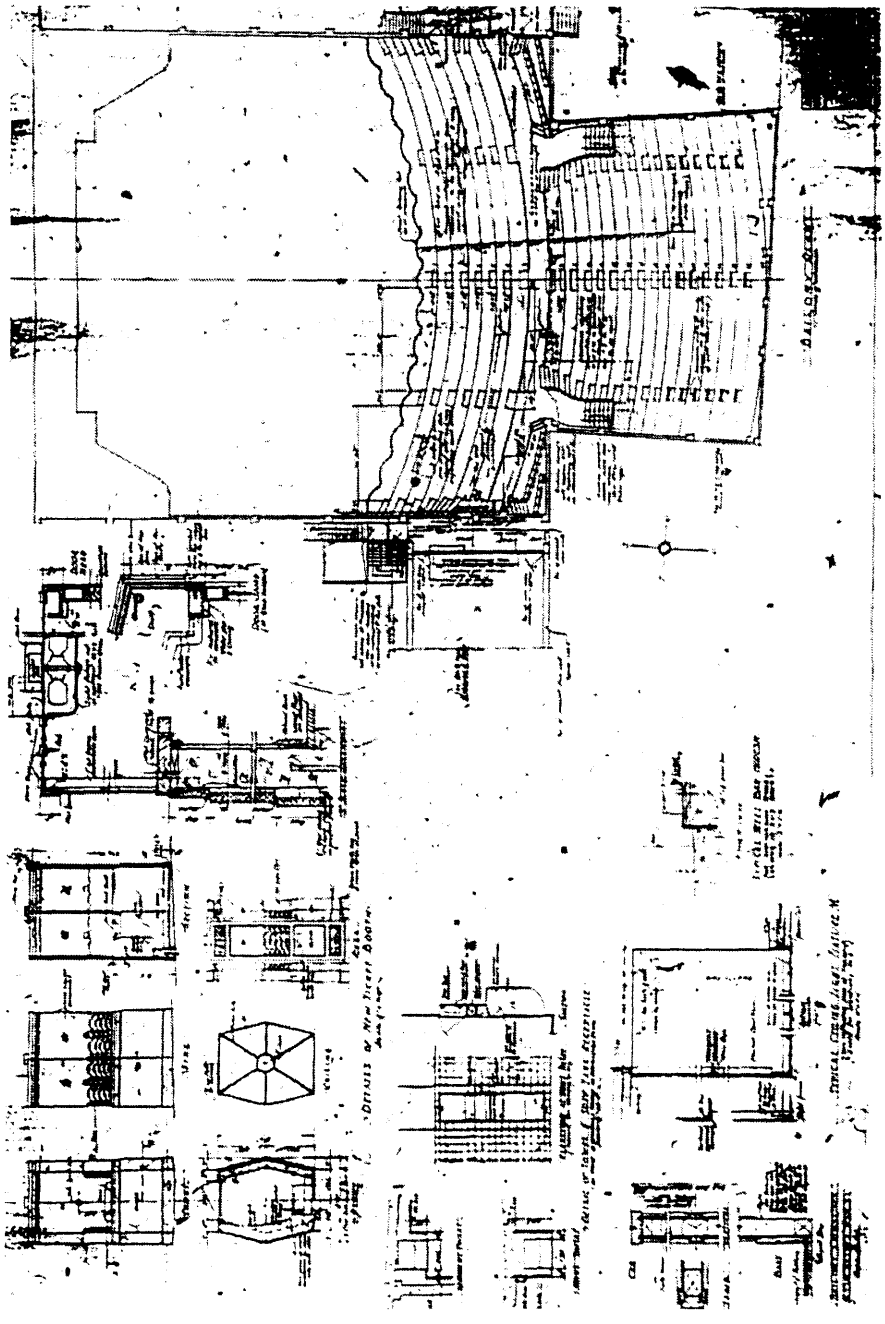

Figure 2: Balcony Plan of New Mission Theater, Drawings by T. Pflueger, 1932

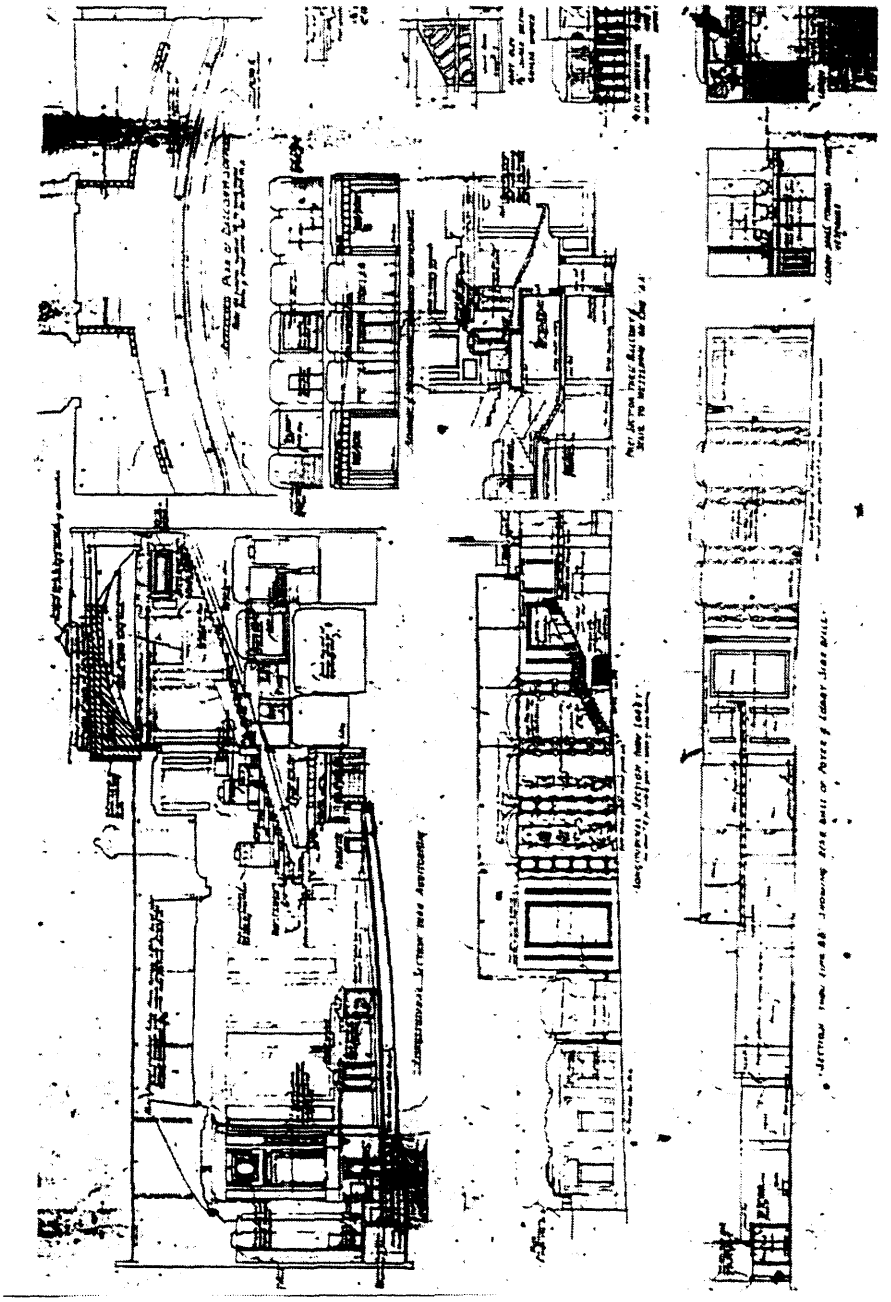

Figure 3: Section of New Mission Theater, Drawings by T. Pflueger, 1932

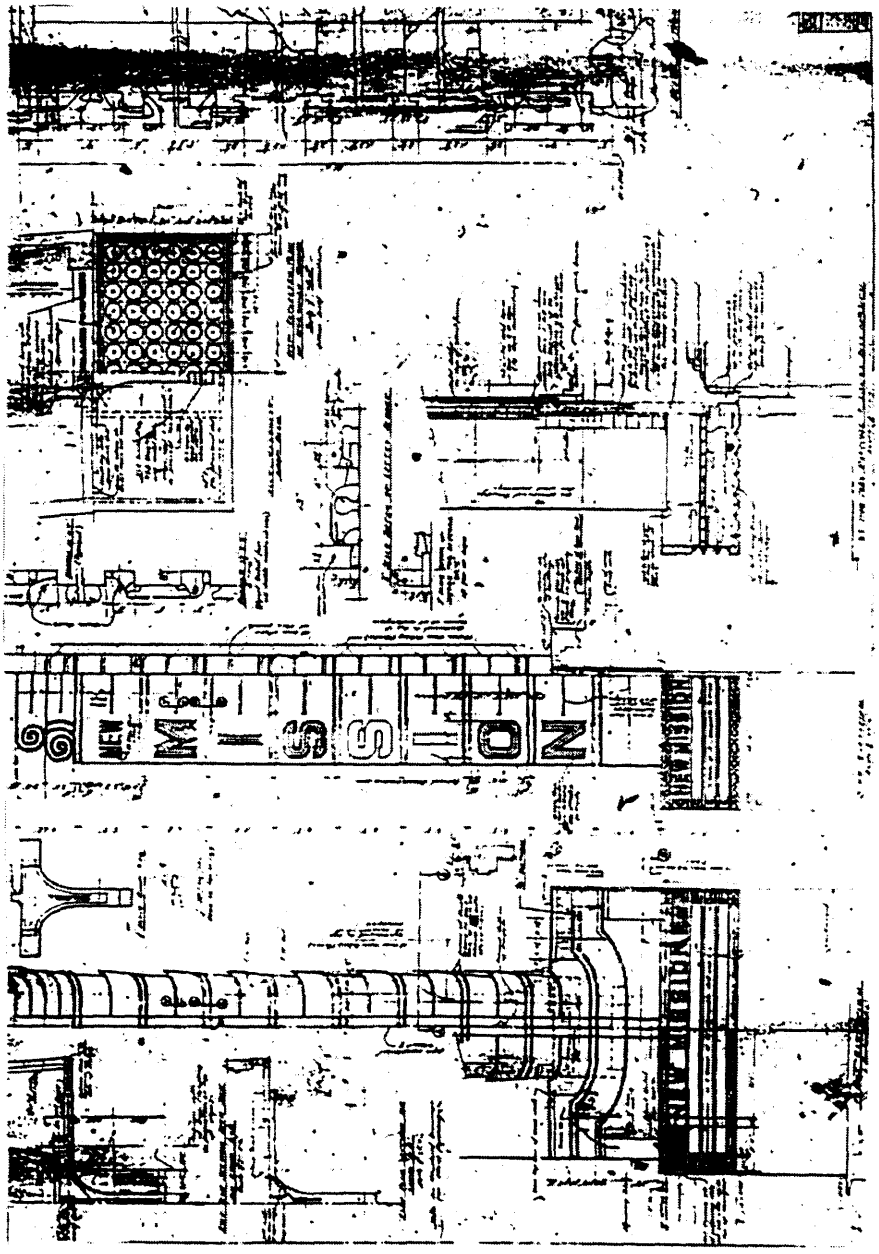

Figure 4: Façade of New Mission Theater, Drawings by T. Pflueger, 1932

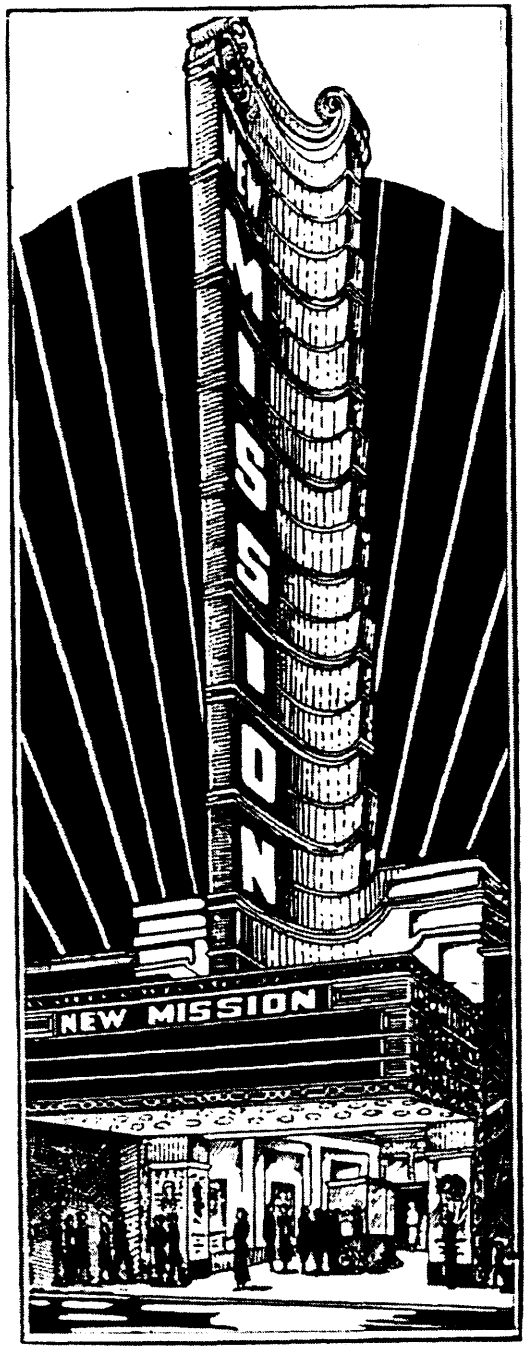

Figure 5: Playbill from Reopening of New Mission Theater, 1932

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Pflueger Archives, Glen Ellen, California: drawings and correspondence files for New Mission Theater

San Francisco Architectural Heritage: building and architect files

San Francisco Archives, San Francisco Public Library: historic photographs

San Francisco Assessor's Office: ownership records

San Francisco Department of Building Inspection: building permits and drawings

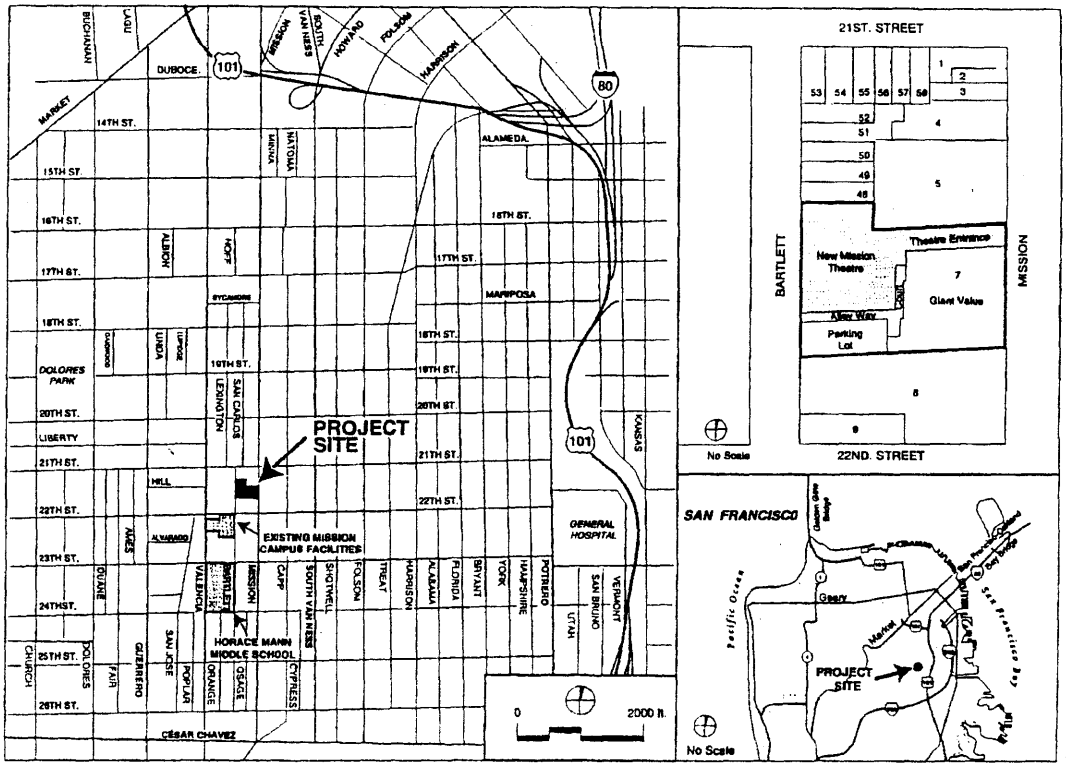
San Francisco Water Department: water service application

Boundary Description

The New Mission Theater and the adjacent Giant Value Department Store are both located on Block 3616, Lot 7 in San Francisco's Mission District. The block is bounded by Mission Street to the east, 22nd Street to the south, Bartlett Street to the west and 21st Street to the north. Lot 7 is bounded by Mission Street to the east, Bartlett Street to the west and adjacent parcels to the north and south. The New Mission Theater building is the only portion of the lot to be included in this *National Register* nomination. It occupies approximately 19,500 gross square feet of the northern part of Lot 7, which in total occupies 44,000 square feet.

Boundary Justification

The boundaries are coterminous with the exterior walls of the New Mission Theater and do not include any other buildings or sites. The New Mission Theater achieved its architectural and historical significance between 1916-17 and 1950 on the present site within the existing building envelope.



Source: EIP Associates