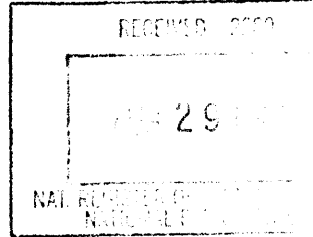


United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service



1167

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determination for individual properties and districts. See instruction 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 an 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 Oriental Theater

other names/site number 5DV5141

2. Location

street & number 4329-39 West 44th Avenue [N/A] not for publication

city or town Denver [N/A] vicinity

state Colorado code CO county Denver code 031 zip code 80212

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally.
(See continuation sheet for additional comments [].)

[Signature] August 18, 1997
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State Historic Preservation Office, Colorado Historical Society
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 certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the 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
See continuation sheet [].

[Signature] 9/26/97
Signature of the Keeper Date

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 count previously listed resources.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	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.

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Function

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/theater

COMMERCE/TRADE/specialty store

DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/theater

COMMERCE/TRADE/specialty store

DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20 CENTURY

AMERICAN MOVEMENTS/Commercial Style

(Exterior)

LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY

REVIVALS/Exotic Revival (Interior)

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE

walls BRICK

STUCCO

roof ASPHALT

other TERRA COTTA

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 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)

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

ARCHITECTURE

Periods of Significance

1927-1947

Significant Dates

1927

Significant Person(s)

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Desjardins, Leo Andrew (Exterior)

Randolph, Paul (National Theater Supply Co.)

(Interior)

Narrative Statement of Significance

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

9. Major Bibliographic References

Bibliography

(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:

Oriental Theater
Name of Property

Denver / Colorado
County/State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

A. Zone 13 Easting 496320 Northing 4402780 B. Zone Easting Northing

C. Zone Easting Northing D. Zone Easting Northing

[] 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 R. Laurie Simmons and Thomas H. Simmons, historians

organization Front Range Research Associates, Inc. date 1 June 1997

street & number 3635 West 46th Avenue telephone (303) 477-7597

city or town Denver state CO zip code 80211

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 SHPO or FPO.)

name George A. and Luanne Sager

street & number 1007 3rd Avenue telephone (303) 776-7239

city or town Longmont state CO zip code 80501

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 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 Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Oriental Theater, Denver, Colorado

Description

The Oriental Theater is a three-story motion picture palace erected in 1927 in Denver, Colorado (Photograph 1).¹ The building consists of a three-story portion facing West 44th Avenue and a one-story theater auditorium to the rear. The flat roofed southern facade of the theater is divided by brick piers and has a raised central parapet. The rear auditorium roof is arched. The first story of the theater facade is divided by the piers into three bays, with a central theater entrance flanked by storefronts. The first story facade is clad with glazed tile and terra cotta panels. The outer bays of the second story feature bands of tripartite windows with terra cotta spandrels. The taller third story is clad with stucco ornamented with polychromatic sculptural terra cotta tablets on the outer two bays and a central, heavily ornamented triple window. The building is crowned by a white glazed terra cotta cornice. The interior of the theater contains a small lobby, large auditorium with balcony, and upper story apartments. The atmospheric design of the theater interior conveys a Persian courtyard theme. The theater faces West 44th Avenue near its intersection with Tennyson Street, the site of a small commercial district within the historic Denver neighborhood of Berkeley, an area of small, well crafted, frame and brick homes facing tree-lined streets. The theater is in fair condition and displays a substantial amount of integrity.

Exterior of the Theater

The Oriental Theater is a symmetrical, rectangular brick building whose front wall conforms with the slight angle of West 44th Avenue. The flat roof of the facade is punctuated by paneled dark red brick piers which project above the roofline, flank the stepped parapet, and create a three-bay division. The building was designed to accommodate street level storefronts in the bays flanking the central theater entrance. The theater entrance is inset, with a canted eastern wall with two sets of double glazed doors and a canted western wall containing a ticket booth with plate glass window and a single glazed door. The walls of the theater entrance are clad with small, reddish, glazed tiles. Slightly to the east of the theater entrance is a secondary entrance leading to the upper stories of the building. Sheltering the theater entrance area is a massive angled, lighted, canopy marquee. The floor of the entrance area is covered with brown quarry tile.

To the east of the theater entrance are two storefronts with central entrances with wood doors with geometric glazing topped by narrow glass block transoms. Flanking the doors are display windows divided into several large lights. The windows have continuous painted terra cotta sills and continuous glass block transoms. Beneath the windows are large panels of terra cotta resembling greenish mottled stone. The eastern storefronts are sheltered by a continuous fabric

¹Funding for the preparation of this nomination came in part from a State Historic Fund grant from the Colorado Historical Society. Photographs are referenced on the Sketch Map.

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Oriental Theater, Denver, Colorado

awning. Beneath the awning is a mottled green stone colored terra cotta course, also found under the marquee of the western bay. Terra cotta insets on the corner brick piers continue the course.

The western bay contains a single storefront with large divided display window with painted terra cotta sill and narrow glass block transom. Adjacent to the window is a wooden door with geometric glazing topped by a narrow transom. To the east of the storefront are two glass-encased display boards. Above the storefront is a flat metal and plastic marquee. The walls of the western bay are clad with the same tile as the theater entrance walls.

The eastern and western bays of the second story of the facade feature bands of tripartite windows divided by small brick piers with terra cotta trim supporting a slightly projecting, thin, molded course of mottled green terra cotta. The windows have a wide, fixed, center light flanked by narrow, eight-light casement windows. The windows have sills of white glazed terra cotta above a continuous row of brick. The spandrels of the windows on the eastern bay are decorated with small plain and ornamented green ceramic tiles, cream colored tiles with raised decorations, and small, projecting cast ornaments. Some of the corner tiles feature images of domed buildings. This spandrel ornament is covered by the flat marquee across the western bay. The canopy marquee obscures a tripartite window flanked by double sash casement windows in the central bay. Flanking the central bay are brick piers with round arched stucco inset panels. The piers have narrow lattice windows at the third story and pierce the roof above the third story.

Each bay of the third story is clad with stucco and enframed with glazed white terra cotta molding with floral ornaments on corner tiles. The eastern and western bays have central triple windows consisting of a central double sash eight-light casement window flanked by single eight-light casement windows. The windows have shared brick sills. Flanking the windows are large polychromatic terra cotta sculptural tablets with whimsical, gnome-like images (Photograph 2). One figure is reading a book, and one figure is writing in a book. The central bay is ornamented by a window with three, single sash, eight-light casement windows. The triple window is flanked by polychromatic terra cotta panels and topped by a heavily ornamented, polychromatic, shaped lintel of terra cotta. Beneath the central window is a continuous band of mottled green paneled terra cotta blocks enclosed by white terra cotta.

The building is crowned by a white glazed and polychromatic terra cotta cornice with elaborate incised scrollwork and circular designs. Projecting above the center of the building is a white terra cotta ornament. Rising vertically from above the marquee is a tall, minaret-shaped, painted and neon sign proclaiming the name of the theater.

The ornament of the facade is continued on the west wall at the third story for one bay, which is flanked by dark red brick piers and has a stuccoed panel with a polychromatic terra cotta sculptural

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Oriental Theater, Denver, Colorado

ornament of a gnome-like image writing in a book (Photograph 3). The sculptural tablet is flanked by a double sash casement window and a sliding window which faces a metal fire escape. The ornamented bay continues the terra cotta cornice of the facade. Beyond the first bay, the roof of the building is a lower, arched steel truss. The western wall of the arched truss section of the building is composed of orange and brown brick. A brick cornice ornaments this portion of the west wall. Double slab doors are located at the north end of the west wall.

The terra cotta cornice and third story stuccoed panel of the facade are repeated for one bay on the three-story southern part of the east wall (Photograph 4). The ornamented bay is flanked by dark red brick piers and has a covered up display window on the first story. The rest of the eastern wall is composed of brown brick, with a wide panel of lighter orange brick, topped by dark brown brick ornamented with mottled green colored terra cotta inserts. The wall has a brick cornice composed of decorative brickwork. A vertical board door and a slab door with louvered vent are found near the southern end of the east wall and slab double doors are near the northern end. A large metal wall gutter is located near the northeast corner of the building.

The rear wall of the building is unornamented and composed of orange brick with several courses of dark brown brick near the roof (Photograph 5). The roof is stepped upward toward the west. Four boarded over windows are visible on the rear. A tall brick chimney rises from the roof of the rear wall. A shed roofed ventilation dormer faces north. The concrete foundation of the building is raised at the rear.

Interior of the Theater

The entrance of the theater opens onto a small, one-story, rectangular lobby with textured plaster walls and ceiling. A recessed, minaret-shaped drinking fountain niche on the curved east wall of the lobby is clad with glazed white tile with decorative red tile molding (Photograph 6). Adjacent to the drinking fountain is a minaret-shaped doorway. A similar drinking fountain niche is located along the western end of the auditorium corridor. The west side of the lobby includes a recessed concession area. Curving staircases with wrought iron railings ascend into the balcony on the east and west.

The lobby faces the slightly curved south wall of the auditorium, which has three auditorium entrances. The central entrance features double wood doors with angled lights flanked by metal wall sconces. On the auditorium side, the entrance has a minaret-shaped arch. At the east and west ends of the wall are single door entrances of similar design. A corridor providing access to the auditorium entrances and men's and women's restrooms is adjacent to the south wall. At the west end of the corridor is the paneled and glazed door with decorative cutouts leading to the "crying room," a small rectangular room with arched window looking out onto the theater.

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Oriental Theater, Denver, Colorado

The atmospheric design of the auditorium interior conveys the environment of a Persian courtyard at twilight. The walls and arched ceiling of the auditorium are plastered. The decoratively shaped, wide proscenium arch echoes the arches of the lobby niches and auditorium entrances (Photograph 7). A red cloth curtain with a band of geometric patterns near its hem extends from the top of the arch to the stage floor. The motion picture screen is behind the curtain. On either side of the stage are decorative proscenium balconies of Moorish design (Photograph 8). The roofs of the decorative balconies are each of a different design; one has a flat roof, one has an arched roof. The roofs of the balconies are supported by slender wreathed columns between decoratively arched openings; corner openings are enclosed with decorative grilles. The carved bases of the proscenium balconies are ornamented with elaborate floral designs. Beneath these balconies are exits with shaped arches which are enclosed with paneled columns and decorative balustrades.

Extending from the proscenium balconies toward the stage and along the walls toward the balcony seating area are murals depicting views of a Persian city, including palm trees, mosques, minarets, and other landscape features at twilight (Photograph 9). Along the lower edge of the murals is a low, decorative balustrade with minaret-shaped openings which curves and extends along the front of the balcony seating area. Beneath the balustrade, the walls of the auditorium are divided by thick piers and between the piers are decoratively arched, shrine-like niches flanked by wall sconces which provide indirect lighting.²

The auditorium seating is positioned in a slight curve facing the stage, with a wide center seating area flanked by broad aisles and smaller seating areas flanked by outer aisles. The balcony seating area has a straight front and is divided into four sections (Photograph 10). The rectangular projection booth at the rear of the balcony is ornamented with large corner lights which resemble minarets set in recessed niches.

Alterations

The theater marquee was replaced by the late 1930s. The current canopy and flat marquees on the face of the building were probably added in 1967. At that time the original ticket booth was removed, a new ticket booth on the west wall was built, and the entrance walls were canted inward. The entrance area was covered with small glazed tiles and glazed doors were added at this time. One of the storefronts to the west of the entrance was removed and the wall enclosed. The walls of the remaining western storefront were clad with tile. On the rear of the building, four windows have been covered with plywood. On the east wall of the building, a store display window near the northeast corner has been covered with plywood.

²The niches are part of the theater's heating system and convey warm air from the basement heating plant to the auditorium.

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Oriental Theater, Denver, Colorado

Alterations to the interior of the building include nonoriginal carpeting and some nonoriginal paneling along the curved rear wall of the auditorium facing the corridor. The original Seating on the main floor of the auditorium has been replaced and the total number of seats reduced. The stage was altered with the removal of central, projecting stage steps and the addition of a small rectangular projection on the stage front within the past five years. The original curtain was replaced in 1967 and the motion picture screen was replaced in 1994.

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Oriental Theater, Denver, Colorado

Significance

*These theaters did a lot for community spirit. People thought, "Our neighborhood has made it. We have our own exotic neighborhood theater."... They also jerked people into the twentieth century with newsreels. Sleepy neighborhoods like north Denver could see the shape of the future. And here was all that glamour right there on West 44th Avenue.--
Historian Thomas J. Noel³*

The Oriental Theater is eligible to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for association with the history of motion picture exhibition in Denver, having been erected as a neighborhood movie theater and having influenced the cultural and recreational life of the citizens of North Denver. The theater is also eligible under Criterion C as an example of neighborhood movie theater architecture of the late 1920s and is especially notable for its atmospheric style Exotic Revival interior. The Oriental is also significant as the only known example of a motion picture theater designed by architect Leo A. Desjardins. The period of significance of the theater extends from 1927 through 1947.

Early theaters offering motion pictures in Denver were centered in the downtown business district, with Curtis Street serving as the city's theater row. The growth of outlying neighborhoods and the convenience of the streetcar system led to construction of neighborhood theaters equipped with all of the latest technological advances and displaying architectural designs influenced by theater construction of major cities such as New York and Chicago. By the 1920s, neighborhood theaters were flourishing throughout the city. "Talking pictures" did not become a commercial success until 1927 and motion picture theater construction reached its peak in the 1925-30 period in the U.S.⁴ The Oriental was one of seven Denver motion picture theaters in the northwestern section of the city by the late 1920s. The 1928 **Denver Householder Directory** listed six other theaters in the area: the Federal, 3830 Federal Boulevard; the Alcott, 3936 Tennyson Street; the Egyptian, 2644 W. 32nd Avenue; the Granada, 2923 W. 25th Avenue; the Navajo, 3654 Navajo Street; and the Rex (Yates), 4977 W. 44th Avenue. Only the Oriental and the Navajo, the latter greatly modified, are still used as entertainment venues; the remainder have been converted to such uses as a piano store, carpet store, restaurant, and music store.

The Oriental Theater has played an important role in the social, recreational, and cultural history of the northwest Denver since 1927. Local historian Ruth Wiberg (author of **Rediscovering Northwest Denver**) went to movies at the Oriental as a girl and recalled that "the Oriental was very important. It was the entertainment center for the neighborhood." Denver City Councilman Dennis Gallagher grew up a few blocks from the theater and described it as "a mystical place to go. It was

³Denver Post, 12 November 1994, 1E.

⁴David Naylor, **American Picture Palaces** (New York: Prentice Hall Publishing, 1981), 32.

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Oriental Theater, Denver, Colorado

the great gathering place. Everybody shared in the communal event--all economic, ethnic backgrounds, it was the great equalizer."⁵

Construction

A building permit for the construction of a "brick theater building" at 4331-39 West 44th Avenue was taken out on 1 July 1927 by the Goldblatt and Spiegleman Investment Company, who were listed as the owners and contractors for the project. The construction site was on the north side of West 44th Avenue, just west of the alley between Tennyson and Stuart streets. An earlier building to the west at the corner of West 44th Avenue and Tennyson Street housed a drug store and a Safeway grocery (See Figure 1). The initial operator of the theater described the new building as "ideally situated... directly on a [street]car line and with a garage just across the street where patrons may leave their motor cars in bad weather."⁶

F.J. Schmidt was the construction superintendent for the Oriental Theater project. Excavation of the building's foundation by Ed McKissack began in early July with footings poured 8 July 1927. By late September the exterior walls had been erected. The theater was completed and opened for its first showing on Christmas Eve 1927.⁷

As was typical for motion picture theaters of the era, a number of firms collaborated in erecting the theater building and in supplying materials and equipment. Brick for the exterior walls was provided by the Denver Sewer Pipe and Clay Company. The McElhinney Tile and Marble Company of Denver supplied tile for the building. Lumber and mill work was supplied by the Arvada Lumber Company. The Hosek Manufacturing Company of Denver designed and cast the ornamental plaster decorations and lighting fixtures for the theater's interior. The tall "Claude Neon Lighting" sign on the building's facade, the third largest theater sign in Denver at the time, was manufactured by the Electrical Products Corporation of Denver. The Stearns-Roger Manufacturing Company of Denver fabricated the ventilation fan for the theater, while the heating boiler was made by Heggie-Simplex of Joliet, Illinois.⁸

⁵Denver Post, 12 November 1994.

⁶Denver Post, 16 December 1927.

⁷Sanborn Map Company, "Denver, Colorado," fire insurance map (Pelham, New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1930); photograph of theater, 29 September 1927, in the files of the Denver Public Library, Western History and Genealogy Department; and **Rocky Mountain News**, 24 December 1927. A newspaper advertisement identified Schmidt as "F.J. Schmidt," but the customary spelling occurred in the 1927 city directory.

⁸Rocky Mountain News, 23 December and 24 December 1927 and Denver Morning Post, 24 December 1927.

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Oriental Theater, Denver, Colorado

Newspaper accounts of the theater's construction listed its cost at \$200,000, with a seating capacity of 1,200. The Oriental, located in the Berkeley area of northwest Denver, was described as a "suburban" or neighborhood theater. The **Rocky Mountain News** described the Oriental as "the last word in neighborhood motion picture homes" and observed that "the theater promises to be a real surprise and is so attractive and comfortable that it not only should be of interest to the North Denver cinema patrons but to patrons in every portion of the city." The **Denver Post** reported that the new facility "will be provided with the most modern theater equipment available."⁹

The building was approximately 55' by 110' in size, with the southern wall slightly angled to conform to the alignment of West 44th Avenue (See Figures 2 and 3). The southern quarter of the theater was three stories in height, with a first story central theater entrance flanked by two storefronts on either side, four office rooms on the second story, and four apartments on the third story. The rear three-quarters of the building included the theater auditorium, a tall one-story section with a balcony at its rear (southern end).¹⁰

The exterior of the building combined the solid brick construction found in the surrounding residential neighborhood and the buildings of the Tennyson Street commercial district to the south with ornamental details which lured theatergoers inside, including an elaborate terra cotta frieze, whimsical sculptural tablets with polychromatic figures, a central entrance with ticket booth, double recessed entries, and a projecting canopy marquee with a towering vertical sign bearing the theater's name in "Oriental" lettering. Two street lights in front of the building were mounted with supplemental lights that illuminated the face of the building at night.¹¹

The interior of the building reflected the era when "where we went to the movies was just as important as the movies we went to see."¹² The interior design combined elements typical of movie theaters of the 1920s, and exotic elements which conveyed the "Oriental" theme. The auditorium included main floor seating, a balcony, and a popular feature of 1920s theaters, a glass-faced "crying room" where patrons could take noisy infants but still view the film. Smoking was permitted in the balcony and patrons were assured that "the modern ventilation and heating plant will carry off every vestige of smoke so those on the main floor of the house will not be annoyed thereby."¹³

⁹**Rocky Mountain News**, 23 December 1927, 16 and **Denver Post**, 16 December 1927.

¹⁰Sanborn Map Company, "Denver, Colorado" and historic photographs of the Oriental Theater, Denver Public Library, Western History and Genealogy Department, Denver, Colorado.

¹¹Historic photographs of the Oriental Theater, in the files of the Denver Public Library, Western History and Genealogy Department, Denver, Colorado.

¹²David Naylor, **Great American Movie Theaters** (Washington: The Preservation Press, 1987).

¹³**Rocky Mountain News**, 23 December 1927, 16 and **Denver Post**, 16 December 1927.

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Oriental Theater, Denver, Colorado

The **Denver Post** observed that "the Persian theme in architecture is carried thruout the new theater" and reported that there were "many startling effects in the decoration of the interior."¹⁴ The interior was designed in an "atmospheric" style, which had been popularized in the late 1920s by Austrian-born theater architect John Eberson. Eberson's interior designs have been described as "complete imitations of exotic environments, conceived in a highly romantic way."¹⁵ Eberson's version of a Persian courtyard, the Avalon Theater in Chicago, also opened in 1927. The fullest expression of the atmospheric style in a Denver theater was perhaps the Aladdin at 2010 East Colfax Avenue. The interior of that 1,400-seat theater was decorated in a "Garden of Allah" motif with fountains, ferns, palms, and 2,500 lights that dimmed. The Aladdin was demolished in 1984.¹⁶

The interior decoration of the Oriental was provided by the National Theater Supply Company under the supervision of Paul Randolph, scenic artist. The twilight atmosphere of a Persian courtyard prepared the theatergoer for glamour and excitement on the screen. Above the courtyard walls, which extended about two-thirds of the way up the theater's walls, were large wall murals portraying desert scenes with minarets, domes, and palm fronds and speaker recesses designed to resemble balconies. The **Rocky Mountain News** described the murals on the east and west walls of the theater as "amazingly realistic" and "unusually beautiful. In fact, it is the best work of its kind in a Denver theater."¹⁷

The colors of the seats, curtain, and draperies imbued the theater with "rich Oriental tones." The stage curtain was composed of rose-colored panne velvet, while the draperies were of heavy hose silk threaded with gold. The seats were rose-colored leather striped with black. The rose and black carpeting was made especially for the Oriental. A small orchestra pit was located in front of the stage, as well as a \$25,000 pipe organ from the Robert Morton Organ Company of Van Nuys, California.¹⁸

Opening

The grand opening of the Oriental Theater took place on Christmas Eve, 24 December 1927. The initial offering featured a newsreel, a short comedy, and the main presentation, "The Joy Girl" starring Olive Borden. The film was a 1927 silent picture directed by Allan Dwan and produced by the Fox Film Corporation. The audience was also entertained by live performances on opening

¹⁴**Denver Post**, 16 December 1927.

¹⁵Dennis Sharp, **The Picture Palace** (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), 74.

¹⁶**Denver Post**, 1 February 1984, 6 and **Rocky Mountain News**, 31 August 1984, 8.

¹⁷**Rocky Mountain News**, 23 December 1917, 16.

¹⁸**Rocky Mountain News**, 23 December 1927, 16.

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Oriental Theater, Denver, Colorado

night. Hungarian violinist Paul Weiss and a six-piece orchestra played, Loretta Reynolds presented an organ solo, and the Georgia Lane Dancers offered "an Oriental dancing number." On Christmas afternoon Santa Claus made a special appearance at the theater and gave bags of candy and nuts to the children in attendance.¹⁹

Nearby businesses welcomed the new theater to the neighborhood. Miller's Pharmacy, on the corner to the west, created an "Oriental Sundae" to celebrate the opening. Berkeley Auto Service encouraged moviegoers to "let us drain your oil and refill your car as well as grease it thoroughly while you are enjoying the show in the New and Beautiful Oriental Theater."²⁰

Operation

Frank B. Culp was the initial operator who leased the Oriental Theater. Culp was also interested in the Alcott, Cameron, Granada, and Ivy theaters in Denver. The **Rocky Mountain News** noted that Culp was "a veteran theater man in Colorado and is considered an unusually good showman." The theater was open on evenings during the week, with matinees on weekends and holidays. Admission prices were twenty-five cents for adults on the main floor and thirty-five cents in the balcony; children were admitted for a dime. Initial plans called for films to be changed three times a week.²¹

In addition to the Oriental Theater, the 1928 **Householder Directory** indicated that the storefronts and offices of the new building were occupied by dentist Samuel C. Lutz, barber James C. Jackson, and John A. Kallminzer, who operated a meat shop. Other longtime business occupants of the building from the 1930s and 1940s included barber Earl C. Crawford and Florence M. Ducate, who operated a beauty parlor and lived in one of the upstairs apartments. The apartments were known as the Oriental Apartments.²²

While it was primarily a motion picture theater, live performances at times supplemented movie fare at the Oriental. In early January 1928, an advertisement for the theater listed three vaudeville performances, entertainment by "Paul Weiss and his Orientals," and organ music. By September 1928, the Oriental was listed in newspaper advertisements as part of the Consolidated theater chain. Other Denver theaters of the group included the Queen, Egyptian, Granada, Highlands, and

¹⁹**Rocky Mountain News**, 23 December 1927, 16; **Denver Morning Post**, 24 December 1927, 10; **Denver Post**, 24 December 1927; and Internet Movie Database, URL <http://us.imdb.com>, accessed 1 June 1997.

²⁰**Rocky Mountain News**, 24 December 1927.

²¹**Rocky Mountain News**, 23 December 1927, 16.

²²**Denver Householder Directories**, 1928-1945.

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Mission.

Longtime neighborhood resident Richard Sandberg remembered that the Oriental showed double features with newsreels and cartoons during the 1930s. The features were changed three times weekly, with one set of films shown on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, a second set on Wednesday only, and a new bill on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. The Oriental held "Bank Nights" during the Depression period of the 1930s to encourage attendance. Groceries, dinnerware, and small cash prizes were given away to lure moviegoers. Since a purchase could not be required to win, some people would acquire non-attendee tickets from the ticket booth and wait on the sidewalk for the winning numbers to be announced. By the late 1930s, an historic photograph of the theater shows that the original lower marquee had been remodeled with two angled signs applied on the sides and "Oriental" decorations added.²³

Claud Pettit, who moved to the Berkeley neighborhood as a boy in 1934, recalls attending Saturday matinee serials at the Oriental in the 1930s and 1940s. The initial segment of a Tom Mix or Buck Rogers serial, for example, would have a reduced admission and include a free comic book or candy bar for attendees. The theater's goal was to generate sufficient interest for the young audience to return for the entire run of the eight-, ten-, or twelve-week serial. The Oriental also sponsored annual Easter egg hunts in Berkeley Park, with selected eggs good for a free admission or a free candy bar at the theater. Pettit remembered trailers being shown at the Oriental advertising businesses in the Tennyson Street commercial area a few blocks south of the theater.²⁴

During much of the 1930s, the Oriental was part of the Civic Theaters chain. The theater group was bought and operated by Anthony P. Archer and Joseph H. Dekker. Dekker was a Minnesota native who moved to Denver as a boy. He began working at the RKO-Orpheum Theater in downtown Denver in his teens and by the late 1920s had risen to become its manager.²⁵

In the late 1930s or early 1940s, the Oriental became the first Denver theater in Charles U. Yaeger's Atlas chain of movie houses. Yaeger was born in Central City, Colorado, in 1901 and entered the movie business as an usher. He rose in the business, and, by 1934, was district manager for Fox Theaters. During the 1930s, Yaeger was an early promoter of the concept of "bank night" and reportedly became a millionaire by marketing the idea to theaters across the country. The promotion was credited with "saving hundreds of theaters from bankruptcy during

²³Richard Sandberg, telephone interview, Denver, Colorado, 22 May 1997 and **Denver Post**, 12 November 1994, 1E.

²⁴Claud Pettit, telephone interview, Arvada, Colorado, 28 May 1997.

²⁵**Rocky Mountain News**, 17 January 1980, 162 and Richard Sandberg, telephone interview, Denver, Colorado, 22 May 1997.

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the Depression." Yaeger bought his first theater in Lamar, Colorado, in 1937, and went on to create and operate the Atlas and Atoz chains in the Denver area.²⁶

In 1962, the Oriental, still owned by Yaeger as part of the Atlas chain, was remodeled and reopened as a first-run theater. In announcing the change, Yaeger noted that the Oriental "was the only indoor theater between here and Boulder, and it has a tremendous population from which to draw." The **Rocky Mountain News** reported that "the theater's handsome auditorium panels and pictures in an Oriental theme have been retouched and repainted where necessary, and walls and ceilings have been redecorated." New carpeting was also installed. The seating in the auditorium was altered at this time and the number of seats was perhaps reduced, as the article describes "raspberry mohair lounge chairs with foam interiors and 40-inch spacing for ample leg room." On the exterior, the marquee was equipped with fluorescent lighting to make it "the brightest marquee in town."²⁷

The Oriental underwent additional remodeling in 1967. The projection screen was expanded to 58' in width and "an elaborate new curtain with an oriental theme" was installed. New carpeting and seats had been added a few months earlier. The remodeling included "a complete changing of the outside front." The theater remained a member of the Atlas chain owned by Charles Yaeger.²⁸

In October 1969, the Oriental and the Federal Theater, at West 38th Avenue and Federal Boulevard, were picketed for showing adult films. Pickets, composed of students, teachers, housewives, and members of the clergy, urged the theaters to show general, family-oriented films. Dennis Gallagher led the protest at the Oriental and asserted that "we would like to get across to the owner that there are a lot of children in the area. All we want is a little variety." During the 1970s and 1980s, the Oriental "settled into shabby disrepair as a dollar movie house, running second- and third-run films." The theater was popular with college students such as Lisa Rogers who attended nearby Regis College in the 1980s. She recalled that "we went almost every night in college. It was a dollar for the movie and fifty cents for the popcorn. It was always full of college kids." Failing health led Charles Yaeger to sell all of his movie houses in about 1976; he died in January 1977. The Oriental closed as a theater in 1987.²⁹

From 1987 to 1991, the theater housed Grace Chapel, a church which eventually outgrew the facility. Except for occasional special performances, the Oriental was vacant until 1994, when an

²⁶**Rocky Mountain News**, 27 January 1977, 8.

²⁷**Rocky Mountain News**, 25 December 1962, 42.

²⁸**Rocky Mountain News**, 22 April 1967, 77.

²⁹**Denver Post**, 25 October 1969, 4, 26 October 1969, 28, and 12 November 1994, 5E and **Rocky Mountain News**, 27 January 1977, 15.

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effort to revive the theater as a venue for art films was made by Raymond Amos. The experiment, which featured films such as "Little Buddha" and "Mi Vida Loca," was short-lived. Since early 1996, occasional live music and comedy productions have been staged at the Oriental by Funglutton Productions.³⁰

Architect L.A. Desjardins

The building was designed by Denver architect Leo Andrew (L.A.) Desjardins.³¹ L.A. Desjardins was born in Fort Collins, Colorado, on 12 May 1885. His father was Bernard R. Desjardins, a Canadian native, who came to Fort Collins in 1878 and moved to Denver in 1889. The older Desjardins was described as a "pioneer Denver architect," who "designed and built many of Denver's older office buildings and apartments."³² L.A. Desjardins spent his boyhood in Denver and studied architecture at Cornell University. He subsequently taught architecture at the Denver School of Technology, worked for architects in New York City and abroad, and opened a Denver "consulting service for local architects, assisting in enhancing the reputations of many local offices upon their most pretentious buildings."³³

In 1910, Desjardins became the first architect in Colorado to be licensed through examination. He scored the highest average after three days of testing and was awarded License Number One.³⁴ Desjardins was a Fellow in the International Congress of Master Architects and was an organizer of the Independent Architects Association, Inc. (IAA). The latter group was formed in Denver in 1927 with the purpose of "protection of the public against wasteful planning, improper designing and mishandling of taxes applied to public structures," promoting the use of Colorado labor and materials, and insisting on "opportunities for its members equal to architects of other organizations." Desjardins served as secretary-treasurer of the IAA.³⁵

Desjardins was a strong proponent of the value of architect-involvement in the erection of buildings over contractor-designed or planbook structures:

However strange it may seem, the work of a real architect planning a building is more momentous than the actual building of the structure, and frequently more of a job....

³⁰Denver Post, 12 November 1994, 5E.

³¹A photograph of the theater in late September identifies Desjardins as the architect, Denver Public Library, Western History and Genealogy Department.

³²Denver Post, 14 January 1937, 6.

³³Desjardins Review, 5.

³⁴Denver Post, July 1910, cited in Desjardins Review, 5.

³⁵Denver Post, 27 February 1927, sec. 1, 16.

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The difference in value between a building having had no architect, even though carefully built, and one upon which ample time has been spent by an architect, though he may not be a genius, may amount to a per cent difficult of calculation.³⁶

Desjardins left Denver in 1931 and practiced in Enid, Oklahoma, for several years. In 1935, he settled in Trinidad, Colorado, where he spent the remainder of his life. Desjardins, who never married, died in Trinidad on 14 January 1967.³⁷

Other Colorado buildings designed by L.A. Desjardins prior to 1928 included: the Woodruff Library, La Junta; the First National Bank, Florence; the Beth Ha Madrosh Hagadol Synagogue, Denver; the Buick Garage, Denver; the Swastika Apartments, Denver; the Elks Club, Denver; and National Register listed Holy Cross Abbey, Canon City (with Joseph Dillon). Desjardins' promotional booklet also included drawings for buildings in California, Washington, Texas, New Mexico, Oregon, and Arizona, but it is unclear if these structures were actually built.³⁸

³⁶Desjardins Review, 5.

³⁷Trinidad Chronicle-News, 17 January 1967.

³⁸Desjardins Review and National Register of Historic Places, "Holy Cross Abbey," 5FN688, Canon City, Colorado, listed 18 August 1983, with additional information provided 1987, in the files of the Colorado Historical Society, Denver, Colorado. The Texas and Washington State Historic Preservation Offices were contacted for information on Desjardins designs in those states but no information was received.

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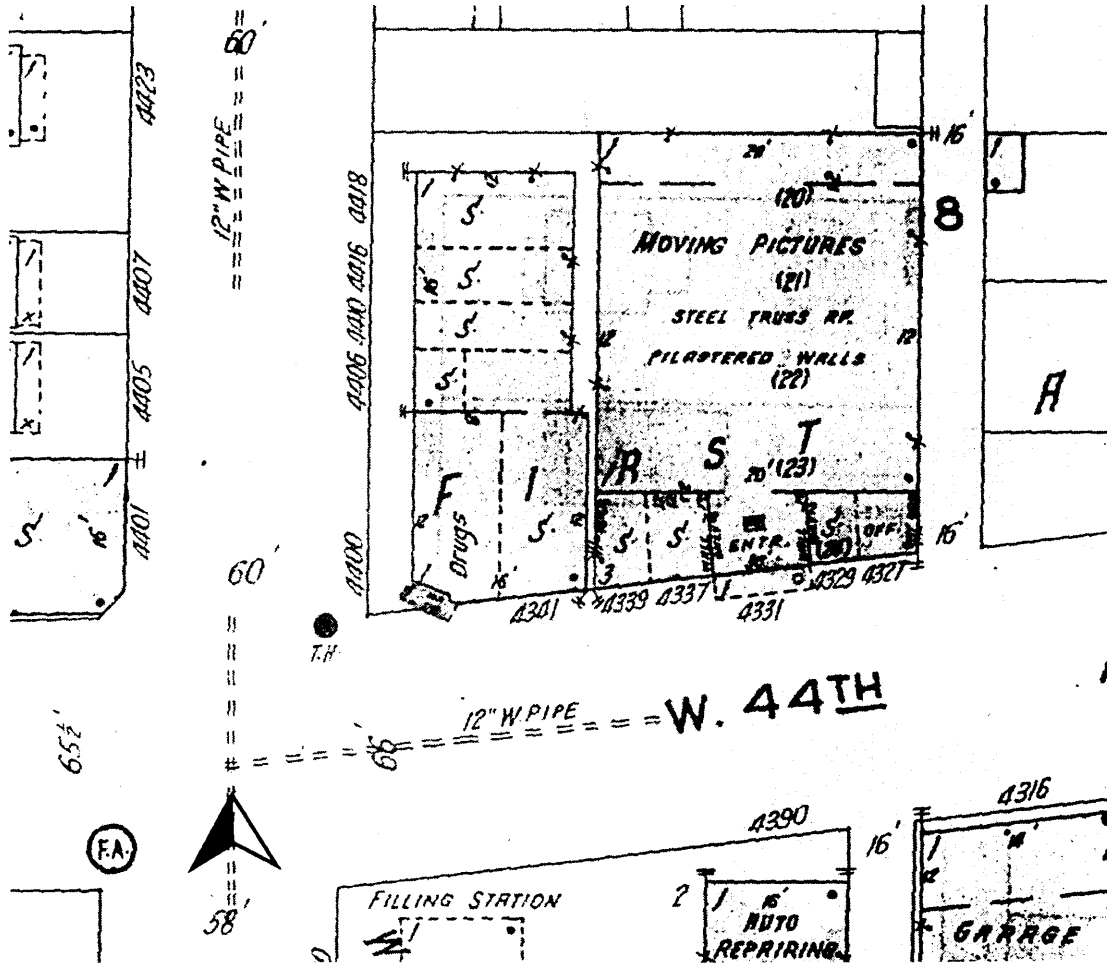


Figure 1. Extract of 1930 Sanborn Insurance map showing the Oriental Theater and the vicinity of W. 44th Avenue and Tennyson Street. SOURCE: Sanborn Map Company, "Denver, Colorado," fire insurance map, sheet 726 (Pelham, New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1930).

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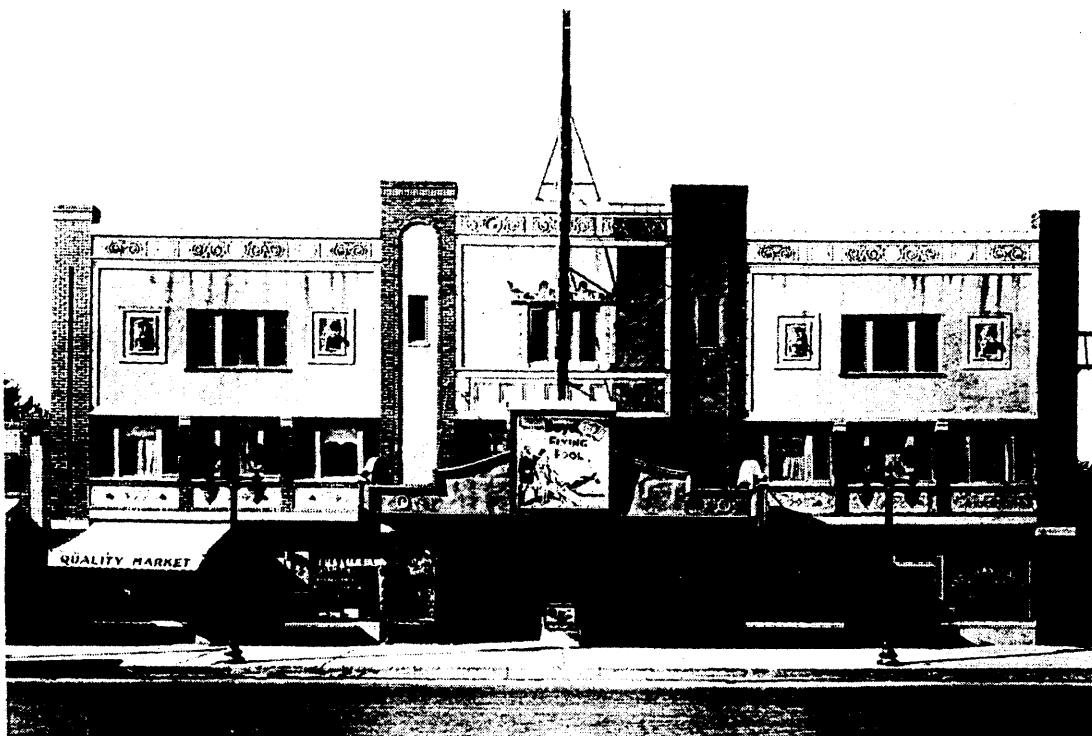


Figure 2. This circa September 1929 photograph of the Oriental Theater shows the south elevation and the original marquee. SOURCE: Rocky Mountain Photo Company image in the files of the Denver Public Library, Western History and Genealogy Department; photo dated based on businesses in building and film being shown.

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Figure 3. This circa September 1929 photograph of the Oriental Theater shows the south elevation, the original marquee, and part of the east elevation. SOURCE: Rocky Mountain Photo Company image in the files of the Denver Public Library, Western History and Genealogy Department; photo dated based on businesses in building and film being shown.

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Figure 4. This circa late 1930s photograph of the Oriental Theater shows the south elevation, a remodeled marquee, and part of the west elevation. SOURCE: Rocky Mountain Photo Company image in the files of the Denver Public Library, Western History and Genealogy Department; photo dated based on businesses in the theater building and the building to the west. Start

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Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property consists of the east 55' of lots 20 to 24, inclusive, Block 8, First Addition to Berkeley, City and County of Denver, Colorado.

Boundary Justification

The nominated area consists of the entire extent of the 1927 Oriental Theater building.

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Index to Photographs

The location and direction of photographic views are indicated on the Sketch Map. Information that is the same for all photographs appears immediately below:

Name of the Property: Oriental Theater

City and State: City and County of Denver, Colorado

Photographer: Thomas H. Simmons

Date: May 1997

Location of Original Negatives: Historic Denver, Inc.

821 17th Street, Suite 500

Denver, Colorado 80202

- 1 Front (south) of building; view north
- 2 Detail of third story decorative panels, windows, and cornice, on the south (eastern part); view north
- 3 South (front) wall and part of the west wall (which adjoins the building to the west); view northeast
- 4 South (front) wall and part of the east wall (alley side); view northwest
- 5 North (rear) wall and part of the east wall; view southwest
- 6 Interior; eastern part of lobby showing drinking fountain and curving stair to balcony; view east northeast
- 7 Interior; stage, curtain, and part of main (lower) seating area in the theater auditorium; view northwest
- 8 Interior; decorative balcony to east of stage with mural above and exit passageway below; view northeast

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Photo
Number

Description of View

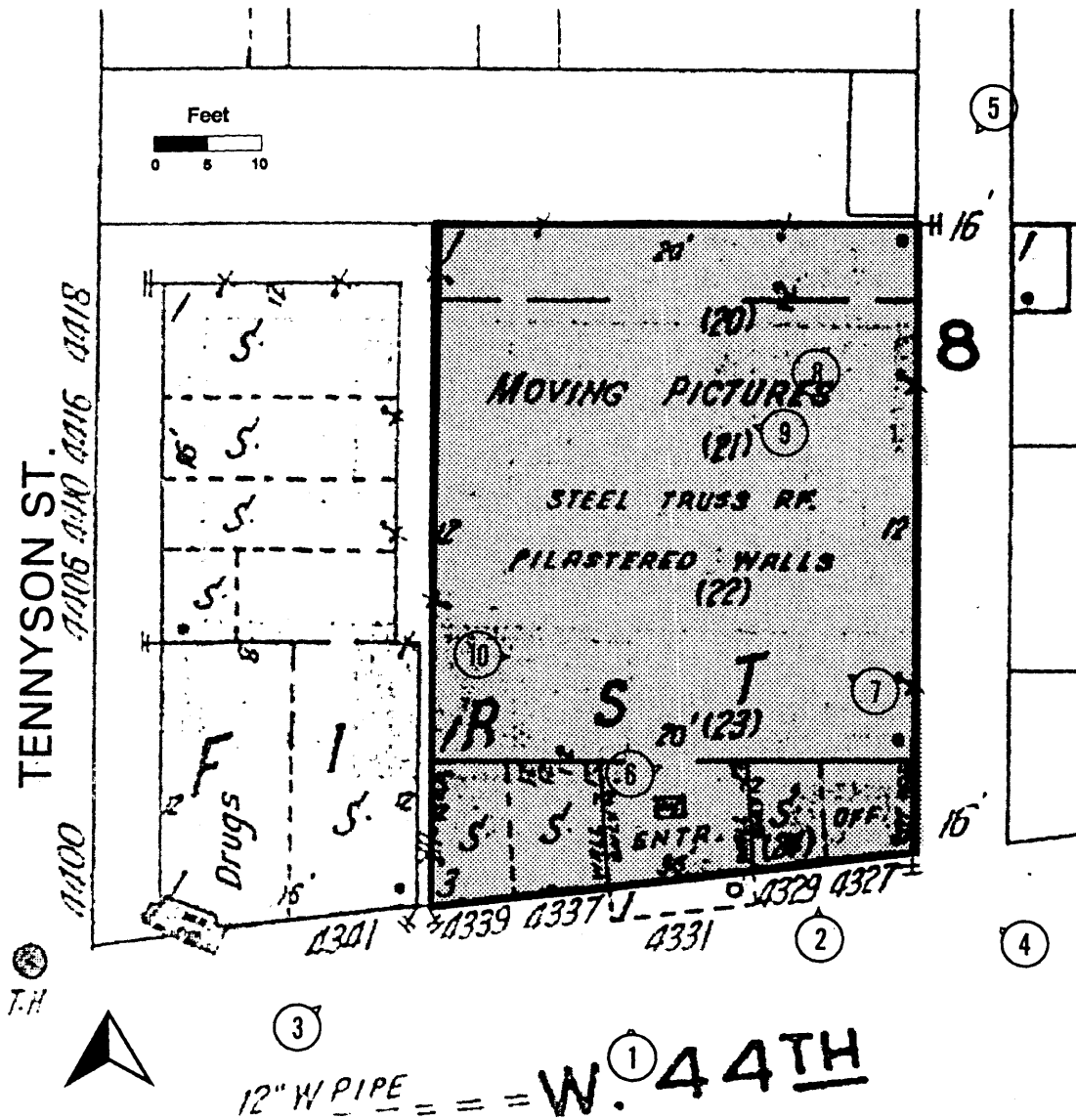
- | | |
|----|--|
| 9 | Interior; west wall and exit with mural above; view west northwest |
| 10 | Interior; part of balcony seating area and projection booth; view east southeast |

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Oriental Theater, Denver, Colorado



Sketch Map. The shaded building is the nominated property. Circled numbers correspond to the photographs referenced in the nomination.

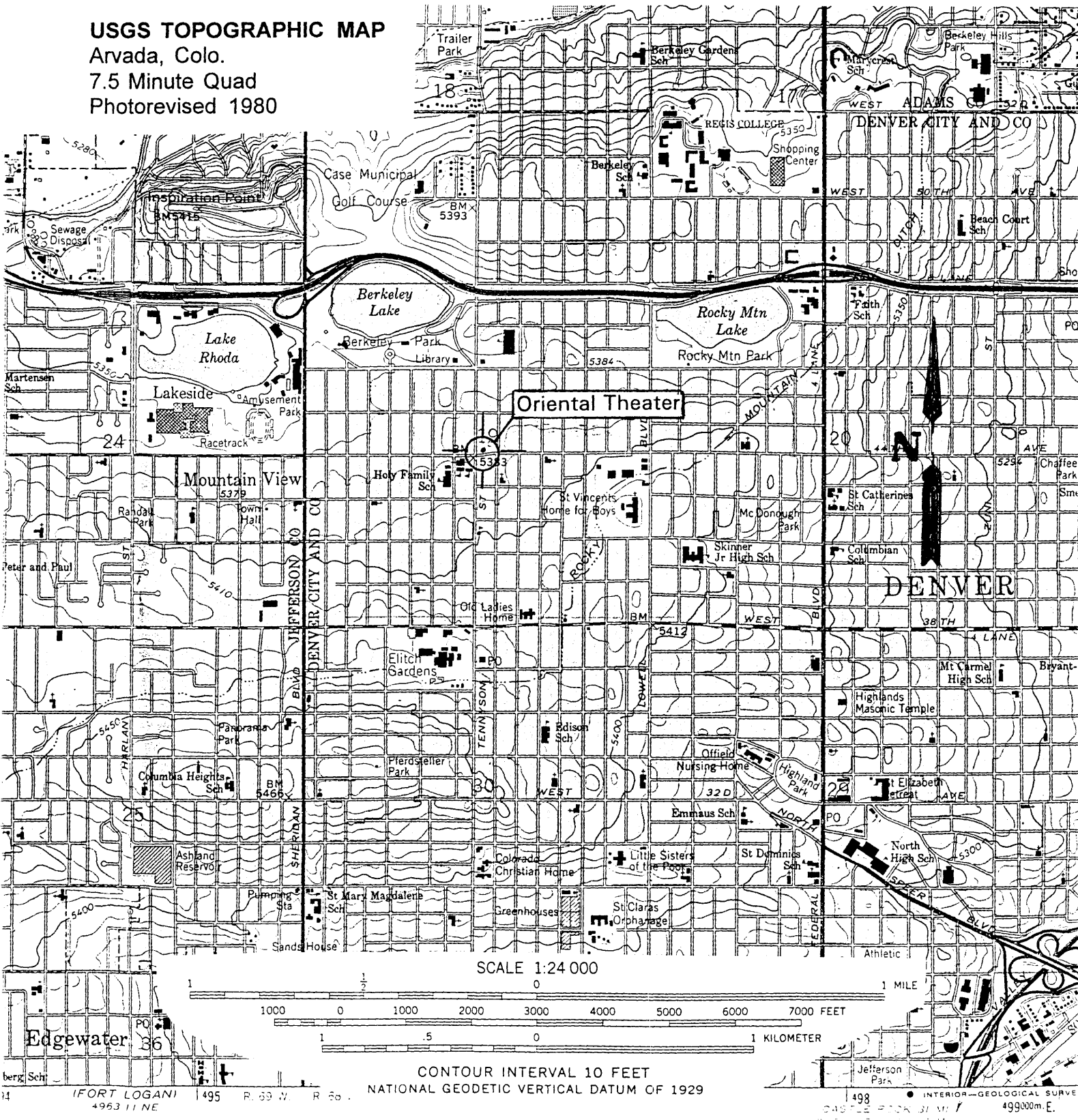
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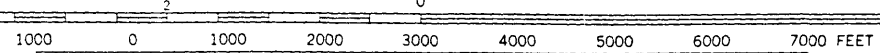
Section number USGS Map Page 26

Oriental Theater, Denver, Colorado

USGS TOPOGRAPHIC MAP
Arvada, Colo.
7.5 Minute Quad
Photorevised 1980



SCALE 1:24 000



CONTOUR INTERVAL 10 FEET
NATIONAL GEODETIC VERTICAL DATUM OF 1929