

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED OCT 5 1982
DATE ENTERED

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC

Florida Theater

AND/OR COMMON

N/A

LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

128-134 East Forsyth Street

N/A NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Jacksonville

N/A VICINITY OF

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

3

STATE

Florida

CODE

12

COUNTY

Duval

CODE

031

CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

OWNERSHIP

STATUS

PRESENT USE

DISTRICT

PUBLIC

OCCUPIED

AGRICULTURE

MUSEUM

BUILDING(S)

PRIVATE

UNOCCUPIED

COMMERCIAL

PARK

STRUCTURE

BOTH

WORK IN PROGRESS

EDUCATIONAL

PRIVATE RESIDENCE

SITE

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

ACCESSIBLE

ENTERTAINMENT

RELIGIOUS

OBJECT

IN PROCESS

YES: RESTRICTED

GOVERNMENT

SCIENTIFIC

BEING CONSIDERED

YES: UNRESTRICTED

INDUSTRIAL

TRANSPORTATION

N/A

NO

MILITARY

OTHER

OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Arts Assembly of Jacksonville

STREET & NUMBER

134 East Forsyth Street

CITY, TOWN

Jacksonville

N/A VICINITY OF

STATE

Florida

LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Duval County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

330 East Bay Street

CITY, TOWN

Jacksonville

STATE
Florida

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

This property has not been
determined eligible.

TITLE

Historical, Architectural & Archeological Survey of Duval County, Florida

DATE

1976

FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

Florida Division of Archives, History & Records Management

CITY, TOWN

Tallahassee

STATE
Florida

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Florida Theater is a fine example of Mediterranean Revival style architecture adapted to meet the needs of a movie theater. It is a rectangular building with construction techniques and decorative elements designed to reflect the Mediterranean architectural influences sought in the 1920s. It is built of buff color brick on the exposed facades highlighted with marble, terra-cotta, and limestone details. The main exterior facade is marked by twin towers, the red tile roof, and a baroque parapet. The interior is notable for its structural and mechanical systems and for its rich use of plaster, iron, marble, and cloth fabric. It was decorated by Michael Angello of Chicago and combines French, Spanish, and Italian motifs.

The Florida Theater is a rectangular building of seven stories located in downtown Jacksonville two blocks north of the St. Johns River. Most of the area surrounding it is comprised of pre-1930s buildings of the same scale and material. There is some new development in the area.

The Florida Theater Building commands the greater portion of a city block with the length on an east/west axis along Forsyth Street. The second through the sixth story, in a single bank across the front consists of office space. The seventh story was originally a roof garden which over looked the St. Johns River. There was a dance floor, orchestra space and kitchen. It was enclosed in 1938 to provide additional office space.

The second, third and fourth bays on the main facade form the theater lobby. The theater itself occupies the remainder of the building. The other seven bays across the main facade at ground level form retail stores and offices, entry to the office space and stage area. The second and third stories above the main entrance and the windows on the seventh story are decorated with limestone and polychromed terra-cotta.

The ground floor is faced with very smoothcoursed limestone with mortar protruding. Arcaded corbeling divides the first story from the remainder of the building which is built of buff colored brick laid up in Flemish bond with headers advancing. A belt course of limestone and terra-cotta divides the main body of the building from the seventh story which is decorated with limestone and cream, yellow and blue terra-cotta indicative of the Mediterranean Style.

The first and ninth bays rise above the main roof line to form twin towers which are capped with hipped roofs. The fifth bay rises to form a Baroque parapet. There are shed roofs between these structures.

The south and west facades of the building are almost totally obscured by adjacent buildings. They are of light red brick laid up in running bond. The west end of the building adds a tenth bay to the north (main) facade and comprises the backstage area. There is an alleyway between the south facade and the adjacent building. There are two metal exit doors at ground level, one from the stage area and one from the theater.

The east facade from the second story to the roof is of buff colored brick laid up in Flemish bond with headers advancing to form a raised pattern. At the southeast corner is a bay of single windows set symmetrically over one another from the second to the seventh story. The seventh story window is an arch set in a foliated yellow and cream terra-cotta frame. Five groups of double hung sash windows, two over two, with transom extends from south to north along the seventh story. Below this is a moulded limestone string course. Below these five are several randomly placed three over three double hung sash windows. At the third story are three quatrafoil windows

(See Continuation Sheet)

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1926

BUILDER/ARCHITECT A: R. E. Hall (New York)
A: Roy Benjamin (Jacksonville)

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Florida Theater Building is significant as an outstanding example of motion picture theater architecture of the 1920s. It was designed by R. E. Hall of New York and Roy Benjamin of Jacksonville; two of the leading theater architects of the period. R. E. Hall, who began his career with the architectural firm of McKim, Meade and White, designed major movie theaters in the North, South, and Midwest. Roy Benjamin designed theaters in several southeastern states as well as major commercial buildings in the Jacksonville area. The Florida Theater displays decorative elements characteristic of the Mediterranean Revival architectural style; the most prominent architectural style associated with Florida during the Land Boom of the 1920s. It is one of only three remaining high style movie "palaces" built in the State of Florida during this period. It is also reputed to be the first building in the South to be built with ready mix concrete. Finally, it is historically significant to the City of Jacksonville as a stage for outstanding visiting entertainers; including Eddie Cantor, George Jessel, Sally Rand and Bob Hope.

The Florida Theater Building was begun on August 31, 1926¹ and opened to the public on April 8, 1927. It was the first instance in the South where ready mix concrete was used and as a result it took only twenty-one days to lay the one million bricks used in the building.²

The Florida Theater Building was designed by R. E. Hall of New York and Roy Benjamin of Jacksonville. Mr. Hall began his career as a builder of theaters with the prestigious firm of McKim, Mead and White. In addition to the Florida Theater R. E. Hall built the Eastman Theater, Rochester, N. Y.; the Lincoln Theater, Lincoln, Nebraska; the Carolina Theater, Charlotte, N. C.; the Texas Theater, San Antonio, Texas; the Metropolitan Theater, Houston, Texas and the Keith's Georgia Theater, Atlanta, Ga. to name but a few.³ Mr. Benjamin built a number of theaters throughout the South and many of his buildings in Jacksonville are considered historic landmarks.⁴ Mr. Benjamin was architect for The Theater at Little Rock, Arkansas; The Theater at San Antonio, Texas; the Palace Theater, Lakeland, Florida; the Ritz Theater, Valdosta, Ga. and also in Jacksonville the Riverside, Imperial and the Palace theaters and the Imperial in Plant City. Mr. Benjamin's other notable buildings include the Fenimore and San Juliene Apartments, the Cheek Mansion and the first steel girder building in this area the Park Lane.⁵ The original owner of the building was the Publix Theaters who also built the Paramount Theater in New York, the Olympia in Miami, the Trivoli in Chicago and the Tampa Theater.⁶

The Florida contained many features unique in the 1920s, including central heating, air conditioning and a central vacuuming system. There was a roof top garden with dance floor and a nursery for young children whose parents were attending the theater.⁷

(See Continuation Sheet)

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

(See Continuation Sheet)

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY LT 1

UTM REFERENCES

A	<u>1 7</u>	<u>4 3 6 9 8 0</u>	<u>3 3 5 4 9 2 0</u>
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C			

B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Jacksonville Harts Map N/19.95' of E 52.53' of Lot 2#
 N/19.95' of W/37. 20' of Lot 3#
 N/19' of E/67' of Lot 3#
 E/½ Lot 5, Lot 5, Lot 10

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Ann McDonald/Larry S. Paariberg, Historic Sites Specialist

ORGANIZATION

Florida Division of Archives, History & Records Management

DATE

May 4, 1982

STREET & NUMBER

The Capitol

TELEPHONE

(904) 487-2333

CITY OR TOWN

Tallahassee

STATE

Florida

12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

TITLE L. Ross Morrell, State Historic Preservation Officer DATE

September 29, 1982

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

Entered in the
National Register

DATE

11/4/82

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

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CONTINUATION SHEET One

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which illuminate the mezzanine balcony. At the northeast end of the building pairs of three over three double hung sash windows are placed symmetrically one over the other from the second to the seventh story. The seventh story windows are arches with carved yellow and white terra-cotta surrounds. The northeast margin of the building advances slightly from the facade to form a tower. There are six metal doors at ground level along the east facade to allow for exit from the theater lobby.

The north (main) facade of the building consists of ten bays. The tenth bay is slightly recessed from the facade. It has a fixed glass window with single double hung sash windows placed symmetrically over one another at each story. The first and ninth bays advance slightly from the facade to form twin towers. The tower windows are single double hung sash one over the other from the second to the seventh story. Windows from the second to sixth story are paired, except those at the second and third story of the second and third and fourth bays. Here there are triple windows framed in limestone and carved terra-cotta. Limestone pilasters with Ionic capitals flank each set of triple windows. They support semi-elliptical arches with paterae margins. The pediment is a griffin in a herald with two mermaids to either side. The lintel between second and third stories is three paterae recessed between limestone mouldings. Engaged shafts divide the windows horizontally. Two cartouches hang above the three windows.

At ground level, there are ten segmental arched bays. Bays one, five, six, seven and ten have a glass door and fixed window set in metal frames. These are retail shops and offices. Bay seven is an ornamental frontispiece of copper with a glass door. It is the entrance to the office portion of the building. Bays eight and nine have smaller windows and the doorways are copper grille work. They are the entrance to the backstage area. The theater entrance is bays two, three and four. Double pairs of copper and glass doors flank an identical single door on either side of a copper and glass ticket booth. This whole area is framed with black marble much of which is now obscured by advertising windows and a plastic marquee. Above this entrance is a copper marquee which is partially obscured by plastic and neon signage.

At the northeast corner tower begins a belt course of coursed limestone capped with a floral terra-cotta band. This band wraps around to the main facade and extends the length of the building. It divides the seventh story from the rest of the building. At the north and northeast corners and the ninth bay a single one over one double hung sash window is set in an ornate limestone and carved terra-cotta frame. Vignette pilasters with foliated capitals support a lintel with two mermaids on either side of a cartouche. The mermaid's tails become foliated and house a heron on either side. There is a cartouche flanked by finials above the lintel. Beneath each window is a limestone and terra-cotta balcony on a carved console. The motif is griffins with foliated tails ending in paterae flanked by vignette piers.

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At the center (fifth) bay is a Baroque parapet with limestone coping and a finial crown. The seventh story window just below it is a pair of one over one double hung sash windows with transoms set in a frame identical to those just described except for the addition of an arch with foliated margin the pediment is cornucopias spilling fruit around a herald set in a ring. The remaining seventh story windows are arched and set in ornate yellow and white terra-cotta surrounds.

INTERIOR

The Florida Theater is a fully equipped motion picture and performing arts theater. The elaborate decor designed by Michael Angello of Chicago combines elements of French, Spanish and Italian motifs and furnishings into a grand and opulent setting. The walls are of deeply textured antiqued plaster with columns and mouldings in mezzo-relievo polychromed plaster throughout. Rails are of marble and wrought iron. Wainscotting is of marble and decorative tile. Floors are of similar tiles, terrazzo and plush carpet. The light fixtures, standards and chandeliers are of wrought iron and amber glass. The ceilings are deeply coffered and beamed.

The stage forms the west wall. The proscenium wall rises a full six stories. Behind the stage are a trap room at the basement level, dressing rooms at the first through the fourth floors at stage left. The fifth and sixth floors are fly space. Stage right and left contain lighting consoles and fly galleries. Directly in front of the stage is an orchestra pit with space for twenty-four musicians. It can be raised to stage level. The curtain is swag draped red and gold cut velvet with long gold fringe. The proscenium arch is successive bands of carved polychromed plaster. Perforated copper screens divide the deeply coffered ceiling which radiates from the arch to the ceiling. An arcaded corbeling divides the ceiling and wall. The proscenium area ends with an arch of alternately colored voussoirs. The pilaster from which this arch springs have a carved face capital. Access to the stage from the auditorium is through a pair of crested arches which spring from salamanacan columns located on either side of the stage. The columns have Corinthian capitals. An ornately grided pulpit rises above these arches.

The orchestra seating is divided from the promenade by a white marble rail. Three aisles divided it into four sections. All of the seats are of red plush upholstery and the row ends are decorated with ornate leather work. The floors are carpeted with a black wrought iron design on a red ground.

The auditorium is completely symmetrical in treatment so that the north and south walls are identical. The walls are of heavily textured antiqued plaster. The balcony ends are supported by arched consoles with cyma recta brackets. Under the center arch is a cross shaped niche of smooth plaster and Spanish tiles. To the east of the niche is a grille work window with a blue painted background. This window is flanked by two niches similar to the first. The area is illuminated by a wrought iron and amber glass hanging lantern.

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The balcony rails are of wrought iron. The first balcony has three aisles and three vomitories. The second balcony has four aisles and two vomitories. The first balcony exit door has ten carved panels. It is set in a frame of salamanca columns with Corinthian capitals. The decorative spandrel supports a semi-elliptical arch with two puti on either side of a herald. The whole is of deeply carved polychromed plaster. Large tapestries hang from decorative valances on either side of the door. The second balcony door is similar to the first but is topped by a crest instead of an arch.

The ceiling is deeply coffered with box beams overlaid. The beams have a stenciled design. Some of the coffers show an ornate frame. This is the air conditioning duct. Where the beams intersect are four radiating volutes carved in leaf shape. Twenty lite chandeliers of wrought iron and amber glass hang from these intersections. Round amber glass fixtures hang from beneath the balcony.

The entrance lobby is along the south wall behind copper and glass doors with a ticket booth in the center. The walls of antiqued plaster are punctuated with wrought iron grille work above Spanish tile wainscotting. The floor is carpet over patterned terrazzo. A niche of Spanish tiles on the west wall contains a marble statue of a young girl. The south wall is obscured by a concession stand circa 1950. Six steps from north and west lead to the Promenade. There are wrought iron rails and light standards on the stairs.

The Promenade has large segmental arches on the north, south and west sides. Exit from the theater is along the east wall thru carved wood doors. The arches are of antiqued plaster with polychromed cartouches applied over wrought iron light fixtures at the piers. Stairs from the north and south lead to the mezzanine. This mezzanine forms a gallery overlooking the Promenade. It has wrought iron railings and salamanca columns with capitals carved like dolphins. These polychromed columns and antiqued plaster piers support a pergola roof from which are hung star shaped lanterns of wrought iron and frosted glass. The ceiling above is painted to simulate the sky. Entrance to the rest rooms, smoker and balcony are through wrought iron doors. All of the furnishings in the theater add to the Mediterranean decor.

Restoration of the theater which will include modernization of all equipment and restoration of the original decor is expected to begin shortly.

Two technical features of the Florida Theater are of particular interest. First, the structural framing of the balcony floor and the auditorium ceiling is quite complex and carefully tailored to the specific needs of this unique building; and secondly, basic components of the original supply and return air ductwork system remain adequate and serviceable today after fifty years of almost continuous use. It is remarkable that the original construction drawings, specifications, and shop drawings for the architectural and structural components have been preserved.

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In order to meet sight-line requirements each row of the balcony seating steps up to the rear of the auditorium. In plan each row forms the arc of a circle, the common center of all rows being located near the rear wall of the stage. In order to avoid placing columns in the orchestra seating area, approximately two-thirds of the balcony is supported by two steel trusses, each of which spans ninety feet and is approximately eight and one-half feet deep. The total supported area is approximately 4500 square feet. The cast-in-place concrete balcony floor system is supported by large sloping girders approximately four feet deep placed just below or above the top chords of the trusses as required by the slope and curvature of the floor. All steel and concrete is in excellent condition, and there is no evidence of structural distress of any kind.

The ceiling of the auditorium between the proscenium arch and the rear wall is supported by four steel trusses approximately eleven feet deep spanning ninety feet. Moreover, these trusses also support the floor of the seventh floor rental office area. The total supported area is approximately 7200 square feet. The system is in excellent condition.

Although the compressors and cooling tower of the original air conditioning system have been replaced, the air supply fan and cooling spray section may be original and can continue in service without extensive repair. Parts of the steam heating system, particularly the piping and radiators, appear to be original and serviceable. However, the original supply ductwork system is of the most interest. The galvanized ducts are externally insulated with cork and discharge into the auditorium area through highly decorative plaster diffusing pans that contain concealed illumination. The supply system will be reused with minor code and acoustical modifications.

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The Florida was not just a motion picture theater. A typical program would include short subjects and variety acts as well.⁸ There was orchestra space for twenty-four musicians and a large Wurlitzer organ. Over the years stars such as Eddie Cantor, George Jessell, Sally Rand, Bob Hope and Elvis Presley appeared on the Florida's stage. Presley's appearance here marked his first on a theater stage.⁹

The Florida Theater Building features an unusual system of brick bonding where the headers advance from the facade making a raised pattern. There is much Mediterranean Style terra-cotta ornamentation on the exterior. The glass and copper entrance doors are done in the Venetian manner. The interior also reflects the Mediterranean influence with ornate tiles, wrought iron grille work and plush carpets and wall hangings.

The Florida was typical of the elaborate, atmospheric theaters built during the 1920s. At one time Jacksonville had seven such theaters. Now there are only three theaters of this type left in the entire State of Florida, the Tampa Theater in Tampa, the Olympia in Miami and the Florida Theater in Jacksonville.¹⁰

The Florida Theater Building has been purchased by the Arts Assembly of Jacksonville to be restored as a performing arts center much to the delight of thousands of Jacksonville residents who remember it in its heyday.¹¹

Footnotes

¹City of Jacksonville, Building Permit #1345, August 31, 1926.

²Jacksonville Journal, April 7, 1927, p. 14.

³Sexton, R. W. and B. F. Betts, American Theaters of Today. New York, 1927, p. 73.

⁴Jacksonville Historic Sites Research Project, September, 1980.

⁵Office of KBJ Architects. Original Plans of Roy Benjamin.

⁶Jacksonville Journal, January 19, 1926, p. 1.

⁷Times Journal Magazine, May 13, 1973, pp. 8-15.

⁸Florida Collection of the Haydon Burns Library, Florida Theater Programs.

⁹Times Journal Magazine, May 13, 1973, pp. 10, 12.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 8, 10.

¹¹Jacksonville Times Union, July 31, 1981, p. 31.

