

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

PHO 685 151

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RECEIVED SEP 26 1978  
DATE ENTERED NOV 28 1978

**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

Skinner Building (Fifth Avenue Theatre)

AND/OR COMMON

**LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER

1300-1334 5th Avenue

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Seattle

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

STATE

Washington

VICINITY OF  
7th - John Cunningham

CODE  
53

COUNTY  
King

CODE  
033

**CLASSIFICATION**

**CATEGORY**

- DISTRICT
- BUILDING(S)
- STRUCTURE
- SITE
- OBJECT

**OWNERSHIP**

- PUBLIC
- PRIVATE
- BOTH
- PUBLIC ACQUISITION**
- IN PROCESS
- BEING CONSIDERED

**STATUS**

- OCCUPIED
- UNOCCUPIED
- WORK IN PROGRESS
- ACCESSIBLE**
- YES: RESTRICTED
- YES: UNRESTRICTED
- NO

**PRESENT USE**

- AGRICULTURE
- COMMERCIAL
- EDUCATIONAL
- ENTERTAINMENT
- GOVERNMENT
- INDUSTRIAL
- MILITARY
- MUSEUM
- PARK
- PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- RELIGIOUS
- SCIENTIFIC
- TRANSPORTATION
- OTHER:

**OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

University of Washington ATTN: James Ryan, VP for Business & Finance ✓

STREET & NUMBER

U of W Administration Building

CITY, TOWN

Seattle

STATE

Washington

**LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

King County Administration Building

STREET & NUMBER

Fourth and James

CITY, TOWN

Seattle

STATE

Washington

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE

None

DATE

FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

## 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

Erected in 1926 in the heart of Seattle's central business district, the Skinner Building is of modified Italian Renaissance design. The building is faced with Wilkeson sandstone and displays excellent cut-stonework on three street front facades. It also possesses quality metal detailing around exterior show windows and shop entrances, as well as in its lobby. Interior details include rinceau friezes above the elevator door frames and decorative newell posts on the staircase. The building mass is broken up along the two uppermost stories by a central recessed section of fourteen bays. Flanking portions of the building along Union and University Streets are of five, rather than seven stories. Hipped parapets of red mission tile are visible on all roof surfaces from the ground and the projecting cornices of the seventh story are supported by handsome consoles. As an urban design element, this restrained, elegant building plays a strong role in the sophisticated, pedestrianized qualities of Fifth Avenue and creates an excellent street wall with its low key, block long unity.

Within the building is the Fifth Avenue Theater, which is one of a mere handful of extant movie palaces in Seattle today. The theater interior represents an excellent imitation of Chinese wooden temple construction. The theme is consistent throughout all of the major spaces of the theater from the lobby and auditorium, the staircases and other public rooms, to the furnishings and all architectural elements original to the theater. The decoration is extremely rich and authentic.

The decorative theme is introduced in the recessed entry off Fifth Avenue. Here, a ticket booth is canopied by a plaster ceiling formed to represent wooden brackets. These are stenciled with gold dragons and flower patterns on a jade green background. The wooden doors leading to the theater lobby have "good luck" knobs; these doors are separated by posts sculpted with relief figures.

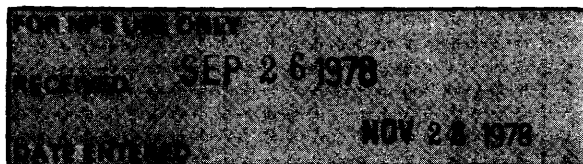
The main lobby depicts a Chinese temple purportedly inspired by the Temple of Heavenly Peace in the Forbidden City. An imitation bamboo roof thirty feet above the floor is supported by Chinese red lacquered pillars and interconnecting beams, all elaborately stenciled. The lobby and balcony promenade are furnished with some of the original Orient-inspired sofas and lamps. Tapestries given as gifts to the theater for its opening stand on either side of the promenade, and paintings of mountain landscapes decorate the wall above the staircase.

The auditorium is said to have been patterned after the Ming dynasty royal audience hall in the Forbidden City. The colorfully designed opening night program for the Fifth Avenue Theater described it in dramatic prose:

"...Its most imposing feature is the great dome, as elsewhere throughout the theater, its symbolic themes borrowed from Chinese legends, its motifs from Chinese poetry. Coiled within an azure sphere and surrounded by glowing hues of cloud red, emblematic of calamity and welfare; blue of rain; green symbolic of plague; black of flood; and gold of prosperity--is the Great Dragon, guardian genius of the place, his presence shadowed and multiplied in varying shapes and forms throughout the structure. On the huge beams surrounding and supporting the dome are five-clawed dragons--the Emperor's emblem--spitting fire in pursuit of the Jewel, rendered in the shape of a disc emitting effulgent rays, and symbolic of Omnipotence. In the squares of the richly coffered ceiling the dragon appears repeatedly again and again, often in the company of his

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consort, the phoenix, symbol of the virtues, and the personal emblem of the Empress. Along the tiered beams of the theatre the dragon writhes and coils his gilded length among the brilliant bird and flower motifs. Again in the proscenium arch and on the face of the great curtain he reigns supreme, flanked only by the minor creatures of his animal realm.

Throughout the decorative scheme the flower forms embodied in the moutan, the lotus, the chrysanthemum and the horned orange prevail in only a slightly lesser degree than the birds and beasts. High on the side walls are inset grills simulating shallow balconies and wrought in further variations of the bird and beast forms. The theatre boasts a single balcony--a wide, low, gently inclining elevation around the sides of which are again the exquisite panels, the same graceful patterns worked out in delightfully varied line.

In brilliant colorings that catch and carry on the hues of the luxuriant curtain hanging from it, the proscenium arch is a massive but graceful plastic form in which two coiled guardians, one on either side, are supplemented by a row of squatted lions, or Dogs of Foh.

The two main curtains are themselves works of art. Here on the asbestos shield the dragon appears in scintillating coils against a background of rich color, surrounded by conventional flecks of cloud. In abrupt departure, however, from the grim themes employed in its framework, the silken stage and picturesque figures linger in the tranquility of weeping willows, rippling brook and flowering lotus.

Striking and beautiful features of the interior designs are the two grills screening the great organ. One on either side of the stage, they are in the form of two lyric medallions in the confines of whose circles groups of Ho-ho birds, emblematic of the five cardinal virtues, stalk in colorful propinquity."

The monumental auditorium, lobby and entrance create the illusion of complex timber construction. In fact, all of the interior work, the bamboo roofs, and the massive pillars and beams were created out of plaster. The coffered plaster ceiling is suspended by wire from overhead steel trusses which are a part of the concrete and steel skeletal frame of the Skinner Building.

The Skinner Building and Fifth Avenue Theatre are currently undergoing renovation by UNICO Properties, lessees of the University of Washington's metropolitan tract. The project involves the renovation and expansion of retail shop space directly under the auditorium and stage, as well as changes within the theatre itself. Alterations underway within the Fifth Avenue are intended to make the facility more attractive to today's performing arts organizations, and for the most part will not compromise its elaborate decorative scheme. Architect for the theatre work is Richard F. McCann, AIA, successor to the firm of theatre designer B. Marcus Priteca.

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To date, all of the theatre's dressing rooms beneath the stage have been removed to enlarge the Skinner Building's rentable shop space. The orchestra pit has been expanded to accommodate additional musicians for dance productions. The organ lift has been removed and sold to the Capitol Theatre (National Register, 4/11/73) restoration project in Yakima, Washington. Other modifications will include modernization of all lighting, sound, and backstage mechanical systems. The stage itself is to be raised by one foot and slightly increased in depth. Proposed alterations include increasing the slope of the auditorium floor to improve sight lines, and removing the ticket booth at the main entrance on Fifth Avenue.

# 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 checked="" 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 R. C. Reamer, Architect

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Chinese-inspired Fifth Avenue Theater is Seattle's most extravagant and unique eclectic fantasy. This 2400-seat theatrical showplace, opened in 1926, has been called the largest and most authentic example of traditional Chinese timber architecture and decoration outside of Asia. It is also considered to be one of the best preserved "movie places" left in the United States; a remarkable combination of good luck and good management have saved it from insensitive remodeling during its fifty years of continuous use as a vaudeville theater and film house. Consequently, the theater interior still exhibits a splendor and richness of detail unparalleled in Seattle's architecture.

The Fifth Avenue Theater was built during a period of great economic growth for the city of Seattle, a period marked by development of Far East trade links which inspired Seattle's business community to dub Seattle "The Gateway to the Orient". The theater, which cost 1.5 million dollars and took eleven months to complete, was an outgrowth of these local interests. The famed Graumann's Chinese Theater in Hollywood, constructed one year later, projected the ambiance of the Orient with little authenticity of traditional Chinese architecture and design. In contrast, the Fifth Avenue seriously attempted to copy interior details from rooms in the Forbidden City of Peking. Ernst Boerschmann's two volume illustrated text, Chinesische Architektur (Berlin, 1925) was the main source book for the decorative scheme. The book contains color plates, scale drawings of plans and details, and hundreds of black and white photographs of interiors in Peking and elsewhere in China. Great care was taken to utilize illustrated design motifs and symbols in the carvings, paintings, fixtures, floor coverings and furnishings.

The interior of the theater was executed by the Norwegian artist Gustav Liljestrom. Liljestrom was responsible for the design of many of the oriental appointments and the "Inner Jade Room" of Gump's San Francisco, as well as a room in the home of Winnie Sheehan, head of Fox Studios in the 1920's. In the Fifth Avenue project, Liljestrom collaborated with Joseph Skoog, leader of the design team in the architect R. C. Reamer's office. Together the two created, with the help of Chinesische Architektur, an historically accurate and harmonious interior.

Robert C. Reamer, architect for the Skinner Building and Fifth Avenue Theater was one of the most innovative designers to settle in the Northwest. He won national acclaim with the completion of his Old Faithful Inn in Yellowstone Park (1903), a building which became the prototype for the rustic lodges built in the United States National Parks from then on. His 700-room Canyon Hotel (1911), also in Yellowstone Park, was as sophisticated and beautifully detailed as Frank Lloyd Wright's famous Tokyo Hotel and was built several years earlier.

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Gump, Mr. Richard B., letter to Seattle Office of Urban Conservation regarding Gustav Liljestrom.

Kreisman, Lawrence. Essay, "The Fifth Avenue Theater"

Opening Program, Fifth Avenue Theater, September 1926

# 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY Approximately one

UTM REFERENCES

A	1,0	55,017,0	5,217,219,1,0
ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING	
C			

B			
ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING	
D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The nominated property occupies the west one-half of the block bounded by Union Street and University Street, Fifth Avenue and Sixth Avenue in Seattle, Washington.

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

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

# 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Edited by: Florence K. Lentz, Hist. Pres. Spec. OA & HP Olympia, Wa. (206) 753-1707

ORGANIZATION

Office of Urban Conservation

DATE

March 1978

STREET & NUMBER

400 Yesler Building

TELEPHONE

(206) 625-4501

CITY OR TOWN

Seattle

STATE

Washington

# 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL X

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

*Jeanne M. Welsh*

TITLE Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE

September 18, 1978

FOR NPS USE ONLY

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

*Charles R. Gurney*

DATE

11-29-78

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHITECTURE AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

ATTEST:

*W. Ray Price*

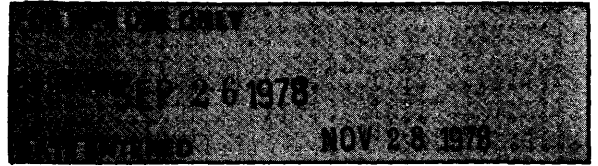
DATE

11.29.78

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

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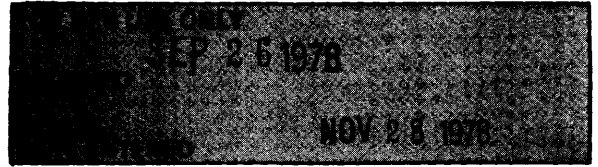
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Largely on the basis of his work in Yellowstone Park, Reamer was hired in 1921 as chief architect for the Metropolitan Building Company in Seattle. His firm played a prominent role in shaping a new and distinctive skyline for the downtown business core. His buildings continue to be prestige addresses. They include the AIA-honored Skinner Building (1925) of which the Fifth Avenue Theatre is a part, the 1411 4th Avenue Building and the Great Northern Building (now Pacific First Federal Savings (1927-1929), the Seattle Times Building (1931-1932) and the Meany Hotel (now University Tower Hotel, 1931-1932). This innovative concrete and glass structure was included in an AIA-organized exhibit of one hundred distinguished American buildings, which toured the United States and England in 1938. In addition to the Fifth Avenue Theatre, Reamer designed theatre buildings in Bellingham (the Spanish Mount Baker Theatre) and Spokane (the art deco Fox Theatre).

Seattle benefits twofold from the Skinner Building. First it houses Seattle's finest theatre, the Fifth Avenue, and second, it provides a sophisticated street environment. This is achieved both through the Renaissance styling and the humanizing scale of the building, and through the use of quality building materials. It is a building which strengthens the integrity of Seattle's urban downtown.

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Skoog, Mr. Joseph. Conversations regarding source materials for interior decorative scheme of Fifth Avenue Theatre

The Metropolitan Bulletin, October 15, 1926.