

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

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

**SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD**

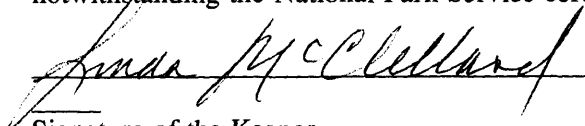
NRIS Reference Number: 03000905

Property Name: Fox Theater

County: Pima State: Arizona

\_\_\_\_\_  
Multiple Name

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This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.



September 15, 2003

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

=====  
Amended Items in Nomination:

Section 8: Significance

The Period of Significance is hereby revised as "1929 to 1953" for consistency with the National Register policy calling for closing dates of individual properties to correspond with the fifty-year guideline unless exceptional importance is demonstrated.

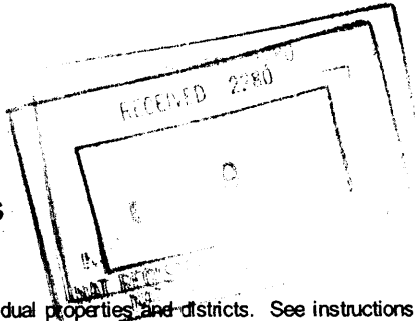
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The Arizona State Historic Preservation Office was notified of this amendment.

**DISTRIBUTION:**

- National Register property file**
- Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)**

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form



905

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being nominated, 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, wordprocessor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property Fox Theatre

historic name Fox Tucson Theatre

other name/site number Inventory No. 114

2. Location

street & number: 17 W. Congress Street \_\_\_\_\_ not for publication  
city/town: Tucson \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity  
state: Arizona code: AZ county: Pima code: 019 zip code: 85701

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).

James W. Gammon ARIZONA 24 JULY 2003  
Signature of certifying official Date

ARIZONA STATE PARKS  
State or Federal agency and bureau

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

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting or other official Date  
\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register  
 See continuation sheet

determined eligible for the National Register  
 See continuation sheet

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

[Signature]  
Signature of the Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action  
SEP 12 2003

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

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

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

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

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing      Noncontributing

One \_\_\_\_\_ buildings  
 \_\_\_\_\_ sites  
 \_\_\_\_\_ structures  
 \_\_\_\_\_ objects  
 One \_\_\_\_\_ Total

Name of related multiple property listing

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

HISTORIC AND ARCHITECTURAL  
 RESOURCES OF DOWNTOWN TUCSON  
 ARIZONA

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A \_\_\_\_\_

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE / theater

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Vacant (not in use); being restored & rehabilitated for Recreation and Culture / theater

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

7. Description

Architectural Classification

Modern Movement: Art Deco Style;  
Two-Part Commercial Block

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete  
 walls Brick; Concrete  
 roof Laid composition  
 other \_\_\_\_\_

Narrative Description

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

**10. Geographical Data**Acreage of Property Less than one acre**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	<u>12</u>	<u>502660</u>	<u>3565040</u>	3	_____	_____
2	___	_____	_____	4	_____	_____

 See continuation sheet**Verbal Boundary Description**

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

**Boundary Justification**

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

**11. Form Prepared By**name/title Janet Parkhurst / Janet H. Strittmatter, Incorganization University of Arizona Preservation Studies Class date May 10, 2002street & number College of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture,  
University of Arizona, P.O. Box 210075city or town Tucson state: AZ zip code 85721-0075**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets****Maps**A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.A **sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.**Photographs**Representative **Black and White photographs** of the property.**Additional items** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)**Property Owner**

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

name Fox Tucson Theatre Foundationstreet & number P.O. Box 1008 telephone \_\_\_\_\_city or town Tucson state AZ zip code 85702**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 instruction, 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

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)

- Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
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.
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:

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

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Community Development/Planning

Architecture

Period of Significance

1929-1970

Significant Dates

1929

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Eugene Durfee (architect)

Narrative Statement of Significance

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

9. Major Bibliographical 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:

UA Arizona Architectural Archives; Arizona Historical Society/Tucson; Assessor's Office; Herb Stratford private collection

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 7 Page 1

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

### NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

#### Summary

According to Longstreth's definition, the Fox Theatre is a typical two-part commercial block theater building as it appears from W. Congress Street. As such, it was designed to abut commercial buildings of similar composition, with a public street level zone and more private upper story, along Tucson's "Main Street." Oriented north-south, only the lobby of the L-shaped complex has street frontage. This facade includes features such as a wide entrance with a central ticket booth, a zone immediately above the entrance for a projecting marquee and a recently installed replica of the elaborate, vertical neon sign. These appendages provided a conspicuous advertising medium. The building's more imposing spaces, the east-west oriented foyer and auditorium, are obscured from view by the Congress Street facade. Designed to accommodate live theater as well as film, the auditorium was originally sized to seat 1,300 patrons and includes a stage with a full fly-loft. The exterior of the fly-loft and part of the auditorium can be viewed from the west through a strip of vacant land fronting on Church Avenue. Modest Art Deco exterior detailing on the pink plastered street facade belies what was once very lavish interior ornamentation, the work of professional interior decorators, as shall be explained.

#### Description

The Fox Theatre, 17 W. Congress Street, is located in Block 196, on the north side of the street. The Fox Tucson Theatre Foundation's property occupies parts of Lots 3 and 4, in an L-shaped configuration, location of the theater lobby and auditorium, as well as vacant land between neighboring buildings to the west. Included in the subject property are parcels numbered 117-12-034A, 117-12-0370, 117-12-0450 and 117-12-048B. The Fox is the second occupant from the northwest corner of Stone Avenue and W. Congress Street, always a strategic location with respect to downtown Tucson. To the west of the entry facade stands an adjacent two-story commercial shop building (parcel number 117-12-0350), under separate ownership and partially encased by the auditorium to the north and theater lobby to the east. The adjoining building (27 and 37 W. Congress) copied the Fox's Art Deco parapet details thus have always appeared to be part of the theater. It houses an Italian restaurant today.

The south or Congress Street facade of the vacant building is a plastered, non-fenestrated, two-story high wall with a deep, recessed, rectilinear entrance beneath a flat ceiling. The parapet has a sculpted Art Deco zigzag-cap with a "drape and rosette" frieze. Above the marquee is a pair of applied vertical pilasters of an inverted arrow design. Two thick squared piers that flank the entry are clad in ceramic tiles of strong terra cotta, orange, yellow, turquoise and black colors. A zig-zag pattern runs vertically up the center of the ceramic tile surface.

Historic photographs show that the original marquee was a thick rectangular canopy which extended well over the sidewalk, both to protect patrons from the elements and allow for ample electric signage. In December 1940, the marquee was replaced by one that was triangular in plan, coming to a point near the street. The second marquee was removed in 1985. The current marquee, a replica of the original rectangular plan one, was installed in May 2002. The original heavy, vertical sign of metal with large illuminated FOX lettering was held up by a steel structure that looked like an oil derrick. During its removal in 1985, the original sign collapsed. The current sign, which weighs 2,000 pounds, has been mounted according to the latest city codes, minus the derrick. A small, flat roofed ticket booth, built in 1956, occupies the center of the entry. At the rear of the entry space is a glazed, aluminum-framed window wall containing the doors to the entrance foyer. This window wall was part of the 1956 upgrade. As shown on the early plans by California architect M. Eugene Durfee on file at the Arizona Historical Society library (case 5, D-5), the sheltered exterior entry zone of the building was called the lobby.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 7 Page 2

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

The west façade, which allows a glimpse of the fly loft on the extreme west end as well as the auditorium block, is illustrative of the structural system of the walls, as shall be explained. The reinforced concrete frame and brick fill are clearly visible on the exterior.

To discuss the interior spaces and various components of this theater, it is helpful first to understand its plans. Blueprints of the original plans, which, according to Herb Stratford were not followed exactly, show a main (1<sup>st</sup>) floor, a balcony (2<sup>nd</sup>) floor and a basement as well as building elevations, sections and many details. Like the parcel on which it stands, the building footprint is L-shaped. The first floor of the north-south oriented entry complex includes the lobby and the entrance foyer inside (a gathering, ushering and advertising space) which contains a pair of stairs at the north end for accessing the balcony floor above or the basement lounge area directly below.

Due north of the entrance foyer and within the enclosure of the auditorium proper is the principal foyer. It is an elongated space containing a drinking fountain, additional stairs on the northeast corner and four entrances on the west wall connected to the auditorium aisles. To the west, the ground level of the auditorium, measuring 140' by 76', contains the sloped floor of the orchestra seating, which drops down to a sunken orchestra pit, the former site of a centrally-located, expensive Wurlitzer organ (Section 8). The seating is traditional (not continental) and divided into three sections of curved rows. The largest number of seats fills the central section which is separated from the side seating by aisles. In addition there are aisles along the perimeter walls. The elevated stage and its lateral ancillary spaces fill the entire west end of the building.

Directly above the first story entry zone, the balcony level contains the stairs and a lounge area with a reception room, offices and a womens' rest room. Balcony seating is accessed from this zone or from the northeast foyer stairs below. The balcony contains a loge, a railed-off section at the front, approximately 160 square feet in size, for more spacious (and more costly) seating. Balcony seating is also standard with a central zone separated by aisles from its side seating. Centrally located on the south is a spacious, rectangular concrete projection booth that cantilevers beyond the building walls.

In the basement directly below the first story entrance zone is a lounge with a reception room and fireplace, mens' and womens' rest rooms and offices. The basement contains much of the building "infrastructure" including mechanical system components. Still standing are the original 1930 swamp cooler and the 1936 Carrier Refrigeration unit which made the first, major mechanical refrigeration installation in Tucson ("It's Working..." 1973). Below the stage is space for actors' dressing rooms that was never finished (Section 8).

The structural system of the building includes concrete foundations for the reinforced concrete frame that structures the walls and supports the roof members. The concrete frame is filled with brick. The auditorium roof is spanned by seven 76' long steel bowstring trusses with curved top chords. They are interconnected by welded steel joists and form a curved roof surface above with a flat ceiling below. According to an early newspaper article, the roof was "fireproof." Above the trusses was a sheath of specially prepared steel decking over which a layer of Celotex, an insulating material, was laid. Above this was a Johns-Manville asbestos roof ("Fireproof Roof..." 1930). Reinforced concrete was used elsewhere to construct the auditorium floor, the balcony, the projection room and offices. The roof of the fly loft was spanned by open web steel joists running in a north-south direction. In its deteriorated state today, under poor lighting conditions and minus carpeting and furnishings, it is possibly easier to appreciate the magnificence of the structure itself.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 7 Page 3

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

### The Fox's Art Deco Ornamentation (Past and Present)

Enough still remains of the interior Art Deco detailing to remind the viewer that the Fox Theatre was indeed one of the "magic movie palaces" of the 1920s and 1930s with décor that stinted nothing to create an extravagant effect. Glittering chandeliers, thick specially designed carpets, opulent staircases, gold leaf columns, rich tapestries, murals, decorated prosceniums and multi-layered curtains of elaborate weave characterized these luxurious centers (Tselentis 1986). Gone are the carpets and some of the wall decoration and furnishings of Tucson's Fox Theatre. Years of abandonment have caused serious stabilization problems.

Art Deco was a modern style that emphasized verticality and ornamentation of building surfaces and elements with predominantly rectilinear motifs in relief such as chevrons, zigzags and frets. There was much use of fluting and reeding. Polychromatic decoration of surfaces was achieved by ceiling and wall murals, faience, ceramic tile and the application of gold leaf. Color was also used in the rich decoration of furnishings such as chandeliers, lamps, carpets and curtains. The style was inspired by Mayan, Egyptian Native American and other precedents. Designers were known to give local flavor to its application, as in the Southwest-influenced "Pueblo Deco" and one journalist in 1930 described the décor of Tucson's Fox as "Spanish modernistic" ("Modern \$325,000..." 1930).

The high-walled auditorium itself was the most dramatic and lavishly decorated space. The stage or focal point of this Art Deco showcase featured a lavender plaster proscenium with gold and purple tiles surrounding the stage. A gold plush rhinestone curtain, 30' X 54', was the exterior drop. There was a second curtain of silver dream cloth, upon which the title of the films was shown. The screen was the "latest scientific achievement in the film research world" of that time, being perforated to allow the sound to come through. ("Artists Rush..." 1930.)

The \$20,000 Wurlitzer organ, of the two manual theater concert type, was said to be "a whole orchestra" within itself. On either side of the stage, imposing forms that resembled skyscrapers covered the organ chambers. These forms and the faceted auditorium walls themselves were clad in a light brown acoustic plaster, Acustone, that resembled finely finished stone. Tall, fluted gold-leaf decorated columns, originating from faceted bases and ending in lavender glass, ascended the walls at regular intervals. The ceiling mural was a colorful sunburst motif in yellow, orange, purple, green and brown. From the center of the sunburst hung a cut-glass chandelier. For the patrons' comfort, the seating arrangement was roomy so that the distance between rows was greater than that of most auditoriums. The seats themselves were clad in Moroccan leather with ornamental tapestry backs. The loge contained upholstered benches. ("Artists Rush..." 1930 and Boyer 1988: 308, 309.)

The rest of the theater was elaborate, though not as impressive as the auditorium. Eleven hundred square yards of thick, colorfully decorated carpet covered the concrete floors of the foyers, restrooms, offices and aisles. Light fixtures throughout were of cut glass, patterned after those in the auditorium. Stairway banisters were gold-painted wrought iron which can still be seen today. The deteriorated floral-motif wall murals in the entrance foyer date back to a 1940s renovation. Of particular beauty has been the drinking fountain and its surround, still a focal point of the auditorium foyer space. The silver colored curvilinear metal forms resemble elaborate leaves.

This former splendor is currently in a very deteriorated state owing to the fact that the building has been abandoned



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 7 Page 4

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Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

since 1974. Under the direction of Herb Stratford, the current effort by the Fox Tucson Theatre Foundation to raise funds for the stabilization, preservation and rehabilitation of this remarkable building is most encouraging (Section 8). As funds appear, renovation is currently under way to revitalize the theater and restore Art Deco features.

With serious stabilization problems, the current condition of the Fox Theatre is poor but improving due to the concerted effort of the Fox Tucson Theatre Foundation. The overall integrity of this building is excellent, especially of the interior. The recent additions to the Congress Street façade are replicas of the former marquee and sign. It is recommended that future preservation work for this building follow guidelines which minimize replication of significant missing features and maximize the preservation of what exists if over fifty years of age. The replacement of non-historic features should be done with compatible, contemporary construction, clearly differentiated from the historic fabric.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 5

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

### NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

#### Summary

The Fox Theatre, 27-33 W. Congress Street, (formerly 17 W. Congress Street) is significant under Criteria A and C. The 1,300 seat theatre, which opened in 1930, was strategically located on Congress Street near Stone Avenue, the "epicenter" of downtown Tucson for over forty years and is an irreplaceable part of Tucson's community heritage. It pertains to the theme of theater and entertainment in the central business district. The building, especially with respect to its interior appointments, is an excellent example of the Art Deco style with Southwest influences. From the street it is a two-part commercial block, the west segment of which is a traditional 1930s theatre building. Vacant for many years, currently funds are being raised for its stabilization, preservation and rehabilitation. The period of significance for this building begins with its construction in 1929 during the third period of Tucson's central business district development (1896-1935) and ends during the fourth period of downtown development (1935-1970).

#### Historical Overview

The following is based largely on an interview with Herb Stratford, executive director, and B. C. McKinney, technical director, of the Fox Tucson Theatre Foundation and on Diane Boyers "Glitter Amidst Adobe - Tucson's Fox Theatre," an article in the *Journal of Arizona History* (1988). Primary sources consulted were numerous newspaper articles about the once popular theatre covering its founding, opening night, ups and downs and the recent Fox Preservation Foundation movement. Also consulted were historic photographs, blueprints and ephemera from the Arizona Historical Society Library and transcribed interviews conducted by W. Lane Rogers in 1992.

On August 24, 1929, just as Tucson was beginning to feel the pressures of the Depression, ground was broken on site for the Tower Theatre on W. Congress Street near Stone Avenue. The theatre was to be the "crown jewel" in the Diamos Brothers' Lyric amusement chain operating throughout southern Arizona. These brothers, Daved, Nick, Frank, John and George, and their uncle James Xalis, were immigrants from Greece who simplified their surname Diamantatsikos. They found the region to their liking and by 1929 owned most of the theaters in southern Arizona including Tucson's Lyric Theatre on Congress down street from the subject site. At that time other Congress Street theaters included the Rialto and the Opera House, owned by the Drachman family, and the Plaza, under construction by Judah Aaron Kaufman, a local merchant. (Boyer 1988: 306).

California architect Eugene Durfee was the designer and plans had already been drawn up for the elaborate \$300,000 Tower Theatre when ground was broken. On September 28, 1929 of that year, desiring to eliminate competition, the Fox West Coast motion-picture company pressured the Diamos brothers to lease them the Tower along with all other theaters in their chain. The Tower then became the Fox Theatre and construction resumed as planned. Durfee's design was for a dual purpose theatre to accommodate both film and vaudeville, or live-performance. The theatre as designed featured a stage, full fly-loft and dressing rooms. However, severely affected by the Depression, touring vaudeville circuits were suffering from the advent of sound movies. The Fox Theatre was therefore adapted to a dual vaudeville/movie house but its dressing rooms were never completed.

Opening night was April 11, 1930. It is said that the largest party Tucson ever held took place along Congress Street that evening (Photo 1). The street was closed and waxed for dancing. Outside there were four live bands, a live radio broadcast and free trolley rides downtown. Fifteen usherettes wearing "salonette uniforms" escorted ticket holders to their seats. The evening's overture was "A Spanish Fantasy" (to honor the glitzy Art Deco decor) followed by three short

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 6

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

films including Fox Movietone News and a Mickey Mouse cartoon. To further impress the audience, Herbert Nixon, nationally known director of a jazz orchestra, then played on the \$20,000 Wuritzer pipe organ installed in the center of the orchestra pit. Movie stars Don Alvarado, Polly Moran, Lois Moran, Charles Farrell and Gwen Lee made appearances as did Fox West Coast executives. Last on the slate was the feature, "Chasing Rainbows," an all-talking musical partly in color known today for its song "Happy Days are Here Again." (Boyer 1988: 304, 305.)

Tucson's Fox Theatre building was leased to the West Coast branch of a huge entertainment empire with affiliated theatres in strategic locations throughout the United States. This empire was founded by William Fox (1897-1952) who was born in Tulchva, Hungary. Brought to the U.S. as an infant and reared in New York City, Fox entered the motion-picture business in 1904 when he bought a nickelodeon in Brooklyn. He soon formed a chain of motion picture theatres and later a production company in Staten Island, N.Y. In 1915 he founded the Fox Film Corporation to produce, distribute and show films. Fox was a pioneer in the development of sound film, a process of photographing sound on film. This type of sound film became known as Fox Movietone. (Borowsky 1969: 676.)

There had been fierce rivalry among film giants for theater outlets and Fox's competition, Paramount/Publix had leased Tucson's Rialto Theatre and Opera House. According to Herb Stratford, during the initial years, Fox theaters throughout the country ran only Fox company films but later were allowed to show the work of other film companies. Tucson's Fox Theatre became home to the first runs of Fox West Coast and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer pictures, the Fox-Lyric served as the second-run house while the Plaza featured Spanish-language movies. Tucson's theaters traded rights to show Warner Brothers and RKO films. (Boyer 1988: 311.) Four to five world premiers took place in Tucson's Fox Theatre. Other than "Chasing Rainbows," these included "Deadly Companions," "Let Freedom Ring" and "Gay Desperado." The last was a United Artists film.

The Fox Theater's first manager was Albert D. Stetson. Shortly after, in 1933 the Fox West Coast management lured prominent Tucson businessman and theater owner Roy P. Drachman away from Paramount/Publix. Drachman, a fine showman and promoter, had managed the Opera House and Rialto theaters since 1925.

When the Fox opened, the building quickly became a community center. It was considered the most special of Tucson theatres and it had the premier location. T. Ed Litt's popular drugstore stood nearby, with its soda counter to serve movie-goers after the show. The Fox hosted numerous special events to attract clientele such as Bank Night, a weekly event where ticket holders had a chance to win a cash prize, China Night, where one could obtain a complete set of dishes, Ladies' Matinee, bicycle races, band concerts, the Miss Southern Arizona beauty pageant and parades. Of particular service and perhaps best loved by the community was the Fox's sponsorship of the Mickey Mouse Club (Photo 2). This Walt Disney-promoted club started in April of 1930. Participating theater owners purchased a Mickey Mouse Club license, membership and promotional materials. So phenomenally successful that it became unmanageable, the national organization disbanded around 1933 but local theaters, including Tucson's Fox Theatre, continued it. Tucson's "Aunt Minnie" was Mabel Mathew Weadock who ran the Club from 1932 to 1946. It was open to children of all races (unusual for the time since the Fox normally permitted African Americans in the back of the balcony only). The admission price was ten cents unless the child could not afford the dime. (Boyer 1988: 308, 314, 315, 316, 318.)

The theatre was immensely popular, not only for its films and community activities but for its beautiful interior decoration (see Section 7). A "piece of Hollywood" in Tucson, the rather simple exterior of the reinforced concrete frame edifice belied the lavish Art Deco embellishments within. Decorator Robert Powers, also from California designed the interior.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 7

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Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

No aspect of this was minus an Art Deco touch, but the auditorium was the most impressive area with its elaborated proscenium, specialized curtains, Wurlitzer organ chambers, fluted columns, ceiling murals, chandeliers and 1,300 leather and tapestry-clad seats in tiers. (Boyer 1988: 308, 309).

The most up-to-date equipment was installed in the Fox Theatre. Of great importance was the temperature-regulating system, especially with respect to cooling. When the Fox opened, it had evaporative cooling. This was replaced in 1936 by the first commercial mechanical refrigeration system installed in the city, two forty-ton Carrier units. Other technological innovations were the flashy neon sign, the special perforated screen for the passage of sound and the most up-to-date sound and projection equipment.

During the 1940s, especially during World War II when war pictures and newsreels were of great interest, business at the Fox flourished. However, the magnitude and grandeur of events and promotions was beginning to decline. After the war, Tucson's growth skyrocketed accompanied by a corresponding increase in recreation facilities. The Fox was remodeled in 1956, but it was already past its prime. (Boyer 1988: 320). Competition from drive-in theatres and television coupled with the commercial decline of the central business district ended the Fox Theatre's forty-year run as the center of Tucson's entertainment world. On June 19, 1974, Tucson's Fox Theatre closed. Various later efforts to revive the theater were unsuccessful. Fortunately the building was not demolished although it remained vacant for many years.

In the Spring of 1998, a group of concerned citizens joined together in their commitment to revive the landmark theatre. Bolstered by a City-commissioned feasibility study, it was determined that the time was ripe to reopen the Fox. Part of a movement taking place across the country to restore historic Fox theatres, the non-profit Fox Tucson Theatre Foundation grew from this group. Its goal is the restoration, renovation and return to the public of this Art Deco jewel. The estimated cost of restoring and retrofitting the theatre is \$8.5 million. Both with respect to its size and its adaptability, the theatre fits a niche for the community. It will be especially appropriate for movies, small-scale live performances, dance groups and community functions.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 9 Page 8

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 9 Page 9

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Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

Tselentis, Tony. "Canadian's pleasure domes may make 'going to movies' magical again." *Arizona Daily Star*. May 25, 1986

*See also Section I: Major Bibliographic References of the Multiple Property Documentation Form for Historic and Architectural Resources of Downtown Tucson, Arizona.*

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 10 Page 10

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

### VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

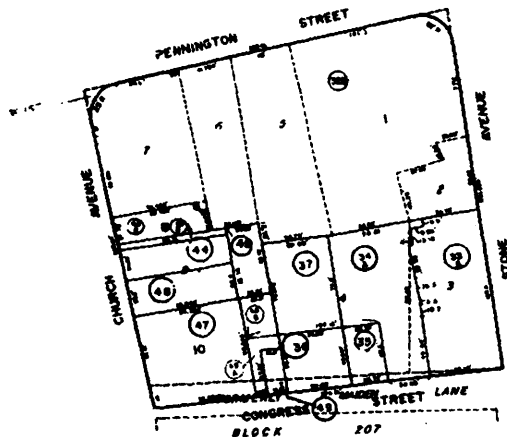
Property currently comprises four parcels in Block 196, City of Tucson. The parcels accommodate the L-shaped layout of the theater building with the lobby oriented north-south and fronting on W. Congress Street and the auditorium oriented east-west north of two adjacent commercial parcels. Tax parcel 117-12-034A accommodates both the lobby and part of the auditorium. Its legal description is part of Lots 3 and 4, Block 196. parcel 117-12-0370, which accommodates the west portion of the auditorium, is the northwest part of Lot 4. Parcels 117-12-0450 and 117-12-048B form a strip of vacant land, approximately 24 feet wide to the west. The lobby has a frontage of 32.28 feet along Congress Street. The east boundary of the theater property is approximately 122 feet long, the north boundary, minus the vacant strip, totals approximately 170 feet, and the west boundary of parcel 117-12-0370 is approximately 75 feet long.

### BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The boundary of the nominated property corresponds with the current ownership of the property; the property boundaries of the four parcels contain the building walls of the Fox Theatre and its adjoining vacant strip; accessor's parcel numbers 117-12-0370, 117-12-034A, 117-12-0450, 117-12-048B.

**ASSESSOR'S RECORD MAP**  
117-12  
2/17  
**CITY OF TUCSON**  
**BLOCK 196**

1 B



SCALE 1" = 80'  
SEE BOOK 5, PAGE 71 M.S.P.  
2001-1

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 11

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

NOTE: Archival pen used to label all original photos.

PHOTOGRAPHER:	Janet H. Parkhurst
DATE:	July 13, 2002
NEGATIVE NUMBER:	DTT-5-24A
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES:	Arizona Architectural Archives College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture P.O. Box 210075 The University of Arizona Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #1: View of front façade showing recently installed sign and marquee; looking NW





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National Park Service

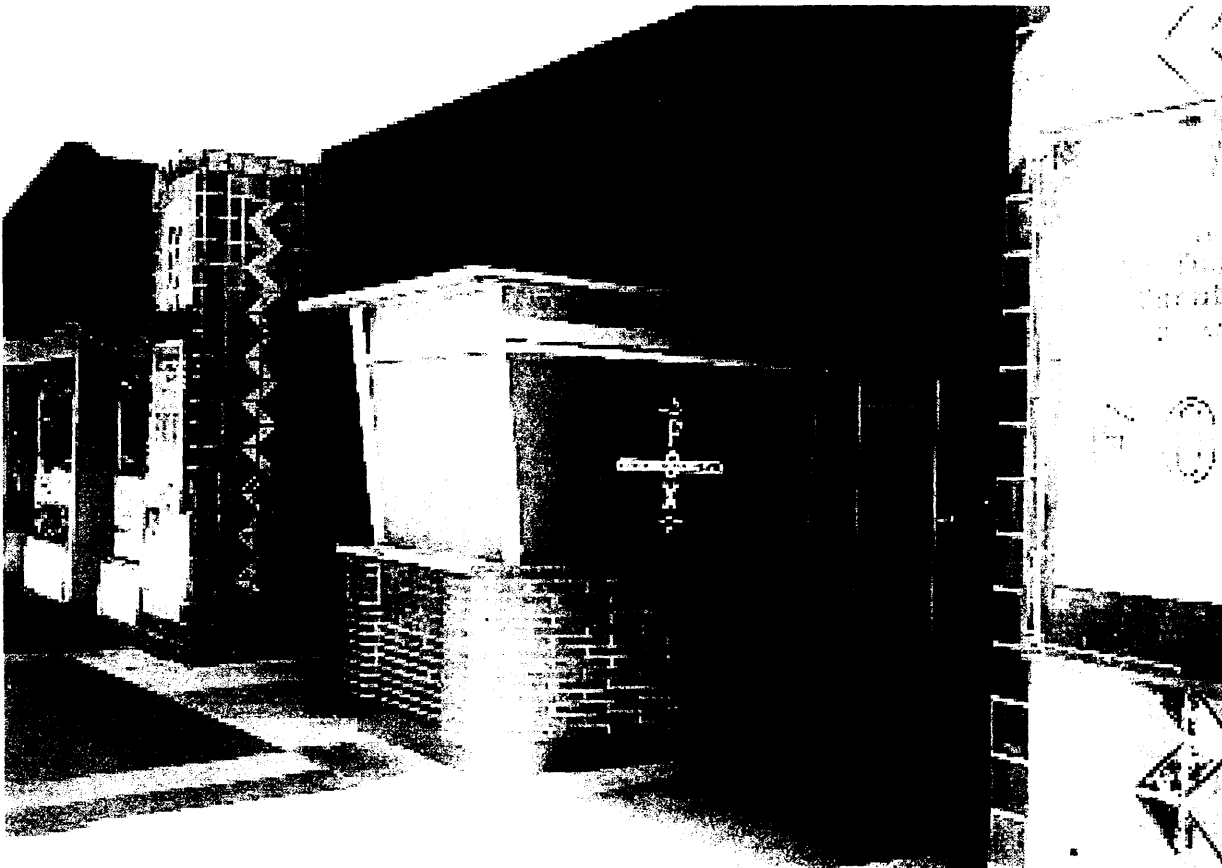
## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 12

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

PHOTOGRAPHER: Janet H. Parkhurst  
DATE: July 13, 2002  
NEGATIVE NUMBER: DTT-5-25A  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES: Arizona Architectural Archives  
College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture  
P.O. Box 210075  
The University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #2: View of 1950s ticket booth; looking NW



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National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 13

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

PHOTOGRAPHER: Goran Radovanovich  
DATE: April 13, 2002  
NEGATIVE NUMBER: DTT-2-23  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES: Arizona Architectural Archives  
College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture  
P.O. Box 210075  
The University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #3: Detail of patterned tile-decorated column at entry; looking NW



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 14

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

PHOTOGRAPHER: Goran Radovanovich  
DATE: April 13, 2002  
NEGATIVE NUMBER: DTT-2-13  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES: Arizona Architectural Archives  
College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture  
P.O. Box 210075  
The University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #4: View of lobby stairs in NE corner of building; looking NE



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 15

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

PHOTOGRAPHER:	Goran Radovanovich
DATE:	April 13, 2002
NEGATIVE NUMBER:	DTT-2-11
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES:	Arizona Architectural Archives College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture P.O. Box 210075 The University of Arizona Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #5: Detail of Art Deco auditorium ceiling mural with sunburst pattern in bright colors



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 16

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

PHOTOGRAPHER:	Goran Radovanovich
DATE:	April 13, 2002
NEGATIVE NUMBER:	DTT-2-19
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES:	Arizona Architectural Archives College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture P.O. Box 210075 The University of Arizona Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #6: Interior of auditorium showing loge (without seating) and balcony seating; looking east



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 17

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

PHOTOGRAPHER: Goran Radovanovich  
DATE: April 13, 2002  
NEGATIVE NUMBER: DTT-2-15  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES: Arizona Architectural Archives  
College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture  
P.O. Box 210075  
The University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #7: Detail of Art Deco-decorated water fountain in theater foyer



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 18

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

PHOTOGRAPHER: Goran Radovanovich  
DATE: April 13, 2002  
NEGATIVE NUMBER: DTT-2-10  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES: Arizona Architectural Archives  
College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture  
P.O. Box 210075  
The University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #8: Detail of typical Art Deco gilded column and base



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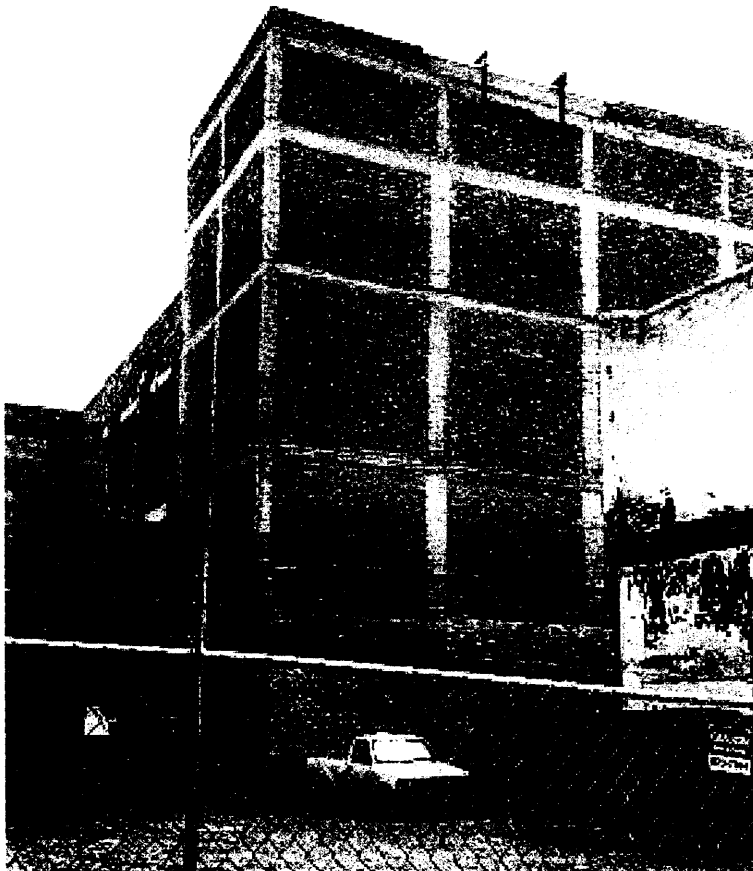
## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 19

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

PHOTOGRAPHER: Janet H. Parkhurst  
DATE: July 15, 2002  
NEGATIVE NUMBER: DTT-6-32A  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES: Arizona Architectural Archives  
College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture  
P.O. Box 210075  
The University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #9: West façade from Church Avenue showing fly-loft and concrete frame construction; looking SE





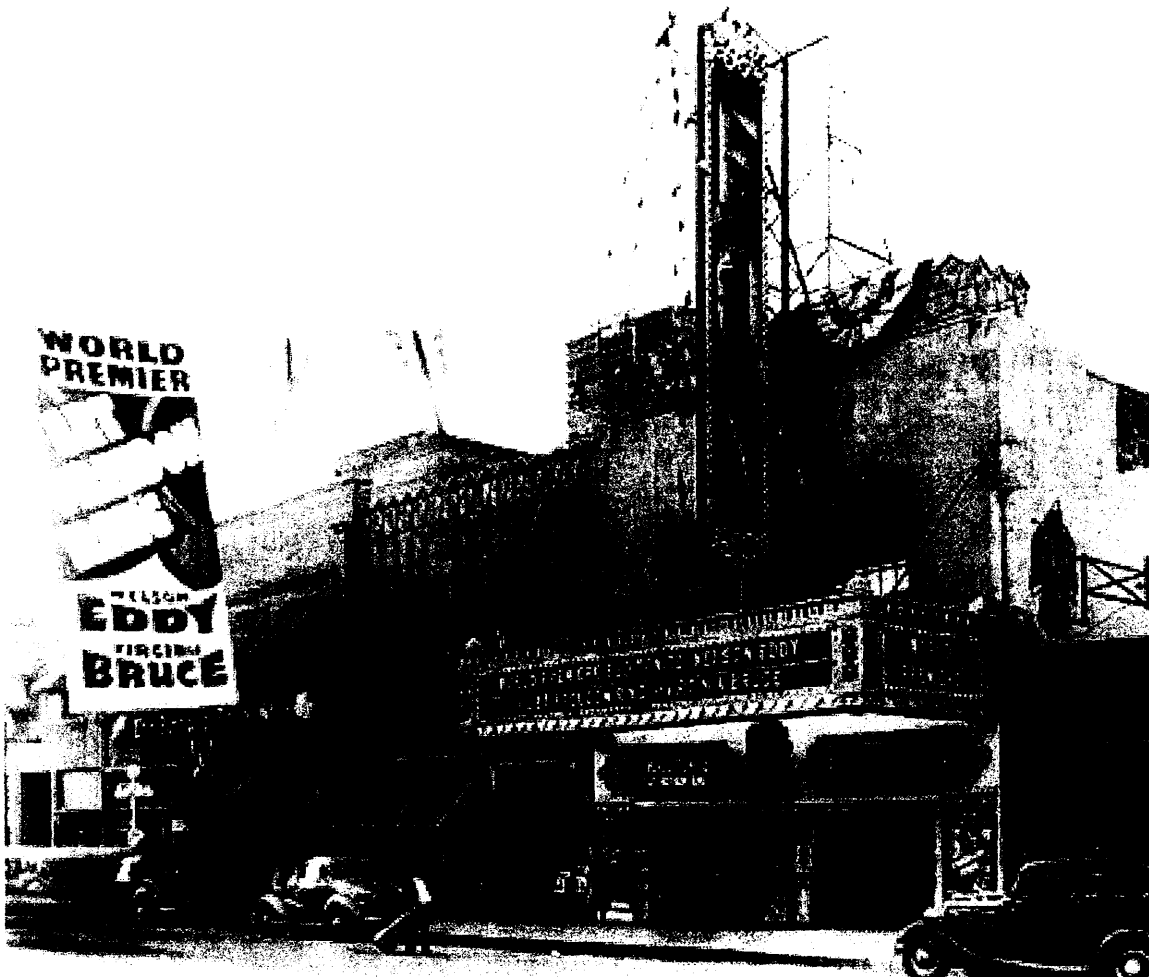
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# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number ADD.INFO. Page 20

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

HISTORIC PHOTO #1: Fox Tucson Theatre, c. 1940 (Photo courtesy of Arizona Historical Society/Tucson; AHS B27703)



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number ADD. INFO. Page 21

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

HISTORIC PHOTO #2: Fox Theatre, opening night, April 11, 1930 (Photo courtesy of Arizona Historical Society/Tucson)



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number ADD.INFO. Page 22

Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

HISTORIC PHOTO #3: Fox Theatre, auditorium stage showing elaborate proscenium and curtains. Note Wurftzer organ in orchestra pit. (Photo courtesy of Arizona Historical Society/Tucson)



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number ADD.INFO. Page 23

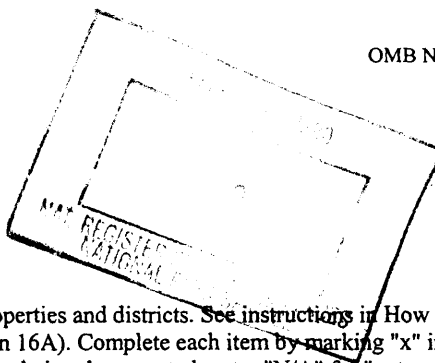
Fox Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

HISTORIC PHOTO #4: Fox Theatre, the Mickey Mouse Club fans (Photo courtesy of Arizona Historical Society/Tucson)



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National Park Service

### NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM



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

1. Name of Property Fox Theatre

historic name Fox Tucson Theatre

other names/site number Inventory No. 114

#### 2. Location

street & number 17 W Congress St  not for publication

city or town Tucson  vicinity

state Arizona code AZ county Pima code 019 zip code 85701

#### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X 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 X meets \_\_\_ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant X nationally \_\_\_ statewide \_\_\_ locally.  
( \_\_\_ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Thomas W. Gannan AZSHPO  
Signature of certifying official  
ARIZONA STATE ARIZONA PARKS  
State or Federal agency and bureau

7 APRIL 2004  
Date

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

Signature of commenting or other official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

#### 4. National Park Service Certification

- I, hereby certify that this property is:
- entered in the National Register  
 See continuation sheet.
  - determined eligible for the National Register  
 See continuation sheet.
  - determined not eligible for the National Register
  - removed from the National Register
  - other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Keeper Linda McClelland Date of Action 4/16/04

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 1

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### FOX TUCSON THEATRE – NATIONAL REGISTER AMENDMENT

#### Introduction

The Fox Tucson Theatre, once a link in a national chain of over 1,000 theatres, is believed to be the sole remaining Fox Theatre in Arizona. Built in 1930 at the advent of the sound motion picture, Tucson's Fox became a key cultural and community center in southern Arizona. With strong Hollywood ties, it hosted several "world premiers" and many famous visitors and performers.

The Fox was a "vaude-film house" film and performing arts facility. To reflect the modernity of sound technology, it was decked in Zig-Zag Art Deco décor and state-of-the-art finishes. Today its intact ornament includes features like a striking mural and, most notably, a very rare acoustic plaster on its auditorium walls. According to theatre restoration expert Jeff Greene of EverGreene Painting Studios Inc., New York, the design quality of the ornament is on par with the best Art Deco theatres in America. What makes the Fox Tucson Theatre unique, however, is the integration of the innovative acoustic plaster with the decorative scheme.

Owing to the takeover by the Fox Corporation of the Diamos family's local theatre chain after construction had begun, the most important elements of architect Eugene Durfee's original design were retained. Fox decorators probably supplied superficial decoration near the end of the construction process. The theatre is remarkable for the excellent integrity of its intact although partially damaged Art Deco features. The building has been stabilized to prevent further damage to the original décor.

#### Nomination Amendment

The following is an amendment to the National Register nomination of the Fox Tucson Theatre, part of the Downtown Tucson multiple property nomination listed on September 12, 2003. The State Historic Preservation Office has determined that information learned about the theatre following the nomination submittal indicates the building may be nationally significant under Criterion C.

The Tucson Fox is significant both for the excellent quality of its Art Deco décor and for its special acoustic treatment. Tucson's Fox uniquely integrated its rare auditorium wall

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 2

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finish, a material called "Acoustone," with its top-quality Art Deco decoration. (The finish, a product of Acoustone Co. Ltd. of Los Angeles, is not the mineral wool tile of the same name produced by United States Gypsum in the 1930s.) The rarity of the material is noted by Jeff Greene (see Additional Items). According to Joana Diamos, a member of the original owners' family, the plaster was installed in just two other theatres and integral to the decorative scheme in this theatre alone.

Zig-Zag Art Deco style elements like the dramatic, sculpted forms and flat surfaces of Acoustone, the sunburst-and-cloud motif on the auditorium ceiling and the cast plaster elements reflect a style that corresponded with and infinitely suited the modernity of the sound motion picture. The Fox Tucson Theatre arrived at the beginning of the Great Depression when theaters generally became simpler than the lavish picture palaces of the 1920s. If styled, they were commonly Art Deco, and Tucson's Fox was a particularly opulent example thereof.

### **Brief Historic Background: Dominance of the National Studio Theatre Chains**

In the late 1920s and 1930s, major studio theatre chains largely squeezed out local entrepreneurship through monopolistic practices. The Fox Tucson Theatre represents an important example of the replacement of local ownership by a national motion picture chain. The Tower Theatre, under construction in 1929 near the corner of Congress Street and Stone Avenue in Tucson, Arizona, was intended to be the crown jewel in the Diamos brothers' Lyric amusement chain operating throughout southern Arizona. This theatre was part of an industry created by the American public's insatiable appetite for entertainment at the time when some studio theatre chains were forming into national conglomerates.

The moving picture became popular in the United States shortly after Thomas A. Edison developed a camera in the 1890s for taking a series of pictures on a film band that could be viewed by an individual peeping into a "Kinetoscope." His invention of the "Vitascope," a device that projected images onto a surface, allowed for film viewing by an audience. (Pildas 1980.)

In the early days, companies were formed either to make motion pictures or to exhibit them. Production companies needed theatres to exhibit their product and theatre companies needed a steady supply of motion pictures to entertain their patrons.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 3

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Independent owner/operators, such as the Diamos family in southern Arizona (see original nomination) and Rickards & Nace in Phoenix and northern Arizona, began to build theatres, lease films and develop flourishing regional chains. Most of these eventually came under the monopolistic control of the major studio theatre chains that were developing aggressively and simultaneously while combining film production with exhibition.

### Takeover of The Diamos' Lyric Amusement Chain

According to Joana Diamos, in 1919 brothers Daved, Nick and Frank Diamos and their uncle James Xalis built the Grand Theatre in Douglas, Arizona, one of several in their chain, using California architect Eugene Durfee. After the Grand, they began to plan for a Tucson theatre and sought a site on the northwest corner of Stone and Congress Street. There were three different owners of the property they desired in Block 196. It took the family ten years to assemble appropriate leases and acquire easements and adjacent lots plus the improvements thereon so that they could begin to build their Tower Theatre and its adjacent commercial building, using the same architect Durfee.

In 1929, with construction underway, Fox West Coast representatives arrived and forced the Diamos family to lease them the Tower, threatening to build a theatre across the street, cut off Fox film rentals, and cut prices to put the family out of business. In this manner, Fox forced the Diamos family to lease out all theatres in their chain. In spite of the takeover by Fox West Coast, the Diamos family continued to own the theatre complex buildings in Block 196 for many decades. The theatre, dual commercial shops and office space above were leased to others. The land beneath the edifices, however, remained in the hands of two families, the Allisons and the Metzgers, until 1981 when the Diamos Realty Company finally acquired the fee then put the buildings up for sale.

### The Studio Theatre Chains

Among the national studio theatre chains, the Fox Corporation started as a theatre business, began to distribute films made by others, got into film production and by the late 1920s was a large film producing and theatre enterprise. The other major chains to compete with Fox, through take-overs, mergers, etc., became Paramount (later Paramount Publix), Warner Brothers, RKO (Radio Keith Orpheum) and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Eventually the country was divided with one or two major film companies controlling the



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 4

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theatres in a region. Fox became strong on the West Coast and in the Midwest. The dominance of the major film companies continued until 1952. Resulting from the judicial Consent Decree of that year, the motion picture companies were required to divorce their film production operations from their film exhibition operations and they gradually sold their interest in theatre company corporations. (Goodkin 2002).

### The Fox Empire

The Fox empire was founded by William Fox (1897-1952), born Wilhelm Fuchs in Tulchva, Hungary. Raised from infancy in New York City, Fox entered the motion-picture business in 1904 when he bought a nickelodeon in Brooklyn. An entrepreneur, he formed a chain of "nickettes" then began to renovate dilapidated theatres. William Fox then proceeded to buy and rent films while continuing to increase his theatre holdings. In 1925 Fox Theatres Corporation was created to handle exhibition.

In 1913 William Fox had gone into film production to fuel his exchanges and theatres. Production commenced in 1914 and in 1915 the company became the Fox Film Corporation. Fox eventually became a pioneer in the development of sound film, a process of photographing sound on film. Called Fox Movietone, the system debuted in 1926 and became the first in regular use. (King 1987.)

In 1927 William Fox purchased controlling interest of West Coast Theatres or Wesco, a large regional chain. With roots in Los Angeles, the chain had spread throughout the state. This gave him 150 houses, which he increased to 500, in eleven states west of the Rockies. This Fox-controlled branch of Wesco's operations officially became known as Fox West Coast Theatres (FWCT). (King 1987.)

Fox's West Coast division and Paramount Publix began to compete in Arizona to take over theatres. Paramount absorbed Rickards and Nace with theatres in Phoenix, Tucson and other cities and Fox West Coast took over the Diamos theatres in southern Arizona. Harold B. Franklin, president of Fox West Coast, was instrumental in this expansion. The take-over process probably occurred by coercion or for economic reasons since the introduction of sound pictures would require the independent, local chains to expend considerable capital to retrofit theatres with sound equipment. (Goodkin 2002.)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 5

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By 1929 William Fox controlled more than 1,000 American theatres, 300 theatres in England and a major interest in MGM. Too thinly capitalized, he began to have serious legal and economic difficulties. A combination of the crash of the stock market and a government anti-trust action forced him into a seven-year struggle to prevent bankruptcy. Two days before the opening of the Fox Tucson Theatre, on April 9, 1930, Fox left the studio, theatre and film branches bearing his name. (Goodkin 2002, King 1987.)

Reorganization occurred during this era of serious legal and financial difficulties. In 1932 the directors of Wesco contracted with the Skouras brothers to take over management of their holdings. Spyros, Charles and George Skouras were emigrants from Greece who had built a local theatre chain in the Saint Louis area. Charles P. Skouras then became president of Fox West Coast. (Kaufmann 1987.) The Skouras era was, among other things, notable for a characteristic theatre decorating style.

In 1935 a merger of the Fox Film Company with Darryl Zanuck's Twentieth Century Pictures created the new Twentieth Century-Fox. To combat television's lure, in 1953 Twentieth Century-Fox introduced Cinemascope, a panoramic format (Ventura 1996). In 1985 the Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation (minus the hyphen) became just one division of the Australian Rupert Murdoch-owned Fox, Inc. Ironically, in 1989 the film production unit was renamed simply Fox Film Corporation.

### **Sound Motion Picture Technology (Acoustics) and the Art Deco Theatre**

The downtown Art Deco motion picture theatre, of which the Fox Tucson Theatre is an excellent example, evolved through various phases of theatre development originating from the spartan nickelodeon of the early 1900s to the opulent picture palace of the 1920s. The Art Deco theatre, a different breed altogether, was the result of sound motion picture technology combined with a vibrant modern art style tempered by the Great Depression. Finishes like the Acoustone plaster found on the walls of Tucson's Fox were needed to provide the sound absorption required for "talkies." The acoustical requirements for a sound motion picture auditorium differed from those of a concert hall and other types. The decorative treatment on the walls of earlier theatres, such as the 1920s picture palaces, created acoustical problems for sound motion pictures.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 6

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### Development of the Movie Theatre

In the first decade of the twentieth century, movies became so popular that initially there was not time to construct buildings exclusively for exhibition. The mostly working-class public interested in this novelty tolerated the discomfort of spartan wooden seats plus a simple cloth screen installed in long, narrow store spaces converted into theatres. The first small town and neighborhood purpose-built theatres continued this narrow, elongated form. Called "Pictureplay" theatres, they generally lacked stage production facilities and were employed exclusively for film showing. (*Marquee on Main Street* 1982.) As movie audiences grew, larger town opera houses and live-performance theatres were gradually converted into movie venues and many new theatres were built to accommodate both vaudeville and film because owners were unsure whether movies would remain attractive. (*Marquee on Main Street* 1982.) These combination theatres were known in the trade as "vaude-film houses" (Goodkin 2002).

### The Picture Palace

Around 1910, with the opening of the City Theatre, Regent Theatre and Strand Theatre in New York, the era of the large, architect-designed "picture palace" began. For the first time, the building became as important as the films exhibited. (*Marquee on Main Street* 1982.) For a twenty-five cent ticket, patrons could see not only a silent film, but crystal chandeliers, gold leaf and art work. Escorted to their seats by uniformed ushers, the entertainment might also include live variety acts and musical accompaniment to the silent film by a thirty-piece orchestra or mighty Wurlitzer organ. (Pildas 1982.)

While the silent film era flourished, large, luxurious picture palaces appeared in every major American city. The picture palace indulged this age of unabashed affluence, being the work of entrepreneurs and showman managers like Samuel Lionel Rothafel (otherwise known as "Roxy") in the East and Sidney Patrick Grauman in the West. The silent films accompanied by orchestral or organ music complemented the "fairy tale" aesthetics of the theatres. Elitist critics did not consider the flamboyant palaces (nor the work of early film producers) to be legitimate art and this allowed picture palace architects unfettered artistic freedom. The extravagance of picture palaces reflected a romantic period in American film history. (Hall 1961.)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 7

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Two main styles of picture palace architecture emerged. The standard, or hard-top (referring to the decorated ceiling over the auditorium) was an exotic version of the opera house and vaudeville theatre. Built in grandiose versions of Empire, Renaissance, Baroque, and Adam styles, sometimes incorporating Aztec, Chinese and Egyptian motifs, hard-tops were lavishly decorated with gilded columns, grand staircases, crystal chandeliers, art galleries and plush carpets. The most famous hard-top architect was an immigrant Scotsman named Thomas W. Lamb. (Hall 1961.)

From 1923 to 1929, a second movie-palace style flourished, the Atmospheric style introduced by immigrant Austrian architect John Ebersson. In this type, stage decoration became architecture and auditorium walls were clad in ornate plaster-cast columns, trellises and statues representing the exotic setting intended. Stars and drifting clouds were projected onto a flat ceiling to create the effect of a night sky. The patron would feel transported outside once again, into an Italian garden or Persian court fashioned of ornamental staff work (plaster plus fiber) with a romantic night sky above. (Pildas 1980.)

The movie palace architect's most valuable associate was the decorator. Both commonly collaborated during the planning and building stages. The building, its functional spaces and styled effects such as coffered ceilings were generally designed by the architect. In some cases, the three-dimensional, ornamental staff work may have also been the architect's general province. For example, Ebersson created elaborate cast plaster features in his own studio. The decorator usually appeared near the end of construction to add the colored wall paint, murals, gold leaf and furnishings like carpeting, rugs and wall hangings. There were a number of top-rate professional theatre decorators in the field such as Harold W. Rambusch of New York. William Fox was known to employ his wife, Eva Leo Fox, to decorate such palaces as the San Francisco Fox in the "Eva Leo style." (Hall 1961.)

The picture palace era was to change, however, with the advent of sound technology in 1928. Attracted by sound, theatre patronage increased although the nation was entering a severe depression. Patronage growth fostered theatre renovation and new construction through the 1930s. The extravagant picture palaces of the 1920s were out-of-date, being expensive to run and acoustically inadequate for "talkies." In addition, patrons expected air conditioning and better lighting. Changing times mandated an innovative approach and a new style. (*Marquee on Main Street* 1982.)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 8

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### The Art Deco Theatre and the Sound Motion Picture

Art Deco was a vibrant style that flowered in the United States in the late 1920s and 1930s. Art Deco movie theatres, an important component of the Art Deco scene, played a leading role in America's visual transformation between the two world wars. This all-pervasive style appeared just when the sound moving picture (or "talkie") was becoming America's most popular, accessible entertainment mode. Signifying "modernity," sound films embodied the latest ideas in technology, production, content and imagery. Although it was the Great Depression, movies expressed optimism. The theatres' Art Deco forms and décor reflected perfectly the technology and escapism found in the moving pictures of that era. Theatre architecture became one with the film's form and content. Lights, sounds and scents in the lobby, auditorium and ancillary spaces combined with the film to create a total experience of escape. (*Marquee on Main Street* 1982.)

Although some were large and impressive, many Art Deco theatres were modest venues found in small towns and neighborhoods during the depression era. During this time, movie theatres not only contributed to the nation's entertainment but were also centers for community activities. Theatre-sponsored promotions like cooking lessons and bank nights, where cash prize drawings occurred, became social events. (*Marquee on Main Street* 1982.)

### Art Deco

As now known, the term "Art Deco" comes from the title of a celebrated exhibition, the Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes, held in Paris in 1925. Although originating in Europe, Art Deco was an ornamental style that largely came to fruition in America. In quantity and zest there was no equivalent overseas. According to architectural historian R. G. Wilson, Art Deco is a synthetic term for four modernistic trends of the 1920s and 1930s. One form, predominant in the 1920s and early 1930s is the multiplication of parts using zig-zags, angular and wavy lines and repetitious decoration. The second form, which flourished during the 1930s, is an abstract classicism, with parts modernized, abstracted, and not historically rendered. A third Art Deco variant is streamlined, with rounded corners suiting movement. A fourth variant is biomorphic in which the object has humanlike, animal or biological properties. (Preddy 1989.)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 9

---

Whiffen and Breeze in *Pueblo Deco* (1984) identify three machine-age styles that characterize this era and developed overseas and in America: the International style, Art Deco and Streamline Moderne. To Herbert Scherer in *Marquee on Main Street* (1982), Art Deco theatres pertain to two phases: Zigzag Deco (1928-1935) and Streamline Deco (1935-1941). However characterized, the later streamline style borrows forms from modern transportation machines, ocean liners, trains and cars, emphasizes horizontal lines and tends to use less costly materials than the earlier Art Deco/Zigzag Deco. Regardless of its definition, it is the zigzag phase of Art Deco that pertains to the Fox Tucson Theatre.

Zig-zag Art Deco ornament is normally in low relief with a flat front plane. Verticality is stressed. Common motifs include fluting and reeding, often flanking door or window openings or defining horizontal bands above them. Chevrons, zig-zags, frets and sunburst patterns are common. Square or oblong blocks and other rectangular projections form symmetrically around entrances. Some of the influences derive from Mayan, Southwestern and Native American art. Other motifs are an adaptation of cubism. Polychromatic effects are achieved by a variety of means, including the application of gold leaf or faience on surfaces. (Whiffen 1992.)

### **Art Deco Ornament in the Fox Tucson Theatre**

Art Deco features ornamenting the Fox Tucson Theatre originate on the entrance facade, extend through the entrance lobby, the foyers and basement lounge and culminate in a total coordinated design in the auditorium. An eclectic assortment of motifs common to the Zig-Zag era of the style include Native American inverted arrows, Egyptian reeded papyrus columns, stepped forms, standard zig-zags and other repetitive patterns plus a magnificent painted, polychromatic sunburst-and-cloud on the auditorium ceiling. Like the inverted arrows and entry tile glaze hues, some of the motifs and colors employed are either Southwest-inspired or very appropriate for a Southwest Art Deco theatre. The Zig-zag Art Deco ornament is executed in a rich variety of media including ceramic tile, cast stone, wrought iron, plastered concrete, cast plaster, acoustic plaster (Acoustone) and paint. Art Deco fixtures are of cast metal; steel frame, sheet metal and cut glass.

On the south entry façade, ornamental cast stone features have been built or anchored into the masonry substructure. Of a highly refined form of molded concrete with a limestone appearance, the cast stone clads the parapet and is used in two inverted arrow

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 10

---

ornaments. The parapet has a sculpted zig-zag cap with a drape and rosette pattern. Cladding the entry piers is a recently uncovered, ceramic tile finish of non-standard 5 ½" size units. The tiles are glazed in Southwest-appropriate hues of terra cotta, orange, yellow and turquoise. At the cornice level on the entrance lobby walls is a cast plaster, Art Deco frieze of draped zig-zags capped by a dentil course (see photograph).

Inside, in the foyer, passageway and lounge spaces, the most noteworthy Art Deco features include gold painted, wrought iron stair railings, a plastered concrete, zig-zag beam wall and a cast plaster fireplace. The stair railing design is a repetitive series of linked wrought-iron rectangles divided by diagonals (see photograph). The zig-zag beam wall is a strong feature marking the passageway between the foyers to the basement lounge stairways. The fireplace in the basement lounge is a symmetrical feature comprising stepped rectangular forms. [In the foyer spaces, the original decorative ceiling murals and a drinking fountain were modified during the 1940s Skouras era (see photograph and following).]

The auditorium or "house" is the Fox Theatre's most lavishly decorated and intact interior space. It features a totally integrated Zig-Zag Art Deco design of emphatic geometrical lines and shapes and vibrant colors. (See Photographs and color photograph, Additional Items.) The stage is the focal point, surrounded by an ornamental cast plaster proscenium that is stepped and edged with a purple and gold decorated band. The band is divided into a repetitive pattern in relief that combines abstract angled, curvilinear and rectilinear elements. A thick, sculpted plaster "beam" of zig-zag and striped elements with a central, floral motif crosses the ceiling in front of the proscenium.

The auditorium ceiling is a flat, rough-sand-finished, plaster plane approximately 68'-8" wide by 114'-8" long with an elaborated cornice of stepped, run-in-place plaster and a sloped, cast plaster air-conditioning grill. Most striking is its sunburst-and-cloud ceiling painted mural in an Art Deco palette of yellow, orange, purple, green and brown hues. Secondary motifs in the design include geometric triangles within circles and snail patterns. The paint is distemper with tarnished bronze powder. Hanging from the center of the sunburst is the original chandelier, a gold-painted fixture of light steel frame and decorative sheet metal with angled, etched, drop glass panels lit by rings of light bulbs.

Integrated into the Art Deco scheme are the very tall, imposing Acoustone-clad auditorium walls (see photograph). Resembling finely finished stone from a distance, the

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 11

---

side and rear walls and the face of the balcony are covered with this light-brown-gray, painted acoustic plaster. The Acoustone is installed either in uniform flat panels or in dramatic Zig-Zag Art Deco style forms in relief. On either side of the stage, covering the organ chambers and capped by skyscraper shapes, are stepped Acoustone forms with openings in between (see photograph). Zig-zag bands in relief also appear above the nearby exits. Along each side wall are five ornamental Acoustone pilasters with flat frontal planes that extend almost to the multi-colored, zig-zag pattern, cast plaster cornice at the ceiling edge.

Installed between the Acoustone pilasters on each side wall are five gilded, fluted, cast plaster pilasters that rise from a faceted base and terminate in a lighted metal and purple glass capital. The Art Deco motif for these pilasters is Egyptian papyrus reeds with a palm leaf capital.

Fixtures that once graced the auditorium include the pilaster lights, chandeliers, wall sconces, exit lights and seating. Several of the remaining light fixtures and the dismantled seats are in storage. According to existing examples, 1930s light fixtures are fabricated of gilded, light steel frames with elaborated, cut sheet metal bases. Removable etched glass panes drop or are clipped into the frames. The exit light covers are of cast metal. Auditorium seat stanchions are of cast iron with a design in relief depicting a zig-zag, "rainbow" arcs and a stylized cloud.

Regarding the Fox's decorators, "Robert Powers" and "Powers Scenic Co." have been named (Boyer 1988 and *Arizona Daily Star* 1930). Research has yielded no information about Robert Powers or Powers Scenic Co. but has identified Robert E. Power Studios, operating in California, as interior designers and decorators who specialized in theatres during that era. The firm's ambition allegedly was to make every theatre they decorated unique. (Humberger 2002)

### Acoustone

According to Jeff Greene, the Fox's Acoustone is a one-inch layer of pigmented material resembling a coarse nylon sponge, with irregular small voids throughout into which sound waves can be absorbed. In broad, flat zones on the walls, Acoustone units, generally 16" high by 24" wide by 3/4" to 1" thick, are installed in a running bond pattern. Some units are solid plaster cast in forms with a solid rear face of the same material.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 12

---

Others are cast over 1/4" gypsum board, a material that came into use before 1920 as a wall and ceiling finish and a backing lath for gypsum plaster. The sculpted Acoustone areas on the side walls are installed as a layer over, or projecting out beyond, the standard units.

The material was cast on site undoubtedly from a mix provided by the supplier, Acoustone Company Ltd. The Acoustone is either face-nailed or glued with plaster or an adhesive to furring strips and wood framing that is nailed to the brick backing of the auditorium walls. In some cases, it is glued directly to the brick work. In places, to fit a unique situation, the Acoustone units are tapered or cut into special shapes. Custom shapes were fabricated to create the pilaster tops, the stepped face panels between the pilasters, the organ sound chamber blocks, the zig-zag units above the exit passages, and for other special locations.

Acoustone was one of the historic products developed to provide sound deadening in buildings. Sound movie theatres had particular acoustical requirements because the patron was meant to hear noise once and only once, a minimum of .6 seconds before the arrival of the next sound. Unlike a concert hall, where some sound reflectivity is desirable, the sound motion picture theatre required (and requires) absorptive material on both side and back walls of its auditorium. By the time the product Acoustone was installed on the walls of the Tucson Fox Theatre auditorium, the science of acoustics and the corresponding development of appropriate acoustical materials had progressed considerably.

In 1895 Harvard Professor Wallace Clement Sabine developed a theory of acoustics based on a room's volume, the material of construction and the time of reverberation. This theory was meant to solve the common acoustical problem of excessive reverberation in spaces like lecture halls. To control reverberation, it would be necessary to surface ceilings and walls with sound-absorbing materials. Numerous materials appeared in the early 1920s including felt and membrane systems, acoustical plasters and board and tile materials. It was difficult to combine high sound absorption with the structural, architectural and decorative requirements demanded of interior finish materials. Pioneering studies and patents by Wallace Sabine and Rafael Guastavino spurred invention by others. (Jeff Greene 2003 and Sabine 1954.)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 13

---

Acoustone was one of the acoustical plaster products developed. These products were generally a standard gypsum plaster with fibrous or porous aggregate material added to make the plaster more permeable and sound absorptive. An alternative to the fiber or modified aggregate plaster was one containing an activating ingredient to give off gas when mixed with water, creating holes for sound absorption. Apparently soap, which could create bubbles, was also tried. These products could be provided to a contractor as a mix, necessitating the addition of water.

The acoustical plaster in the Fox Theatre was furnished by the Acoustone Co. Ltd., 1200 C. C. Chapman Building, Los Angeles, California, a company no longer in business and about which little information was found. This Acoustone should not be confused with a product of the same name, a mineral wool tile fabricated by U. S. Gypsum that was known in 1935 and continues today as a ceiling tile. An ad for the company appeared in the April 11, 1930 *Arizona Daily Star*, the issue devoted to the opening night. In it the company states "In the Talking Picture Theatre Its Acoustics and the Beautiful New Fox Theatre is Correct in this Respect for Acoustone was Used Throughout." It further claims that Acoustone was "the one product that will correct all troubles with sound whether theatre, school, church or auditorium." (See Additional Items.)

The success and ability of Acoustone Co. Ltd. to survive the Great Depression has not been determined. According to Joana Diamos, member of the prior owners' family, this particular Acoustone product was installed in only two other theatres, the Diamos family owned Douglas Grand, badly deteriorated today, and a theatre in Los Angeles, since demolished. At the time of installation in the Tucson Fox, the plaster was retrofitted onto the existing auditorium walls of the Douglas Grand, a theatre that had been built prior to the advent of the sound motion picture.

Through Evergreene Painting Studios of New York, N.Y., the Fox Tucson Theatre Foundation recently ordered a composition analysis of an Acoustone sample. This analysis was performed by Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc. of Northbrook, Illinois. The sample, a triangular shaped piece two to three inches long per side approximately one inch thick, had a peach colored plaster body with one face painted a mauve color. The sample was analyzed according to its "paste" and "aggregate." The paste was found to contain gypsum, pigment, and fragmental calcite. The aggregate was vermiculite, essentially weathered mica, predominantly muscovite. The air content of the sample was

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 14

---

estimated at 50%. Air was entrapped, possibly resulting from the use of vermiculite and a relatively stiff paste. (Wiss et. al., 2003).

### Conclusion

National chain theatres served to make motion pictures a fundamental component of American popular culture. When Fox West Coast absorbed the Diamos family's Tower Theatre into its empire, southern Arizona patrons came into contact with the national and international scene, albeit from the Fox point of view. While the fortunes of the Fox empire ebbed and flowed, the Fox Tucson Theatre remained under Diamos family ownership until 1981. This stability of ownership possibly helped preserve the integrity of the top-quality Art Deco features, including the Acoustone decking its auditorium walls. On par with America's best Art Deco theatres, Tucson's Fox distinguishes itself in the integration of its decorative scheme with its rare acoustic finish. The community considers the Fox Tucson's Theatre's restoration and rehabilitation crucial to the revitalization of Downtown Tucson.

### Methodology

In his May 2003 letter to Herb Stratford, Executive Director of the Fox Tucson Theatre, restoration expert Jeff Greene, President of Evergreene Painting Studios, Inc., New York, N. Y, gives his professional opinion of the Tucson Fox's exceptionally high quality Art Deco décor and the uniqueness of the integration of the rare material Acoustone with the decorative scheme. With special interest in decorative design and historic interior finishes, Mr. Greene has observed thousands of theatres in the United States and abroad. (See Additional Items.)

Information about historic acoustical materials was found in the chapter on the same subject by Anne E. Weber in *Twentieth Century Building Materials* (1995) and a 1954 article in *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* by Hale J. Sabine. Information about the Acoustone Co. Ltd., of Los Angeles California, was not found. The composition of Acoustone was discovered through an analysis of a test sample conducted in the spring of 2003 by Will, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc. of Northbrook, Illinois.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 15

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Information about the visual historic qualities of the Acoustone, techniques of installation, etc. came from a historic building condition assessment report written by Ralph Comey Architects and Janet H. Strittmatter Inc. for the Fox Tucson Theatre Foundation.

Information about the Damos family's development of the Tower Theatre and the subsequent take-over by Fox West Coast came from a manuscript written by Joana Damos, daughter of Daved Damos, one of the Lyric Amusement chain founders, May 29, 2003.

Some of the following information on the rise of the studio theatre chain as well as the development of the movie theatre came from email communications with Barry S. Goodkin, a member of the Theatre Historical Society of America, who has recently retired in Arizona. Mr. Goodkin's special interest is the formation and operation of the studio theatre chains including Paramount Publix, Loew's (MGM), Fox, Warner Brothers and RKO. Also, Donald C. King's article on William Fox in *Marquee* (1987) proved most useful.

Two principal sources for the development of the movie theatre through the 1920s, the era of silent film, were Ave Pildas' *Movie Palaces* (1980) and Ben M. Hall's *The Best Remaining Seats - the Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace* (1961). For 1930s Art Deco theatres, useful information was forwarded by historian Herbert Scherer, Associate Professor Emeritus of the University of Minnesota, who is in the process of writing a book on the subject. Professor Scherer's articles about Minnesota architect Jack Liebenberg's Art Deco movie theatres (1928-1941) showed an insightful connection between the Art Deco movie house, Art Deco movie sets and sound moving pictures.

Insights into Art Deco as an architectural style came from several sources. General information was found in Marcus Whiffen's *American Architecture Since 1780 - A Guide to the Styles* (1992) and Alastair Duncan's *American Art Deco* (1986). In *Pueblo Deco* (1984) Whiffen and Carla Breeze focused upon Southwest influences on the style. Also valuable were contributions by Herbert Scherer and by art historian Richard Guy Wilson, in Jane Preddy's article in Annual #16, 1989, of the Theatre Historical Society of America.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 16

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### Additional Information

#### The "Skouras Style"

Subsequent to writing the original nomination, it has been discovered that certain decorative elements in both foyers of this theatre exemplify the "Skouras Style." They probably date back to the early 1940s. This style was found in theatres operated by National Theatres Amusement Co. and its subsidiaries, especially Fox West Coast Theatres, when Charles P. Skouras was film executive. Appearing at the end of the 1930s, the Skouras style flourished after World War II until 1954. It grew from a creative relationship between Charles Skouras, and to a lesser extent, his brother, Spyros, and major West Coast theatre designers like S. Charles Lee. (Kaufmann 1987).

Found in new construction and renovations, Skouras style elements included brightly lit marquees, juke-box-like ticket booths, etched aluminum paneling, painted murals with sweeping scrollwork patterns, festooned drapes, neon-lit coves, brass and aluminum light fixtures and use of gold leaf. (Kaufmann 1987).

Known Skouras style elements in the foyers of the Fox Tucson Theatre include ceiling murals and etched aluminum paneling around a water fountain. The sweeping scrollwork patterns in shades of pale green and pastel colors characterize early 1940s Skouras work. The entrance foyer mural and plaster ceiling are badly deteriorated from water intrusion. The foyer ceiling mural (see photograph) is approximately 75% intact, the remainder of which is also seriously water damaged.

In a recessed niche on the east foyer wall is a white, Art Deco style vitreous china water fountain surrounded by an elaborate, hand etched aluminum panel. The ceramic-tile-clad base with faceted sides of this feature is probably the 1930 original. It is also believed that the terrazzo floor in the entrance lobby dates back to 1940. The floor has a swirling design of pink, light tan, and pale green terrazzo with plated or chrome steel divider strips.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 9 Page 1

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 9 Page 2

---

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number Photographs Page 1

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### PHOTOGRAPHS

Photographs have been labeled with an archival pen.

1) Historic Photo, Fox Tucson Theatre Auditorium, 1930s. Three-quarter view looking NW towards stage and organ chambers. (Photo courtesy of University of Arizona Main Library, Special Collections, Tucson).

2) Historic Photo, Fox Tucson Theatre Auditorium, 1930s. View looking east towards balcony. (Photo courtesy of University of Arizona Main Library, Special Collections, Tucson).

The following information is the same for all photographs.

Date: October 2002.

Location of Original Negatives: Office of Janet H. Strittmatter Inc.

3) Auditorium. View towards stage. Shows Art Deco cast plaster proscenium, floral beam, sculpted Acoustone over organ chambers, cornice grille and ceiling mural.

Photographer: Ralph Comey

View Direction: W

4) Auditorium. View towards balcony. Shows Art Deco ceiling mural, chandelier, cast plaster cornice features and Acoustone walls.

Photographer: Ralph Comey

View Direction: E

5) Auditorium. View of north Acoustone wall. Shows Art Deco forms in relief around organ chambers and at intervals along wall. Stepped niches are for Egyptian-influenced, cast plaster pilasters with capital lights.

Photographer: Ralph Comey

View Direction: N



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number Photographs Page 2

---

6) Auditorium. Acoustone Detail. Shows stepped Art Deco Acoustone forms over organ chambers.

Photographer: Janet Parkhurst

View Direction: NW

7) Auditorium, Ceiling Mural Detail. Shows Art Deco sunburst and cloud motif with other stylistic design elements. Also shows chandelier, cast plaster cornice details and underside of floral beam.

Photographer: Ralph Comey

View Direction: E

8) Entrance Lobby, Cast Plaster Cornice Detail. Shows Art Deco draped zig-zag motif with dentil course.

Photographer: Ralph Comey

View Direction: W

9) Entrance Foyer, East Stair Detail. Shows gilded, Art Deco wrought iron railing.

Photographer: Janet Parkhurst

View Direction: NE

10) Foyer, Ceiling Detail. Shows Skouras style painted ornament of pastel scrolls.

Photographer: Janet Parkhurst

View Direction: SW

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

Fox Tucson Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number Additional Items Page 1

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### ADDITIONAL ITEMS

- 1) Comprehensive View of Integrated Art Deco Style Auditorium Interior (shot from balcony looking SW). Shows sculpted Acoustone walls, sunburst ceiling mural with chandelier, ornamental cast plaster cornice work, floral beam, wall light fixtures and decorative proscenium. Color Photograph Courtesy Tim Fuller Photography, 2001.
- 2) Copy of Letter from Jeff Greene, President of Evergreene Painting Studios Inc. to Herb Stratford, Executive Director, Fox Tucson Theatre Foundation. May 19, 2003.
- 3) Copy of Acoustone Advertisement. *Arizona Daily Star*, April 11, 1930, p. 22.
- 4) Erickson Leader Associates Architects Inc. As-Built Drawings of Fox Tucson Theatre.