

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

MAJESTIC THEATRE

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: MAJESTIC THEATRE

Other Name/Site Number:

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 230 East Houston Street Not for publication: _____

City/Town: San Antonio Vicinity: _____

State: TX County: Bexar Code: _____ Zip Code: 78205

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property
Private: _____
Public-local: X
Public-State: _____
Public-Federal: _____

Category of Property
Building(s): X
District: _____
Site: _____
Structure: _____
Object: _____

Number of Resources within Property
Contributing
1
1

Noncontributing
_____ buildings
_____ sites
_____ structures
_____ objects
_____ Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of related multiple property listing:

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this _____ nomination _____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property _____ meets _____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property _____ meets _____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I, hereby certify that this property is:

_____ Entered in the National Register _____

_____ Determined eligible for the _____
National Register

_____ Determined not eligible for the _____
National Register

_____ Removed from the National Register _____

_____ Other (explain): _____

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: Recreation and Culture

Sub: Theater

Current: Recreation and Culture

Sub: Theater
Music facility
Auditorium
Business

Commerce/trade

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION:

Late 19th and 20th Century Revivals
Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival

MATERIALS:

Foundation: Concrete
Walls: Brick
Roof: Concrete (gypsum)
Other: Cast Stone (trim);
Concrete (marquee);
Cast-iron (marquee).

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

The Majestic Theatre opened in June, 1929, as the flagship house of the Interstate Amusement Company chain. It closed briefly in early 1930, but was in continual operation from that date until the late 1970s, when it went dark for two years. It reopened in 1981 as a venue for touring Broadway shows and has been in almost continuous use since.

The theater was built as a part of a 15-story office building, capped by a three-story residential penthouse. The theater occupies parts of the first six floors of the office building.

Originally, the theater had 3700 seats, making it the largest in Texas. In addition to the orchestra level, there are two balconies. The second balcony was designated for black patrons and was served by a separate lobby and elevator located on the opposite side of the block from the main entrance. Use of this balcony was discontinued about 1960. There are plans to restore and reopen it with a larger lobby on the sixth floor of the office building.

The theater was designed by Chicago architect John Ebersson. Interior decoration was done by Michelangelo Studios, an Ebersson family enterprise. Construction, including demolition of the existing building, excavation for the full basement, and interior decoration, was completed in thirteen months. The theater was the first publicly-accessible building in San Antonio to be air-conditioned.

The Majestic was designed as a combination movie/vaudeville house. Consequently, the stage is shallow, only 27 feet, and wing space is minimal. Dressing rooms were limited, occupying the basement area under the stage. There was a full orchestra pit and an organ, still in place but not functioning.

The principal facade is that of the office building. Except for the marquee and ornamental ticket kiosk, the theater is not architecturally elaborate on the exterior. Exterior walls are of solid brick or of brick with clay tile back-up. The brick facade is trimmed with cast stone. The structural frame of the theater is of steel, with major columns and beams encased in concrete fireproofing. The foundation consists of large, spread concrete footings. The roof framing of the theater is of very deep, but lightweight, steel trusses. The roof deck is gypsum plank.

The marquee is of architecturally-formed concrete carried on steel columns with ornamental cast iron covers. Interior partitions are of clay tile finished with plaster. Virtually all interior surfaces of the theater are plaster.

The exterior appearance of the Majestic Theatre is much as it was in 1929. The marquee is in its original configuration except for the reader board. The original board, using hundreds of light bulbs, was replaced with a similar-scaled board, internally lit

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by fluorescent tubes and with neon trim, in the 1940s. A gigantic electric rooftop sign, visible for 30 miles, was removed in the 1950s.

The entrance doors are original, as is the marble and cast iron ticket kiosk. The old segregated entrance on College Street consists of a mini-version of the Houston Street marquee and ticket kiosk. This is presently not used, though funds are being raised to restore and reopen it.

The most significantly altered space in the theater is the outer lobby. A plaster and mosaic tile fountain, in the form of a baroque architectural niche, was destroyed in the 1940s for installation of a concession stand. The centerpiece of this fountain, a bronze sculpture by Harriet Frishmuth, remains. A large aquarium with a highly ornamental plaster surround was also replaced by a concession stand. The aquarium has been returned to its original location with a simplified plaster surround in the form of the original.

With these exceptions, the lobby appears as originally built with a mosaic tile floor, plaster vaults with painted canvas insert panels, plaster walls, and metal-and-glass chandeliers. The paint color scheme is original.

The inner lobby is minimal in size and rises through the second lobby level in an elliptical form. Originally, orchestra level seats extended halfway under the elliptical rotunda; these have been removed to increase the lobby area. The only separation between the inner lobby and the house was a half-height almost to the ceiling, with glass panels. The original wood rail is presently not in place but is stored awaiting restoration.

Architecturally, the lobby spaces have a rather dark, Mediterranean baroque feeling. The detailing of the two-story rotunda of the inner lobby has a Churrigueresque quality--a lavishly ornamented, Spanish, 18th century Baroque style. The brilliance of Eberson's atmospheric design concepts, however, are fully realized only upon entering the auditorium. This is one of Eberson's best.

In an atmospheric theatre, one is made to feel out of doors while inside. Entering the auditorium from the lobby--an architecturally treated interior space--the ceiling dissolves to a vaulted blue sky and the side walls become architectural compositions. At the Majestic, the architecture is Spanish/Moorish baroque with towers, turrets, arches, brackets, corbels, twisted columns, straight columns, balconies, oriels, windows, fountains, vine-covered latticework, grillwork, tilework, figurative sculpture, and much more. Though the two sidewalls are completely different there is a remarkable coherence to the assemblage of details. The proscenium, carried on heroic twisted columns, is an extravaganza of scalloped forms, architectural elements, potted palms, putti, and vegetable swags.

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Every stop is pulled out to enhance the illusion of an exotic outdoor scene. The "sky" is not a true dome but a flat ceiling with large-radius curves down into the side walls. Electric stars, supposedly in astronomically accurate compositions, twinkle. Special effects projectors sweep wispy cloud patterns across the ceiling, optically correcting for the flat-and-curved ceiling planes. Trees, shrubs, flowering plants, and vines abound. Birds perch on architectural elements or are frozen in flight.

The use of plaster on the interior is unrelenting. If it looks like stone, wood, tile, or metal, it is really plaster. Even the twisted "iron" bars used as braces in coffered ceilings are plaster. The craftsmanship is astonishing. "Stone," "wood," and "metal" surfaces are unfailingly accurate. Though generally composed of precast elements, much of which was reputedly ordered from catalogs, continuity of line and curve are meticulously maintained.

The house has very much the appearance that it had at its 1929 opening. The original carpet has been replicated, as has the seat upholstery. Seating end stanchions have been repainted in the original color scheme. The seats themselves have been rebuilt using mostly original pieces. The grand drape and lambrequin replicate the originals in color and pattern.

The greatest visual change is the restored intensity and vibrance of the original paint color scheme. Those who remember the theater from the recent past, with its dun and dusty colors, even a dusty blue sky, are somewhat taken aback. Because the original polychrome scheme was done completely in tempera (70 feet or more above the floor), cleaning using solvents was not possible. All decorative surfaces were vacuumed and brushed, then repainted using partially loaded brushes dragged across the rough plaster surfaces.

The original foliage was beyond salvage and was replaced with new synthetic plant materials compatible in scale with the originals. Birds were replaced one for one, though with some changes in species. Original light fixtures were rewired and repainted, and replicated where missing. Cloud machines were replaced with updated products by the Austrian manufacturer of the originals.

Lobbies on the upper floors are very close to their original appearance. Decorative plaster surfaces have been repainted as in the house, lighting restored, and carpet replaced to match the original. Unfortunately, most of the antique furniture gathered by Eberson to furnish the lobbies has been lost.

Restroom and similar support areas have been updated for code compliance and convenience. The dressing rooms have been completely rebuilt. New chillers, boilers, and pumps have been installed. However, it was determined that the original air handling units could not be improved upon in terms of efficiency of operation and low noise levels.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: Nationally: X Statewide: Locally:

Applicable National Register Criteria: A B C X D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

NHL Criteria: 4

NHL Theme(s): XVI. Architecture
M. Period Revivals
2. Spanish (Mission)

Areas of Significance: Architecture

Period(s) of Significance: 1929-1942

Significant Dates:

Significant Person(s):

Cultural Affiliation:

Architect/Builder: John Eberson (1875-1954)

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

The Majestic Theatre is one of the few remaining atmospheric/fantasy palaces in the United States. It is one of the most remarkable, faithfully restored theaters in the Southwest.

The great movie palaces gradually replaced Burlesque as entertainment within everyone's reach, rich and poor alike. In the 1920s and 1930s, the picture palace flourished, in big cities and small towns, as fantasy worlds into which anyone could escape for a few hours. When the boom was over, it left remnants of this glittering age across America and a handful have been reused and restored--the Atlanta Fox, Columbus' Ohio Theater, Detroit's Fox Theater, Milwaukee's Pabst Theater, and two great Art Deco halls, the Paramount in Oakland and New York's Radio City Music Hall. They are all National Historic Landmarks. There are several other restorations that should be noted, but San Antonio's Majestic is the finest surviving Atmospheric theater by the masters of that style, the Ebersons.

The theater was designed by John Eberson and built in 1929 for the Interstate Theatre Amusement Company.

By 1928, Eberson and his son Drew, who joined him as a partner in 1926, had already designed atmospheric theaters in many parts of the country, many of them for (Karl) Hoblitzelle. Although Hoblitzelle purchased property in San Antonio as early as 1911, it was not on his own property that the new, Greater Majestic was built. The land he leased for the office building-theatre complex was owned by J.M. Nix, who purchased it from the Enterprise Company of Dallas in 1920. There was a covenant running with the land stating "that neither aforesaid land nor any building or improvement or any part hereon shall be used or occupied for theatrical, motion picture or amusement purposes at any time prior to April 5, 1928." However, the 1929 opening of the Majestic exceeded that time limit.

After the lease was finalized, Eberson's plans were accepted and contracts were sought for the \$3,000,000 building. It was the largest theatre in the south with a seating capacity of 4,000. The local contract firm of Walsh and Burney, Inc., was selected for the project and Otto Johnson was picked as the local architectural representative. Building began immediately. By June 8, 1929, final touches were put on the theater. Debris was removed from the site, last minute pointing was done, carpet and tile installations were complete, and antique furniture and statuary were moved into place. Hanging the sign on the building's front drew a crowd of hundreds who watched the enormous beacon as it was put in place by a group of workmen.

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The opening of the building had a special significance in addition to its theatrical functions. In many ways, it was a symbol of newness, of a progressiveness which San Antonio wished to identify with. This was evident in the opening ceremonies which marked the beginning of "Prosperity Month" in the city. The celebration, largely centered around the Greater Majestic, would "commemorate the era of progress and development that has occurred in this state in recent years." This festival would supposedly draw as many as 500,000 visitors to the city due in part to "reduced railroad fares" in local as well as statewide areas.

... A banquet was held the night of its opening during which prominent citizens and other notable guests praised the accomplishments of the city as well as the new theater. The chief of Staff of the Mexican government, General Tapia, was an honored guest at opening day ceremonies....

Profits from the opening night performance were to be donated to the Children's Hospital Fund, a special project of the San Antonio Junior League. By June 12, two days before the new theater's opening, this group had raised \$15,000 through ticket sales. By opening night this amount had risen to \$25,000, \$5,000 above the expected goal. There was a separation of the profits of the sales which reflected life in the twenties, not only in San Antonio, but in the entire country. The money was divided by theater section with profits from the white section going to the Children's Hospital and those from the black section distributed to the Orphanage and the Campfire Girls.

Advance publicity heralded the opening of the theater and special articles appeared in the June 9, 1929 issue of the San Antonio Express. Headlines of one article symbolized the hyperbole lavished on the opening theater in this way: "Matchless in Beauty and Comfort - Is Beacon of Progress and Symbol of All That is Worthy and Fine."

The San Antonio Majestic Theater opened on June 14, 1929, with pomp and ceremony. In keeping with the new atmosphere surrounding the movies in the late twenties, their new-found glamour and sophistication, the opening of the Greater Majestic brought ads which touted its splendor. Air conditioning, a major attraction in the southwest, was featured prominently in the ad. The concept of "an acre of cool, comfortable seats" was further emphasized by the snow which topped the letters of the theatre's name.¹

¹ Preddy, Jane, "The Greater Majestic Theatre," *Marquee*, Vol. 20, No. 3. Third Quarter, 1988, pp. 5-6.

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In 1988, Las Casas Foundation raised \$5.5 million to faithfully restore the theater to its original splendor, with precise reproductions of its upholstery, carpeting, seating, plaster and paint treatments. Besides the many experts directing various facets of the project, the son and grandson of the original plaster artisan were hired to perform the restoration of the damaged plaster. Tony Heinsbergen Company of Los Angeles provided consultation on the paint treatments.

The house is filled with a unique and eclectic blend of Roman, Greek, and fantasy statuary heightening the fantasy of the theater setting. The most notable of these statues is a bronze created by the renowned Harriet Whitney Frishmuth, entitled, "Sweet Grapes." The statue was returned to its original location in the Majestic. At this time, funds are being raised to restore the ornamental plaster and tiled mosaic alcove that once adorned the statue. The alcove was removed in the 1940s for a concession stand.

The Majestic has long attracted people from around the world who come to marvel at its beauty or come for first-class entertainment. Since its reopening in 1989, the Majestic has also hosted events for international leaders. In 1990, the spouses of the world leaders attending the 1990 Economic Summit in Houston came with First Lady Barbara Bush to the Majestic for a special performance. President and Mrs. Bush returned in 1991 to host a state dinner in the Majestic for the leaders of seven Latin American countries.

The Majestic is now the cornerstone of the San Antonio Cultural Arts District. It is the home of the San Antonio Symphony and is a venue for Broadway shows and concerts. The theater's uniqueness and the quality of performances presented there have drawn over 750,000 people from San Antonio, South Texas, and from around the United States in the time period between its reopening in September 1989 until September 1992. The Majestic is one of the small group of restored picture palaces that has been given a new life and is once again a show-place in a lively downtown business and entertainment complex.

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Hall, Ben. *The Best Remaining Seats, The Golden Age of the Movie Palace*, (New York: Decapo), 1988.

Naylor, David. *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*, (New York: Nostrand, Reinhold), 1981.

Preddy, Jane. *Palaces of Dreams*, Catalogue for Eberson Exhibit-McNay Museum of Art, San Antonio, Texas, (New York: Abrams Gleber Warhover), 1989.

The Theater Catalog, 1948-1949. (Philadelphia: J. Emanuel Publications).

"John Eberson," *National Cyclopedia of American Biography*. (New York: James T. White & Co.) Vol. XL, pp. 562-63.

"The Greater Majestic Theatre" *Marquee*. Preddy, Jane. Vol. 20, No. 3 (Columbus: The Journal of the Theatre Historical Society of America), Third Quarter, 1988.

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 (Texas State Historical Commission)
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University (University of Texas at Austin: Ransom Center)
- Other (Specify Repository):
(Dallas Public Library-The Hoblitzelle Collection)

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10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: 0.6 acres

UTM References: Zone Easting Northing

A 14 549460 3255120

Verbal Boundary Description:

The "Majestic" property (consisting of the land only located under both the Majestic Building and the Majestic Theatre) legally described as: A 0.600 acre (26,138 square feet) tract of land out of Lots 3, 4, and 5, New City Block 406 (original City Block 21) San Antonio, Bexar County, Texas, being that tract of land effectively described in a Warranty Deed from Hoblitzelle Foundation to Majestic Music Hall, Inc., dated April 27, 1977, recorded in Volume 8071 - page 68 of the Deed Records of Bexar County, Texas, SAVE and EXCEPT the West 0.75 feet of Lot 3, said 0.600 as surveyed, as follows:

BEGINNING at a point in the North right-of-way line of College Street and in the East boundary line of that tract from Hoblitzelle Foundation to Majestic Music Hall, Inc., dated April 27, 1977, and recorded in Volume 8071, at page 68 of the Deed Records of Bexar County, Texas, for the Southeast corner of this tract, said point being 0.10 foot inside the South wall and 0.29 foot inside the East wall of an existing building known as the Majestic Building, whence a point in the East face of the East wall of an existing building, 0.15 foot north of the Southeast corner of said building, the point of intersection of the North right-of-way line of College Street and the West right-of-way line of Navarro Street bears South 89 deg. 42' 47" East a distance of 175.17 feet and a drill hole in the concrete walk bears South 0 deg. 04' 03" East a distance of 1.00 foot;

THENCE, North, 0 deg. 08' 20" West parallel to and 0.75 foot East of, measured at right angles, the West lot line of Lot 3 and the East lot line of Lot 2, New City Block 406, a distance of 159.38 feet to a point in the East face of the distance of 159.38 feet to a point in the East wall of the "Little" Brady Building, 0.11 foot South of the outside face of the North Wall of the "Little" Brady Building, the Northeast corner of that tract of land conveyed to Robert B. Green Memorial Hospital by Bexar County National Bank, at page 882 for the Northeast corner of this tract, whence a drill hole set in concrete bears North, 0. deg. 08" 20" West a distance of 1.00 foot;

THENCE, North 89 deg. 58' 00" East with the South right-of-way line of Houston Street, at 159.63 feet, a lead plug set in the South curb of Houston Street bears North 0 deg. 04' 03" East a distance of 15.30 feet, and continuing on the same course and by the same count, in all, a distance of 163.63 feet to a point lying 0.19 foot inside the North wall and 0.34 foot inside the

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East wall of the Majestic building, the Northwest corner of that tract of land conveyed to Frank R. Prassel by George W. Oge on November 1, 1973, by deed of record in Volume 7251 at page 431 of the Deed Records of Bexar County, Texas, for the Northeast corner of this tract, whence a drill hole set in concrete bears North 0 deg. 04' 03" West a distance of 1.00 foot;

THENCE, South 0 deg. 04' 03" East with the East boundary line of that tract of land referred to as the "Second Tract" in said Warranty Deed from Hoblitzelle Foundation to the Majestic Music Hall, Inc., a distance of 160.29 feet to the POINT OF BEGINNING.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary encompasses the original site of the Majestic Theatre and the Majestic Building.

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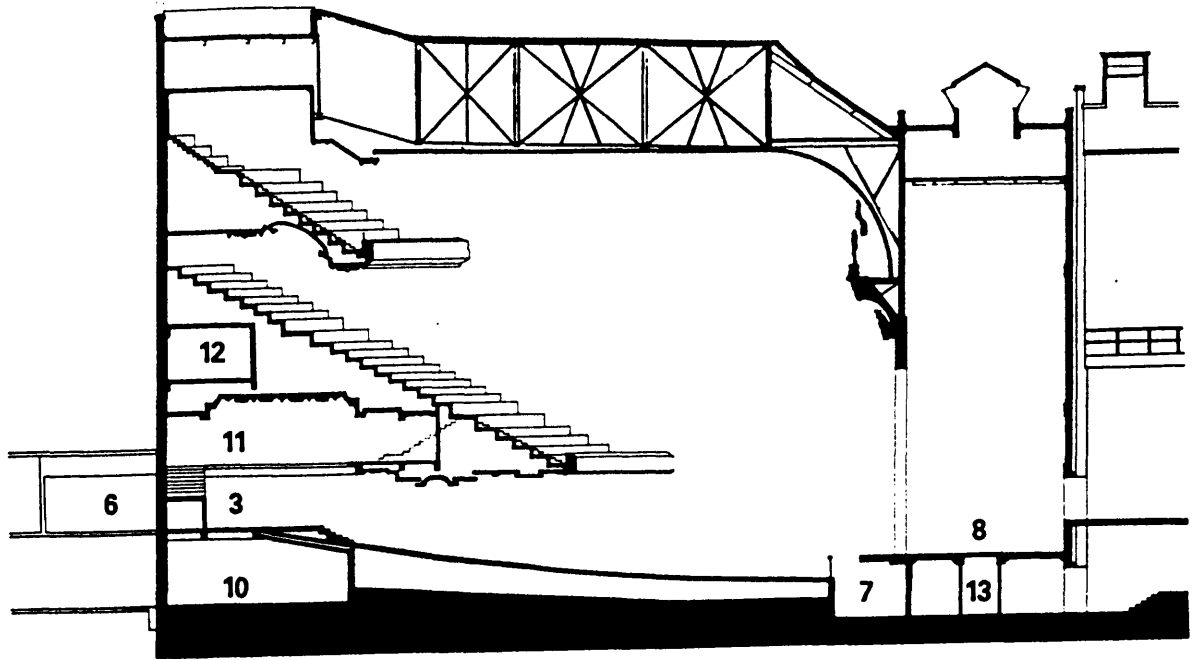
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11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: Mary Margaret McAllen, Projects Director
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City/Town: San Antonio
State: Texas
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Date: September 11, 1992

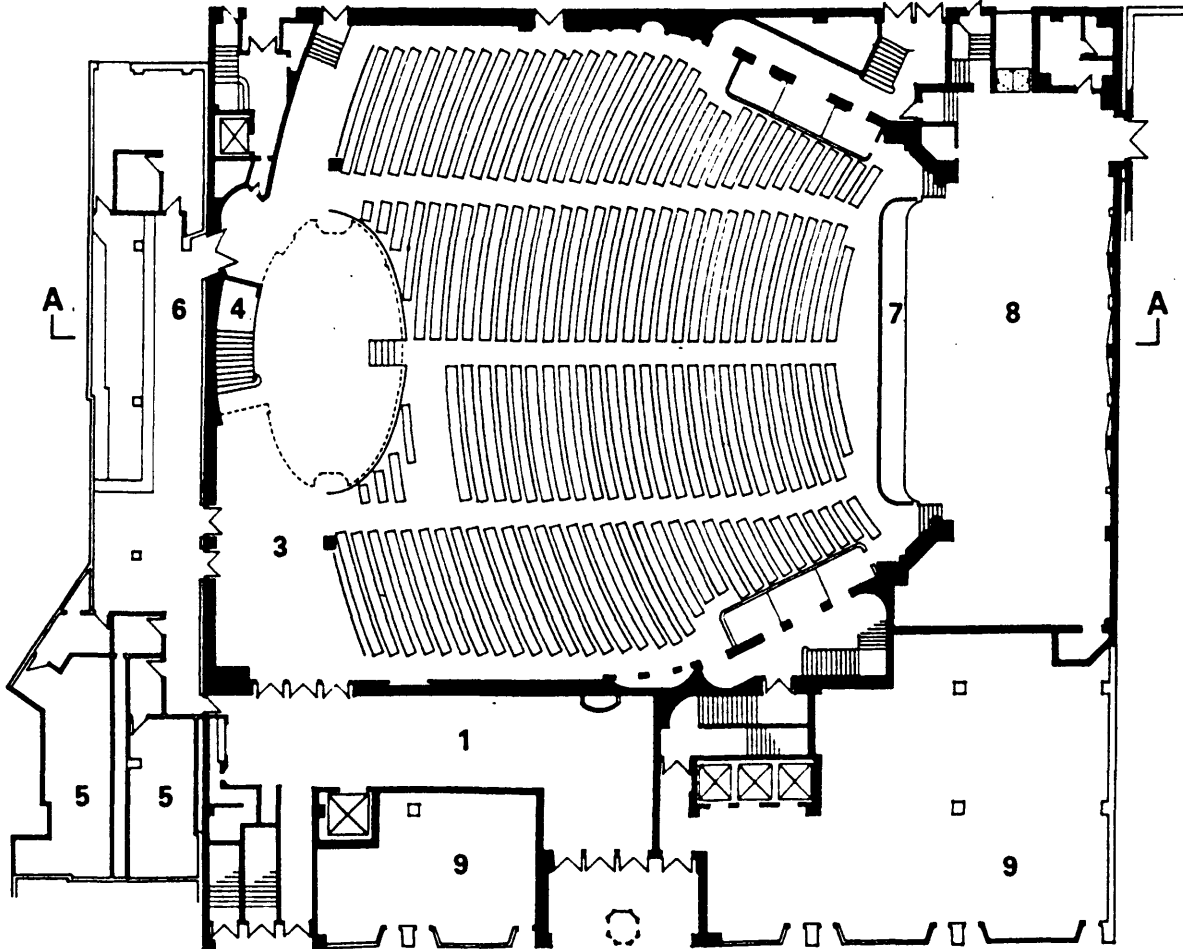
Edited by: Carolyn Pitts, National Park Service
(202) 343-8166

Majestic Theatre - San Antonio, Texas



SECTION A-A

- | | | |
|---------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| 1 LOBBY | 6 LOUNGE | 10 OFFICES |
| 2 ELEVATOR | 7 ORCHESTRA PIT | 11 BALCONY FOYER |
| 3 FOYER | 8 STAGE | 12 THIRD LEVEL FOYER |
| 4 STAIRS TO BALCONY | 9 RETAIL | 13 DRESSING ROOMS |
| 5 RESTROOMS | | |



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

N ↓ 40'/12m