

1041

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See Instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Type all entries.

### 1. Name of Property

historic name Rialto Theater  
other names/site number N/A

### 2. Location

street & number 310 Ninth Street  not for publication  
city, town Tacoma  vicinity  
state Washington code WA county Pierce code 053 zip code 98402

### 3. Classification

Ownership of Property  
 private  
 public-local  
 public-State  
 public-Federal

Category of Property  
 building(s)  
 district  
 site  
 structure  
 object

Number of Resources within Property  
Contributing Noncontributing  
1 0 buildings  
— — sites  
— — structures  
1 0 objects  
1 0 Total

Name of related multiple property listing:  
Movie Theaters in Washington State

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

### 4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 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.  See continuation sheet.  
Mary M. Sampson 6/30/92  
Signature of certifying official Date  
Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation  
State or Federal agency and bureau

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

Entered in the National Register  
Shelton Byers 5/21/92  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
for Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

---

**6. Function or Use**

---

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)  
Recreation & Culture: theaterCurrent Functions (enter categories from instructions)  
Recreation & Culture: theater

---

**7. Description**

---

Architectural Classification  
(enter categories from instructions)Classical Revival

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete  
walls concrete stuccoroof composition  
other terra cotta

---

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Rialto Theater is a 1918 commercial property consisting of a 780 (originally 1500) seat theater and retail space. The two-and-a-half-story structure is located within the historic downtown commercial core of Tacoma and in an area long associated with theaters and entertainment. The theater is distinguished within the area by its nearly free-standing appearance, dramatic siting along a steep incline, and its classical embellishments sheathed in glazed white terra cotta. Both the interior and exterior convey much of the original stylings designed by Roland E. Borhek. Built to showcase movies, the Rialto houses an auditorium, proscenium with stage, a relocated projection booth, balcony, lobby, and commercial space and meets the classification of a palace era theater property type identified in the Movie Theaters of Washington Multiple Property Documentation Form.

A 1991 rehabilitation minimized the effects of previous alterations and neglect which negatively impacted the property. The most significant impacts over the years were the loss of the commercial storefronts and marquee and alterations in the lobby which concealed the decorative ceiling, expanded concession areas, and changed traffic patterns. The rehabilitation effort restored damaged or replicated missing significant decorative features including the lighted marquee and one of the storefronts and removal of lobby intrusions.

Bounded by 9th Street on the north, Market Street on the west, and "C" Court on the east, the theater abuts the Rialto garage to the south. The structure is a rectangular plan, measuring 120 feet along its primary facade and 90 feet along the Market Street and "C" Court facades. Ninth Street rises a full story from the corner of "C" Court to the corner of Market Street. The primary facade is located along the steep incline of 9th Street with the main entrance to the theater situated at the lower end of 9th in the northeast corner of the property. Originally, three storefronts were located within the facade with access along the incline. The replicated storefront is sited in the northwest corner of the property at the higher end of 9th Street at street level—a full story above the main entrance.

Exterior of the Property: The rectangular structure features wide expanses of wall surface on the three exposed facades projecting a horizontal appearance. Patterned, buff-toned stucco covers most of the exterior, a muted backdrop for the classical decorative features executed in glazed, white terra cotta and applied in high concentration around the main entrance. The roof above the auditorium is gabled and elsewhere flat, abutting the parapet walls. The structure is brick and hollow clay tile construction with a steel truss roof system free spanning the auditorium. Reinforced concrete beams support the proscenium arch and balcony.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Section number   7   Page   2  

---

The primary facade includes the main entrance at the northeast corner, a considerable stretch of wall surface with an emergency exit, and a commercial space set into the opposite upper-level corner. The remaining emergency exits for the theater are located along the secondary facades.

The main entrance is set into the turret-like northeast corner of the property. The entire corner is sheathed in the terra cotta. The decorative treatments convey a classical motif executed in terra cotta. Three arched openings form a semi-circular arcaded entry sheltering a ticket window, a double leaf door set with single panes of glass, and terrazzo flooring and marble kickplating. Projecting out from the arcaded entry is the replicated three part flower petal marquee. Although not identical in material or design, the replica conveys the same feeling as the original Art Nouveau influenced marquee. Above the entry, the second story is enclosed and capped with decorative parapet with lighted finials. The fenestration on the upper facade of the turret-like corner mirrors the arcaded entry below and features three sets of segmented arch windows.

The remainder of the primary facade is less ornamented. The stuccoed wall surface is divided into six bays along the length by terra cotta piers of classical design. The decorative terra cotta parapet extends the entire length with lighted finials where the piers abut the cornice line. Adjacent to the main entry, the upper story of the first three bays features fenestration and an ornamented cornice. Additional lighted finials slightly smaller than the pier finials adorn the parapet on these bays. The windows in each of the bays are three sash with mullions shaped at the top to form one continuous semi-ellipse which echoes the arcaded entry. Originally storefronts occupied the first level of these bays. The 1991 rehabilitation installed patterned stucco panels where original storefront fabric was missing. The terra cotta cornice is less decorative above the last three bays, the farthest from the highly ornamented main entrance. The sixth or corner bay features a replicated storefront composed principally of glass segmented and framed in wood in a manner consistent with photo documentation of the original.

At the east and west ends of the building flat stucco walls are accented with round louvered ports near the parapets. The taller C Court elevation includes lobby exit doors onto a raised dock. The Market Street elevation includes the replicated storefront on the corner and an stairwell climbing up from an emergency exit serving the auditorium. The 1991 rehabilitation reinforced the auditorium walls on the exterior of these facades and reconfigured the stairwells and exits to meet current codes.

Interior of the Property: The interior plan of the Rialto includes a lobby, auditorium with balcony, projection booth, a shallow stage with proscenium, backstage dressing areas and mechanical rooms, and commercial space. The plan exhibits consideration for traffic flow both into and out of the theater characteristic to palace era theaters. The lobby area abuts the rear of the auditorium and includes a ramp and stairways to the balcony. The balcony is situated above the lobby area with a

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Section number   7   Page   3  

---

shallow overhang above the main floor seating. Located along the length of the auditorium are the backstage dressing rooms, mechanical rooms, stairwell access to street exit and the former commercial spaces. Also located along the length of the auditorium on the second story are the spaces formerly housing the manager's office, restroom facilities accessed through waiting or smoking rooms, storage, and the corner commercial spaces.

The lobby features recessed lights and a coved ceiling segmented and decorated with plaster swags of greenery. The ramp and stairway access to the balcony dominates the long narrow space behind the auditorium. The ramp parallels the back wall and splits into two separate tracks which access the balcony from opposite sides approximately one-third of the way up in the steep seating. The subdued decorative treatment adopted for the lobby in contrast with the highly manipulated entrance and equally ornamented auditorium is characteristic of palace era theaters which consider traffic through the facility and purposely manipulate the visual impact upon patrons.

The auditorium is entered from the rear and is divided by the access aisles into three seating areas. The rectangular two story high hall is designed for movies with a shallow stage and wings. The ceiling is coved. The walls curve away from the proscenium on either side providing an elliptical shape and character to the front of the room. The classical ornamentation is executed in cast plaster and applied to the walls, ceiling, proscenium, and balcony railing. The proscenium displays the richest plaster relief work consisting of an entablature supported by classical piers. Two cherubs blowing long trumpets and separated by a lighted torch are perched atop the proscenium. Flanking the proscenium are screened areas that once housed organ pipes. The areas are ornamented with cast plaster grills capped by eagles and flags. Also of particular note is the curving balcony rail. The ceiling is set with ornamented arched beams and inverted acoustical cones supporting the main light fixtures. Lighting includes the principal chandeliers suspended above the main seating, replicated wall sconces, and indirect lighting along the cornice and beneath the organ grills emphasizing the coved ceiling and detailing the statuary.

Accessible from the balcony, the room above the main entrance is perfectly round and originally served as the anteroom to the ladies restroom. It now provides the property with a small meeting space, well lighted by the floor to ceiling arched windows. The remaining area on the upper level was redesigned in the 1991 rehabilitation and now houses updated restroom facilities and a small rehearsal hall and abuts the replicated corner storefront.

The 1991 rehabilitation in part, updated the technical and mechanical aspects of the theater, restored the lobby to its pre-1951 remodel appearance, and applied an interior color scheme similar to the pallet of hues described in the documentation as original to the Rialto. However, a noteworthy impact was the relocation of the projection booth from the lobby area to the rear of the balcony.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Section number   7   Page   4  

---

Also, for acoustical reasons the rear wall of the auditorium beneath the balcony was redesigned as a curved surface—mirroring the line of the balcony railing. The relocation of the projection booth and the alteration to the rear wall of the auditorium which abuts the lobby altered the configuration of the lobby space. Each still functions in a similar manner to the original design with limited impact on the patron. Other acoustical apparatus have been affixed to the side walls of the auditorium but do not represent irreparable change. Seating dating from the 1951 remodel was refurbished and reupholstered. The shallow stage was extended which impacted the first three rows of seating. And, conformance with handicap access and public safety in both the main floor and balcony areas impacted the seating arrangements.

---

## 8. Statement of Significance

---

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally     statewide     locally

Applicable National Register Criteria     A     B     C     D

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

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Entertainment/Recreation

Period of Significance

1918-1942

Significant Dates

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Roland E. Borhek

---

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The Rialto Theater is a notable landmark among Tacoma's downtown properties, visually prominent because of its location and distinctive appearance and historically significant for its association with the expansion of film entertainment. Completed in 1918 to showcase movies, its design represents increasing affluence coinciding with the post-war age of optimism executed in a classical motif. It embodies the characteristics of the palace era property type identified in the Movie Theaters of Washington Multiple Property Documentation Form, including association with local entrepreneur Henry T. Moore and Tacoma architect Roland E. Borhek.

Historical Background: The Rialto Theater occupies a site which has been used for theater since at least 1895. Rialto is distinctive as one of three remaining theaters and adjacent to the site of a fourth in an area long associated with theaters and entertainment. It follows the Lyceum (1895) and the Star (1900) theaters. The Star is shown in a 1906 photograph as a lap sided wood frame vaudeville theater with an entrance and marquee at the corner of C Court and 9th Street. It burned about 1908 at which time the intersection of Broadway and 9th was clearly established as the City's "Theater District".

The owner of the neighboring Colonial Theater on Broadway, Henry T. Moore, recognized the growing audiences at Fort Lewis due to the first world war. By 1917 he had commissioned Roland E. Borhek, a Tacoma architect who would later design the Winthrop Hotel, to design a 1500 seat picture palace for the site. By summer of 1918 the theater was under construction though the war's wrap up caused some delay in completion.

Area of Significance—Entertainment: One of three remaining historic downtown theaters, the Rialto Theater is the sole remaining intact structure which represents the importance of film entertainment in 1918 to the inhabitants of Tacoma. Since its construction until the recent rehabilitation, the theater has provided the community with a facility in which to experience movies.

The nearby Pantages Theater—a palace by classification—was built in 1916-1918 to principally showcase live entertainment. Executed in the Second Renaissance Revival style, the Pantages illustrates the exuberance in ornamentation and the integration of style with function associated with palaces. Also nearby and intact, the earlier Temple Theater was built for live performances.

The Rialto opened for its first audience on September 7, 1918 with a D.W. Griffith silent picture.

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Section number   8   Page   2  

---

Musical accompaniment was provided by a special orchestra of 18 skilled musicians. Matinee seats could be had for a quarter.

The Rialto was affiliated with the Sidney Gruamann Theater chain in the years before anti-trust regulations forced film producers to sever links with distributors and theater operators. Paramount Studios provided the film product for the house, bringing top stars to the Rialto's screen.

Upon opening, the Rialto was praised for its advanced film projection capabilities. Great attention was paid to the projection equipment and audience viewing standards. Notable were the balcony loges which provided sectioned seating to groups of up to ten seated in upholstered wicker rocking chairs.

Henry T. Moore, in partnership with two other men, built a regional chain of movie and vaudeville houses which grew to include the Victory, Strand, Fort Lewis, Sunset, and Kay St. theaters. In 1926 Moore took on different partners under the new banner of Pacific Northwest Theaters and with new capital opened the Broadway Theater in February 1927. Just six months later however, Moore's wives' health forced him to place the Rialto and other houses under the management of the Fox West Coast Theater chain and he went into retirement in southern California.

In the early deepening years of the Depression, Fox West Coast dropped the Rialto and Moore returned to Tacoma reopening the movie house in March of 1933. Through the Depression, World War II, and post war years, the Rialto remained a first run movie house somewhat overshadowed by the Tacoma and Pantages but always a serious competitor for audiences. In the late 40's, Moore died and not surprisingly she relinquished operation and management of the Rialto in a deal that was closed in October, 1949.

The Rialto was taken over by the John Hamrick theater chain which also controlled the Temple. Early in 1951, vice-president Will J. Connor directed the theater's first significant remodel. Architect Paul Carlson designed the work including major changes to the lobby ceiling and balcony access areas as well as the installation of an expanded concession stand. Theater seating was upgraded and technical improvements were made to the sound and projection system.s

Through the 50's, 60's, and 70's the theater remained unchanged with the exception of the storefronts which were replaced with aluminum frame windows and doors. By 1963, when the massive Tacoma theater next door burned in a spectacular fire, the Rialto was an independent house showing second run and pick up films. Its slide continued as the downtown began to lose its position as the region's entertainment center. In the late 70's and through the 80's it was a dollar a seat movie house running double features for evening shows only.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Section number   8   Page   3  

---

In 1989 the Rialto was sold to the Rialto Theater Foundation, a non-profit corporation intent on its restoration and reuse in conjunction with the new Broadway Theater District. Significant changes as a result of the project include removing the impacts of the 1951 remodel, providing adequate public facilities, replacing missing elements with replicas, relocation of the projection booth, and overall refurbishment of character defining features. Completed in 1991, the effort restored the theater's integrity of appearance and its use by the current tenant although principally live provides entertainment to a broad audience much as it did in its heyday.



**9. Major Bibliographical References**

Bonney, W. T., History of Pierce County, Pioneer Historical Publishing, 1927.  
Morgan, Murray, Puget Sound, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989.

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 # \_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreeage of property      Less than one

UTM References

A	10	542380	5233440	B			
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
C				D			
	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

Lot 1, Block 907, Map of New Tacoma, Washington Territory, as per map thereof filed for record February 3, 1875, in the Office of the Auditor of Pierce County.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the Rialto Theater.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

Name/title      Michael Sullivan, edited by Kay Austin  
organization    City of Tacoma, Community Development  
street & number 747 Market Street, Suite 1036  
city or town     Tacoma

date              September 11, 1990  
telephone       (206) 591-5220  
state              Washington zip code 98402