

PH0670243

DATA SHEET

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICENATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED APR 4 1977  
DATE ENTERED AUG 19 1977SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

\*\* Loew's State Theatre

AND/OR COMMON

Ocean State Theatre

**2 LOCATION**

STREET &amp; NUMBER 220 Weybosset Street

CITY, TOWN

Providence

VICINITY OF

2 (Representative Edward Beard)

STATE

Rhode Island

CODE  
44COUNTY  
Providence

CODE

007

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

## CATEGORY

 DISTRICT  
 BUILDING(S)  
 STRUCTURE  
 SITE  
 OBJECT

## OWNERSHIP

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

## STATUS

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

## PRESENT USE

 AGRICULTURE  
 COMMERCIAL  
 EDUCATIONAL  
 ENTERTAINMENT  
 GOVERNMENT  
 INDUSTRIAL  
 MILITARY  
 MUSEUM  
 PARK  
 PRIVATE RESIDENCE  
 RELIGIOUS  
 SCIENTIFIC  
 TRANSPORTATION  
 OTHER:**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

Ronald Dario Bacciocchi and Jean Bacciocchi

STREET &amp; NUMBER

c/o 220 Weybosset Street

CITY, TOWN

Providence

VICINITY OF

STATE  
Rhode Island**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Providence City Hall

STREET &amp; NUMBER

Dorrance &amp; Washington Streets

CITY, TOWN

Providence

STATE

Rhode Island

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE

Interface: Providence

DATE

1975

 FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCALDEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission

CITY, TOWN

Providence

STATE

Rhode Island

# 7 DESCRIPTION

## CONDITION

## CHECK ONE

## CHECK ONE

EXCELLENT  
 GOOD  
 FAIR

DETERIORATED  
 RUINS  
 UNEXPOSED

UNALTERED  
 ALTERED

ORIGINAL SITE  
 MOVED DATE \_\_\_\_\_

### DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Ocean State Theatre -- originally Loew's State Theatre -- located at 220 Weybosset Street in the heart of downtown Providence, was completed in 1928 at the height of nationwide motion picture theatre building activities. Designed by the firm of C. W. Rapp and George L. Rapp, of Chicago, who were among the most successful and prominent of American movie theatre designers, the complex building includes an elaborate 3200-seat theatre as well as offices and stores. The complex is of steel frame construction with concrete floors and reinforced twelve-inch brick curtain walls. The primary (Weybosset Street) facade is entirely faced in terra cotta tile; elsewhere the brick walls are exposed and rather plain, except for terra cotta detailing used for storefronts, string courses, cornices, and roof parapets.

The theatre occupies most of the city block bounded north by Weybosset Street, east by Page Street, south by Pine Street, and west by Richmond Street. The Weybosset Street and the Richmond Street facades are the primary and secondary facades respectively. The sections of the theatre building vary in height from one to five stories according to the functions for which they were designed. The front entrance and lobby portion of the building, with offices above, is four stories high. The auditorium and its concomitant service areas at the rear are five stories tall. Shops, offices, and the secondary theatre entrance occupy one- and two-story sections along the west (Richmond Street) side.

The theatre is irregular in shape as well as in height, due to the site it occupies (see site plan). Although fourteen buildings were razed on the theatre site, two buildings -- at the corners of Weybosset and Page Streets and Weybosset and Richmond Streets -- were left standing. Thus the section of the theatre facing Weybosset Street is narrowed on either side for a depth of 58 feet along Page Street and 85 feet along Richmond Street to accommodate the earlier buildings. Behind this, the building expands fully east to Page Street, west to Richmond Street, and south to Pine Street.

The four-story Weybosset Street facade is faced with terra cotta, divided into six bays by fluted pilasters, and capped with a cornice and panelled parapet with decorative plateresque finials (see photograph 1). The two end bays at the left and that at the extreme right contain three double-hung windows on the second, third, and fourth stories, opening above three storefronts on the first story. These storefronts are presently covered with undistinguished contemporary facings which conceal the original terra cotta wall treatment. The first story bay at the right contains an entrance to the offices above. The asymmetrically-placed entrance to the theatre -- consisting of a ticket booth flanked by four doors at either side -- occupies the second, third, and fourth bays from the right. Each bay contains two double-hung windows on the upper stories. Above the entrance is a large, angled,

(See Continuation Sheet 1)

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light-studded marquee projecting from the building over the sidewalk at the second story level. This marquee was added in 1946 and slightly altered about 1960. Judging from the architects' original drawings the original marquee was in the same location but was a rectangular, flat-roofed, projecting canopy ornamented with rather simple moderne scrollwork. Above the marquee a prism-shaped sign projected from the building rising the full height of the facade to above the level of the roof parapet. This sign remains, now covered over to read "Ocean State Theatre," and boldly draws attention to the entrance.

The off-center placement of the theatre entrance was probably so designed to provide maximum visibility from Mathewson Street, a major downtown cross street which terminates opposite the theatre. If the entrance had been centered on the facade rather than on Mathewson Street, the marquee and vertical sign would not have been nearly so prominent. As constructed the marquee is a dominating focal point attracting attention from across the downtown as well as from along Weybosset Street.

The Page Street (east) side of the theatre is an essentially blank wall, pierced only by exit doors at street level and the windows of three stories of dressing rooms at the rear and left of the auditorium. The wall is articulated by buff terra cotta mouldings at the roofline which rise at six equally spaced points in a curving plateresque decorative motif and by a simply-moulded terra cotta string course extending across the facade about seven feet below the roofline. Six elaborate curvilinear terra cotta medallions extend downward from this string course and are centered beneath the roofline ornaments. A terra cotta string course also extends across the building at the second story level.

The Pine Street (south) facade of the complex is ornamented in a fashion similar to that of the Page Street facade, with terra cotta string course, curving mouldings, and medallions. It is divided into two sections, however, by a service alley extending deep into the block. The tall rear wall of the auditorium occupies about two-thirds of the block-wide facade, east of the alley. The wall is unbroken except for double loading doors at street level which open directly onto the stage, and small windows on the upper levels at the corner of Page and Pine Streets. The remaining section of the complex facing Pine Street is one story in height and contains two boarded-over storefronts.

(See Continuation Sheet 2)

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The southern section of the building facing Richmond Street also is one story high and contains storefronts, many of which are presently vacant. The facade of this section is symmetrically disposed, divided into three terra cotta-framed segments which in turn are divided into individual storefronts. The end segments contain three stores, while the central segment contains four. The storefronts are unified in appearance by their design. All have recessed entrances, large glass windows uniformly topped by black painted panels, and plateresque terra cotta capping mouldings, elaborated with a central curvilinear ornament which is surmounted by an urn. The roofline at the corner of Pine and Richmond Streets is also topped by an urn. Behind the storefronts rise the blank brick walls of the auditorium.

The northern section of the Richmond Street facade is two stories high, about 45 feet long, and divided into two sections by terra cotta blocks resembling quoins (see photograph 2). The most northerly section contains, on the first story, a small storefront and a plateresque, terra cotta-framed entrance for the offices above. The southerly section is given over to an elaborate entrance to the theatre, framed by terra cotta mouldings with decorative panels above. Over the panels a composite window is centered in the boldly scalloped gable which rises above the entrance and is punctuated by urns at its apex and sides. The window group consists of two round arched windows separated from a narrow rectangular central window by tapering columnar mullions. A small window above, surmounted by curvilinear mouldings and a finial, completes the essentially triangular plateresque composition.

The monochromatic and orderly handling of detail on the exterior gives way to an extraordinary display of sumptuous and eclectic detail on the interior. The theatre-goer experiences a series of ever-changing, ever-grander spaces as he proceeds from Weybosset Street to his theatre seat. After passing under the low, light-studded marquee, he enters the one-story ticket lobby, with marble panelled walls, bronze detailing, and multi-colored ceramic tile floor. Two double-doored entrances flank the central ticket booth, which is identical to that on the street, and lead to the long 30 by 60 foot entrance lobby. This area channels the theatre-goer into the right side of the grand lobby, which reaches two stories high and extends far to the left across the entire width of the auditorium (see photograph 3). The auditorium itself is reached by passing through a three-story gallery which also runs the width of the auditorium. Above this gallery are two galleries

(See Continuation Sheet 3)

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providing entrance to the mezzanine and the first and second balconies, and a fourth level opening directly to the rear of the second balcony.

The lobby areas, galleries, and circulation spaces throughout the interior are expansive and splendid. Their total effect is one of exuberant richness, elaborated with all manner of baroque and eclectic ornament executed in marble, bronze, gilded plasterwork, and other fine material. The walls are painted primarily wine, blue, and rosy buff, with some shades of salmon and quantities of gilt. This color scheme is a careful restoration of the original treatment.

The spacious one-story entrance lobby displays much of this richness. Its ceiling is transversed by four beams. The walls at each side are divided into five bays, articulated by gilt framed arched panels. The first, third, and fifth panels at either side are filled with beveled mirrors. The second and fourth panels contain glass display cases. The baseboards are of black marble, as they are throughout the circulation spaces. As in the ticket lobby, the floor is ceramic tile. Etched crystal and bronze chandeliers hang from the ceiling and additional glass fixtures are placed between the mirrored panels and display cases on the walls. With few exceptions the lighting fixtures throughout the building are original. They are elaborate, more Art Deco than baroque in design, and effectively complement the decorative treatment of the interior.

The grand lobby is separated from the entrance lobby by brass-framed glass doors with glass transoms above (photograph 3). Inside the grand lobby these doors are framed by a pair of colossal free-standing brown marble columns with foliate capitals and pilaster responds at the sides. Above the doors and transoms the second story wall is covered with beveled mirrors. This mirror treatment continues along the second story facing the mezzanine level for the full length of the grand lobby (see photograph 4).

Directly opposite the doors between the entrance and grand lobbies are the entrances to the auditorium reached by passing through a one-story gallery running the width of the auditorium and lobby. This gallery also leads, on the right, to a side stairway, the theatre's administrative offices, and the Richmond Street entrance. At either end of the grand lobby are impressive staircases to the second story mezzanine level and the upper reaches of the balcony. The staircase on the right is partially enclosed, while that on the left is open

(See Continuation Sheet 4)

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and extends expansively into the room (see photograph 3). The mezzanine overlooks the entire length of the grand lobby.

The walls are articulated by round arches separated by pilasters extending through the full two-story height of the room (photograph 4). The end walls are articulated by triple arches. Overhead is a slightly-coved ceiling with coffered decoration. Three large, elaborate, angular etched crystal chandeliers light the grand lobby. Numerous similar Art Deco wall fixtures augment the lighting, which is soft here as throughout the theatre. The recently installed carpeting used throughout the building is done primarily in shades of blue, blue-green, and gold combined in a figured medallion pattern. This replaces the original carpeting of heavy red and gold plush. Along the north wall of the grand lobby, opposite the first floor gallery, is an unobtrusive refreshment counter which was not part of the original interior decor.

The mezzanine level overlooking the grand lobby consists of a long, handsome gallery with gilt-framed, panelled walls. This gallery gives access to the loge and first balcony seats, the men's smoking and rest rooms, and the ladies' lounge and powder room. The third level gallery, running the full width of the auditorium, leads to the first and second balconies. It is less richly appointed than that on the mezzanine level. The fourth level has no separate gallery but opens directly to the rear seats of the second balcony. From this height the view of the entire auditorium below is especially impressive.

The 3200-seat auditorium is a large and exciting space, not only because of its extraordinary richness of ornamentation, but also because of the dramatic sense of space opening up as one enters it. The orchestra seats -- 1,984 in number and now upholstered in a neutral buff naugehyde -- are divided by three aisles and slope downward in a broad expanse to the stage and proscenium (see photograph 5). An outward-curving, hydraulically operated orchestra pit fronts the 86-by-32-foot stage. The proscenium opening, 52 feet wide by 34 feet high, is framed by wide, elaborately ornamented, curving gilt fascia bands (see photograph 6). At either side, gilt panels curve upward and outward to the ceiling. Between these framing panels and the stage, at an angle to the stage at the second story level, are overscaled, round-arched openings with projecting urn-topped balconies at their bases. These were designed not as box seats but as organ grills to hold the pipes of the theatre's original organ, which

(See Continuation Sheet 5)

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remained in the theatre until 1963. Beneath these balconies are exit corridors from the orchestra seats. Above them the wall areas are filled with decorative panels which curve upward to the apex of the ceiling in front of the proscenium where a gilt sunburst is placed. Within each arched opening is a tall, elaborately-decorated, curvilinear pediment supported by three-quarter engaged columns and pilasters on pedestals. The effect created is that of a half baldacchino nestling within, and slightly in front of, a much larger round arch. Directly in front of each arch and its enclosed pediment, and hanging from the outward-curving ceiling, is a large, extravagantly-designed stained glass lighting fixture with bulbs extending outward in many directions.

The walls of the auditorium at either side of the balcony are articulated by three tall round arches which correspond to the loge, first balcony, and second balcony levels. At the base of each arch is an exit framed by architraves and surmounted by a broken segmental pediment with a curvilinear cartouche at its center. The decorative wall panels between the round arches curve upward and outward and merge with the coved ceiling which is elaborately articulated by coffered panels in a complex design. At the apex of the 65-foot-high ceiling, and centered over the balcony, is a recessed saucer dome lit from beneath by hidden spotlights. A second half dome extends toward the main dome from the extreme rear balcony level, where a free-standing partition, supported by widely-spaced square columns, terminates the balcony seats and separates them from the circulation space behind. Wide aisles extend across the auditorium between each balcony level, and entrances from the corridors penetrate each level at various points.

Decoration embellishes nearly every surface in the auditorium except for the painted walls within the round arches articulating the side walls on the balcony level and the corresponding panels on the side walls at orchestra level. The overall effect of the decoration and the great open space is opulent and suitably festive, especially now that the theatre has been refurbished to a state consistent with its original splendor.

The functional provisions of the theatre include three tiers of dressing rooms rising above the stage at stage right; a well-designed lighting system controlled by a twenty-foot long light board in the wings off stage right; a counterweight rigging system operated from a stage-level locking rail along the stage right wall; and a scenic artists paint bridge extending across and thirty feet above the rear of the stage with a paint frame capable of holding fifty-foot drops behind that. Neither the bridge nor the paint frame have ever been

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used. Below the stage are two large chorus rooms, an orchestra room, an animal room, a carpenter shop, electric shop, and a screening preview room, as well as the machinery to operate the stage and orchestra pit elevators. The rear two-thirds of the stage floor is comprised of two elevating sections each of which could move above or below the level of the stage. The organ lift in the orchestra pit operated independently of the stage and orchestra lifts. Floods from a number of hurricanes and long disuse have left this machinery in poor condition. The stage elevators were not used until the vaudeville shows of the 1930's and even then were not frequently needed.

Roger Brett, in his book Temples of Illusion, speculates on these backstage facilities -- "facilities any opera house would be jealous of and few could afford" -- which were never or infrequently used. Wondering why Loew's had Rapp and Rapp design the theatre on such a grand and complete scale, he writes:

Did Loew's want it to be ready for any conceivable use in the expanding, skys-the-limit show world of the late twenties? Was it simply because Loew's could (and did) afford the very best? Half a century later, the Ocean State in Providence and a few dozen other movie palaces scattered across the country, like the ruins of an ancient civilization, inspire wonder in we inhabitants of a more austere modern world.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Roger Brett, Temples of Illusion, page 259.

(See Continuation Sheet 7)

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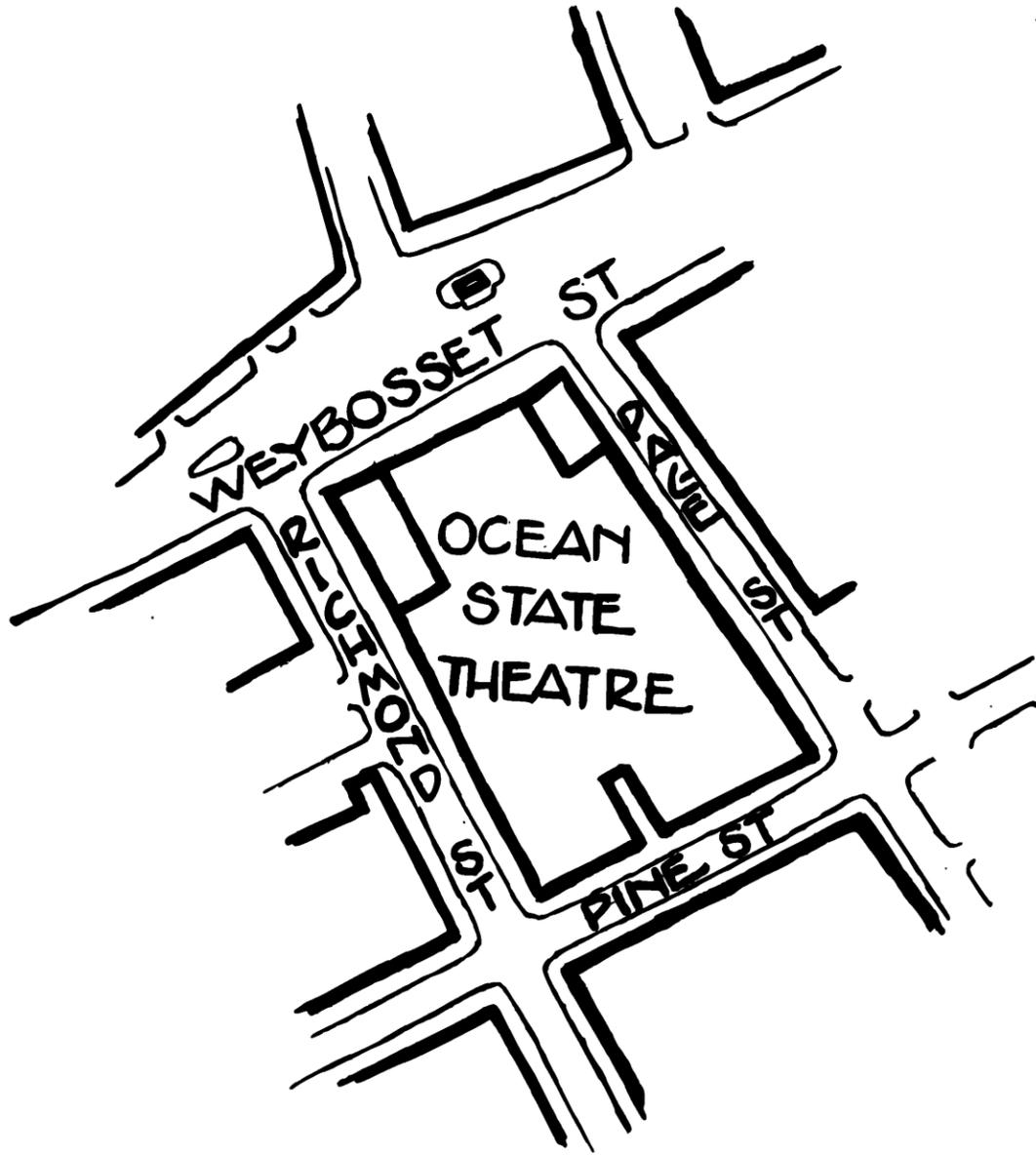
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SITE PLAN OF  
THE OCEAN STATE THEATRE

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

## PERIOD

## AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW

<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
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<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES 1928

BUILDER/ARCHITECT C. W. Rapp & George L. Rapp

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Ocean State Theatre has considerable significance for the city of Providence and the State of Rhode Island. Since the time of its design by noteworthy theatre architects Rapp and Rapp, and its opening as Loew's State Theatre in 1928, the theatre has been a visually exciting space, and it is today the grandest surviving "picture palace" in Rhode Island. The theatre's role as the locus of a long and varied succession of entertainments -- starting with the movies for which it was designed and continuing with vaudeville in the 1930's and, more recently, with such alternate functions as concerts and opera -- has given it importance in social and entertainment history. With the recent restoration and refurbishing undertaken in the belief that such a theatre does have a future in Rhode Island's capital city, the Ocean State has assumed a present and future significance as an anchor in the projected revitalization of downtown Providence.

Plans for the erection of a major new motion picture theatre in Providence were first announced by Loew's Theatres, Incorporated, of New York, in September, 1926. It was to be located on a 46,000-square-foot downtown lot viewed as "one of the most valuable and central locations" in the city at that time. This lot was composed of a series of separate parcels that had been assembled by the Smith Estates in the early 1900's. The building permit for the theatre was issued in July, 1927, and its cost was estimated to be \$1,500,000. It eventually cost \$2,500,000 by the time it was completed.

In order for construction to begin, all but two of the existing buildings on the site were razed. One of these unfortunate buildings, ironically, was the old Bullock's Theatre, one of the first motion picture theatres to operate in Providence. Bullock's was located in the former Richmond Street Congregational Church (erected 1852-1853 and sold in 1905) and had opened for vaudeville and motion pictures in 1909.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>"Cornerstone box much in demand," Providence Journal, June 1, 1927, p.3.  
"Popular Amusements--the drama in Providence," Providence Board of Trade Journal, vol. 28, no. 10, October, 1916.

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Brett, Roger, Temples of Illusion. Providence, 1976.  
 "Dario buying Loew's State; plans unknown," Providence Evening Bulletin, July 13, 1971, p. 1.  
 "14,000 at opening of new theatre," Providence Sunday Journal, October 7, 1928, p. 10.

(See Continuation Sheet 15)

# 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY about 1

UTM REFERENCES

A	1,9	29,9	6,8	0	4,6	3,2	5,0	0	B	1,9	29,9	6,4	0	4,6	3,2	4,4	0
	ZONE	EASTING			NORTHING					ZONE	EASTING			NORTHING			
C	1,9	29,9	5,6	0	4,6	3,2	5,0	0	D	1,9	29,9	6,0	0	4,6	3,2	5,4	0
	ZONE	EASTING			NORTHING					ZONE	EASTING			NORTHING			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

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

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

# 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Robert T. Gifford, Architectural Historian January, 1977

ORGANIZATION

Downtown Providence Development and Preservation Project

STREET & NUMBER

44 Washington Street

TELEPHONE

401-351-4300

CITY OR TOWN

Providence

STATE

Rhode Island 02903

# 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL

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

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

*Frederick O. Williams*

TITLE

State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE

March 25, 1977

FOR NPS USE ONLY

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

ATTEST:

*Charles [Signature]*

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

*8/2/77*

DATE

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Another building on the site, facing Weybosset Street, was the Gaiety Theatre, in operation as a movie house by 1914 and renamed Conn's City Theatre in 1925. A 1914 photograph looking south down Mathewson Street toward Weybosset shows the twin square brick towers of the former church as well as the recently-opened Gaiety.<sup>3</sup> Both theatres and twelve other commercial buildings were torn down to clear the site for Loew's State Theatre. Demolition was begun on April 18, 1927.<sup>4</sup>

Early in 1928, as construction was underway, it was announced in the press that the new Loew's State Theatre would include "many of the elaborate features which have been incorporated in the bigger 'movie palaces' of New York City."<sup>5</sup> Loew's State was the largest movie theatre ever built in southern New England and it was the first such "palace" in the area to be built by a national chain unassisted by any form of local management. It was the fifth Loew's theatre built in New England, with the other four located in Boston.

Marcus Loew, founder of Loew's Theatres, by the mid-1920's was forging the first nationwide chain of three hundred motion picture theatres in America. To quote Roger Brett,<sup>6</sup> Marcus Loew recognized the appeal of the "fantastic lands of make believe where average people could escape reality and indulge in dreams." Loew recognized the importance of the fantasy of the physical setting as well as that of the film itself and "his tickets were to theaters rather than to movies."

Loew's State became known, following its opening Saturday, October 6, 1928, as a showplace par excellence. The formal dedication ceremonies began at 8 p.m. The three hundred and fifty prominent civic and political leaders attending included the Governor of Rhode Island and the Mayor of Providence. Fourteen thousand people attended the

<sup>3</sup>"The theatre building era," Providence Magazine, July, 1914, p. 512.

<sup>4</sup>"Work is started on theatre site," Providence Journal, April 19, 1927, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>"New Loew's theatre to rival 'Palaces'," Providence Journal, February 23, 1928, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup>Op. cit., p. 255.

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the opening day's performances which started at 10 a.m. and featured William Haines in "Excess Baggage," various short subjects, and appropriate music played on the four manual pipe organ which was located at the left side of the orchestra pit.<sup>7</sup>

The enthusiastic public response was probably due, at least in part, to the glowing advertisements that had appeared in the Providence newspapers for more than a week preceding the opening. These advertisements extolled the virtues of the new theatre. The would-be patron was introduced to the new "Palace of Splendor" and asked to

Imagine a theatre so magnificent, so costly, so different, so far exceeding anything that has ever been done anywhere in Providence that there is nothing for you to compare it with.

Imagine the years of planning for this magnificent new showplace! Imagine all the luxury, comfort, and dazzling beauty of color and ornamentation that you ever dreamed of in a theatre -- and you're still miles shy of what you're going to see in the new Loew's State Theatre.<sup>8</sup>

A feature story on the theatre in the October issue of Providence Magazine reported the universal praise with which the new facility had been greeted, suggesting that the new theatre had already "put new life into that section of the city in which it is located," and that "there isn't a single feature in the building and its decorations and equipment that would not be a credit to a city twice the size of Providence." Among the features discussed in the article were the organ, the hydraulically-operated orchestra pit which could be raised or lowered in three sections, and the full size stage and dressing rooms which made the theatre adaptable for any type of presentation. These features were surprisingly underutilized, put into service only sporadically for vaudeville in the 1930's and again in 1949 for appearances of big name bands, top vocalists and some other live entertainers.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>"14,000 at opening of new theatre," Providence Sunday Journal, October 7, 1928, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup>Advertisement, Providence Journal, October 1, 1928, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup>William J. Trambukis, letter regarding Loew's State Theatre, December 29, 1976.

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C. W. and George L. Rapp of Chicago were the architects for the theatre. Rapp and Rapp had begun their theatre building activities in 1906 and subsequently designed a large number of movie theatres across the nation. By the 1920's they were among the foremost theatre architects in the United States. One of their most impressive designs was the Times Square Paramount Theatre in New York which opened in 1926, the year of C. W. Rapp's death. George L. Rapp continued the firm's work, completing, in 1927, the Lowe's Penn Theatre in Pittsburgh, and, in 1928, Loew's State Theatre, the Paramount Theatre in Brooklyn, and the Ambassador Theatre in St. Louis. Prior to his retirement in 1938, George L. Rapp was Consulting Architect for New York's Radio City Music Hall. He died in 1941. Loew's State Theatre is the only work by Rapp and Rapp in Rhode Island.

The hallmark of Rapp and Rapp theatres was elegance. The firm's Baroque and Rococo designs incorporated handsomely-proportioned lobbies, galleries, and stairways, which served as an impressive prelude to the magnificence of the theatre proper. Fine materials were used lavishly, and every detail of the decorative scheme was designed to enhance the overall effect of opulence and splendor. In Loew's State Theatre their use of rich materials -- bronze, marble, tile, moulded plasterwork, and gilt -- and their elaboration of interior design, incorporated a level of craftsmanship no longer commonly available. The rising cost of materials and labor and the declining importance of theatres to American life in the television age, have made theatrical survivors of this era a magnificent phenomena never to be equalled again.

In addition to visual richness, Rapp and Rapp were also concerned with the functional requirements of their theatres. Public circulation, cooling, ventilating, and heating systems, and the stage equipment were given equally careful attention. Given the basic vocabulary of forms with which the firm worked, each new theatre was a variation on an established theme, altered to conform to the individual requirements of size, function, and location. The ingenuity and facility with which the firm exercised their design options made each of their theatres a unique visual experience and a functional space. Their expert professionalism of design has made it possible for several of their theatres to find new life in recent years as performing arts centers. Loew's Penn Theatre is now Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts, home of the Pittsburgh Symphony. The former St. Louis Theatre was renovated and is now Powell Hall, home of the St. Louis Symphony.

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When Loew's State Theatre was completed in 1928, the four manual Robert Morton pipe organ, which had cost over \$100,000, was one of its most prominent features. Loew's organ was a late installation in the development of movie theatres. Prior to the advent of "talking pictures," music and sound effects to accompany the action of the movie were provided in first run theatres, either by an organ or by a full orchestra. By the mid-1920's, however, the movies were well on their way to becoming "talking pictures." By 1927, when the Loew's State was only half completed, the new sound systems had proven so successful that sound wiring and horns were hastily installed. By the time Loew's opened, its organ had become "an opulent accessory rather than a vital necessity."<sup>10</sup>

In spite of this, the organ was used considerably. A long-time tradition was the organ music of Maurice Cook, theatre organist at Loew's from 1930 to 1940. By 1940 the great theatre organs were seldom used, and there were only seventy-five theatre organists in the entire country. Cook's last performance in May, 1940, "was practically a burial of the theatre organist business in New England" and he was "the last of the clan."<sup>11</sup> After his retirement, however, the organ continued to be played. In 1948, the theatre was one of the few in the country which still featured community singing with organ accompaniment as part of its program.

The final chapter in the Loew's organ story was begun in 1954 when the instrument was severely damaged by flooding when Providence was struck by Hurricane Carol. In 1956, the decision was made to remove the organ. By this date Loew's organ was the last remaining in a downtown theatre. The organs at other major theatres -- the R. K. O. Albee and the Majestic -- had previously been removed; and the organ at the Strand, severely damaged by the 1938 hurricane, was destroyed by Hurricane Carol. A newspaper article accurately reflected that "the disposal of the Loew's State organ will mark the end of an era."<sup>12</sup> It was not until 1963, however, that the organ was finally removed. In the spring of that year the 32-year-old, 1500-pipe instrument was sold and moved over a period of weeks to a private home in Waltham, Massachusetts where it remains today.

<sup>10</sup>Brett, op. cit., p. 256.

<sup>11</sup>"Maurice, last of New England's movie theatre organists plays final postlude," Providence Journal, May 26, 1940, section 2, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup>"Of old theatre organs," Providence Sunday Journal, December 2, 1956, section 6, p. 1.

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The theatre itself continued to be a major focus for entertainment in the decades after its completion. In October, 1948, the theatre celebrated its 20th birthday by presenting a hundred pound birthday cake to the Children's Department of Rhode Island Hospital. It remained the largest theatre in the city. A newspaper article suggested that "although Loew's State is no longer young as theatres go in these fast moving times, it is still classed as one of the most beautiful and best equipped motion picture houses in New England."<sup>13</sup>

The theatre's 30th anniversary was celebrated in 1958. By this date, and "despite the howls of volunteer mourners who are eagerly trying to bury the movie business before it is dead," Loew's State was "merrily continuing its \$500,000 annual pace at the box office."<sup>14</sup> The theatre employed 67 people directed by William J. Trambukis, the 11th manager. He worked at Loew's State for 25 years, and is presently the General Manager for Loew's Theatres in New York. In its 30 years of operation, the theatre had attracted an average of 991,672 customers a year, and shown 2,109 features and co-features. As might be expected, its most successful picture was "Gone With the Wind" which played there in 1940, '41, '42, '47 and '51 for a total take at the box office of \$234,536.

By 1965, the situation had changed. Loew's Theatre officials confirmed that the theatre had been up for sale for four or five years, although it was continuing to operate at a profit. In 1965, Loew's State was one of four remaining downtown theatres. The 2,100-seat R.K.O. Albee Theatre (1918) on Westminster Street closed on August 31st of that year as an unprofitable venture, leaving in operation only Loew's State, the 2,149-seat Majestic Theatre (1916) on Washington Street, and the 1,205-seat Strand Theatre (1916) also on Washington Street. The R.K.O. Albee was purchased later the same year (1965) with the hope that it might become a performing arts center. These plans did not materialize and the Albee was razed in 1970. In 1971 the Majestic Theatre underwent remodelling for use by the nationally renowned Trinity

<sup>13</sup>"Loew's State will observe 20th birthday," Providence Journal, October 10, 1948, section 6, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup>Bradford F. Swan, "Loew's State Theatre is 30," Providence Journal, November 2, 1958, p. W1.

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Square Repertory Company. The Majestic Theatre (entered on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972) opened as Trinity Square's new home, the Lederer Theatre, in 1973. The Strand Theatre has become a pornographic cinema.

Loew's State was purchased by its present owner in 1971 for \$250,000. Following the purchase, the owner -- who had also been the purchaser of the R.K.O. Albee in 1965 -- indicated that under no circumstances would the Loew's State Theatre face a similar end. He stated that "the theatre is too beautiful to take down. I am not going to make a parking lot out of it."<sup>15</sup> Loew's State, renamed the "Palace Theatre," reopened under new management on August 27, 1971 with a closed circuit boxing match. The Palace presented movies as well as a wide variety of live entertainment, including numerous rock concerts.

In late 1975, the theatre was closed for extensive renovation and restoration. During the next nine months the public areas of the theatre were completely refurbished, at a cost of over \$500,000. The entire interior was cleaned, painted, and polished. Chandeliers and other fixtures were repaired. The theatre seats were reupholstered and softened. New carpeting was installed throughout. As part of the refurbishing process, and to suitably signify the changes that were occurring, the theatre was renamed the Ocean State Theatre, in honor of Rhode Island.

On Monday, June 21, 1976, a preview of the restored interior was given to 2,000 invited guests including the Mayor of Providence. The Ocean State opened to the public on Wednesday, June 23, with first run motion pictures. The theatre has also been made available for a wide variety of other possible uses including meetings, fashion shows, opera, and symphony concerts. In August of 1976 the Rhode Island Summer Opera Association presented fully-staged productions of "La Traviata" and "Aida." These performances only hint at the important role the theatre can play in the coming years once additional work is done to fully recondition the stage fittings, orchestra pit, and dressing rooms, modernizing them as necessary to make the theatre fully capable, once again, of accommodating nearly any type of entertainment.

<sup>15</sup>"Tentative new owner won't raze Loew's," Providence Journal, July 14, 1971, p. 22.

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Despite the present owner's recent investment in restoring the interior of the Ocean State, his plans that the theatre once again succeed showing first-run motion pictures have not proved economically feasible. As a result, a group of concerned Providence citizens are currently investigating alternative uses for the theatre, including its conversion into a center for the performing arts. Success in finding such a use will be of strategic value in any future revitalization of downtown Providence.

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