

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

NATIONAL  
REGISTER

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 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Tower Theatre  
other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

2. Location

street & number 1201 North Wishon Avenue N/A not for publication  
city, town Fresno N/A vicinity  
state California code CA county Fresno code CA 019 zip code 93728

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u> objects
		<u>1</u>	<u>1</u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing:  
N/A

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.

Shade R. Craze  
Signature of certifying official

Aug 19, 1992  
Date

California Office of 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

Delores Byrum

9/24/92

fu Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/theaterCOMMERCE/TRADE/specialty store

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/theaterCOMMERCE/TRADE/restaurant**7. Description**

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

MODERN MOVEMENTModerneOther: Streamlined Moderne

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concretewalls ConcreteGlassroof Synthetics/Asphaltother Ceramic TileNeon Tube Lighting

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Tower Theatre is located on the northwest corner of North Wishon and East Olive Avenues in suburban Fresno, California, 1.9 miles north of the Fresno County Courthouse. Constructed in 1939, the mixed-use building was designed to function as a motion picture theater flanked by retail shops. Originally built on a 2.12-acre full city block, it had a 150-vehicle paved parking lot. Two detached buildings, one situated at the northeast corner of the block on a legally-segregated .29-acre parcel, split off in 1964, and the other a noncontributing resource located on the southwest corner of the block, now occupy 12% of the original parking surface. Under present-day parking formulas, the lot still holds 150 vehicles. Covering over 20,000 square feet of ground, the Streamlined Moderne style theater consists of three connected steel-reinforced concrete elements in an arrowhead-shaped footprint. The central auditorium is oriented on a 45-degree axis to the corner site, has a bowstring truss roof and is flanked by two flat-roofed retail wings, one parallel to Olive, the other to Wishon. Historically, cobalt blue ceramic tile wainscoting, single-light French doors with overhead transom lights, plateglass storefront windows and canvas awnings dressed out both five-bay retail shop wings. The theater has been the dominant vertical landmark in a suburban shopping area for 52+ years. Its 80' fluted concrete tower, fitted with linear ribbons of neon tube lighting and capped by a flashing neon-pronged orb, serves as a neighborhood beacon. The slender tower closely resembles the "Star Pylon" at the 1939 New York World's Fair. A cantilevered marquee wraps around the corner entrance, seemingly perched atop a hexagonal box office, creating an open-air vestibule. Originally, terrazzo paving, poster cases trimmed with gold and silver leaf, and six etched-glass entry doors embellished the main entrance. "Speedline" moldings and an expansive wall of glass block along the second-floor front facade were typical Streamlined motifs. Inside, the auditorium could seat 900 patrons on a single level. The toilets and projection room were located off a small second-floor lounge. The theater was one of the first in the U.S. to use ultraviolet (black) light as an ornamental device, illuminating fluorescent figurative wall and ceiling murals. A false proscenium stage framing the original screen was removed when alterations were made to convert to Cinemascope in 1954. Early exterior alterations appear to have been limited to the south retail facade, where tile wainscoting was removed and a metal awning was attached. Inside, the once-exotic foyer was totally painted over circa 1980. It was restored during a Certified Historic Rehabilitation completed in 1990, its richly patterned carpet, etched-glass doors, gold- and silver-leafed casework, hardwood paneling and ceiling murals replicated, and its neon cove lighting and bas-relief etched glass panel repaired. In the auditorium, "blacklight" wall sconces, murals, painted wall surfaces and seating were restored. A performance platform, dressing rooms and open-web aluminum trusses for suspended sound equipment and stage lighting were added. The auditorium now seats 761 patrons and is handicapped accessible. New handicapped restrooms were also added. Restored exterior features include the south facade, ticket booth, marquee and tower neon. The building was repainted in historically accurate cream and pastel colors. Blue striped canvas awnings were replaced, closely matching the original pattern. Restaurant tenant improvements have been completed in lease bays with little loss of original fabric. The building is structurally sound and maintained in excellent repair. The mixed-use building functions today as a performing arts theater, with retail spaces utilized by shops, restaurants and a medical office. The property exhibits a substantial degree of historical and architectural integrity. The Setting is a city block bounded by residences (c. 1919-1939) and commercial buildings (c. 1938-1948). Properties surrounding the block are in fair to good condition. The on-site parking lot is 88% extant. The single noncontributing resource, a modestly-scaled building sufficiently removed from the theater, does not detract from the historic character of the property. In 1965, the Wishon-Fulton Connector was cut thru the deadend at Olive, destroying shops across from the theater, to align Wishon with Fulton one block to the east. Vehicular traffic, which moved both ways along Wishon in 1939, now moves south one-way.

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Tower Theatre, Fresno, California

### DESCRIPTION

#### Location

**The Tower Theatre** (Tower Theatre building) is located on the northwest corner of North Wishon and East Olive Avenues in suburban Fresno, California, 1.9 miles north of the Fresno County Courthouse. Built in 1939, the theater building was designed to function as a mixed-use facility, consisting of a high-profile single-story motion picture auditorium flanked by nearly identical low-profile single-story retail wings. The building was placed on the site with its frontage on property lines at the southeast corner of a 2.12-acre city block, utilizing about one-quarter of the site in an arrowhead-shaped building footprint. [Photos 5 and 6] The balance of the block, 1.7 acres, was developed as an on-site parking lot for approximately 150 vehicles. Prior to development of the theater building, the privately owned parcel was used as a neighborhood playground for twelve years under the terms of a no-rent agreement between the owner and the City of Fresno, with the condition that the land would revert to the owner when an option to sell, lease or develop it became feasible. The block was located at the center of a growing suburban shopping district and had significant commercial value. Any mature park landscaping, some of which was initially retained along the perimeter of the parking lot, is no longer in evidence. [Photos 6 and 15] Upon completion, the theater building and its attendant parking lot solely occupied the block. In 1964, at the request of the owner, the Fresno County Assessor "segregated" the block into two (2) contiguous parcels for property tax and lease purposes. Ownership of the property did not change. Subsequent to the parcel split, the theater has been identified with 1.83 acres of the original site (APN 451-265-03). The northeast corner of the block, which had been leased by Standard Oil Company since 1956, as a service station location, was then calculated as a separate .29-acre parcel (APN 451-265-02). The service station was demolished in circa 1975. The small corner parcel was then leased by "Me 'n' Ed's Pizza Parlor" as a restaurant location. In 1965, the property owner initiated construction of a retail lease building on the southwest corner of the theater site. This single detached noncontributing resource is identified as follows: [See sketch map]

- 1) **Building at 777-779 East Olive Avenue**, consisting of a 5,680-square-foot single-story commercial building (with a small 680-square-foot second-floor storage/office space) constructed in 1965, with an addition in 1967, that functioned as an apparel shop and a dry cleaning establishment. The apparel shop was converted into a restaurant during the early 1980s. It was remodelled again in 1989 to function as a micro-brewery, pub and restaurant. Exterior modifications made at that time, including the addition of a ceramic tile wainscot and awnings, were made by the owner and the tenant independent of rehabilitation efforts at the theater. [Photo 20]

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Also located on the theater site at the north central edge of the parcel is a 300-square-foot open-air trash enclosure constructed circa 1989. It is built of concrete block painted white. [Photo 21]

The pizza parlor, located on the contiguous parcel at 1247 North Wishon Avenue, is a 2,862-square-foot single-story commercial building constructed in 1975. It is a variation of a typical "Me 'n' Ed's" restaurant plan. It has a used-brick and stucco-faced exterior facade and a mock-mansard roof. [Photo 19]

Taken collectively, the single noncontributing building resource, trash enclosure and the pizza parlor located on the contiguous parcel occupy 12.2% of the original parking lot, 87.8% of which survives intact. Under present day parking lot formulas, including State of California handicapped access provisions (24 CCR, Building Code Section 7102) and local parking requirements enforced by the Fresno Municipal Code (Section 12-222.5-1 for properties zoned C-6, heavy commercial), the gross area of the block still accommodates 150 vehicles.

The detached trash enclosure, innocuous in scale and appearance, is a direct extension of the theater building and its mixed-use commercial wing function(s). Both the detached noncontributing building and the adjacent pizza parlor are located approximately 80' from the theater building, one each beyond the ends of the two commercial wings. Since these buildings are modest in scale, sufficiently removed from the theater physically, and have had ongoing functions (retail shop and food service-related uses) equivalent to the historical functions represented in the theater's commercial wings, they do not detract from the historic character of the property.

### Historic Physical Appearance

#### General Plan and Materials

The 20,000-square-foot theater auditorium was oriented on a 45-degree axis to the corner site. It was constructed with a composition-surfaced bowstring roof. Two composition-surfaced flat-roofed retail wings flanked the auditorium, one stretching 115' in length as an east elevation parallel to Wishon, the other 110' in length as a south elevation parallel to Olive. Building massing, therefore, was symmetrical, composed of three steel-reinforced concrete elements. The basic material finish of the Streamlined Moderne style theater building was board-formed poured-in-place concrete. Regularly spaced horizontal board form markings, 5" in width, created an overall striped effect on the building's exterior surfaces. These received what appears to have been a light texture coat, through which the board markings telegraphed softly. All concrete surfaces were painted light cream. [Photo 5]

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### Retail Wings

Architectural ornamentation of the retail wings was minimal, composed of painted wood casework, plate glass storefront windows, single-light French doors with overhead transom lights, a cobalt blue ceramic tile wainscot and retractable overhead blue & white striped canvas awnings. A 26" high wainscot ran the full length of the south elevation and almost the full length of the east elevation. The tile height on the end lease bay of the east elevation was designed 48" inches in height. The cobalt blue ceramic tiles measured 4¼" square. Every other tile through the four center courses of the wainscot was a decorative unit with an impressed, geometric design in the upper left-hand corner, staggered to create a diagonal pattern over the rectilinear tile grid. The grout was stark white. Overhead, a pair of half-round painted wood moldings extended the full length of the building wings just above the awnings. This running trim repeated linear "speedline" motifs used elsewhere on the building. Exterior wood trim on the building was painted cream, pink or seafoam green. Beginning with a one-foot setback above this horizontal molding, the upper wall was battered, stepping back in four one-half inch increments in proportionally varied heights to the top of the parapet. Along the parapet twenty-one vertically-fluted 8" x 18" shallow-relief molded ornaments repeated 5'- 5" on center. Lease bays in the retail wings were unembellished, unimproved shell spaces separated by lightweight, non-structural demising walls. There were five lease bays in each wing. Since 1939, these lease spaces have been rented primarily for retail, commercial office and food service-related functions. One medical tenant, a general surgeon, has practiced uninterrupted in the east wing's north lease bay since 1944. Prior to that the space was a chiropractic office. Over 50 different tenants have moved in and out of the ten lease spaces since 1939. The earliest retail businesses to function in the theater building's rental spaces were a music shop, beauty shop, linen shop, home appliance shop, dress shop and a delicatessen. [Photo 5]

### General Exterior Form

Including a mechanical room, the theater utilized almost 11,400 square feet of the mixed-use building. The dominant Streamlined Moderne style exterior characteristics were concentrated at the theater's entrance, over which towered an off-centered 80' fluted spire, capped by a starlike flashing multi-colored neon-pronged orb. The hollow tower was finished in lathe and plaster. The plaster was a 50-50 mixture of cement plaster and pulverized coral to keep the structure lightweight.<sup>86</sup> The tower was set back from the front facade, seemingly rising from the roof of the south lease wing at the front left corner of the exterior shell of the auditorium. The latter, except for horizontal board form markings and a shallow front mezzanine level faced with glass block, was an unadorned industrial concrete box enclosing a single-story space with 25' of interior height between its flat ceiling and the lowest level of its inclined concrete slab floor. To each side of the mezzanine-level exterior glass block wall were bulbous, half-round building projections, one enclosing the stair well,

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Tower Theatre, Fresno, California

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the other a small office/storage room, with pronounced half-round speedlines running horizontally just below the parapet line. Projecting over the glass block wall was a cantilevered, outwardly curved eave capped with a billet-like ornamental metal fascia. [Photos 3, 5, 11 and 12]

The theater was entered under a concave open-air covered vestibule. Around the front and above this vestibule canopy the corner marquee wrapped, seemingly perched atop a hexagonal ticket booth with wraparound glazed windows. Metallic speedlines below the ticket booth glazing, and stacked, flared light troughs above, repeated the horizontal motifs used throughout the building design. The vestibule was surfaced with multi-colored terrazzo paving in a design based on a radial pattern emanating from a series of concentric circles ringed by simple wave motifs, stylized leaves and an "embattled" border. The three-section corner marquee conformed to the curved street corner below, with each section framed by vertical standards trimmed in surface-mounted exposed neon. Sign panels were negative black ground with white letters. All galvanized metal marquee face surfaces were painted pale yellow ochre with accents in shades of pink, black and gold. The entire marquee and the tower were outlined in surface-mounted exposed multi-stripped neon in shades of white and cerise. The theater name "Tower" was repeated on each section of the marquee face in thick script mounted as reverse pan channel letterforms outlined with surface-mounted exposed neon illumination. The underside of the vestibule canopy was accented with burgundy stripes painted in a fan pattern traced with surface-mounted exposed neon illumination. Recessed can lights with cutout decorative metal bezels dotted the ceiling as well. The cutout leaf pattern of the bezels would have cast shadows on the terrazzo paving below. Flanking the 50' wide vestibule, ten staggered poster cases, trimmed in gold and silver leaf, framed three pairs of etched-glass entry doors and sidelights leading into the theater foyer. [Photo 7]

### Foyer and Lounge

In plan, the foyer was a longitudinally-bisected half ellipse. [Photo 9] Basic material finishes included exotic tropical wood veneers, richly patterned carpeting, gold and silver leaf, painted ceiling murals and indirect neon cove lighting. Zebra, Golden Nara, walnut and varieties of birch veneers covered walls and columns. Floors were carpeted in a stylized acanthus leaf motif on a diagonal grid in shades of taupe, deep cerulean blue and black on a burgundy field. A pale blue coved ceiling was illuminated by indirect pink and white neon. The neon was concealed in a light trough that rimmed the foyer above a rolled soffit, which was finished in gold and silver leaf. The murals were in shades of tan and burgundy trimmed in copper leaf in a stylized curvilinear vine motif. Doors leading into the theater auditorium at each end of the foyer had chrome-plated push plates with clear Lucite pulls attached to the semicircular plate units. Stylized gold-leafed curvilinear vine patterns also embellished each door in opposed views. A circular stairwell to the left side of the foyer curved up to a small mezzanine-level lounge, off of which were located men's and women's

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toilet rooms. Both natural daylight and nightlight (from the marquee and tower neon) illuminated the lounge through a full-length glass block wall installed above wainscot height. Painted murals of stylized vines decorated a rose-colored ceiling. Individually cut and hammered tin ceiling light fixtures in a palm frond motif illuminated the murals. Walls were painted a light tan. Toilet rooms had ceramic tile floors and wainscots. The women's toilet room was particularly unusual because of its outer circular powder room and Moderne style vanities and mirrors. The theater projection room, with a private toilet, was located off the lounge, as were a small office and a maintenance closet. Downstairs another small office and a maintenance room were located adjacent to foyer. On axis with the groundfloor front entry doors, a recessed passageway provided central access to the auditorium through opposed double side doors identically detailed to those in the foyer. The passageway also served as a niche for a carved-glass panel framed on both sides by polished aluminum fluted trim and illuminated from behind. The panel depicted three hunters on horseback pursuing deer. [Photo 8] Upon entering the auditorium lightweight glazed partitions created transitional spaces into the theater proper. There was no concession counter in the building.

### Auditorium

The nominally rectangular theater auditorium sat 900 patrons on a single groundfloor level, with both "opera" and "loge" type seating arranged between four aisles. [Photo 10] Ramped aisles were carpeted in the same millgoods as the foyer. Acoustically ("Acoustite") treated interior walls had a blue color scheme of five bold, horizontal stripes gradating from light to dark, bottom to top, above a base stripe of intermediate blue. Narrow horizontal white stripes separated the blue fields of color. Each side wall had three rectangular recessed niches, painted yellow, in which circular murals (tondos) were positioned above decorative sconces. Above each niche was a shallow dropped soffit (plenum) enclosing HVAC ducting (the entire theater was air conditioned, the refrigeration plant located in a mechanical room extending from the rear westerly corner of the auditorium). The six tondos and the corresponding dropped ceiling planes of the soffits were decorated with highly stylized "Leda and Swan" and "Vine" motifs, painted in fluorescent pigments. The murals and other overhead painted perimeter bands were illuminated by ultraviolet (black) light sources contained in the sconces below. The sconces were designed as box vases with individually cut and hammered tin palm fronds that gently bent out and upwards to direct "blacklight" onto the murals. The murals glowed in the dark. Overhead, house lighting illuminated both the auditorium and the pale yellow ceiling with rings of colored neon around six lunette fixtures. These had individually cut and hammered tin palm frond reflectors. The projection screen was set within a false proscenium stage opening, framed on each side by vertical light troughs. The outside surfaces of the light troughs, semicircular in section, were decorated in painted motifs of stylized climbing vines. A draped curtain cascaded above and down the sides of the screen. Behind the screen was a shallow backstage for soundspeakers. A storage room and an electrical room were

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located to each side of the backstage. Side auditorium walls curved into the stage, which was flanked by draped ramped passageways leading to rear emergency exits. Double doors at the end of each passageway opened onto an exterior ramp leading up to the rear parking lot.

### Alterations

Over 50 different tenants have occupied one or more of the ten lease bays in the commercial wings of the theater building since 1939. Originally designed as unfinished and unembellished shell spaces, all but one of the tenant bays have undergone numerous interior modifications to reflect changing functions. Tenant improvements made in east elevation lease spaces were generally accomplished without noticeably affecting the exterior integrity of the building. Tenant improvements made in south elevation lease spaces did result in major exterior alterations to the street level facade, where tile wainscoting was removed, aluminum storefront doors were installed, plate glass window sections were reconfigured and decayed canvas awnings were replaced by a cantilevered metal awning. Various generations of nonconforming painted and manufactured back-lighted signs were installed along the parapet to identify various tenants. Signs were also painted on or affixed to the rear and side walls of the building facing the parking lot. The bottom band of marquee neon was vandalized, then removed. The overhead vestibule neon, also vandalized, was removed. The most substantial alterations made inside the theater resulted when the decorative false proscenium stage opening, decorated indirect lighting troughs and curtain were removed. These alterations were made when the theater was converted for Cinemascope in 1954.<sup>87</sup> Minor interior repainting in the auditorium was generally limited to lower wall surfaces. Ceiling murals sustained some water damage from roof leaks. Blacklight fixtures were removed, disconnected or cannibalized. Three rows of front seats were cannibalized for parts or removed to install a makeshift plywood performance platform in circa 1978, reducing theater capacity from 900 to 868. All original carpeting, except for a small sample located on a closet floor, was removed from the building. In spite of these alterations, the theater interior was in remarkably good condition. In circa 1980, the foyer and upper lounge were totally repainted, masking over wood veneers, metal-leaved surfaces and ceiling murals. The damage was irreparable. A later-generation concession counter also altered the foyer space. All but one of the etched-glass entry doors were vandalized, leaving a single glazed element as a pattern for future restoration.

### Present Physical Appearance

In March 1990, a Historic Preservation Certification Application, Part 2, was submitted for review and approval to the National Park Service. That application, as approved, documented the first phases of an ongoing historic rehabilitation of the property, including the building facade, interior rehabilitation for adaptive reuse of the auditorium for the performing arts, restoration of the theater

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Tower Theatre, Fresno, California

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foyer and tenant improvements (restaurant expansion) for compatible functions in the commercial wings. A Certification Application Amendment, dated February 14, 1992, was submitted and approved for additional tenant improvements completed in November 1991 (coffeehouse). The rehabilitation and restoration of the theater interior is summarized as follows:

The primary goal was to restore where possible, or, where restoration was not possible, to replicate those elements that could be reproduced based on available documentary references. All decorative murals were either cleaned and restored, or recreated in their entirety. The larger, and more difficult task of adding a stage [open performance platform] and attendant technical requirements was accomplished by utilizing the area that was originally behind the projection screen as dressing rooms and removing the first six rows of seats to facilitate the stage. Fire exiting is provided by two ramps flanking the stage, thus necessitating no further openings in the exterior of the building. Sound and lighting are suspended from the ceiling on open web aluminum trusses to underscore the distinction between original fabric and later additions. The added weight of these elements is supported by a new steel bowstring truss that was designed to be erected within the attic piece by piece so as not to require any undue modifications to the appearance of the building. The need for box office space and handicapped restroom facilities was satisfied by appropriating a vacant tenant space abutting the theater, and providing an opening directly into this area. A sound and lighting control platform was inconspicuously added over the interior soffit area at the rear of the theater.<sup>88</sup>

The theater auditorium now seats 761 patrons. To maximize seating and make the auditorium completely handicapped-user accessible, the lightweight glazed rear partitions were removed. Interior walls were repainted with particular attention paid to preserving their textured acoustical surface, in order to maintain the excellent acoustical characteristics of the hall. New blacklight fixtures were installed to illuminate properly the restored murals and ceiling ornamentation. [Photo 18] Special care was taken to rehabilitate the foyer, the most heavily altered of the interior spaces. Its richly patterned carpet, etched-glass doors, gold- and silver-leafed casework (using aluminum leaf and Dutch metal), hardwood wall veneers and ceiling murals were replicated. [Photo 16] Given the prohibitive cost of replicating large expanses of metal leaf, soffit surfaces were refinished with highly reflective Imron coatings. Indirect neon cove lighting above the soffit was restored, and the bas-relief carved-glass panel was carefully removed, cleaned and reinstalled. The absence of a concession counter reflects the original plan. [Photo 17]

Great care was taken to rehabilitate exterior features of the building. Original roofs were preserved, reroofed with Mansville 4GNC 3-layer rolled roofing with asphalt saturated felt and a mineral cap

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sheet. Except for the bottom neon band, the entire marquee was restored. Likewise, the easily reached overhead neon illumination originally attached to the ceiling of the open-air vestibule was not reinstalled because of the continued threat of vandalism. Painted overhead vestibule striping, however, was restored. The building was completely repainted in historically accurate colors. Other major exterior features that were replicated included the tower neon, ticket booth and south facade, from which the nonconforming metal awning was removed. It was replaced by blue striped canvas awnings closely matching the original fabric. A close replica of the missing ceramic tile wainscot was reinstalled on the south elevation. All nonconforming signs on the building were removed, replaced by freestanding, base-mounted cut-out letters above the awning line as per the architect's original 1939 sign system. [Photos 3, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15]

Tenant improvements to date include the enlargement of a restaurant operation in the east commercial wing and the construction of a coffeehouse in the south commercial wing. The former expanded from two into four lease bays, and the latter converted two adjoining lease bays, previously utilized by retail shops, into one contiguous space. Both tenant improvements were completed with little or no loss to original exterior fabric. A new recessed entrance was constructed, however, for the restaurant tenant in the east retail wing to meet fire exiting requirements and accommodate a backflow prevention device. This modification was approved by the National Park Service.

**The Tower Theatre** exhibits a substantial degree of historical and architectural integrity because:

- 1) The property is structurally sound and maintained in an excellent state of repair.
- 2) Stylistic modifications to the architectural facade and loss of original fabric have been minor.
- 3) The primary functions of the building have remained appreciably similar for over five decades.
- 4) An exemplary Certified Historic Rehabilitation has been completed.

### Setting

The historic 1939 setting of the property was a one-block parcel bounded by residential stock (circa 1919-1939), commercial properties (circa 1923-1939) and undeveloped parcels. Residential property styles located immediately opposite the theater property to the rear included Craftsman and Spanish Revival styles typical of the general stylistic mix of the Tower District at that time.<sup>89</sup> Commercial properties immediately fronting the theater in 1939 included examples of Streamlined Moderne and Moderne styles. Also, a Revival style church (1924) faced the south retail elevation of the theater, and a Standard Oil service station (circa 1923) the east retail elevation. Other major commercial properties and parking lots now located beyond the first row of structures surrounding the theater block date from circa 1938 to 1976. A survey of all commercial buildings in the Tower

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District located within view of the theater produced the following profile of the district's principal construction periods: Pre-1942, 31%; 1946-1949, 34%; 1950-1959, 22%; 1960-1976; 13%.<sup>90</sup> Tower District commercial development has undergone a lively evolution since the first buildings appeared along Olive Avenue in 1923. But for World War II, the district's Streamlined Moderne style personality, which made its debut in the neighborhood in 1938, would have become more dominant. A few small shops were added in 1940 and 1941, before commercial construction was halted altogether because of the war. Not until 1946 did major construction of commercial buildings resume.<sup>91</sup> By then the International style had become the popular style of choice in the area.<sup>92 93</sup> Largely compatible with the theater and other core Moderne buildings, these post-war International style additions predominate today. The advent of the International style in the Tower District was an appropriate development. The style shares basic simplicities with the Streamlined Moderne and Moderne idioms that preceded it, and does not detract from the pre-war character of the neighborhood. Only 34% of the commercial properties within view of the theater have been remodelled. All show vestiges of their original trademark styles. As previously detailed, 12.2% of the original theater parking lot has been displaced by the construction of one (1) noncontributing building resource, a trash enclosure and a pizza parlor, the latter located on a contiguous parcel legally segregated in 1964 from the historical full-block boundaries. None of these three features fully disrupts views of the theater building.

Several prominent properties were located immediately across from the Tower Theatre in 1939, but are no longer standing. A small neighborhood Presbyterian church dating from 1924 was razed in 1957 to make way for a new International style bank building and a parking lot.<sup>94 95</sup> The circa 1923 Standard Oil station, later remodelled into a Streamlined Moderne style "Super Station," was located on the northeast corner of Wishon and Olive. It was razed in 1957 for a parking lot.<sup>96</sup> Traditional traffic patterns and street characteristics have also changed in the Tower District since 1939. On May 22, 1939, shortly after building permits were pulled to begin construction of the theater, trolley service ended in Fresno as the city inaugurated a municipal bus service.<sup>97</sup> In 1965, a row of shops built in 1940 was destroyed when the Wishon-Fulton Connector was cut through the deadend at Olive Avenue to align Wishon with North Fulton Avenue one block to the east. Vehicular traffic, which moved both ways along Wishon in 1939, now moves south one-way.<sup>98</sup> A recent streetscaping project completed by "Tree Fresno," a non-profit organization dedicated to planting trees in the public right of way, introduced deciduous columnar street trees along Wishon and Olive Avenues.

These evolutionary changes within the commercial core of the Tower District, and specific changes to what was the historic setting of the Tower Theatre in 1939, have been relatively minor. Consequently, the historical significance of the theater has not been diminished by any overwhelming loss of integrity to its traditional setting. The recent implementation of the "Tower

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District Specific Plan," approved by the Fresno City Council on March 26, 1991, virtually assures the long-term preservation of the Tower District. With architectural controls and an architectural review committee in place, modifications to existing residential and commercial building resources are being closely monitored, and new construction is being strongly regulated.

**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)

Architecture

Period of Significance

1939 and 1940

Significant Dates

1939

1940

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Lee, S. Charles (Architect)

Trewhitt, Shields & Fisher (Builders)

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

**The Tower Theatre (The Tower)**, located in the "Tower District" (a neighborhood suburban shopping area named after the theater), opened its doors to the film-viewing public on December 15, 1939. The double feature program included "Dancing Coed" and "Henry Goes Arizona." The Tower is significant to the architectural history of Fresno, California, under Criterion C of the National Register Criteria as follows: This distinctly-detailed, modestly-scaled Streamlined Moderne style mixed-use motion picture theater/retail shop facility is the most dramatic example of a Streamlined Moderne style building in Fresno. It is a representative example of late 1930s suburban theaters by Los Angeles architect S. Charles Lee (1899-1990), and is his only completed work in Fresno. Lee, the prolific designer of over 400 theaters, actively designed theaters between 1922-1950. He was an acknowledged master and early proponent of Art Deco and Moderne Idioms. A high-profile private sector venture during the late Depression, the Tower was reviewed in professional journals upon completion. Rushed into occupancy before Christmas of 1939, the building was not issued a final certificate of completion until January 29, 1940. No events of exceptional significance are known to have occurred on the property during the last 52+ years, thus the period of significance spans the construction years 1939 and 1940. Significant dates are 1939, the year the theater opened and 1940, the year construction was actually completed. The facility was built by Trewhitt, Shields & Fisher, major Central San Joaquin Valley general contractors. Developed by A. Emory Wishon (1882-1948), a prominent California hydroelectric executive, the building was constructed for Fox West Coast Theaters for \$100,000. Significance under Criterion B is not claimed. Any social significance attributable to Wishon or the Fox interests, respectively the absentee owner/developer at lease holder of the property, would not appear to be singularly associated with this property. In context, approximately a dozen other Streamlined Moderne style commercial buildings, none equal in size or ornamental sophistication to the Tower were built in Fresno from 1937 to 1942, Fresno's Streamlined Moderne style commercial building period. About half of those buildings were built in 1939 and 1940, the Tower's period of significance. Much of this meager resource has suffered physical alteration or demolition. The Tower survived virtually intact, enduring only minor alterations until 1987. That year the current owner embarked on plans for an ambitious Certified Historic Rehabilitation. While preserving the building's principal extant features (massing, materials, fenestration, exterior and interior ornamentation, neon marquee and illuminated spiked tower), these ongoing major tenant improvements and the adaptive reuse of the theater auditorium for performing arts use earned a 1991 California Preservation Foundation Restoration Award. Special care was taken to restore dazzling interior murals originally created by the renowned Dutch-born muralist Anthony Heinsbergen (1895-1981), and to repair a bas-relief glass panel carved after a 1927 design by acclaimed New York sculptor Gaetano Cecere (1894-1985). The Tower is also one of six surviving vintage theaters standing in Fresno. Others include the Liberty (1917), the Wilson (1926), the Pantages (1928), the Crest (1949), and the Azteca (1949). All except the Tower are located in the downtown core. The Tower was the city's first suburban theater, and the first Fresno theater designed with a parking lot on site. In the context of surviving Fresno film houses, only the Tower represents "true" Moderne period architecture. The Crest is a post-war modernist box embellished with heavy-handed ornamentation. The Azteca is vaguely "modernistic." The three older theaters reflect Beaux-Arts or Period Revival styles. **The Tower Theatre** is structurally sound, fully operational, exhibits a high degree of architectural and historical integrity, and has been in continuous use since 1939. It is listed on the Fresno Local Official Register of Historic Resources, Property No. 190.

See continuation sheet

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Tower Theatre, Fresno, California

### STATEMENT OF CONTEXT

#### Abstract

**The Tower Theatre**, located in Fresno, California, is historically significant within a three-part context: 1) Constructed in 1939-1940, at the close of a decade marked by the Great Depression and a consequent decline in local building activity, the Tower Theatre was developed during a period when the Streamlined Moderne style locally had reached its peak popularity. The theater was, and still is, the largest and most sophisticated privately-funded commercial building designed in that style at that time in Fresno. It is identified specifically with a suburban neighborhood and shopping area, the "Tower District," in which modest examples of Moderne styles are found in small concentration. 2) The Tower Theatre is the only completed work in Fresno designed by "master architect" S. Charles Lee (1899-1990) of Los Angeles, and is a representative example of suburban motion picture theaters conceived by Lee during the late 1930s to meet the increasing needs of an automobile-oriented culture. 3) The Tower Theatre is one of six surviving vintage theaters in Fresno. It is the only suburban theater of the group, and the only facility designed with a parking lot on site. The other five are all located in the downtown core and include the Liberty (1917), designed by Coates & Traver of Fresno;<sup>1</sup> the Wilson (1925-1926), designed by Fisher, Lake & Traver of Fresno;<sup>2</sup> the Pantages (1928), designed by B. Marcus Priteca of Seattle;<sup>3</sup> the Crest (1949), designed by Carl Moeller of Los Angeles;<sup>4 5</sup> and the Azteca (1949), designed for Fresno's Chinatown by John D. Johnson of Fresno. The Crest is a post-war modernist box embellished with heavy-handed ornamentation derived from Art Deco forms, but is more reminiscent of idiomatic expressions associated with Las Vegas architecture. The Azteca is vaguely "modernistic." The other three theaters are solid expressions of Beaux-Arts or Period Revival styles. Therefore, within the local context of the late Depression, the Tower Theatre is the prime example of a Streamlined Moderne style building developed by private-sector business interests. It is the only representative example of the work of S. Charles Lee in Fresno. The theater is also the city's only Streamlined Moderne style suburban motion picture theater, notable in part because it has a parking lot on site, a "design first" in Fresno. The Tower Theatre qualifies for listing on the National Register of Historic Places with local significance under Criterion C of the National Register Criteria.

#### Period, Locale and Stylistic Context

The period of significance for the Tower Theatre is defined as 1939 and 1940, the two-year period during which the building was started and completed. The advent of the Moderne and Streamlined Moderne styles in the designs of other local commercial buildings, however, pre-dates the theater by several years. Even after the theater opened in 1939, a small number of new properties were designed in modest interpretations of Moderne styles, one built as late as 1947. Buildings designed

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in the International style and transitional versions of that style became increasingly popular during the post-war commercial building boom. Examples of the latter, built during the late 1940s and early 1950s, are also found in the Tower District.

A survey of over 375 articles printed in *The Fresno Bee* between 1937-1942, and a review of related Fresno building news published during the same period in the journal *Architect and Engineer*, matches what one sees while making a visual reconnaissance of the community: a small resource of Moderne and Streamlined Moderne properties.<sup>6</sup> Locally, virtually all Streamlined Moderne style commercial buildings were built within the 1937-1942 time frame. Besides the theater, fewer than a dozen other commercial buildings, none equal in size or ornamental sophistication to the theater, were built locally in those styles between 1937-1942. Six were built in 1939 and 1940, the theater's period of significance. Much of this meager resource has suffered physical alteration or demolition. The local press gave good coverage to Moderne-era buildings, examples of which are as follows: An advanced little administration, terminal and control tower building, dedicated at Fresno's Chandler Field in 1937, became a streamlined symbol for eight years of progress improving commercial airline service to this area.<sup>7</sup> It now serves only private pilots. Huebner Sports (1938), a small sporting goods shop on the corner of Yosemite and Olive, pre-dates the theater by exactly one year. Designed by Allen C. Collins, this building has a curved corner entrance, and was a rare commercial project by a local residential architect.<sup>8 9 10</sup> In later years it functioned as a flower shop, and is in good repair today. A similarly small Streamlined Moderne style medical office was designed by the local architectural firm of Franklin & Kump in 1938.<sup>11</sup> Located on Van Ness Avenue within the Freeway 180 alignment, it was razed during land clearance for the freeway. Harris Construction Company built a small office building on an industrial edge of downtown for its own use in 1938.<sup>12</sup> It was later destroyed to make way for new commercial development. One public sector project, Fire Station No. 3, located in Fresno's Chinatown, was the largest Moderne building begun in 1938. Still in use, it was designed by local architect Edward Peterson.<sup>13</sup> During the early autumn of 1939, Lauck's Bakery and Hurt Chemical Company completed simple Moderne style buildings. The bakery, since remodelled, is located one block east of the theater property. The small chemical plant, slightly modified, is still in use at Blackstone and Olive Avenues.<sup>14 15 16</sup> Though not a building, a new residential neighborhood bridge, built over Dry Creek at Thomas Avenue in 1939, demonstrated how up-to-date a small public works project could be.<sup>17</sup> Its streamlined pipe railing remains both decorative and functional today. Yturri's, a downtown Basque hotel built in 1939, will soon fall to expansion of the Civic Center Square Redevelopment Project. The two-story hotel's curved corners are still evident in spite of several remodellings of the building. It was issued a "Notice of Negative Declaration" on March 18, 1992.<sup>18 19 20</sup>

When the theater opened its doors to the film-viewing public on December 15, 1939, a small concentration of nearby Moderne shops and markets already functioned as a neighborhood

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shopping district. Most of these properties were built between 1938-1939.<sup>21 22</sup> One property in the neighborhood, the Cobb Building, was remodelled in 1939 to update its 1923 storefront to reflect the growing architectural character of its newer neighbors. A number of small commercial infill projects, designed to perpetuate the Moderne personality of the district, were built between 1940-1941. A sizeable section of one shop group was destroyed by the realignment of Wishon Avenue during construction of the Wishon-Fulton Connector in 1965. That roadwork project extended Wishon Avenue, which had historically come to a dead end at Olive, by blasting through this group of shops to complete an "S" curve connection with North Fulton Avenue one block to the east.<sup>23</sup> Dodge Laundry Building, now just a shell of a Streamlined Moderne property, is located on Broadway south of the Tower District. Reconstructed during an expansion of a building dating from 1919, the Dodge plant remodel was designed by structural engineer A. Segal in 1940-1941. It has been badly neglected by its present owners. None of the 700 feet of neon tube lighting installed in the 1940s expansion survives.<sup>24</sup> A significant effort to encourage the preservation of this once-striking façade appears to have failed. One of the district's last large commercial projects, built in the Moderne tradition in 1941, was Turpin's Furniture Store. The building was altered with an addition in 1954, and has been somewhat gaudily repainted. It now functions as an antique store and a community center.<sup>25 26</sup> The summary above places the theater within the context of a small and dwindling architectural resource, of which it is the most symbolic surviving representative.

As Fresno's first suburban cinema, the Tower Theatre became the dominant vertical landmark anchoring a loosely-knit collection of shops that had been developing into a lively little corner shopping area since 1923.<sup>27</sup> As early as 1927, there was talk of building a theater in the neighborhood, but nothing came of those plans for another eleven years.<sup>28</sup> On December 3, 1938, the first of three different motion picture theater proposals for the neighborhood was announced. Fox West Coast Theater Corporation, negotiating with prominent hydroelectric executive A. Emory Wishon, published a rendering [Photo 1] of the Ritz Theatre in West Los Angeles (Westwood). The caption read "Proposed \$200,000 Fresno Theater." The accompanying article stated that Fresno's new theater would closely duplicate the Westwood Ritz, designed by Los Angeles architect S. Charles Lee.<sup>29</sup> The proposed site was the one-block parcel on the northwest corner of Olive and Wishon, owned by the Wishon Estate. At that time the land was being used rent-free as a city playground, pending lease, sale or development by the Wishon family for other purposes. From the beginning, the Fox proposal targeted the entire one-block playground for a theater and parking lot.

A second and even larger theater proposal, dubbed the "The Tower," was designed by San Francisco structural engineer Thomas F. Chase in early 1939. Building records indicate that this proposal was also targeted for the Wishon parcel. Little is known about this enormous design [Photo 2], plans for which are dated March 29, 1939, but it was eventually abandoned.<sup>30</sup> A third

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proposal for a smaller theater, estimated to cost \$65,000, was announced during the week of April 16, 1939. Designed for the southwest corner of North Van Ness and Olive for Redwood Theatres, Inc., it never materialized. William David of San Francisco was identified as architect for the project.<sup>31</sup> On May 11, 1939, the City of Fresno issued a building permit for a \$100,000 theater, code-named "The Ritz" on plans and renderings [Photo 3] prepared by S. Charles Lee.<sup>32</sup> This was a much smaller facility than originally planned for the Wishon/Fox interests, but it went into construction immediately.<sup>33 34 35</sup> In August of 1939, Lee issued a revised set of plans for the theater, modifying the building's low-profile finned tower into a slender 80' spire [Photo 4].<sup>36</sup> The new tower scheme appears to have been modelled after the 130' "Star Pylon," designed by Francis Kelly and Leonard Dean for the New York World's Fair. The Star Pylon symbolized the "force of electricity" at the The Fair, which opened on April 30, 1939, three months before Lee's revised plans were signed.<sup>37</sup> Just who conceived the change of plans is not known, but the new design must have appealed to Wishon because of his position in the electrical power industry. Lee also prepared a similar design for a 100' spire in his remodelling of Glendale's Alex Theatre in 1940.<sup>38 39</sup>

Formally dedicated as the "Tower Theatre," the new Fresno cinema opened with a premier showing of the film "Balalaika" for a private party of local dignitaries, Fox Theater executives and guests on December 14, 1939.<sup>40</sup> Co-hosts for the event were A. Emory Wishon of San Francisco, developer and owner of the building, and Charles P. Skouras of Los Angeles, president of Fox West Coast Theaters. Forty-five Fresno hotel rooms were reserved for party guests. The following day the general public's long-standing love affair with the theater began with an opening day showing of the double feature "Dancing Coed" and "Henry Goes Arizona." At night the soft cream-colored building was a blaze of neon. Its fluted concrete tower was fitted with linear ribbons of colored light and was capped by a flashing starlike neon-pronged orb. The tower instantly became a neighborhood beacon that could be seen for miles in all directions.<sup>41</sup> Although not the larger and more imposing design originally planned for the property, the smaller theater, as built, ultimately related better to the residential scale of its immediate surroundings. It stands as testimony to the talents of the architect, artists, builders and developer who were responsible for its ultimate streamlined form and architectural ornamentation.

### Architectural Context

#### S. Charles Lee

The Tower Theatre is a modestly-scaled suburban film house designed by architect S. Charles Lee (1899-1990), recognized during his career as one of the most prolific and distinguished motion picture theater designers on the West Coast. Born September 5, 1899, Lee was trained and

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educated in Chicago. He studied at Chicago Technical College and the Armour Institute of Technology. While a young man working for Rapp & Rapp, a highly regarded Chicago architectural firm, Lee became interested in theater design. In 1922, he settled in Los Angeles. His first major cinema building was the Tower Theatre in Los Angeles, a Spanish-Romanesque-Moorish design that launched a career that would make Lee "L.A.'s principal designer of motion picture theaters" during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>42 43 44</sup> His work quickly caught the attention of regional architectural journals. *Architect & Engineer*, for example, published a handsome presentation of his Tower Theatre, located in Los Angeles, in 1928.<sup>45</sup> In 1934, Lee was honored for architectural excellence by the Royal Institute of British Architects at the International Exhibition of Contemporary Architecture in London, for his 1931 "Spanish American Mission style" design for the Fox Florence Theatre in Los Angeles.<sup>46 47 48 49</sup> Lee is credited with designing over 400 theaters throughout California and Mexico. His palatial and Baroque Los Angeles Theatre (1931) is regarded by many architectural historians as the finest theater building in Los Angeles.<sup>50</sup> Lee's ultimate legacy, however, is as an early proponent of Art Deco and Moderne style theaters. The Bruin Theatre (1937) and Academy Theatre (1939) are among his most characteristic. The latter, located in Inglewood, is a prime example of Lee's successful response to the automobile. Lee is widely credited as one of the first architects to respond "to the impact of the automobile" in theater design.<sup>51</sup> Lee's design for the Fresno Tower Theatre became the community's first suburban theater, notable for having the town's first on-site theater parking lot as well. [Photos 5, 6 and 15] The Fresno building is also noted for being one of several suburban theater designs that Lee devised "to show film industry executives a new look in commercial movie theaters."<sup>52</sup> It was profiled shortly after its completion in a lavishly illustrated article in *Motion Picture Herald*.<sup>53</sup> Between 1939 and 1940, the theater's period of significance, S. Charles Lee designed no less than 22 other cinemas, two-thirds of which were located in the greater Los Angeles area.<sup>54</sup> Lee's Fresno Tower Theatre is the most dramatic example of a Streamlined Moderne style building in this city, and is his only completed work here. It should be noted that a 1928 proposal for a Fresno apartment building for Lee client Carl H. Peterson was never built.<sup>55</sup>

After World War II, one of Lee's non-theater projects, a Jewish synagogue designed in the California Mission tradition, was featured in *Architectural Record* in 1946.<sup>56</sup> Recognizing that the grand theater building had become a thing of the past, Lee redirected his energies toward new technologies in industrial architecture. His work in the field of tilt-up building systems was published in *Architectural Record* in 1952.<sup>57</sup> Highly regarded for his "remarkable business acumen" and "his artistic ability," Lee served as "an officer in some 12 corporations" and had significant business management interests in a broad range of activities, including hotels, theaters and real estate.<sup>58</sup> S. Charles Lee died January 27, 1990, hailed as a "prominent architect of movie theaters of the Art Deco period." His list of honors included receiving the highest recognition of the Society of Registered Architects, the "Synergy Award," in 1975. An endowed chair honoring S. Charles Lee

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was established at the UCLA Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning in 1986, ranking Lee among California's acknowledged master architects.<sup>59 63</sup>

### Anthony Heinsbergen

Anthony Heinsbergen (1895-1981), nationally acclaimed Dutch-born muralist, created the highly stylized "Leda and Swan" and "Vine" motifs for the ceiling and wall murals in the building's dazzling yet simple interiors. [Photos 9, 10, 16 and 18] Heinsbergen, who emigrated to Los Angeles in 1906, began his craft as an apprentice in Holland. He continued his art studies as an apprentice in Los Angeles, and received his first major theater commission from Alexander Pantages in 1924. During his career, he decorated over 750 theaters nationwide. Heinsbergen was most proud of his classically inspired murals for the Orpheum Theater in Vancouver, B.C., but he is largely remembered for his "delightful mish-mash of byzantine sumptuousness, Art Deco cubism and pure kitsch, perfect for the timeless and vulgar opulence of movie-going." Major commissions in Los Angeles included murals for the Los Angeles City Hall and the Wiltern Theatre. Heinsbergen completed a number of commissions in Fresno, including murals or architectural ornamentation for Fresno Memorial Auditorium (mural since destroyed), Security Bank Building (coffered panels badly damaged and obscured from view by a false ceiling) and the 1933 Fresno State College Library, now Fresno City College Library. The library's ceiling panels are in superb condition, and better represent Heinsbergen's personal painting style than do the Tower Theatre murals, the general stylized characteristics of which Heinsbergen did not favor, according to his son. The theater murals do, however, represent a very early use of ultraviolet (black) light and fluorescent paints. S. Charles Lee had first experimented with this novel lighting device in his Academy Theatre in Ingiewood. The Tower Theatre was the second theater in the nation to use such illuminated decoration. The blacklight was designed and engineered for the project by R.H. McCullough and Walter Bantau. Heinsbergen assistants, brothers Tom and Frank Bouman, were largely responsible for the final installation of the Tower Theatre murals, and completed painting them at night by blacklight to assure that they would achieve the proper fluorescent effects. Reflecting on his career and commenting on the demise of grand movie theater design, Heinsbergen commented as follows, "They stopped building them in the 1940s, when there was a depression in the movie business. There were no good pictures coming out and television was just coming in. But you know what really killed them? No parking. People started going to the suburban theaters so they could park their cars. It's as simple as that." During the latter years of his career, Heinsbergen participated in the restoration of a number of fine theaters, including the Oakland Paramount in the early 1970s. Anthony Heinsbergen died on June 14, 1981, at age 86. His son still runs the firm, A. T. Heinsbergen & Company. The junior Heinsbergen coordinated the restoration of his father's Fresno Tower Theatre murals in 1989-1990.<sup>61 62 63</sup> The firm also completed restoration of the Orinda Theater in 1989.<sup>64</sup>

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### Gaetano Cecere

The central feature of the Tower Theatre foyer is a bas-relief etched-glass panel executed by Carvarts of Los Angeles. It is a handsome near-replica of "The Huntsman," a 1927 design by sculptor Gaetano Cecere (1894-1985). Although it is not known if Cecere actually authorized the use of his design for the theater (the original bas-relief was apparently carved by Cecere in marble as a plaque for a clubhouse mantel), the etched-glass panel is clearly a close copy of Cecere's work. Attempts to authenticate the actual authorship of the glass panel's design, through archival records at the National Academy of Design and the Architectural League of New York, were inconclusive. Nonetheless, the image cleverly copies in slightly shifted vertical proportions a design by an artist who, during his career, won the coveted Prix de Rome from the Beaux Arts Institute and a Rinehart Fellowship to study at the American Academy at Rome.<sup>65 66 67 68</sup>

### Trewhitt, Shields & Fisher

The Tower Theatre was constructed by the prominent Central San Joaquin Valley general contracting firm, Trewhitt, Shields and Fisher. Founded in 1910 in San Francisco, by W.D. Trewhitt (1863-1945) and H.W. Shields (1881-1957), the firm operated for many years as Trewhitt & Shields. Its first San Joaquin Valley office was in Hanford. In 1912, the partners moved their headquarters to Fresno. They incorporated as Trewhitt, Shields & Fisher in 1925. R.R. Fisher served as chief engineer of the company. The firm contracted throughout California and Nevada. Between 1910-1953, Trewhitt, Shields & Fisher built over 267 commercial, industrial, municipal, military and school projects. The theater was one of fifteen major projects constructed between Bakersfield and Santa Rosa by the firm between 1939-1941, including two other projects in Fresno: Hamilton Junior High School and the Roosevelt High School Gymnasium.<sup>69 70 71 72 73</sup>

### A. Emory Wishon

The Tower Theatre was developed by A. Emory Wishon (1882-1948). At the time of the theater's construction, he resided in Piedmont, California, and was vice president and general manager of Pacific Gas & Electric Company and president of Yosemite Portland Cement. Son of A. G. Wishon, a pioneer in the development of hydroelectric power in California, A. Emory Wishon was affiliated with his father at San Joaquin Light & Power Company. He joined the utility in 1910, as assistant general manager of the south division in Bakersfield. He moved to Fresno in 1913 as assistant general manager of the corporation, then succeeded his father as president in 1930. The senior Wishon died in 1936, the same year San Joaquin Light & Power merged with Pacific Gas & Electric. A. Emory Wishon then assumed the position of director and assistant general manager of PG&E. Wishon was a trained engineer, having studied at the California School of Mechanical Arts in San

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Francisco, Mt. Tamalpais Military Academy, and the University of Missouri, where he received his degree in the School of Mines and Metallurgy in 1908. He was actively involved in a number of construction related business, including Valley Electrical Supply Company. He also served as board director and chairman of the exhibit committee for the 1939 San Francisco Golden Gate International Exposition.

His theater site, bounded by Fern and Olive Avenues to the north and south, and Wishon and Linden Avenues to the east and west, was used for twelve years as the Wishon Playground. The property was made available for public use "with the understanding that it would be reclaimed by the Wishon interests when arrangements were made for construction of a suitable building." Wishon's nine-year interest in the theater as a private investment appears unrelated to his principal social significance as a leader in the hydroelectric industry. Likewise, the theater was only one among many cinemas operated by Fox West Coast, and was a relatively minor venue in the company's system. Shortly after Wishon's death in 1948, his estate sold the one-block property to a subsidiary of Fox West Coast Theaters for \$200,000. Fox had rented the theater from Wishon for ten years under the terms of a 25-year lease. Significance under Criterion B of the National Register Criteria is not claimed. Any social significance attributable to either A. Emory Wishon or Fox Theater interests, respectively the absentee owner/developer and lease holder during the period of significance, is not singularly associated with this property.<sup>74 75</sup>

### Local Theater Context

When the Tower Theatre opened in 1939, it provided one distinct advantage to movie patrons over competing theaters located in downtown Fresno: an on-site parking lot. Similarly, the little five-block neighborhood shopping area that would soon bear the name of the theater, became a popular destination for all manner of domestic needs and entertainment. The "Tower District," as the area became known, provided two markets, two bakeries, a liquor store, delicatessen, butcher shop, music store, sporting goods shop, pharmacy, Chinese restaurant, hardware store, appliance shop, barber shop, four apparel shops, three dry cleaning shops, two service stations, the new Tower Theatre and acres of free parking. Two miles north of downtown Fresno, the Tower District was located just a few short blocks from Fresno High School and Fresno State College, at the center of a growing residential section of town. With so many basic services nearby, area residents and students no longer needed to rely on shops and attractions downtown, where parking was difficult. On January 21, 1940, fearing the loss of revenue to Tower District businesses, downtown merchants and civic leaders responded by announcing a study of the downtown parking problem.<sup>76</sup> What Fresno was experiencing in 1940, however, was a trend that began ten years earlier elsewhere in the country, as Richard Longstreth's recent study of neighborhood shopping centers discusses: suburban shopping areas, conveniently designed to accommodate

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the automobile, were drawing business away from traditional urban business districts.<sup>77</sup> Fifty-two years after that first study was announced, Fresno is still expanding northward, and each of the city's six older theaters has experienced either a change of function or film patronage because of the radically changing demographics of the city.

In 1980, the Tower Theatre ceased showing first-run feature films and inaugurated a repertory film program.<sup>78</sup> The repertory format was followed by a foreign film series for several years before the theater operation finally shut its doors in 1989. Bady in debt, the building's owners determined that showing motion pictures was no longer economically feasible. A comprehensive strategy to transform the building for compatible new uses was developed, and plans were prepared for a Certified Historic Rehabilitation of the entire premises. A complete restoration of the exterior facade, ongoing tenant improvements in the retail wings and modifications to allow the adaptive reuse of the theater auditorium for the performing arts have brought new life to the theater and to the Tower District, now hailed as the "Soho of the San Joaquin." The Tower District has become a lively collection of restaurants, pubs, jazz clubs and antique shops with the highly successful "Tower Theatre for the Performing Arts" at its center.<sup>79</sup> In 1991, the dramatic theater rehabilitation was honored with a California Preservation Foundation Award for Outstanding Achievement in Restoration, and an Award of Honor from the San Joaquin Chapter, American Institute of Architects.<sup>80 81</sup>

Like the early suburban Tower Theatre, downtown cinemas have succumbed to four post-war decades of automobile-oriented cinemas, all built adjacent to regional shopping centers located 6-10 miles beyond the downtown core.<sup>82</sup> That fact, coupled with the construction of Fresno's first multi-plex facility in 1971, has forced closure or major changes in the use and patronage of the entire resource.<sup>83</sup> The Liberty (1917) underwent a major remodelling of its marquee, was renamed "The Mexico" and now shows Spanish-speaking films. The Wilson (1925-1926), extensively remodelled, is used for rock concerts and boxing events. It has been denied listing on the National Register because of the severity of its alterations. The Warnors-Pantages (1928) is listed on the National Register. It is the largest and most ornamental of all Fresno theaters and is maintained in excellent repair, but struggles as a center for the performing arts on a shoestring budget because of its location downtown, all-but-deserted at night. The Crest (1949), insensitively repainted, shows Spanish-speaking films. The Azteca, Fresno's first and only Spanish-speaking theater when it opened in 1949, is boarded up and abandoned.<sup>84</sup>

### Conclusion

**The Tower Theatre** is structurally sound, fully operational and exhibits a high degree of architectural and historical integrity. In its mixed-use status it has been in continuous use since

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Tower Theatre, Fresno, California

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1939. The significant dates for the theater building are 1939, the year cinema and retail shop operations began, and 1940, the year construction of the building was actually completed. The period of significance is 1939 and 1940, the two-year time frame within which construction of the building was started and completed. The final certificate of completion was issued by the City of Fresno on January 29, 1940. No other events of significance are known to have occurred on the property since that date. The theater is listed on the Fresno Local Official Register of Historic Resources, Property No. 190. Since it reopened in March of 1990, after completion of the initial phases of an ongoing Certified Historic Rehabilitation of the entire facility, the Tower Theatre has been regarded locally as a very successful example of a privately-funded historic preservation effort.<sup>85</sup> **The Tower Theatre** appears eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C of the National Register Criteria.

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

See Continuation Sheets 9-1 through 9-9

**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:**

UCLA Department of Special Collections

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreege of property 1.83 Acres

**UTM References**

A 

1	1	2	5	0	0	2	0	4	0	7	1	4	8	0
Zone			Easting					Northing						

C 

Zone			Easting					Northing						

B 

Zone			Easting					Northing						

D 

Zone			Easting					Northing						

See continuation sheet

**Verbal Boundary Description**

See Continuation Sheet 10-1

See continuation sheet

**Boundary Justification**

The boundary includes the property historically associated with the theater, minus the parcel that was split off in 1964.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title John Edward Powell date June 4, 1992  
organization \_\_\_\_\_ telephone (unlisted)  
street & number 224 East Cambridge Avenue state California zip code 93704  
city or town Fresno

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The nominator wishes to acknowledge Ronald J. Mahoney and Jean Coffey, Department of Special Collections, Henry Madden Library, California State University, Fresno and Terry L. Jones AIA for their comments and suggestions during the preparation of this nomination.

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Tower Theatre, Fresno, California

### Geographical Data

### Verbal Boundary Description

Legally recorded boundary lines for portion of one (1) city block (APN 451-265-03), of approximately 1.83 acres, Grant Deed to Tower Theatre Productions, Aileen C. Abbate, Partner, 6760 North West Avenue, Suite 103, Fresno, California, 93711:

#### **Grant Deed, Book 4349, Page 174, and Document No. 90017183, February 13, 1990**

LOTS 1 to 10, inclusive, in Block 5 of Wilson's North Fresno [Tract, in the City and County of Fresno, State of California, according to the] map thereof recorded November 16, 1908, in Book 4, Page 44 of Record of Surveys [in the office of the County Recorder of said County], records of said County; EXCEPT the South 22 feet of Lots 5 and 6, conveyed to the City of Fresno for street purposes.

#### **Deed of Easement, Book 6514, Page 336, Drawing 15-A-3725**

GRANTOR, hereby GRANTS to the City of Fresno, GRANTEE, an easement and right of way for public street purposes over, through and across that certain parcel of land situated in the County of Fresno, State of California, and bounded and described as follows, to-wit:

A portion of Lot 1 in Block 5 of Wilson's North Fresno Tract, as said lot is shown on the Map of Wilson's North Fresno Tract, filed in the Office of the County Recorder November 16, 1908 and recorded in Volume 4 of Record of Surveys, at Page 44, Fresno County Records, and more particularly described as follows:

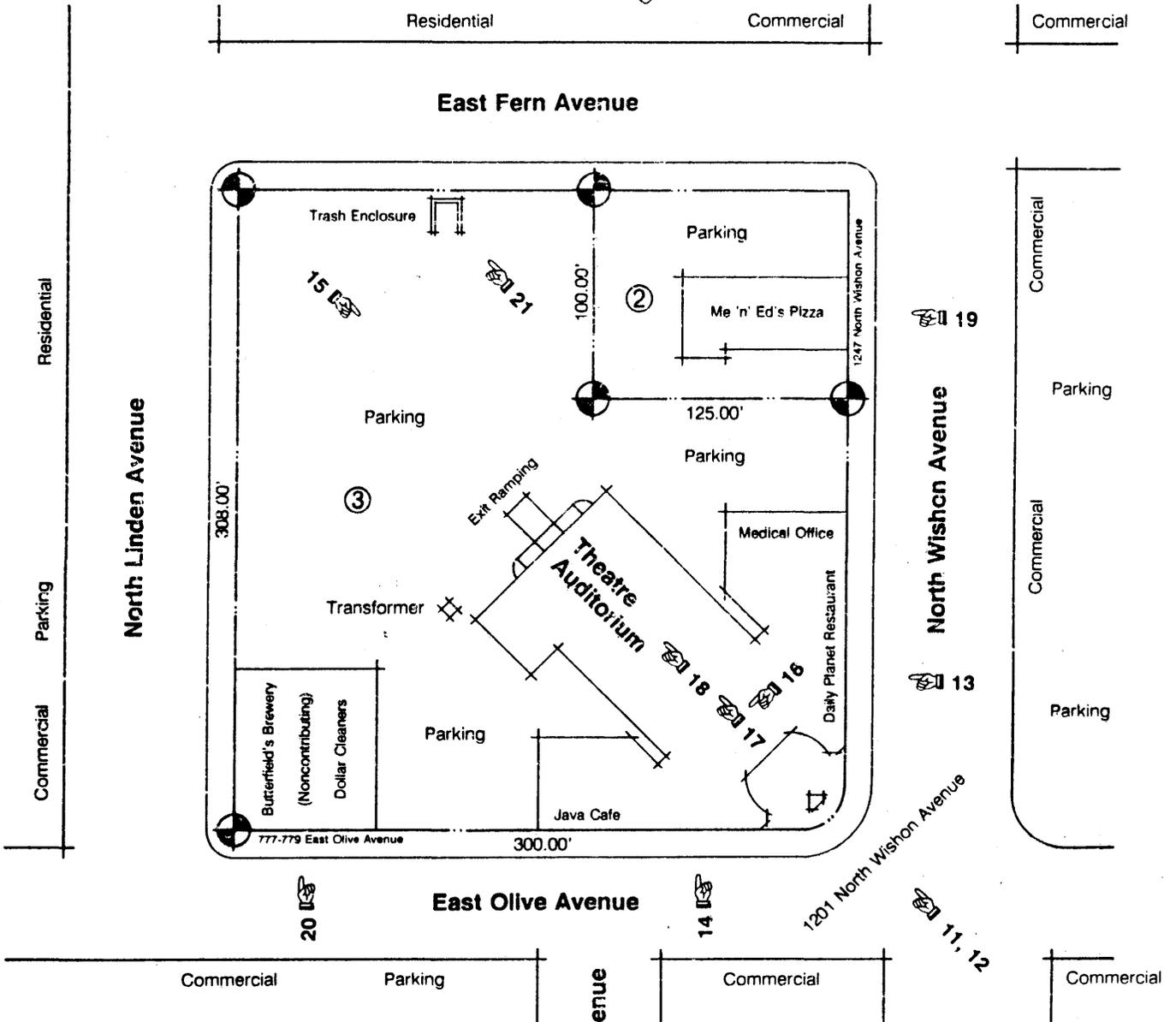
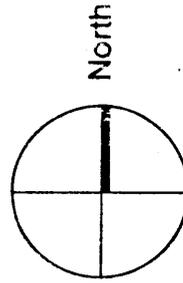
Beginning at the Northeast corner of said lot 1; thence Southerly, along the East line of said Lot 1, a distance of 5.00 feet; thence Northwesterly to the intersection with the North line of said Lot 1, at a point which is 5.00 feet West of the Northeast corner of said Lot 1; thence Easterly, along the North line of said Lot 1, a distance of 5.00 feet, to the point of the beginning.

#### **Lease, Book 3809, Page 417, Document No. 57980, recorded August 16, 1956**

Note: Parcel No. 2 (APN 451-265-02) segregated March 2, 1964 as per "Request for Parcel Change" No. 64-041 by Office of the Assessor, Fresno County, California (document not recorded)

The east 125 feet of Lot 1 and the east 125 feet of the north 25 feet of Lot 2 in Block 5 of WILSON'S NORTH FRESNO TRACT, in the City of and County of Fresno, State of California, according to the map thereof recorded November 16, 1908, in Book 4, Page 44 of Record of Surveys, in the office of the County Recorder of said County.

**THE TOWER THEATRE**  
 1201 North Wishon Avenue  
 Fresno, California 93728  
 UTM, Zone 11, 250010mE/4071480mN  
*Fresno County*



**SYMBOLS**

- Photograph number and direction of view
- ② APN 451-265-02 (excluded)  
Parcel segregated from Block 5 on March 2, 1964
- ③ APN 451-265-03 (included)  
Parcel encompassed within Boundary Justification
- Boundary (property line) intersections



North Yosemite Avenue