

FILE NO. 90-76-2

ORDINANCE NO. 175-76

DESIGNATING THE GEARY THEATRE AT 415 GEARY STREET AS A LANDMARK PURSUANT TO  
ARTICLE 10 OF THE CITY PLANNING CODE,

Be it Ordained by the People of the City and County of San Francisco:

Section 1. The Board of Supervisors hereby finds that the Geary Theater  
located at 415 Geary Street, being Lot 1A in Assessor's Block 316, has a special  
character and special historical, architectural and aesthetic interest and value,  
and that its designation as a Landmark will be in furtherance of and in conformance  
with the purposes of Article 10 of the City Planning Code and the standards set  
forth therein.

(a) Designation. Pursuant to Section 1004 of the City Planning Code,  
Chapter II, Part II of the San Francisco Municipal Code, the Geary Theater is  
hereby designated as a Landmark, this designation having been duly approved by  
Resolution No. 7441 of the City Planning Commission, which Resolution is on file  
with the Clerk of the Board of Supervisors under File No. 90-76-2.

(b) Required Data. The descriptions of the location and boundaries of the  
Landmark site; of the characteristics of the Landmark which justify its designation;  
and of the particular features that should be preserved; as included in the said  
Resolution, are hereby incorporated herein and made a part hereof as though fully  
set forth.

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

RECOMMENDED:

THOMAS M. O'CONNOR  
CITY ATTORNEY

CITY PLANNING COMMISSION

By James L. Deane  
Deputy City Attorney

By Edward I. Murphy  
Edward I. Murphy  
Acting Director of Planning

Passed for Second Reading  
Board of Supervisors, San Francisco

MAY 24 1976

Ayes: Supervisors Barbagelata, Feinstein, Francois, Gonzales, Kopp, Mendelsohn, ~~Mohrari~~, Nelder, Pelosi, Tamaras, von Beroldingen.

~~Noes: Supervisors~~

Absent: Supervisors **MOLINARI**

*Margaret P. Maguire* ACTING  
Clerk

90-76-2  
File No.

Approved

Read Second Time and Finally Passed  
Board of Supervisors, San Francisco

JUN 1 1976

Ayes: Supervisors Barbagelata, Feinstein, Francois, Gonzales, Kopp, Mendelsohn, Molinari, Nelder, Pelosi, Tamaras, von Beroldingen.

~~Noes: Supervisors~~

~~Absent: Supervisors~~

I hereby certify that the foregoing ordinance was finally passed by the Board of Supervisors of the City and County of San Francisco.

*John Berman* ..... Clerk

*George L. Moscone*  
Mayor

SAN FRANCISCO

CITY PLANNING COMMISSION

RESOLUTION NO. 7441

WHEREAS, A proposal to designate the Geary Theater at 415 Geary Street as a Landmark pursuant to the provisions of Article 10 of the City Planning Code was initiated by the Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board on May 7, 1975, and said Advisory Board, after due consideration, has recommended approval of this proposal; and

WHEREAS, The City Planning Commission, after due notice given, held a public hearing on February 5, 1976, to consider the proposed designation and the report of said Advisory Board; and

WHEREAS, The Commission believes that the proposed Landmark has a special character and special historical, architectural and aesthetic interest and value; and that the proposed designation would be in furtherance of and in conformance with the purposes and standards of the said Article 10;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, First, that the proposal to designate the Geary Theater at 415 Geary Street as a Landmark pursuant to Article 10 of the City Planning Code is hereby APPROVED, the location and boundaries of the landmark site being as follows:

Beginning at a point on the southerly line of Geary Street, 40 feet westerly from the point of intersection of the westerly line of Mason Street; thence westerly along Geary Street for a distance of 97.5 feet; thence at a right angle southerly for a distance of 137.5 feet; thence at a right angle easterly for a distance of 137.5 feet to the westerly line of Mason Street; thence at a right angle northerly along Mason Street for a distance of 37.5 feet; thence at a right angle westerly for a distance of 40 feet; thence at a right angle northerly for a distance of 100 feet to the point of beginning; Being Lot 1A in Assessor's Block 316.

Second, That the special character and special historical, architectural, and aesthetic interest and value of the said Landmark justifying its designation are set forth in the Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board Resolution No. 124 as adopted on May 7, 1975, which resolution is incorporated herein and made a part hereof as though fully set forth;

Third, That the said Landmark should be preserved generally in all of its particular exterior features as existing on the date hereof and as described and depicted in the photographs, case report and other material on file in the Department of City Planning Docker LM75.4;

AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That the Commission hereby directs its Secretary to transmit the proposal for designation, with a copy of this Resolution, to the Board of Supervisors for appropriate action.

I hereby certify that the foregoing Resolution was ADOPTED by the City Planning Commission at its regular meeting of February 5, 1976.

Lynn E. Pio  
Secretary

AYES: Commissioners Bierman, Dearman, Finn, Lau, Mellon, Rosenblatt, Starbuck.

NOES: None

ABSENT: None

PASSED: February 5, 1976

LANDMARKS PRESERVATION ADVISORY BOARD  
Final Case Report - January 8, 1975

GEARY THEATER  
(formerly The Columbia)  
415 Geary Street

OWNER: Mary E. Cryan Trust  
Crocker National Bank

LOCATION: 415 Geary Street, south side 40 feet west of Mason Street. The parcel is "L" shaped with a 97.5 foot frontage on Geary Street and, beginning 100 feet south of Geary, a 37.5 foot frontage on Mason Street. The depth of the parcel measured from either Geary or Mason Street is 137.5 feet; being Lot 1A in Assessor's Block 316.

HISTORY: In his column of January 9, 1910, a local drama critic mused:

Perhaps there have been bigger weeks theatrically in the history of San Francisco than the one beginning today, but no one has yet been found who remembers it.

His enthusiasm was well-grounded; the next evening four new shows were to open, one of which was the premier production at the newly-completed Columbia Theater (now the Geary Theater) designed by Bliss and Faville who ranked among the foremost architects of the city at that time. This event, in effect, was hailed as more than the opening of a new theater; it was viewed as another bench mark in the return to the downtown area of establishments which had been occupying temporary quarters elsewhere, or not functioning at all, since the 1906 earthquake and fire.

That disaster had triggered an unprecedented crisis in the history of American Theater in that all eight of San Francisco's downtown theaters had been destroyed. The impact was intensified inasmuch as San Francisco was a city renowned for the variety and frequency of its cultural events and, furthermore known in the theatrical profession as "the only city in the United States, outside of New York, where a high salaried player could be assured a long and lucrative run". However, despite the totality of destruction affecting every aspect of the community's life, it is not surprising to find that in the reshuffling and improvization of quarters immediately after the fire, to accommodate the devastated institutions, theaters were not neglected. A month after the conflagration, the Orpheum had moved its operations to The Chutes, an amusement park and theater on the north side of Fulton Street between 10th and 11th Avenues, and on June 30, 1906, the Park Theater opened in the burnt-out district at 8th and Market Streets. A contemporary account of the latter event noted that the audience, seated under canvas, "applauded just to see the curtain go up once more on a real play".

Nor is it surprising to find that between 1906 and 1911, the most intensive years of rebuilding permanent structures, seven other new theaters were erected in downtown San Francisco.

Building permit application No. 20689 for the Columbia was issued on January 14, 1909, and the structure was completed within a year. The owners and management, Gottlob and Marx, had seen their pre-fire Columbia in the first block of Powell Street destroyed in the fire, and although they had opened a post-fire theater, the Van Ness, prior to rebuilding downtown, they refrained from naming it the Columbia because of their desire to reserve that name for the showcase of their operations.

The new Columbia opened on January 10, 1910, with William Crane, a San Francisco favorite who had opened the Baldwin theater 33 years earlier, in "Father and The Boys". In major coverage of the event one local newspaper featured several stories and heralded the "Opening Of The Columbia Another Step In The City's Rehabilitation". It was a gala, dressy affair, apparently for what it symbolized as well as for its social significance. Among traditional first-nighters, it took precedence over the other three major theatrical productions opening that same evening: Harry Lauder, the internationally acclaimed Scotsman, at Dreamland in his first local appearance; Olga Nethersole, a popular English actress starring in her first drama by an American author, The Writing on the Wall, at the Van Ness; and the stock company of the Alcazar in the first western United States production of St. Elmo.

One critic covering the opening of the Columbia stressed the importance of the theater to the life of a city and noted -- with a presage of the denizens who were to make their local appearance some five or six decades later --

More than any other institution it reflects the life and character of a city, and perhaps this is peculiarly true of San Francisco, most joyous of all the sister cities, the one who always wears flowers in her hair, although her tired feet trail through hot ashes.

In the years following, the management of the Columbia was to continue the reputation of its namesake by presenting outstanding companies and stars of international reputation including Sarah Bernhardt, Nazimova, and native daughter, Isadora Duncan. Nevertheless, these same years saw the ascendancy of motion picture theaters; by 1917, there were nearly 100 of these establishments of various sizes scattered throughout the city. Also by 1917, the Columbia was the only San Francisco theater offering legitimate drama.

Following management changes between 1924 and 1928, the theater briefly became the Wilkes and then the Lurie. During this interval, the name Geary was used once for a two week period only, beginning December 25, 1924, during the appearance of Olga Petrovina in Hurricane.

The theater opened again under the name Geary on February 6, 1928, with Pauline Fredricks in her starring vehicle, The Scarlet Woman. From that date its chronicle of legendary performances grew more illustrious with each passing year. A partial listing of the best known performers on its stage includes: George Arliss, Edward G. Robinson, Basil Rathbone, Ethel Barrymore, Menasha Skulnik, Maurice Evans, Paul Muni, Alexander Woolcott, Ethel Waters, Boris Karloff, Paul Robeson, Jose Ferrer, Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontaine, Katherine Cornell, Cornelia Otis Skinner and Dame Judith Anderson -- all appearing in productions which they had achieved critical acclaim.

Since 1967, the Geary has been the performing home of one of the nation's most highly acclaimed resident professional repertory theaters, the American Conservatory Theatre. It is fitting that the Geary became the stage upon which this company built its international reputation, continuing an unbroken tradition of 65 years of theatrical excellence within the distinguished building.

## ARCHITECTURE

## EXTERIOR:

The structure was designed by the architectural firm of Bliss and Faville who were also responsible for many other prominent downtown structures including the Bank of California. Dimensions of the building are: width, about 90 feet; height, 72 feet with an additional 10 feet for stage housing; depth, 137.5 feet. An annex measuring 37.5 feet by 40 feet containing dressing rooms, fronts on Mason Street and appears to have been added at a later date.

The brick and terra cotta neo-classic facade has three major horizontal divisions. The lowest of these is defined overhead by a marquee running the full width of the building and extending outward nearly to the curb. Suspended by chains anchored in the upper facade, it has three raised arches in its central portion which mark the three slightly recessed entrances to the theater lobby. On either side of these entrances, under the flat portions of the marquee, are found additional entrances to other parts of the building. The terra cotta exposed edge of the marquee, is richly ornamented and originally had panes of obscure glass set in metal strips depending from it, giving it a more ornate, heavier appearance.

Above the marquee, the horizontal mid-section of the facade has a vertical height of about three stories and is monumental in the scale of its architectural treatment. It is separated into five vertical divisions, reflecting the spacing found below in the entrances and marquee. The three central divisions are the most prominent feature of the entire facade and are defined by fluted Corinthian columns which are paired on either side of the central section. These three central divisions are treated identically; each features a tall recessed arched window divided horizontally into two sections by a heavy lintel below the spring line of the arch. The lower section is flanked by additional columns on whose Ionic capitals the lintels rest. These inner columns, dwarfed by their Corinthian neighbors, have an intricate surface design of bucolic imagery. The arched tops are framed with a carved moulding into which are set mythological faces at the keystone positions. The recessed wall surface above each arch is intricately detailed with floral moulding and classical elements.

Below the arched windows, directly above the marquee, balustrades are located in a band of terra cotta moulding extending the width of the building. Centered atop each balustrade are large urns which were apparently added at a later date inasmuch as they do not appear in an early photograph of the theater.

The simplicity of the outermost divisions of the mid-section of the facade contrasts sharply, as intended, with the three central divisions. Fluted Corinthian pilasters, the same scale as their column counterparts, define these sections with the surface between infilled with patterned brickwork.

Above the capitals of the columns and pilasters, a deep and slightly raised cornice extends across the width of the facade. This cornice and a more pronounced one at the roofline, limit the uppermost horizontal division of the facade. Principal features of the upper cornice are the evenly spaced mask-like faces which occur along its entire length. This upper area reflects the spatial division of the facade below, but with simpler embellishment. The divisions are marked by

## ARCHITECTURE

EXTERIOR:  
(Continued)

simple, fluted pilasters aligned with the pilasters and major columns below. The outer divisions feature vertical rectangles of a combined geometric and floral pattern, probably in terra cotta. The three central spaces above the arched windows each have a small centered window which is flanked by rectangles narrower in width but similar in motif to those in the outer divisions.

Above the cornice is a parapet which originally contained balustrade insets in its three central divisions; however, these balustrades have been removed.

## INTERIOR:

The neo-classic influence of the facade continues on the interior, only the principal features of which are described herein.

The proscenium opening is rectangular, 36 feet in width and framed with a decorative moulding. On either side engaged Corinthian columns rise to the height of the moulding above the proscenium. The columns are repeated forward and outward from the proscenium and between the pairs on either side are located three levels of boxes. A deep, richly detailed cornice atop the capitals extends across the full width of the auditorium beginning above the ends of the boxes, returning along their angled fronts and extending across the proscenium opening. A flattened arch resting on the cornice above the boxes spans the front of the auditorium above the orchestra pit. Because of the slant of the front of the boxes, the arch has a greater width and height at its front than at its rear (directly above the proscenium) and its coffered ceiling with rosette inserts, creates a sense of false perspective.

The major portion of the auditorium ceiling is flat and features an oval outline in plaster moulding in whose center is found a shallow, tiered chandelier enhanced by painted radiations of a sunburst effect.

Walls of the balcony seating areas and their foyers reveal carvings of cherubim at play and ageless theatrical symbols -- the lute, the harp, and masks and tokens of Bacchus.

The seating capacity totals 1,456 which includes 573 seats at orchestra level, 484 in the first balcony and 399 in the second balcony.

An interior feature, not visibly noticeable but most certainly a function of the architecture, is the superb acoustics which eliminate the need for microphones. Probably as much as any other aspect of the building, the acoustics have helped to spare it the fate of so many other theaters of the same vintage. Because of the acoustics, the theater has been much in demand throughout the years, particularly for musical production, and by having a viable life, it has been spared demolition. Also because the original construction did provide excellent acoustics, there has never been the necessity to try to improve upon them by remodeling; thus, the original interior design of 1910 remains intact. The major interior change has been the installation of banks of lighting forward the proscenium; but even in this, care was taken to preserve the integrity of the architecture.

ZONING AND  
SURROUNDING  
LAND USE:

The zoning is C-3-G (Downtown General Commercial District), with a height and bulk limit of 160-I. The surrounding land use includes the Curran Theater adjacent westerly; bars, restaurants and other entertainment establishments; hotels of varying sizes and high density residential uses.

SPECIAL  
RECOGNITION:

The Geary Theater is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.