

FILE NO. 90-77-14

ORDINANCE NO. 217-77

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1 DESIGNATING THE ORPHEUM THEATER BUILDING AS A LANDMARK PURSUANT TO ARTICLE 10 OF
2 THE CITY PLANNING CODE

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

4 Section 1. The Board of Supervisors hereby finds that the Orpheum Theater
5 Building, 1192 Market Street, being Lot 22 in Assessor's Block 351 as a special
6 character and special historical, architectural and aesthetic interest and value,
7 and that its designation as a landmark will be in furtherance of and in conform-
8 ance with the purposes of Article 10 of the City Planning Code and the standards
9 set forth therein.

10 (a) Designation. Pursuant to Section 10C4 of the City Planning Code, Chapter
11 II, Part II of the San Francisco Municipal Code, the Orpheum Theater Building is
12 hereby designated as a Landmark, this designation having been duly approved by
13 Resolution No. 7662 of the City Planning Commission, which Resolution is on file
14 with the Clerk of the Board of Supervisors under File No. 90-77-14.

15 (b) Required Data. The descriptions of the location and boundaries of the
16 landmark site; of the characteristics of the landmark which justify its designa-
17 tion; and of the particular features that should be preserved, as included in the
18 said Resolution, are hereby incorporated herein and made a part hereof as though
19 fully set forth.

Passed for Second Reading
Board of Supervisors, San Francisco

MAY 23 1977

Ayes: Supervisors Barbagelata, Feinstein, Fran-
cisco, Gonzales, Kopp, Mendelsohn, Molinari, Nel-
der, Peios, Tamaras, von Beroldingen.

~~Absent Supervisors~~

Absent: Supervisors

YC22

John B. Brown Clerk

90-77-14
File No.

JUN 9 1977
Approved

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

MAY 31 1977

Ayes: Supervisors Barbagelata, Feinstein, Fran-
cisco, Gonzales, Kopp, Mendelsohn, Molinari, Nel-
der, Peios, Tamaras, von Beroldingen.

~~Absent Supervisors~~

Absent Supervisors: BARBAGELATA, MENDELSON

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

John B. Brown Clerk

Shirley B. Brown
Mayor

SAN FRANCISCO

CITY PLANNING COMMISSION

RESOLUTION NO. 7662

WHEREAS, A proposal to designate the Orpheum Theater, 1192 Market 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 November 3, 1976 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 10, 1977, 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 said Article 10;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, First, the proposal to designate the Orpheum Theater at 1192 Market Street as a Landmark pursuant to Article 10 of the City Planning Code is hereby APPROVED, the precise location and boundaries of the Landmark site being lot 22 in Assessor's Block 351.

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. 151 as adopted November 3, 1976, 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 Docket LM76.9.

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 has been ADOPTED by the City Planning Commission at its regular meeting of February 10, 1977.

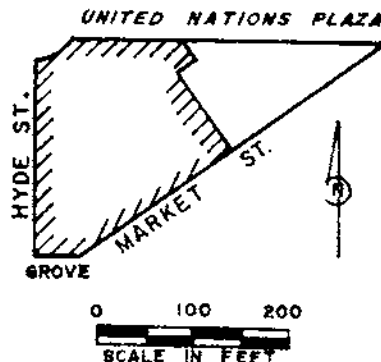
Lynn E. Plo
Secretary

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

NOES: None

ABSENT: None

PASSED: February 10, 1977



Owner: Orpheum Theater Building Company

Location: 1192 Market Street, Northeast corner of Hyde and Grove Streets

STATEMENT OF
SIGNIFICANCE:

Possessing the most impressive theater facade surviving on Market Street, the Orpheum Theater was erected in 1926. It was designed by B. Marcus Priteca, west coast theater architect, to serve as a showcase for one of the nation's most important vaudeville chains.

HISTORY:

Between the turn of the century -- when the motion picture began to develop its own audience -- and the Depression, the screen steadily supplanted vaudeville (variety) as the nation's most potent entertainment, but this was a victory achieved more through absorption than by direct conquest. When movie theater operators began employing variety acts to improve their programs, the magnates of vaudeville began to take the movies' threat seriously and countered by adding screen fare to their bills. The policies of the vaudeville and of the film theaters ultimately grew to be so much alike that by the mid-'20s they had become virtually indistinguishable, with the screen portion of the bill the more important.

Of the operations which began this evolution from the variety side, one of the largest and most important was that of Alexander Pantages for whom the Pantages Theater, now called the Orpheum, was erected. Pantages, a Greek by birth, struck his first show-business bonanza in the Alaska gold rush then opened a theater at Seattle in 1902. The theater circuit he was to build from this ultimately ranged from coast to coast, but was strongest in the West, where it enjoyed power and prestige second only to the Orpheum circuit. The Orpheum, which began in San Francisco, was the leading vaudeville chain, and later became the "O" in Joseph Kennedy's R-K-O (Radio-Kieth-Orpheum) combine.

Pantages' initial operation in San Francisco was installed on Sutter Street, near Steiner, in 1908, during a fascinating epoch in the City's history: the transitional period of rebuilding the city following 1906, during which time the Western Addition served as the central commercial district. By 1911, the theaters operators who had moved west of Van Ness in 1907 were relocated downtown in brand new theaters. Pantages arrived on Market Street, opposite Mason, on December 30, 1911.

HISTORY:

(Continued)

In contrast to his Sutter Street operation, which was little more than a shed, the second Pantages was a large and attractive theater. It was the first theater designed by 21-year-old B. Marcus Priteca, the Seattle architect who was destined to design every subsequent Pantages theater, and scores of others for clients throughout the West. Priteca's firm, with offices in Seattle and Los Angeles, was one of the half-dozen-or-so most important theater designers in the country, and is the only one still in the business, having passed, upon Priteca's death in 1972, to his associate, Richard McCann.

Pantages third and final San Francisco theater (the present Orpheum) opened its doors on February 20, 1926; it was the fifth of Market Street's six major movie palaces. Priteca was, of course, the architect, but the design was a far cry from the chaste classical mode of his early work. Here the architect turned to the Spanish Gothic mode, which was ideally suited to his love of intricate ornament. Until the opening of the monumental Art-Deco Hollywood Pantages, this was by far the largest and most exciting of the circuit's theaters, and is generally regarded as one of Priteca's most significant works.

In 1929, Pantages broke up his circuit, with the bulk of the properties being assumed by Warner Brothers and by R-K-O. R-K-O took San Francisco, and, having closed its O'Farrell Street Orpheum a few months earlier, they gave its name to their new Market Street Theater. The stage and screen policy which had developed in the 1920's did not weather the Depression well, and it was ultimately dropped at the Orpheum, although R-K-O kept such a policy alive in their Golden Gate Theater until 1949.

In 1953, the Orpheum was totally renovated to present the Cinerama process. Upon the termination of the Cinerama contract in the mid-'60s, the theater reverted to conventional screen fare for a time, then closed. Save for occasional events, the theater has remained so up to the present.

At this writing, San Francisco Civic Light Opera is planning to move their operation from the Curran to the Orpheum, which, with 2350 seats, is considerably larger. The effect that this will have on the theater's appearance cannot be determined at this time. Although much of the original decor was draped or painted over in the Cinerama days, the theater is essentially intact and restorable.

Of the six major Market Street theaters, three; the California, the Granada, and the Fox; have been demolished; and the Golden Gate has been renovated extensively. Of the two remaining, the Warfield's interior is in far better preservation than the Orpheum's, but the latter presents a more impressive face to the street, the Warfield's entrance's being but a minor portion of the Warfield Building. (The Golden Gate's entrance is similarly scaled, but it gains from being on the corner of the building.) The Orpheum building is smaller than either the Warfield or the Golden Gate, and is better articulated to stress the theater.

ARCHITECTURE:

The Orpheum building is composed of two distinct parts: a four-story commercial building, incorporating the theater's entrance; and a taller concrete box enclosing the entire Market Street frontage, a small section parallel to Grove Street, and about half the exposure on Hyde Street. The box takes up the remaining Hyde Street frontage and all that on United Nations Plaza.

ARCHITECTURE: The Market Street wall is divided vertically into 7 distinct bays, each four windows wide, except for that above the theater entrance which is five windows wide. The short Grove Street wall is made up of both two and four window units. This articulation is visible only in the second story. On the third and fourth, the window is conceived as a single unit, broken up by wooden mullions. Again, the second bay is different: the five window pattern is carried through all floors.

(Continued)

In addition to the different treatment of the windows, the second bay also carries a highly ornamented parapet significantly higher than that of the remainder of the building. A tile eave, which slopes back from the parapet wall, extends around the entire commercial portion of the building. There is no overhanging cornice.

The ground floor of each bay is divided into two units, framing storefronts. As storefronts will be, these have been modified over the years, but the train of arches which provide the articulation at this level is intact.

The entire commercial facade is made of coarsely textured cement with a great deal of shallow relief. (Anthony Heinsbergen, who decorated and furnished the interior, describes it well as a "drip castle".) The basic color is ochre, with the window frames a harmonious dusty green.

The doors to the theater are set well back from the sidewalk, creating a substantial street foyer. This area is finished in marble, with a cast cement ceiling. The doors are wood, the poster cases are decorated metal, and the free standing ticket office has been retained. The ceiling has been painted, and the light fixtures modified, but the overall effect is still very good. At the street however, the poster cases are enclosed in a plywood construction which appears temporary.

The present marquee and vertical sign date from the removal of older units mandated by legislation of the Board of Supervisors in 1970 which retroactively limited the projection of signs and marquees on Market Street to no more than six feet.

At the time of construction, the unadorned appearance of the auditorium box aroused an indignant public who felt that it had a legitimate concern regarding the exterior treatment of the auditorium walls on Hyde and Fulton Streets (the latter recently renamed to United Nations Plaza). Quite clearly, in the Civic Center plan of some years earlier, the blocks north and south of Fulton, east of Hyde, although privately owned, were destined for buildings worthy of the civic buildings already constructed. Indeed, the Public Library was located diagonally across Fulton and Hyde Streets from the proposed theater. While there was no question that the theater would be required to observe the recessed arc of the street right-of-way at Hyde and Fulton, the City felt that having made a great investment in the acquisition of properties and rights-of-way for the Civic Center, buildings in the area should acknowledge the intended cohesiveness of design.

Priteca had, in fact, designed exterior treatment of the facades which included a sloping tile eave similar to that on the front, with major elements of the front facade repeated on the auditorium walls.

ARCHITECTURE: Nevertheless, neither the building's owners or Pantages would
(Continued) expend funds for this purpose and, the exposed concrete walls remain unfinished fifty years later.

INTERIOR No small part of the theater's success was due to the work of its
DESCRIPTION: decorator, the A. B. Heinsbergen Co. of Los Angeles. Priteca, the architect, and Heinsbergen, the decorator worked together on many theaters, and their talents were complementary to the highest degree. In 1953, to accomodate Cinerama, the theater was modified and redecorated. Some of the large original Spanish wrought-iron light fixtures were replaced. Three projection booths were built on the main floor, the screen and curtains covered the proscenium, and much of the original decoration was painted out. Recent work in the theater has seen the removal of the old screen and the booths, but the decorative scheme is still that of the 1953 work.

The Orpheum's only large public space is the main lobby which is entered from the Market Street doors. The form of this room is rectangular with a barrel-vault ceiling running lengthwise. This ceiling features simulated wooden arches and three colorful cupolas, which have survived intact. The flat panels making up the remainder of the ceiling, once gold, are now painted black. The walls are simulated stone, painted a light color on the main floor and black above. On the wall opposite the entry is a large ornamental portal communicating with the mezzanine.

Beyond the lobby is a small, low, vestibule which gives way to the main floor foyer and to stairs leading into the balcony area. At several points above the main level, the stair landings are large enough to be developed as lounge areas, although none are out of the flow of foot traffic. The stairs, foyers and lounges have all been redecorated except for the lounge serving the upper balcony; this area was closed off in the Cinerama days.

The auditorium is laid out with a main floor and two shallow balconies...an anachronistic arrangement for 1926, but one designed to maximize seating on a small irregular plot. The entire space is finished in plaster and is totally intact save for those portions of the balcony soffit corresponding to the Cinerama booth locations. Much of the decoration has been painted over, however, and the original effect has been lost.

The sidewalls are simulated stone up to the second balcony line, which is also the springline for the proscenium. In the original scheme, this portion of the wall was textured and painted to suggest travertine. The portion of the wall above the second balcony line was conceived as rougher stones with applied sculptural decoration. The portions nearest the proscenium are grills to permit passage of sound from the organ. As finished originally, in a medium green, the grills blended into the remainder of the frieze and did not appear, as they do today, as air registers.

As is typical for this type of theater, the organ screen area is the most ornamented. The principal element of the design is a massive baldaquin starting at the first balcony level. The Spanish Gothic "drip-castle" effect noted on the facade is also employed in the interior, particularly in this area. Beneath the baldaquin, whose appurtenances appear almost Mayan, is an archway originally flanked by tapestries. The heavy proscenium is also richly ornamented, primarily with human figures.

INTERIOR
DESCRIPTION: About the perimeter of the auditorium, a cornice rises in three distinct levels up to the ceiling, which is open grillwork. In the center of the ceiling is a massive sunburst fixture, also in three levels. Between each level of the cornice and fixture were the colored lights which formed the foundation of the original illumination scheme.

In the 1953 redecoration, the ceiling and the balcony soffits were left in their original finish. All illuminated indirectly, they provided the principal color in the auditorium. The soffits especially convey the richness of the interior in its original form. As the theater is virtually intact structurally, restoration would be primarily a matter of paint, carpets and electrical work.

SURROUNDING
LAND USE
AND ZONING: The property is zoned C-3-G (Downtown Commercial District) and is in an 80-X height and bulk district. Arthur Brown's Federal Building is north across United Nations Plaza; to the west is Marshall Square, reserved as the site for a new library building; south across Market Street are hotels and assorted commercial buildings. The only other parcels on the theater block are two small one-story buildings and a small triangular-shaped three-story building facing the plaza.

RESEARCH: The research for and writing of this case report was done by Mr. Steven Levin.