
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD

Historic Landmark Case No. 12-06

York Theater 3641 Georgia Avenue NW Square 3031, Lot 233

Meeting Date: November 29, 2012
Applicant: Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1A
Affected ANC: 1A
Staff Reviewer: Tim Dennee

After careful consideration, the Historic Preservation Office recommends that the Board designate York Theater, 3641 Georgia Avenue NW, a historic landmark to be entered in the D.C. Inventory of Historic Sites. The staff further recommends that the nomination be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places with a recommendation for listing at the local level, with a period of significance of 1919 to 1954, the era of the building's operation as a theater. The property merits designation under D.C. Criterion B and National Register Criterion A ("History") as it is "associated with historical periods... achievements, or patterns of growth and change that contributed significantly to the heritage, culture or development of the District of Columbia or the nation," and also under D.C. Criterion D and National Register Criterion C ("Architecture and Urbanism") for "embody[ing] the distinguishing characteristics of... [a] building type... or... siting..."

Background and significance

The York Theater was erected in 1919 for Harry Crandall, probably the greatest entrepreneur of Washington's movie theater industry. Crandall made his fortune building up his own movie exhibition and distribution circuit centered on Washington, but including theaters in Cumberland, Maryland, Martinsburg, West Virginia, Connellsville, Pennsylvania, and in Petersburg and Roanoke, Virginia. Crandall got his start in 1907, opening a little nickel theater after being impressed by a picture at one of the earliest show houses and foreseeing the growth of the entertainment. Motion picture theaters proliferated in the following two decades, but most of the earliest buildings were not purpose-built, but rather remodeled from another use and typically combined with a vaudeville stage.

Crandall succeeded for many reasons—and bought out his most serious competitor in 1920—but among these was his sound judgment in selecting locations. When he built his Metropolitan Theater, for instance, he guessed correctly that the theater district was moving, with the center of downtown, westward along F and G Streets, rather than continuing up 9th. He also recognized that the city's population center was shifting northwest, to new neighborhoods such as Mount Pleasant, Columbia Heights, Park View and Petworth, and he positioned new theaters to capture that market, rather than merely hoping it would trickle downtown. Building the Lincoln Theater

on U Street, he sought to draw patrons from the new “Black Broadway,” as most downtown theaters did not admit African Americans.

The York is important first for being an early theater. It was erected eight years before the era of talking pictures.¹ It predates the 1920s and the apogee of theater architecture, generally known as the “Movie Palace Era,” when the largest and most ornate houses were built, and *per capita* attendance reached its peak.² These years coincided not only with the introduction of “talkies,” but also with the installation of modern air-conditioning, which made it possible to seat huge crowds comfortably year round. This golden age preceded the plunge in attendance brought about by radio and television.

The York is older than nearly all of the movie theaters that have been landmarked in Washington.³ Only the Howard predates it, and it was heavily remodeled in 1931, before falling into a deteriorated state.

With the exception of an open-air theater dating to 1910, the York appears to be only the second theater building in Washington actually erected by and for Harry Crandall. That is, his earlier houses were either remodeled from older buildings—such as the Joy—or purchased after they were built by other showmen, including the Savoy, the Apollo, the Avenue Grand, and the Knickerbocker. The York was preceded only by the Metropolitan, completed downtown a year earlier.⁴ In fact, as late as 1915, Crandall had rented a large theater so that he could exhibit multiple-reel films to a substantial crowd. The York was built for the express purpose of movie exhibition, and while it had a stage, it was not the intention to book vaudeville acts, as many earlier theaters, hedging their bets, did. For this reason, the floor was not sloped dramatically for views to the stage. Freed from scheduling live performances, the York exhibited more movies than did Crandall’s other theaters. After the Metropolitan and the York, Crandall would build the Lincoln (1921) on U Street, the Ambassador (1923) on the ruins of the Knickerbocker, the Tivoli (1924) and the Colony (1926), and he would buy other movie houses before merging his company with the Stanley Company of America. The York also preceded his acquisition of nearly all of his out-of-town movie houses.

The York was designed by Reginald Geare, Crandall’s favorite architect and, with Thomas Lamb and John Zink, one of the most important theater architects of the time. Geare also designed the Metropolitan, the Lincoln, the Dunbar, and the Knickerbocker, and had commenced drawings for the Tivoli. His career was cut short by disaster and suicide, however; Geare had been the architect for the Knickerbocker Theater, whose roof collapsed under the snow deposited by a

¹ Washington theaters only began installing permanent sound systems in 1929.

² It is said that in 1930, 65 percent of Americans attended a movie weekly. The Depression and World War II, followed by the Korean War and the rise of television, made theater builders economize.

³ The Howard (1910), Lincoln (1921), Dunbar (1921), Chevy Chase/Avalon (1922), Tivoli (1924), Earle/Warner (1924), Plymouth (1928), Strand (1928), Atlas (1938), Senator (1941), and MacArthur (1945) have all been landmarked. After a 1922 remodeling, the National began showing films as well. There are a few other former movie houses that are contributing buildings within historic districts. A couple of these are earlier nickelodeons, such as the Minnehaha (now Ben’s Chili Bowl; 1910) and Meader’s (1909). The rest are generally later, such as the Takoma (1922) and the Penn (1935).

⁴ The Metropolitan closed in 1966 and has since been demolished.

1922 blizzard, killing 98 people and injuring 133 others. He could not recover from his feelings of guilt and the damage to his reputation.

The York Theater is important for being a major neighborhood theater, built well before the 1930s to 1950s heyday of the modestly-sized neighborhood movie houses that typically ran second- (and third, etc.) run films. Small theaters, even open-air theaters, were reaching more neighborhoods in the late teens through mid 1920s, but few approached the York's 1,000-seat capacity. For certain, Crandall's Metropolitan was the flagship of his circuit, at about 1,500 seats and located downtown. But the first 1,000-plus-seat movie theater in Washington had not been built even downtown until 1914 (although there had been a few larger live-performance spaces earlier, some of which came to screen films).

On the one hand, the York was an effort to cash in on bringing motion pictures to a prosperous new neighborhood. On the other, it was provided as an amenity to promote settlement in Park View and adjoining new suburbs. Its construction can be seen as a collaboration between Harry Crandall and the builders, Kennedy Brothers, who had owned the lot. Although developing all over the city, Kennedy Brothers, Inc. had erected a row on the site of the theater a decade earlier and continued building rowhouses and apartments within its "Princeton Heights" subdivision on Georgia Avenue, Quebec Street, Rock Creek Church Road and Warder Street until 1919. The theater itself is modest, in part because a neighborhood theater of the time neither needed the kind of rich ornament that the downtown theaters sported, nor could it afford it. But the York is of a piece with the residential neighborhood; simply detailed and built of the same brick and a similar sheet-metal cornice as the Kennedy Brothers' homes. It was of the neighborhood in other ways.

[Crandall] constantly used his theaters and position to educate them [the people of Washington] and provide space for their cultural and civic activities. He created a Public Service and Educational Department and placed it under the direction of prominent Washington club woman and past chairperson of the Motion Picture Committee of the District of Columbia Federated Women's Clubs, Harriet Hawley Locher. This was one of the first and most ambitious programs of its kind in the country. Crandall and Locher believed that the neighborhood theater could function as a community center, and that it could provide space for educational, cultural, and religious activities when not showing movies.... Crandall [also] provided equipment for boys' baseball teams. There were four teams: the Savoy, the York, the Apollo, and the Avenue Grand....⁵

Of course, Crandall was not entirely altruistic; his efforts were aimed at cultivating a positive reputation and filling his theaters. He was among the first to introduce serials, which kept customers, mostly kids, coming back for successive episodes, especially following cliff-hangers. And even before the advent of true air-conditioning in Washington theaters, Crandall addressed the problem of interior comfort at the York with the installation of a large ventilation system that operated like a big heat pump.

⁵ Robert K. Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington, D.C.* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1999), pp. 80-81.

The York Theater is sufficiently significant, both in terms of the development of a city-wide and nation-wide social phenomenon as motion-picture entertainment, and as an important part of the story of the development of this neighborhood.

Description and historic integrity

The York Theater is a fairly simple box in massing, complicated only by a gable roof set back from all sides. It is brick-faced over structural tile walls, except on the rear or alley side, where the tile is exposed. The original cornice was recently replaced, seemingly with EIFS or a similar material. The theater's principal exterior motif is repeating false or blank arches, originally stuccoed and more recently re-parged when the original stucco failed. As originally, the south side of the building has no openings within the arches. There have always been three double doors within the north side arches and a door in the southwest corner, although all the doors themselves have been replaced. The small window openings on the north wall are, however, not original. The west, avenue-facing wall is the principal façade, containing the primary entrance. The door opening has been altered in size, and unfortunately, the canopy, like the original sign, is long gone. The remainder of the west arches once contained niches that held cabinets for movie posters and stills. With the exception of two, these niches have been filled and parged over.

Still, inside and out, the building is readily recognizable today compared to historic photographs. Most materials and elements are present. The National Register of Historic Places identifies seven aspects or qualities of historic integrity: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. The York Theater is obviously in its original location and retains much of its setting; although the commercial corridor has gone through changes, much of its architecture is still contemporaneous with the theater. And the neighborhood's rowhouses, by Kennedy Brothers and others, remain all around. Some of the workmanship of the interior decoration is lost or obscured by later paint, but with the exception of the original seats, the historic fabric—pilasters and arches, skylights and ceiling medallions, stage and later loft projection room—is there. The loss of the original sign and canopy definitely reduce the integrity of feeling and association by making the building less readily recognizable as a theater.

Overall, the total physical integrity is better than that of several of D.C.'s landmark theaters. Consider the Strand, another simple neighborhood theater, which has had an equivalent amount of exterior alteration, but whose interior is nearly destroyed.⁶ Brookland's Newton Theater, also plain on the exterior, retains its original canopy and sign, in modified form, but the interior has been completely remade as a CVS store. The Dunbar was similarly gutted for commercial space in the late 1980s, the MacArthur in the 1990s (after being converted to a triplex). The Tivoli exterior remains largely there, although the storefronts were rebuilt; the original interior was destroyed by neglect and reconstruction. The recent restoration of the Howard is really a reconstruction of exterior and interior elements based on photographic evidence. The Atlas, too, is a major restoration, although not quite as extensive. The theaters that have been the best preserved—or retained the most fabric for restoration—have been those that have largely remained in at least sporadic use, including the Avalon, the Takoma, the Warner, the National, the Lincoln, and the contributing Uptown, although these have all gone through their own restorations and remodelings, and some have long since ceased showing movies.

⁶ It is, nonetheless, expected to be renovated using federal historic rehabilitation tax credits.