

21 March 2011

Zoning Board of Adjustment  
City of Cape May  
643 Washington Street  
Cape May, New Jersey 08204

Re: Beach Theatre Foundation

To the chair and the members of the board,

I am providing an assessment of the Beach Theatre in Cape May, New Jersey. I do so as an architectural historian who has devoted close to fifty years to the study of American and European architecture, especially that of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In recent decades, much of my research has focused on work in the commercial sphere, examining work firsthand throughout the continental United States and consulting a wide range of period sources. A copy of my curriculum vitae is enclosed for your review.

My study of movie theaters began in 1970, when I was doing research for a guide to architecture in the Philadelphia region (Architecture in Philadelphia: A Guide, MIT Press, 1974, co-authored with Edward Teitelman). A by-product of this investigation was one of my first published works, which was on William H. Lee (Marquee 3 [second quarter 1971]: 7-12) and was written before I entered graduate school. While I consider it an elementary piece in retrospect, it helped concretize my strong interest in American movie theaters. Since then, I have had the opportunity to examine hundreds of movie houses of all sizes and periods in communities of all kinds nationwide.

I have been professionally involved in the preservation field at the international, national, state, and local levels – both in the public and private sectors – since the early 1970s. I have taught courses in both American architectural history and historic preservation – the latter at the graduate level – for over thirty years. Much of my work in the preservation sphere, as an academic and as an activist, has focused on the matter of historical significance. A compilation of testimony I had presented at landmark hearings in Washington was published by the National Park Service in cooperation with the National Council for Preservation Education as a guide for framing arguments on historical significance (History on the Line: Testimony in the Cause of Preservation, 1999). For over two decades, I have been especially concerned with issues related to preserving buildings and landscapes of the post-World War II era. Currently I am working

on a book devoted to this subject that will reprint some of the articles I have written on the subject and will also include a number of new chapters (Looking Beyond the Icons: A Legacy of Architecture and Landscape from the Recent Past, University of Virginia Press, tent. 2013).

I have reviewed Mr. Thomas's report entitled "Analysis of the Significance and Integrity of the Beach Theatre and Its Relation to the Cape May Historic District," of 10 May 2010 and the minutes of the meetings at which Mr. Thomas testified. I have also reviewed the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, Historic Preservation Office's Base Form for the property (2008); a University of Pennsylvania Master's thesis, Mark Edward Donofrio, "Preserving the Neighborhood Theatres of William Harold Lee" (2010); and several other recently compiled historical accounts of Lee's career and a list of his work. This supplements the research I conducted while preparing my article, which include site visits to numerous Lee-designed theaters in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

I should further state that I have known George Thomas for many years and respect his scholarly work. He has added significantly to our knowledge of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Philadelphia architecture, and his book on Cape May has been a valuable asset to preservation efforts there. Concerning the case at hand, however, we have basic differences of opinion. My remarks are framed in response to his report and testimony.

**Period of Significance.** The argument that the Beach Theater should be demolished because it not designated or is ineligible for designation because it does not fall into the historic district's period of significance has serious flaws. If the city's ordinance specifically states that only properties that fall within the designated period of significance can secure protection, that is a legal matter. The bigger issue is whether the ordinance works at cross-purposes with fostering a district that conveys a sense of authenticity and life, not an artificially themed environment.

The criteria in the Cape May ordinance for designation are far broader and are not limited to National or State register designation. Furthermore, since the ordinance provides that all properties in a historic district require approval prior to being demolished, I will address the historical significance of the Beach Theatre and why the Zoning Board of Adjustment should allow an opportunity for interested parties to purchase the property at fair market value.

There is no question that Cape May's nineteenth-century architectural legacy is what makes the community one of singular distinction; indeed, it is the best surviving substantial example we have of a coastal resort of the Victorian era. Expanding the period of significance to capture an array of early twentieth-century properties, as has been done, enriches the ensemble even if those properties as a whole are less rare in nature than the collective legacy of the nineteenth century.

But history has no terminal point. Cape May did not cease to change after 1930, and while many of those changes may have detracted from, rather than enhanced, the

character derived from earlier periods, others have likely further enriched the place, and it is important to protect them as well. Why? Because preservation is not about freezing time; it is about managing change so that the salient qualities that have distinguished the past – all periods of the past – can remain active components of the landscape. Indiscriminately ignoring any period of the past will render a false impression of the history a preservation ordinance seeks to protect.

I have had the privilege of serving on the Maryland Governor's Consulting Committee on the National Register of Historic Places since 1992 and have chaired that committee for thirteen years. As a matter of practice we encourage the period of significance of proposed historic districts to be as inclusive as possible, often extending the time frame to 50 years from the present. We pursue this objective precisely because it is important for as much of the historical record to be recognized as is possible. In this way, post-World War II work is routinely included when it is interspersed with older properties that are the primary reason for listing.

**Significance of the building.** I find Mr. Thomas's assessment of the Beach Theater's historical significance or, more to the point, lack thereof, to be simplistic and misleading. The exterior of this building is clearly thoughtfully conceived in its arrangement and detail. It is also clearly of its time in the use of a number of elements, the lally columns conspicuous among them. Yet it speaks to the physical setting in a way that is sympathetic to tradition. The exterior does not, of course, directly allude to the nineteenth-century legacy of Cape May – what building of its period would have? – but it does possess some historicizing characteristics. The “Colonial” motifs of the exterior and the character they convey belong to a tradition of coastal resort architecture in the northeast that extends back to the 1880s – light in scale, festive in appearance – an architecture that is well-suited to the escapist nature of a seaside resort. Much of that legacy has been modified, demolished, or destroyed by fire long ago; early examples are hard to find. Perhaps William H. Lee was conscious of such work and was working from memories of places known in his youth. He may have sought to echo the lacy qualities of Cape May's Victorian porches in a language more respectable to his generation. Although there no record to document such possibilities, Lee clearly made his theater in Cape May different from his Ocean Theater in Wildwood, which is an unabashedly streamline modern design. It likewise differs in character from those theaters he was designing in urban areas at that time.

To dismiss the Beach Theater as merely a Wildwood transplant is fallacious on two grounds. First, it predates and is rendered in a different architectural vocabulary than the modernist work in Wildwood, most of which dates from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. Even if that was not the case, the assertion completely ignores the considerable significance of Wildwood's resort architecture, which has been the focus of a nationally known preservation effort for over a decade.

I would assess the Beach Theater as an important contributing work of the postwar era on the basis of its design as well as a place of entertainment. Like good infill

buildings today, it is different from earlier work, but speaks to the character of the place in a sympathetic way.

**Significance of the architect.** Historical significance can be found when a building is associated with an architect or other person of importance to the locale, state, or nation. Under the circumstances, I do not understand Mr. Thomas's dismissal of Lee's significance as an architect, especially when he included ten Lee buildings, including two theaters, in the recently issued Buildings of Pennsylvania: Philadelphia and Eastern Pennsylvania, of which he is the principal author, and the contents of which must necessarily be limited to work of substantial significance on the local level, at least. Lee had a prolific career that spanned several decades and extended over a wide radius from his Philadelphia base. From the 1930s into the 1950s, at least, he was the region's most prominent architect for movie theaters. In this respect, his career was similar to that of John Zink in Baltimore and Washington.

Many major cities in fact had an architect like Lee who specialized in theater design and dominated that field regionally during these decades. Like Lee, too, they did not do the grand movie palaces of the 1920s, a large portion of which were done by a small cadre of architects based in New York or Chicago. Instead, they worked in neighborhoods, suburban communities, and in small cities and large towns beyond the metropolitan periphery. Many of them were instrumental, too, in shaping a major transition in the motion picture business that entailed providing family entertainment through feature-length sound films in moderate-sized houses rather than the combination acts (silent movie, organ concert, live stage routine) of the movie palace.

Many of Lee's theaters were noteworthy examples of their type, and the Beach Theatre fully qualifies in this realm. History has not been kind to a major portion of this legacy. I suspect the biggest portion has been destroyed. The Erlen in Philadelphia, Norris in Norristown, and the Hill in Paulsboro, New Jersey, are among the numerous examples that were unsympathetically altered years ago. A few, such as the Landis in Vineland, have been restored to acclaim.

**Integrity.** Changes that have been made to the Beach Theater exterior in recent decades are unfortunate, but hardly compromise the building's integrity as it is defined in preservation practice. Indeed, commercial buildings are especially subject to the kinds of changes found in the case, with modified storefronts, loss of original signs, and damaged ornament. All of these are readily reversible, and such work has become routine in the historical rehabilitation of commercial buildings during the past three decades. Mr. Thomas's assessment in this regard seems to be grasping at straws.

The loss of the original theater auditorium through multi-plexing is regrettable (if perhaps essential for economic viability). Since Cape May's ordinance does not include interiors, changes to the interior are not regulated and do not affect the integrity of the building from a legal standpoint. The loss of original interiors is commonplace among commercial buildings and does not inhibit listing as a general practice. I am familiar with a number of examples where theaters that have lost their original interiors are

individually listed or are listed as contributing to historic districts, and I am sure a systematic survey would yield many such cases.

**Conclusion.** The Beach Theater is a significant example of post-World War II commercial architecture that is tied to traditions of building in coastal resort communities of the northeastern United States. It encompasses both historicizing and modernist elements in a lively manner that is fully in keeping with its seaside environment. It was designed by an architect who made a substantial contribution to the specialized field of movie theater building over a period of several decades. More than enough of its original components remain to convey a clear sense of its historic character.

Yours very sincerely,

Richard Longstreth  
Professor and Director  
Graduate Program in Historic Preservation

Past President, Society of Architectural Historians