

Beach Theatre, Cape May City Supplemental information

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This consultant received several good responses to a query she posted to the Vernacular Architecture Forum list-serve in December 2008. The query asked for other examples of strip malls/shopping centers with integrated theatres from the 1950s and 1960s, and for other examples of theatres with TV lounges from that era. Five respondents noted several shopping centers from the time period that had anchor buildings of theatres and department stores—two in Baltimore (Edmondson Avenue Shopping Center and Northwood Shopping Center), one in Huntridge, Nevada (a defense housing project now an inner Las Vegas suburb), and one in West Chester, PA, the latter anchored by a supermarket at one end and a theatre at the other end.

An excellent book about movie theatres, *Cinema Treasures: A New Look at Classic Movie Theatres* (St. Paul, MN: MBI Publishing, 2004) by Ross Melnick and Andrea Fuchs, devotes an entire chapter (6) to the impact of suburban “shopping centers” and TV on the movie theatre business in the 1950s.

According to Melnick and Fuchs, developer J.C. Nichols built the first “shopping center” in 1922 in Kansas City and is credited with coining the phrase. His center comprised two blocks of stores with a parking lot between them, built concurrently with a series of nearby apartments and intended to give local residents a one-stop retail hub for their everyday needs. A theatre was added in 1928. (Melnick and Fuchs, p. 121)

After World War II, residential construction in the suburbs exploded and developers quickly realized the “unique contribution of movie theatres in bringing incidental and routine shoppers into a multi-pronged American experience.” The marriage of movie theatres and malls thus boosted the revenues of both and offset the loss of downtown patrons and shoppers. Melnick and Fuchs cite the opening of a new movie house in 1960, named simply “The Mall” in Paramus, NJ at Bergen Mall, and note that by naming the theater after the shopping center or mall it serves, the theater ultimately becomes an appendage of the larger complex, often just another tenant. (Melnick and Fuchs, p. 121, 126)

Melnick and Fuchs comment that as shopping centers were molded to fit into their suburban surroundings, the interiors of their theatres changed with the times, too, and were routinely built without stages and a proscenium arch. Gone were the exotic Chinese, Indian, Egyptian and other motifs popular decades earlier, replaced with a sleek modernism that emphasized comfort and monetary economy. Some had a comfortable living-room type lobby with paneled wood walls, a massive chandelier, and full-length picture windows that looked out at the shopping center. One even had a fireplace at one end. (Melnick and Fuchs, p. 122)

The introduction of television in the late 1940s brought a new threat to movie theatre owners. Free and convenient, TV had the potential to make movie patrons stay at home in droves. In response,

theatre owners took a variety of approaches to counter its influence. Many opened TV lounges in their theatres so patrons could have the best of both worlds. At the ca. 1920 Majestic Theatre in Perth Amboy, NJ, a television lounge was added on the mezzanine level capable of seating 100 patrons with standing room for another 100 if needed during special broadcasts. When the Telenews Theatre opened in Chicago in 1949, it had a special “salon” that offered radio, TV, newspapers, magazines, and a telegraphic ticker. In 1951, United Paramount Theatres began projecting television broadcasts onto movie screens in selected theatres to deliver sports and other events. (Menick and Fuchs, p. 132)

Within these contexts, the Beach Theatre, with its wood-paneled lobby originally accented with crystal chandeliers certainly followed the trend for a living-room type interior that was popular for movie theatres at the time. Similarly, its TV lounge also followed the national trend for offering the new media in conjunction with movie showings. The Beach Theatre’s overall design of a small shopping center anchored by a movie theatre appears to be yet another instance of following the national trend for combining shopping with entertainment in a shopping center setting in the 1950s and 1960s. What sets the Beach apart from the others, however, is its small city setting. Where other shopping center theatres were located in the suburbs and were surrounded with spacious parking lots, the Beach is four blocks from the city’s commercial district on Washington Street and has on-street parking only.

Comments by Harry Belangee, Cape May resident and vice president of the Southern New Jersey Theatre Organ Society

Harry Belangee notes in his comments that the theatre was built to provide silent, draft-free heating and air conditioning (it was the first movie theatre south of Atlantic City that was air conditioned), and had an excellent projection angle with no keystoneing. Its design included the ability to present everything from Academy ratio to Cinemascope with stereophonic sound. The TV lounge (located to the left of the entrance, not to the right as this researcher originally thought) was larger than some screening rooms in today’s theatre multiplexes, and even 3D was presented. The TV lounge was designed so that if the planned second movie house was built, it would be the lobby; the second was never built, however.

Comments by George Thomas, author of Cape May: Queen of the Seaside Resorts:

In a recent email to Barbara Skinner, a Cape May City resident who is trying to save the theatre from demolition, Thomas noted:

Key issues are contemporary design -- use of new materials, as well as linking theater to mall --though this was in fact normal by the 1920s when theaters often include shops at the street and theater in the rear-- as in the Boyd in Philadelphia. Not sure how best to help your case. Hotel was way to the rear of the property so any related gasification plants would have been north of theater. The alternate strategy might be to suggest that there is archaeological information to be gained in the site - because it was where the city's largest and most important hotel once stood. That could buy some additional time. Not worth attacking board over its past -- when the last survey was undertaken in 1992, theater was 40 years old and not eligible by their standards.

I think the larger issue is the design. Lee is actually an important theater architect who was designing from the beginnings of the sound era -- original drawings for the theater are in the Athenaeum. Big problem is that theaters are losing out to other media -- and the beachfront is tremendously valuable. I think Hal Wheeler's scheme for Boyd in Phila is worth looking at -- but Cape May's height limits may make this difficult. Question would be -- could Cape May modify its zoning to permit building a tower above the theater - thereby keeping theater while gaining the value from the site?

William Lee, theatre architect

The website Cinematreasures.org lists 79 movie theatres designed by William Lee (see report by Harry Belangee for a complete list). Of these, the Beach Theatre is listed as one of 13 still currently operating as a movie theatre. Of the remainder, 26 are listed as closed or as closed/renovating/restoring, and 40 are listed as closed/demolished.

Lee is identified as the architect of 14 theatres in New Jersey, of which 8 have been demolished. Of those still standing, one is now a mall (the Regent built in 1945 in Wildwood), one is being renovated (the Landis in Vineland, built in 1937), two are open (the Beach built in 1950 in Cape May City and the Hill built in 1935 in Paulsboro), and two are closed (the Rio built ca. 1925? now a church and the Arlo built in 1949, both in Camden). Thus, the Beach Theatre is the newest of Lee's New Jersey theatres and a scan of his other theatres shows that the Beach may have been the last theatre he designed.

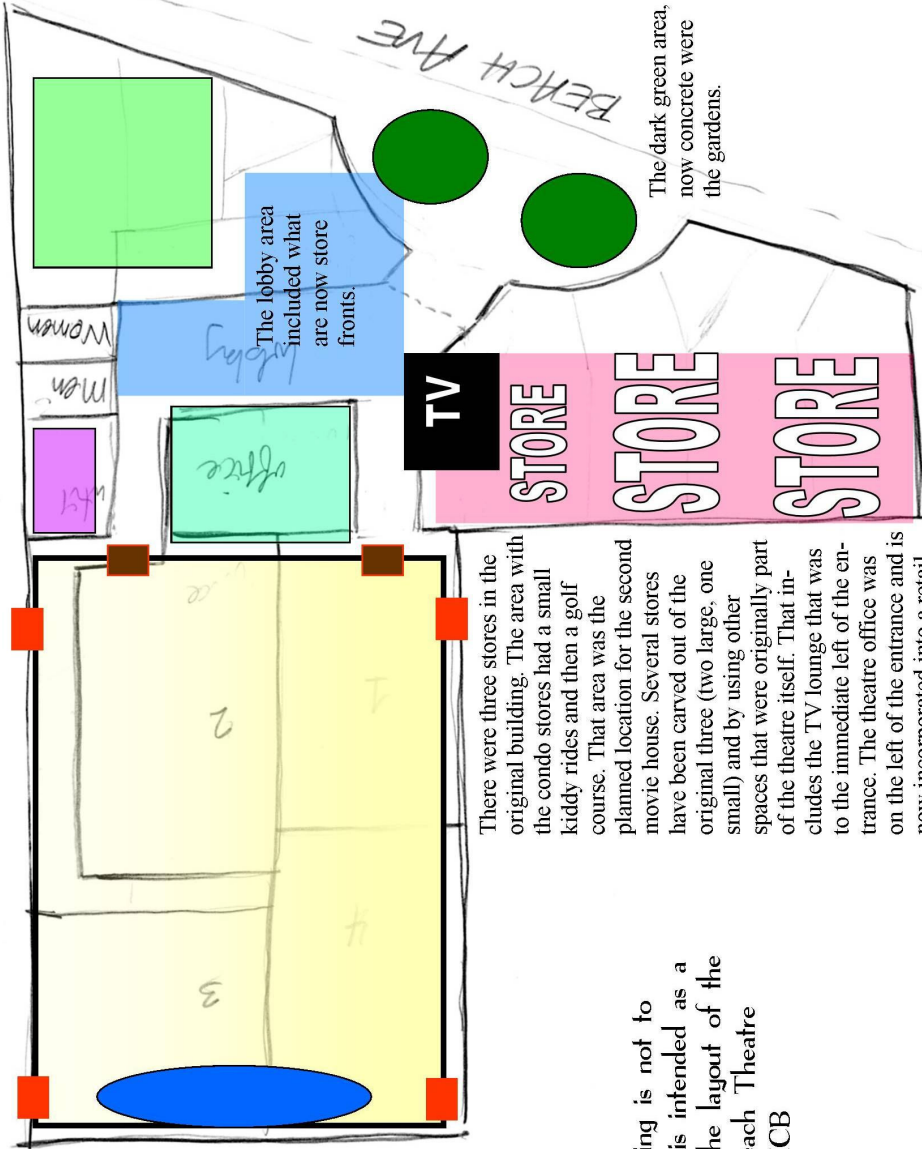
In 1949, Lee designed the City Line Center Theatre as part of a strip mall (City Line Center) that included a supermarket, other retail stores, and a huge parking lot on City Line Avenue in Philadelphia. It was done in the Art Moderne style, was closed in 1990 or 1991, and after extensive renovations reopened as a T.J. Maxx retail store. Satellite photos show the theatre was placed in the corner of an L-shaped strip shopping center and that part of the corner fronting the parking lot and containing the theatre entrance was 2-stories tall with retail on the first floor and offices on the second floor.

<http://maps.live.com/#JnE9eXAUzYwMCtjaXR5K2xpbmUrYXZlbnVlJTJjK3BoaWxhZGVscGhpYSUyYytwYSU3ZXNzdC4wJTdlcGcuMSZiYj00MC42MTEwNzEwMTA4Njc5JTdlLTc1LjM3OTk0NjU3ODANjclN2U0MC42MDk0NTc0MzA4NTY0JTdlLTc1LjM4MTY0MzY4NDk3Mg==>

Floor plan of the Beach Theatre

The original plans are in the possession of a former theatre manager who was contacted by this researcher, but the call was never returned and he appears not to want to get involved with what has become a controversial project in the city. A quick sketch of the floor plan is included on page 4. It was drawn by this researcher and annotated by Harry Belangee.

The layout of the current screening rooms is, I believe, accurate. The light yellow colored box is the original layout. The blue area indicates the original stage and screen. The red is the location of the original exits. The light green area was the projection booth with mechanical equipment on the first floor. The brown boxes are the original entrances to the movie house, they are still in place. Bathrooms are not moved. Purple area was oil burner and other mechanical equipment. Green area was Titelmans restaurant, now Zoes, that layout is unchanged.



NOT TO SCALE

Beach Theatre
Cape May City, NJ

There were three stores in the original building. The area with the condo stores had a small kiddie rides and then a golf course. That area was the planned location for the second movie house. Several stores have been carved out of the original three (two large, one small) and by using other spaces that were originally part of the theatre itself. That includes the TV lounge that was to the immediate left of the entrance. The theatre office was on the left of the entrance and is now incorporated into a retail area.

This drawing is not to scale and is intended as a guide to the layout of the original Beach Theatre building. HCB