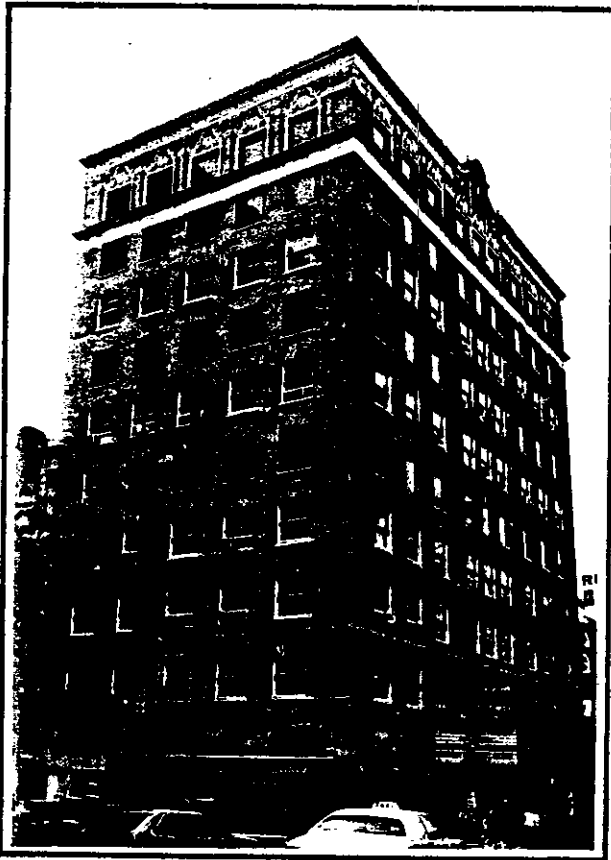

OLYMPIA THEATER & OFFICE BUILDING

174 EAST FLAGLER STREET

Designation Report



City of Miami

REPORT OF THE CITY OF MIAMI PLANNING DEPARTMENT
TO THE HERITAGE CONSERVATION BOARD
ON THE POTENTIAL DESIGNATION OF
THE OLYMPIA THEATER AND OFFICE BUILDING
174 E. FLAGLER STREET
AS A HERITAGE CONSERVATION ZONING DISTRICT

Prepared by Sarah E. Eaton 3-11-83
Historic Preservation Consultant Date

Accepted by Charles Spivey 3/22/83
Chairman, Heritage Conservation Board Date

Designated by the Miami City Commission

Ordinance No. **9643**

Date JUN 15 1983

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I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Historic Name:

Olympia Theater and Office Building

Current Name:

Gusman Cultural Center
Olympia Building

Location:

174 E. Flagler Street
Miami, Florida 33132

Present Owner:

City of Miami
3500 Pan American Drive
Miami, Florida 33133

Present Occupant:

City of Miami Off-Street Parking Authority
190 N.E. 3rd Street
Miami, Florida 33132
and
Various Commercial Tenants

Present Use:

Entertainment and Commercial

Present Zoning District:

C-3

HC Zoning Overlay District:

HC-1

Tax Folio Number:

01-0112-10-1010

Boundary Description of HC Zoning District:

Lots 1 and 2 and the southerly 55 feet of Lot 3 and the northerly 45 feet of Lots 18, 19, and 20, less the westerly 2 inches of the northerly 65 feet of Lot 2, of Block 121, of the plat of MIAMI NORTH, as recorded in Plat Book B at Page 41, of the Public Records of Dade County, Florida.

HC Zoning Classification:

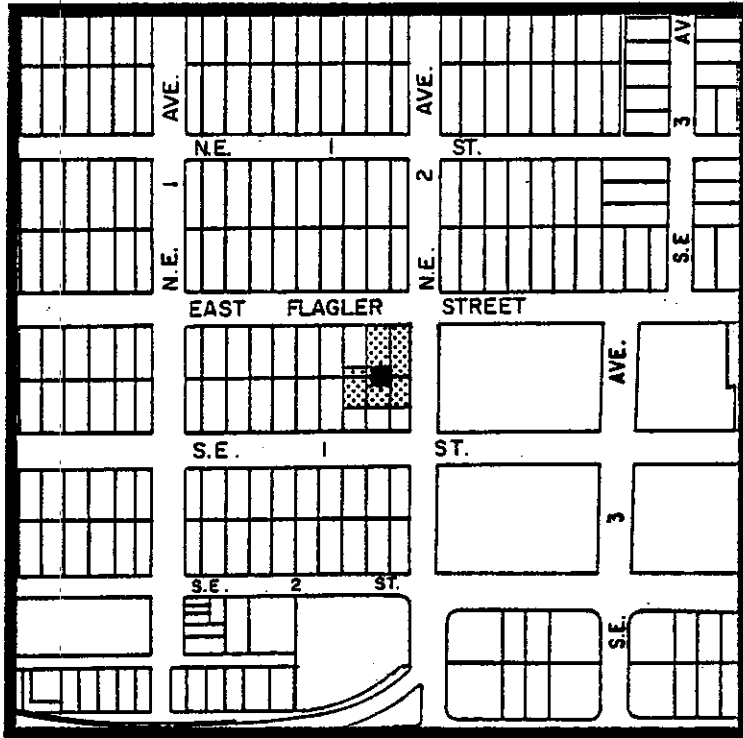
Historic Site

Dade County Historic Survey Rating:

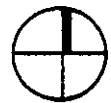
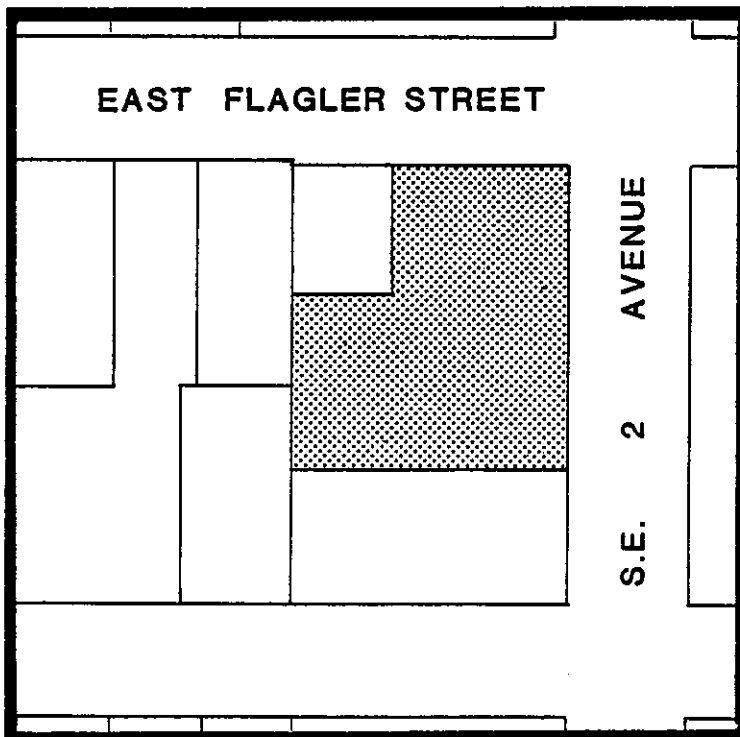
Architectural Significance - 1
Historical Significance - 1
Contextural Significance - 1

OLYMPIA THEATER & OFFICE BUILDING

174 EAST FLAGLER STREET



location



site plan

II. SIGNIFICANCE

Statement of Significance:

The Olympia Theater and Office Building is significant as an outstanding example of theater design and is noted for the quality of its details, materials, and craftsmanship. Designed by one of America's most prominent theater architects, the Olympia is also a unique example of Mediterranean Revival style architecture.

The Olympia is Miami's most outstanding theater and, together with the Tampa Theater in Tampa, is one of only two atmospheric theaters which survive in Florida. Designed by Chicago architect John Eberson, who created the concept of the "atmospheric," the Olympia is regularly cited as one of the finer examples of his work. Eberson theaters created for the audience the illusion of sitting in "a magnificent amphitheater under a glorious moonlit sky. . . an Italian garden, a Persian court, a Spanish patio, or a mystic Egyptian temple-yard. . .where friendly stars twinkled and wisps of clouds drifted." In the Olympia, patrons were treated to a large Italian garden, closed in on three sides by the walls of an imposing castle. A duplication of the Florida sky appeared overhead.

The Olympia Theater and Office Building is also an outstanding example of the application of Mediterranean Revival styling to a ten story commercial building. Despite the popularity of the Mediterranean Revival style in South Florida, the style was not generally utilized on tall buildings. With its elaborate window treatments, terra cotta and wrought iron detailing, and use of brick, the Olympia is therefore unique in Miami.

Relationship to Criteria for Designation:

The Olympia Theater and Office Building is eligible for designation under the following criteria:

5. Embodies those distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or method of construction.

The Olympia Theater and Office Building is an outstanding example of atmospheric theater design and is one of only two which survive in Florida. The building is also a unique example of the application of Mediterranean Revival style detailing to a ten story commercial building.

6. Is an outstanding work of a prominent designer or builder.

The Olympia Theater was designed by John Eberson, America's foremost atmospheric theater designer, and is one of his finer works.

7. Contains elements of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship of outstanding quality or which represent a significant innovation or adaptation to the South Florida environment.

The Olympia Theater and Office Building is particularly noteworthy for the excellence of its craftsmanship, materials, and detailing, as expressed throughout the theater and lobby space.

III. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Date of Erection:

Construction on the Olympia Theater and Office Building was begun in May 1925, and the grand opening took place on February 11, 1926.

Architect:

The architect for the Olympia was John Eberson of Chicago. Eberson was America's foremost atmospheric theater designer.

Builder/Contractor:

The contractor for the Olympia was George Fuller and Co. Robert E. Hall of New York served as Associate Engineer.

Historical Context:

The Olympia Theater and Office Building was built by Paramount Enterprises, Inc. at a cost of approximately \$1,500,000. It replaced the Airdrome, an open-air theater which had occupied the same site. The theater was named by Mrs. A. E. Rickmers, from whom the land was leased.

John Eberson, who had designed his first atmospheric theater, the Majestic Theater in Houston, just two years before, was selected by Paramount as architect. Paramount sought to build one of the most elaborate theaters in the South, and, in his almost startling departure from the accepted style in theater decoration, Eberson created one of the region's most beautiful and elaborately equipped theaters. Unlike the Majestic, the Olympia was designed with air conditioning, and is said to be the first air conditioned theater in the South.

The Olympia was one of the finest theaters in the country for vaudeville performances, drawing such entertainers as Sophie Tucker, Joe E. Brown, Martha Raye, and others. The theater featured vaudeville entertainment for 28 years until its closing in 1954.

The Olympia Theater was renovated in 1972 by Morris Lapidus of Miami Beach, and the Theater and Office Building was donated to the City of Miami by Maurice Gusman in 1975.

IV. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

Description of Exterior:

The Olympia Theater and Office Building is a ten story rectangular structure with nine bays across the north (front) facade. The theater itself is contained in a wing which extends to the south of the building. The building is of steel frame construction and is faced with pressed brick in running bond. It is topped with a flat roof with parapet.

A large unadorned terra cotta entablature divides both the first and second stories and the ninth and tenth stories. A smaller entablature separates the second and third stories. Elaborate terra cotta detailing on the tenth story supplies the office building's major ornamentation. Elaborate terra cotta window surrounds feature double Flemish scroll pediments with a coat of arms in the center and flanking arabesques. Windows are flanked by decorative pilasters. The building's cornice, with its decorated arabesque frieze, is broken in the center three bays on the north facade by a recessed scroll pediment containing a plaque with Fleur de Lis.

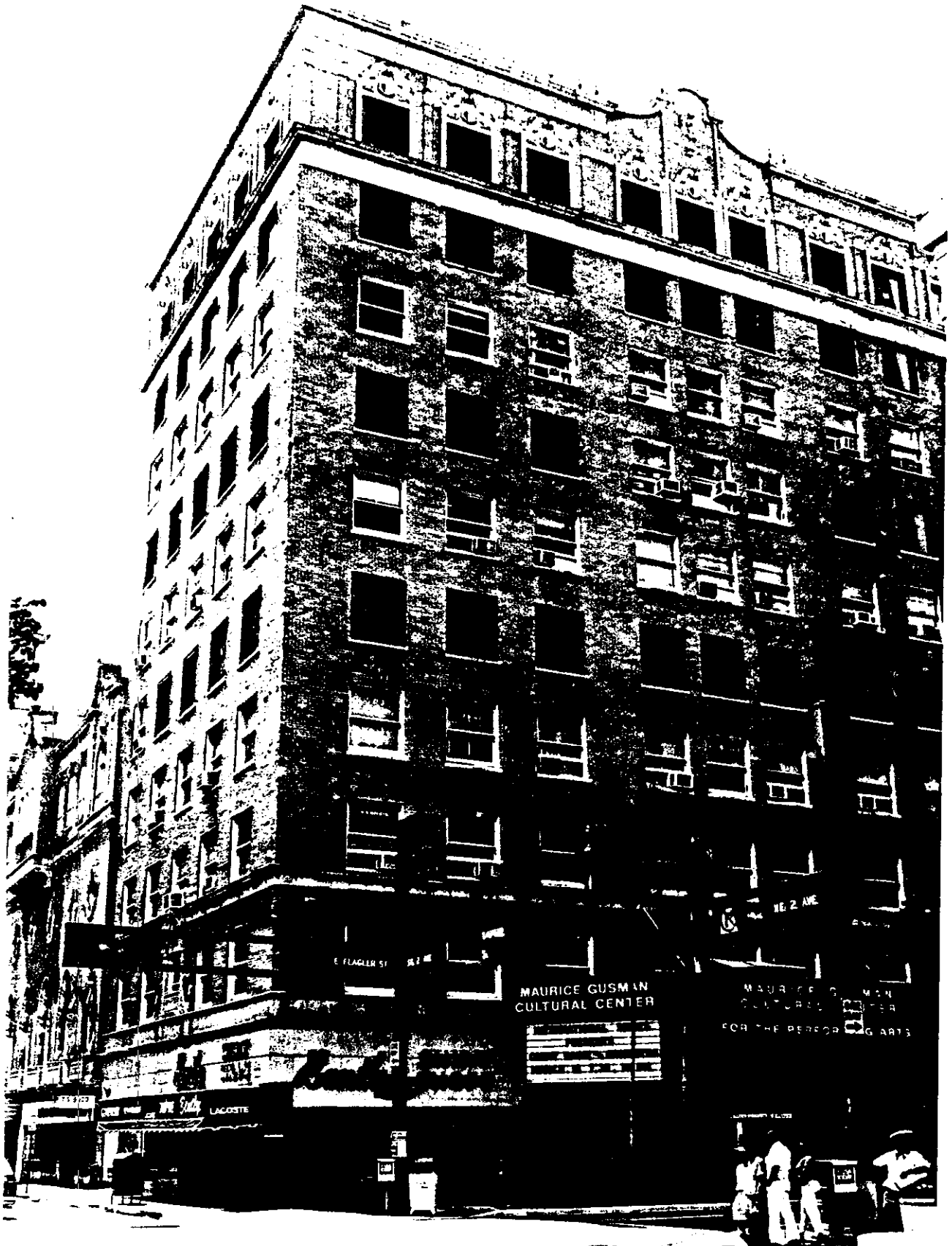
An additional decorated window with a wrought iron grille is located in the center bay on the second story on the building's east facade.

Many of the building's original windows featuring wooden double hung sash with one over one lights remain. Some, however, have been replaced with fixed sheet glass. In addition, the first story storefronts have been completely altered, although the main entrance remains in the center.

In contrast to the office building, the theater wing is highly ornamental. Seven windows with double Flemish scroll pediments rise above the altered first story storefronts. The end windows feature elaborate terra cotta detailing, and all are fronted with wrought iron grilles. Quatrefoil windows are located directly above these windows. The roof line is broken by Flemish scroll pediments in the center and at each end bay. The center pediment projects outward and is supported by four brackets.

Description of Site:

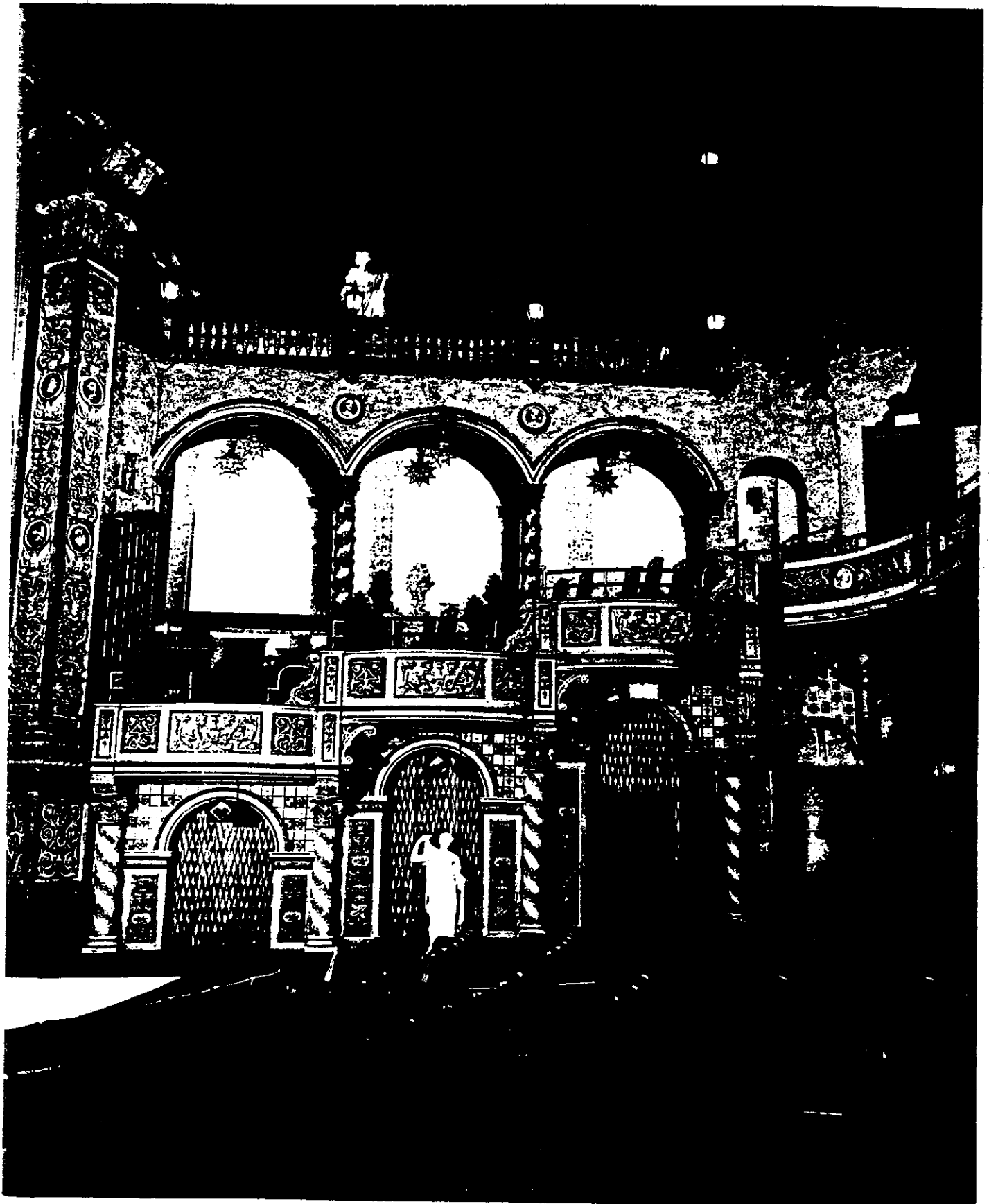
The Olympia Theater and Office Building is located in the heart of downtown Miami. Its site on the southwest corner of E. Flagler Street and S.E. 2 Avenue and fronts directly on the sidewalk.



Olympia Theater and Office Building
174 E. Flagler Street
East and north (front) facades
1983



Olympia Theater and Office Building
174 E. Flagler Street
East and north (front) facades (building under construction)
1925
(Courtesy of City of Miami Off-Street Parking Authority)



Olympia Theater and Office Building
174 E. Flagler Street
Interior of theater
1983

Olympia Theater and Office Building

174 E. Flagler Street

Interior of theater

1926

(Courtesy of City of Miami Off-Street Parking Authority)

V. PLANNING CONTEXT

Present Trends and Conditions:

The Gusman Cultural Center (Olympia Theater) and Olympia Building are managed for the City of Miami by the Off-Street Parking Authority. The office building is in need of extensive interior renovation to upgrade its marketability. The theater is undergoing restoration in phases, the most current of which will be a reconstruction of the original ticket booth.

Conservation Objectives:

The Olympia Theater and Office Building is proposed for historic designation by both the City of Miami and the National Register of Historic Places. The official recognition of outstanding historic and architectural significance provided by the designations, and tax incentives available through the National Register listing, are expected to attract private developers to rehabilitate the Olympia Office Building. The project will be advertised as a unified development with a long term lease on the office building. It is expected that lease revenues from the rehabilitated office building will assist in needed restoration of the theater building. Additional funds for the theater restoration will need to be generated through private donations, increased usage of the theater, and improved usage of internal public spaces for restaurants and other supporting services.

These conservation objectives can best be achieved by maintaining the present zoning of the property. An HC-1 zoning overlay district will maintain the existing zoning, requiring only the review of physical changes to the property.

VI. HC ZONING ELEMENTS

Boundaries:

The boundaries of the HC zoning district have been drawn to include the entire tract of land owned by the City of Miami.

Major Exterior Surfaces Subject to Review:

Only the north (front) and east facades shall be considered major exterior surfaces subject to review.

Interior Surfaces Subject to Review:

All interior spaces of the theater which are customarily open to the public shall be subject to review. This includes the theater itself, the lobbies, and mezzanine. Review of alterations to these spaces shall be guided by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

Major Landscape Features Subject to Review:

The major landscape features subject to review shall include all features which are subject to requirements for tree removal permits, as set forth in Chapter 17 of the City Code.

VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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