
Tower Theater

1508 SW 8th Street (Calle Ocho)

Designation Report



Historic and Environmental Preservation Board

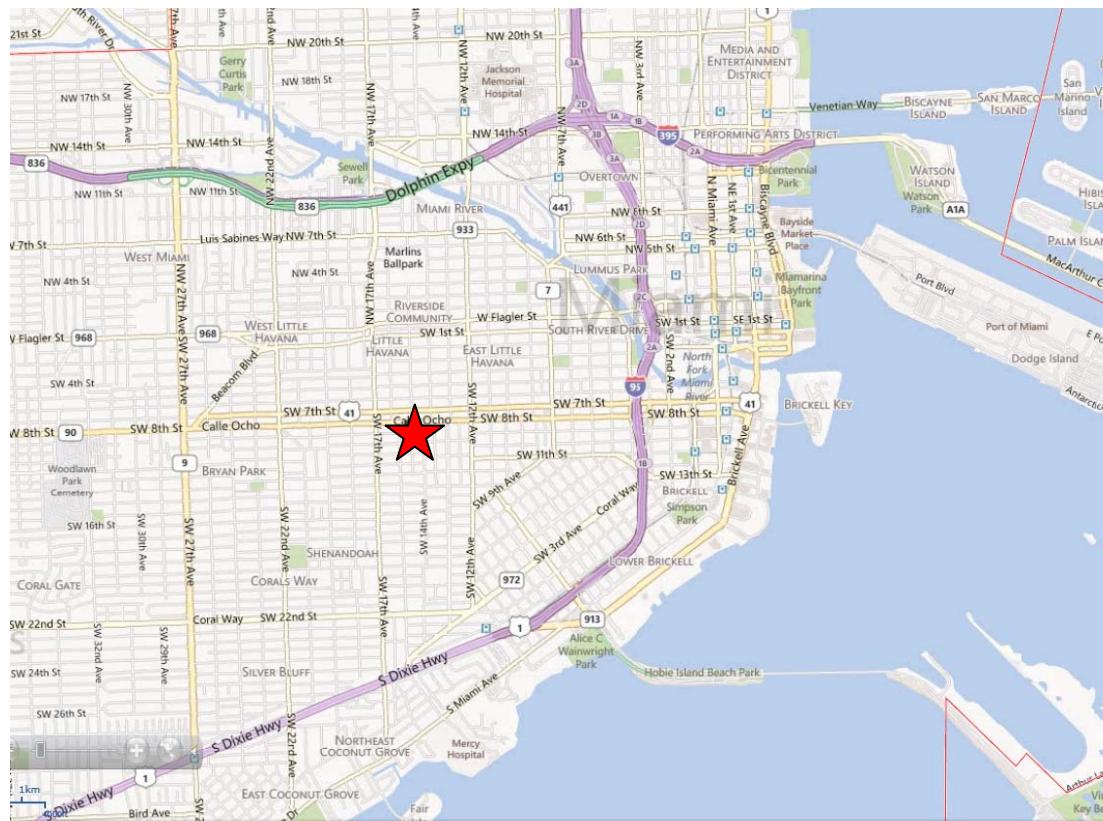
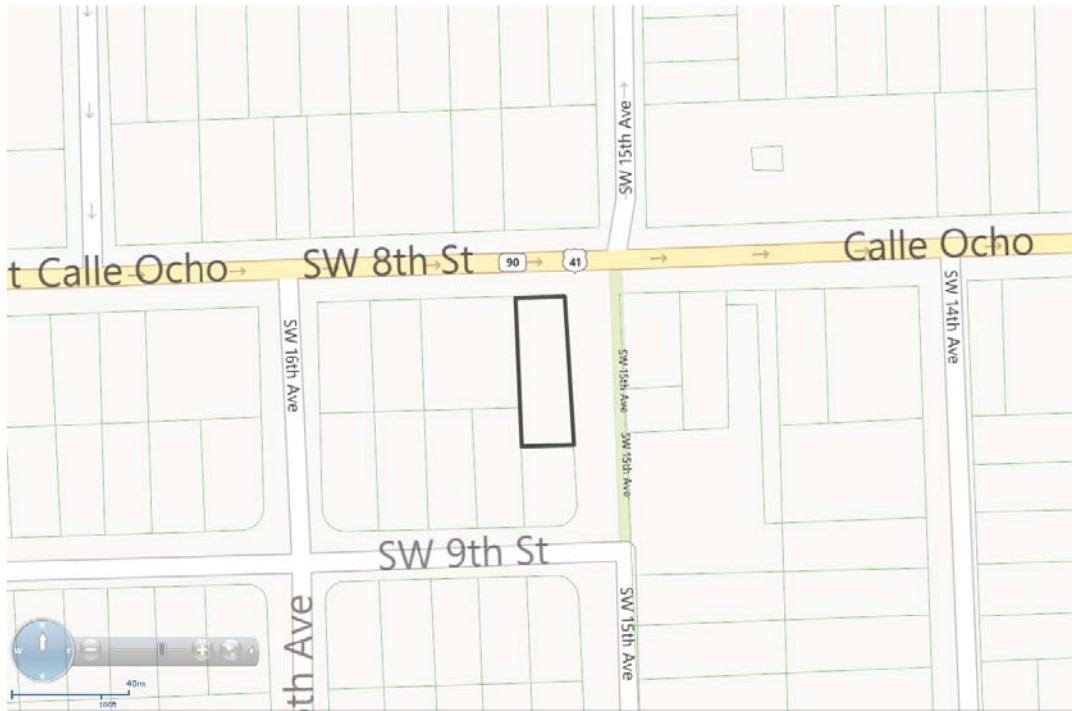


City of Miami

REPORT OF THE CITY OF MIAMI
PRESERVATION OFFICER
TO THE HISTORIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION BOARD
ON THE DESIGNATION OF THE
TOWER THEATER
AS A HISTORIC SITE

Written by Marina Novaes
May 2013

Location and site maps



Contents

- I. General Information
- II. Statement Of Significance
- III. Description
- IV. Application of Criteria
- V. Bibliography
- VI. Photographs

I- General Information

Historic Name: Tower Theater

Current Name: Tower Theater

Date of Construction: 1926 (redesigned in 1931)

Architect: Robert Law Weed

Location: 1500-1508 SW 8th Street (Calle Ocho)

Present Owner: City of Miami

Present use: Theater, cultural center

Zoning: T6- 8- O

Folio No.: 01-4110-063-0230

Boundary (Legal Description): SHENANDOAH PB 8-90 LOT 5 & N 37.2 FT OF LOT 6
BLK 2 LOT SIZE 62.670 X 155 OR 15329-7063 1291 3
OR 12271-1476 0984 00

Setting: The Tower Theater sits in the southwest corner of SW 8th Street (Calle Ocho) and SW 15th Avenue

Integrity: The Tower Theater has witnessed a number of significant alterations throughout its history. The original theater (1926) was designed in the Mediterranean Revival style with a tile roof, square tower on the northwest corner, and a Spanish-inspired interior.

The theater was fully redesigned in 1931 in the Art Deco style. The architectural features of this designation report reflect this alteration. The Tower Theater possesses integrity of setting, feeling, design, association, and location.

II- Statement of Significance

The first movie theaters were not designed as the theaters we know today. The first movies were shown in regular rooms where "Kinetoscopes" could be lined up. Kinetoscopes were small film watching devices invented by Thomas Edison, a box with a light source, a lens, and the film reel inside and a small viewer for the patron to watch the movie.¹ This device would allow only one viewer at a time, and the "movie" would be of girls dancing, prizefights or short scenes alike.

In the late 1800s, the Lumiere brothers projected the first motion picture on a screen in Paris. They developed Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope into a combination of camera and projector which they called "Cinematograph."

In the United States, the first projected film was seen on April 23, 1895 at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York City, projected by "Edison's Vitascope" [an American version of the French Cinematograph] onto a screen of muslin stretched within an ornate gold frame. The show, advertised as "Edison's latest marvel", included short five-minute films of dances, prizefight and crashing waves in "Rough Seas at Dover" all to a cheering crowd.²

Soon, the short films were incorporated to "vaudeville" shows which were a variety of acts including comedy and music. As movies became more popular and profitable small businesses started to clear merchandise from a section of their establishment, bringing chairs and hanging a sheet to project the short film in the rear of the store; a box would be placed at the entry way to sell tickets (the box office). The "store show" or "theatrelet" was born and flourished from 1902-1917.³

The next step was the "Nickelodeon" theater which started to appear around 1905. The "Nickelodeon" was the first permanent theater but, still extremely rudimentary; the term stands for, "nickel" meant for the price of \$0.05 admission and "Odeon" from the Greek word for covered theater.⁴ The Nickelodeon was a small unadorned building, similar to a Kinetoscope parlor with the difference of having only one screen at the front stage where a sheet was stretched to project the movie and chairs or benches lined up for the clientele (an average of 200 person capacity). The Nickelodeon usually had an area for a piano or

¹ Baxter, Karen Bode; Maloney, Timothy P; Ford, Mandy K."Beverly Theater"- NRHP nomination report. MO. 2005

² <http://www.davidandnoelle.net/moviehistory.htm>

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

band to play in the stage area since the first movies were mute; the "show" would consist of four films, five to fifteen minutes each in length that would be played as many as twenty times a day.⁵ Typically the Nickelodeons had exotic names such as Dreamland, Aladdin, or Paradise.

The Nickelodeons were the first to feature advertising posters in front of the theaters to attract customers. Subsequently, the building's façade started to be adorned with Cupids, caryatids, and other features; light bulbs were used by the hundreds outlining decorative motives and the names of the "nicks" spelled out in large letters; the façade became recessed and the "box office" was placed in this small vestibule area. Although its exterior was getting more attractive, the interior still had a lot to be improved from accommodations to the safety of customers; after many complaints and the high demand for the product, a new building type was created: the Movie Palace.⁶

Movie palaces boomed in the 1920s; they were usually in urban centers constructed for first-run movies, with 1000-5000 seats including a balcony or two and a mezzanine, lavish decoration recalling past architectural styles, a liveried staff of ushers and doormen, a first class orchestra and a large pipe organ for matinees when no orchestra was present, and a complete stage and fly setup for the presentation of live shows to enhance the silent movies. Designers wanted to be on the cutting edge of popular architecture, but they also sought to express purpose of the theater through its architecture.⁷

The aim of theater designers was to create an architectural fantasy full of exotic ornaments and colors giving the theater a magical atmosphere. Rich extravagant adornment was considered necessary to express the entertainment and fantasy of going to the movies and to make the patrons feel like millionaires forgetting their daily urban industrial existence and relaxing in a land of romance.⁸ Atmospheric theaters (as they became known) were meant to create a space of fantasy and relaxation usually recreating an outdoor setting.

With the Great Depression, the movie palaces began to run into financial difficulties giving opportunity for the small neighborhood theaters comeback as the movie industry was still appealing and productive. The new theaters of the 1930s tended to be designed in the Art Deco, Art Moderne or Streamline styles

⁵ Baxter, Karen Bode; Maloney, Timothy P; Ford, Mandy K."Beverly Theater"- NRHP nomination report. MO. 2005

⁶ <http://www.davidandnoelle.net/moviehistory.htm>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

not only because of cost but also because it was the architectural trend of the time. The older movie palaces were designed with the richness and luxury that people did not want to be reminded during the Depression years. In addition, all of the architectural details were the principal cause of acoustical problems the early talkies faced. The Art Deco buildings, with their streamlined details based on geometric patterns often flat were much more suited acoustically to talkies than the baroque detailing of the movie palaces.⁹

At the same time, Art Deco's debut in Paris made the style synonymous with elegance, an image that was carried over to the United States and allowed the theaters to retain some of the elegance and connotations of money without being ostentatious.¹⁰

The Tower Theater at 1508 SW 8th Street was built in 1926. It is one of the four oldest theaters still standing in Miami along with the Lyric (c. 1913), Strand (1918), and the Gusman (1925)¹¹, both the Lyric and Gusman are designated historic by the City of Miami and listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP).

At the time of its inauguration the Miami Daily News and Metropolis announced:

Miami's newest movie will open Thursday at 7 pm, when the Tower Theater, SW 8th St and 15th Ave, inaugurate its first performance with a showing of Bebe Daniels in "The Palm Beach Girl."

According to J. A. Donnley, vice-president of the Rodendor Corp., owners and operators of a group of moving picture houses in north and south, a prologue consisting of a number of bathing beauties will take the stage before the picture begins.

The theater was completed recently and is one of the most attractive in Miami. The seating capacity is approximately 1,000. The interior has been done in a semi-Spanish style of architecture, with indirect lighting effect.

One of the latest type pipe organ has been installed and later; it is contemplated; singers will supplement the program. The theater will be under the management of Stanley Spoehr.

⁹ Baxter, Karen Bode; Maloney, Timothy P; Ford, Mandy K."Beverly Theater"- NRHP nomination report. MO. 2005

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Cordle, Ina Paiva. "State grant may restore Tower Theater as Little Havana gem." Miami Today, 9/22/1994.

Arctic Nu-Air ventilating system has been installed, insuring complete circulation of cold air at all times.¹²

A Miami Herald article affirmed the success of the theater inauguration stating:

...At the end of the 7 o'clock showing, the audience was given a treat in the appearance of Giuseppe Argentino, noted tenor, who sang two numbers. Stanley Spoehr, manager of the Tower, announced that Mr. Argentino has been engaged to sing each night for one week as an added attraction.

Jack Holt and Noah Berry in Zane Grey's "The Light of Western Stars" is the picture for Saturday at 3, 7, and 9 pm. A Lloyd Hamilton comedy and novelty reels will be featured.¹³

The brand-new Tower Theater, named for its distinctive Mediterranean Revival style corner tower, was built to serve the rapidly expanding population of Miami's southwest neighborhoods.¹⁴ Henry J. Lawrence was the architect and Herman Hasse the decorator. The Tower Theater was originally a small "movie palace" on the Tamiami Trail (SW 8th ST) commercial corridor; it also served as a neighborhood theater due to its proximity to residential areas such as Riverside and Shenandoah.

Following the trend of the period, the Tower Theater went through a total renovation and makeover in 1931 getting a fashionable Art Deco new look, not because of financial difficulties but to be beautified architecturally and modernized with the latest technological equipment – sound system. The new owners, Wolfson-Meyer Theatrical Enterprise of Miami (Wometco group) closed the theater for a little more than a month for the renovation.¹⁵

The entire interior was covered with balsam wool, a fireproof and sound-absorbing material to proportionate sound clarity and was redecorated in the most sophisticated Art Deco futuristic gaze. The exterior got a total makeover as well; the innovative Art Deco façade was the first applied to a theater in Miami.

¹² Anonymous, "Tower Theather, Newest Movie; to Open Doors – Bebe Daniels in "Palm Beach Girl" Is First Offering" – Miami Daily News and Metropolis – December 1926.

¹³ Anonymous, "Capacity Audience at Opening of Tower" The Miami Herald. December 11, 1926.

¹⁴ Eaton, Sarah. "Tower Theater" national register nomination draft. 1993

¹⁵ Anonymous, "Tower Theater Opens as Wometco Member" Miami Herald. October 3, 1931.

A 40-foot structural steel tower was erected on the roof with neon lighting that could be seen from blocks away.¹⁶

Nelson Tower, the theater manager at the time, said upon the 1931 inauguration event:

A large percentage of Tower Theater patrons live in the community surrounding it and are residents of Miami the entire year. For that reason, the admission fees will be low enough to meet their desires. Two shows will be given every evening at 7 and 9 o'clock, and on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays continuous showings will prevail, beginning at 2 pm. Many proven talking picture hits are in store for Tower Theater patrons.¹⁷

The architect of the 1931 renovation was Robert Law Weed (1897-1961), a native of Sewickley, Pennsylvania who studied at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. Weed moved to Miami in 1919 after serving in the World War I; he began his architectural career designing mansions in Palm Beach and Miami Beach, many in the Mediterranean Revival style.¹⁸

Weed designed numerous prestigious buildings among the most prominent are: the Miami Shores Elementary School; Florida Tropical Home at the Chicago "Century of Progress" exhibition; General Electric Model Home in Miami Beach; Burdines's Blvd Shop; Shrine Building; General Tire Building; Miami Beach Burdines's Department Store; Dania Jai Alai Fronton; as well as U.S. consulates in the Congo and Lagos, Nigeria.

In 1946, Weed was assigned the supervision of the master plan for the new 245-acre University of Miami main campus along with associate architects, Marion I. Manley and Robert Murray Little. Weed and Manley designed the Oscar E. Dooley Memorial Classroom Building in 1947, which set the International Style as the predominant style of the campus.¹⁹

As time passed by, the theater's clientele changed as the neighborhood welcomed exiles from Cuba. In response to the growing Cuban population, the Tower Theater added Spanish subtitles to its movies in the early 1960s – the first

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Hooks, Kisa. "General Tire Building" designation report draft for Janus Research, 2003

¹⁹ Ibid

theater in Miami to do so. Besides making it possible to enjoy the movie, many Cuban exiles recall that subtitles helped them learn English as well.²⁰

The Tower Theater was also used for special events in Little Havana – as the neighborhood became known after a great number of Cuban exiles moved into the area. In 1963, the premiere of a film entitled: "Cuba Ayer" was held at the Tower Theater, television station WTVJ covered the event and showed the exiles attending the gala premiere on the evening news. According to historian Arva Parks, "Calle Ocho [SW 8th ST] is the Cuban exiles' Plymouth Rock, and the Tower Theater, as seen in the 1963 film premiere, is one of the street's most significant buildings."²¹ After almost sixty years of operation, the theater closed its doors to the public in 1984.²²

The Tower Theater was purchased in 1987 as part of the Latin Quarter Specialty Center, the Latin Quarter Cultural Center of Miami, Inc., a nonprofit organization founded by business owners in the area. The organization was founded to buy, renovate, and turn the theater into a performing arts center. In December 1991, the City of Miami purchased the theater and commissioned the firm of Bermello, Ajamil and Partners, Inc. to rehabilitate the theater as a center for Spanish language films, inter-American film festivals and a showcase for growing professional performing arts organizations.²³

Today, the Tower Theater is operated and managed by Miami-Dade College in partnership with the City of Miami.

²⁰ Parks, Arva. "The Tower Theater" for the City of Miami. 1993

²¹ Parks, Arva "A Matter of History, Memory, Respect". Miami Herald, October 25, 1993.

²² Ibid

²³ Eaton, Sarah. "Tower Theater" national register nomination draft. 1993

III- Description

The Tower Theater is a two-story building, rectangular in plan constructed of concrete block with stucco finish and topped by a flat roof. The building was added its Art Deco characteristics such as decorative zigzagged stucco banding, stepped parapet, glass block, rooftop steel tower, and marquee in the 1931 renovation.

The rectangular plan of the Tower Theater, which measures approximately 63 feet by 155 feet, is broken into three components. The largest of these is the auditoriums part- two-story mass. Sit in front of this component is the building's main (north) façade, which contains the lobby, foyer, and concession stand. This section, which is approximately 46 feet wide and 20 feet deep, incorporates virtually all of the building's architectural detailing, is slightly shorter in height than the theater block, and is offset to the west; the third component is a one-story corner section located in the eastern third of the north façade which contains a lounge.²⁴

The main façade of the theater is symmetrical in composition and is vertically separated into three main divisions. The center bay contains the primary entrance, the theater signage, a stepped parapet, and the steel tower on the roof over a stepped octagonal base. Metal casement windows with eight-by-eight lights are located in the end bays on the second story. The main façade has a recessed entrance where the metal ticket booth (box office) is located. Two metal poster boxes with small light bulbs wrapping the displayed poster are placed on the east and west bays. Two metal fluted columns frame the recessed entrance and a door is located at the end of the west bay.²⁵

Located immediately above the first story is a curvilinear concrete marquee which is wrapped in a fluted metal sheet. The marquee displays the theater's name in neon lighting; above the marquee is a projecting, L-shaped metal sign with the name "Tower" on both faces and light bulbs cover the edge's face. The letters are channel capsule with neon. Also projecting is a triangular, five-line sign which provides space to announce the featured attraction. The building's parapet steps upward in the center bay and at the rear of both sides and is

²⁴ Eaton, Sarah. "Tower Theater" national register nomination draft. 1993

²⁵ Ibid

outlined with a stucco band with a zigzag motif painted blue and white. Behind the stepped parapet the base which supports the steel tower is found.²⁶

The one-story section east of the main façade is rounded and has ceramic tiles on its lower half; the top section is smooth stucco. A glass block window wraps the round corner.

The east, west, and south façades are virtually devoid of any architectural detailing, the east and south façades contain steel exit doors with concrete cantilevered eyebrows above. A new waved colorful tile planter was added to the east façade. Tile scuppers drain the roof. The southwest corner of the building is defined by its concave shape while the southeast corner contains a small rooftop projection.²⁷

The building was rehabilitated in 1994; the renovations altered significantly the theater's interior which is not being considered in this designation. Only the exterior of the building will be subject to review.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

IV- Application of Criteria for Designation

The Tower Theater has significance as it relates to the historic heritage of Miami and possesses integrity of setting, feeling, design, association, and location. The property is eligible for designation as a historic site under the criteria (3), (5) and (6) as numbered in Sec. 23-4 (a), of Chapter 23 of the City Code.

(3) Exemplify the historical, cultural, political, economical, or social trends of the community;

The Tower Theater was built in the Miami land boom era (1920s) when the southwest area of the city was developed into suburban neighborhoods (Riverside and Shenandoah); followed by the Tamiami Trail construction which became a main commercial corridor along with Flagler Street. The Tower Theater went through a total renovation in 1931, becoming a landmark in the neighborhood which was transformed into a Cuban enclave after the Cuban Revolution. Little Havana (as the neighborhood became known) was the destination for many Cuban exiles who learned English watching movies with Spanish subtitles at the Tower Theater, and for many, it was also an introduction to American culture.

(5) Embody those distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or method of construction;

The Tower Theater went through a total renovation and makeover in 1931 to be beautified architecturally and modernized with the latest technological equipment – sound system. The innovative Art Deco façade was the first applied to a theater in Miami; a 40-foot structural steel tower was erected on the roof with neon lighting that could be seen from blocks away turning the building into a neighborhood landmark. In 1994, the building went through a restoration which brought the theater's façade back to its splendorous Art Deco gaze of 1931. Today, the Tower Theater is a unique example of Art Deco Theater within the City of Miami.

(6) Are an outstanding work of a prominent designer or builder.

The architect of the 1931 renovation was Robert Law Weed (1897-1961), a native of Sewickley, Pennsylvania who studied at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. Weed designed numerous prestigious buildings in South Florida and was assigned the supervision of the master plan for the University of Miami main campus along with associate architects, Marion I. Manley and Robert Murray Little. Weed and Manley designed the Oscar E. Dooley Memorial Classroom Building in 1947, which set the International Style as the predominant style of the campus.

V- Bibliography

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VI- Photographs





