Landmarks Preservation Commission
October 23, 1979, Designation List 129
LP-1026

NEW AMSTERDAM THEATER, 214 West 42nd Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1902-03; architects Herts & Tallant.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1013, Lot 39.

On January 9, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the New Amsterdam Theater and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing was continued to March 13, 1979 (Item No. 3). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of 16 witnesses spoke in favor of designation at the two hearings. There were two speakers in opposition to designation. Several letters and statements supporting designation have been received.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The New Amsterdam Theater, built in 1902-03 for the theatrical producers Klaw & Erlanger, was for many years one of the most prestigious Time Square theaters and home of the famous Ziegfeld Follies. Designed by the noted theater architects, Herts & Tallant, the New Amsterdam Theater achieved distinction both for its functions and for its artistic program. More than just a theater, the structure was planned, at the request of Klaw & Erlanger, to incorporate two performing spaces with an office tower to house their varied theatrical interests. Even more importantly, however, the New Amsterdam is a rare example of Art Nouveau architecture in New York City, and, as such, is a major artistic statement by Herts & Tallant. Working in conjunction with sculptors, painters, and other craftsmen, they used the Art Nouveau style to carry out a dual theme--the representation of the spirit of drama and the theater and the representation of New Amsterdam in its historical sense as the city of New York. The form of the building vividly expresses the dual functions of office tower and theater, while the Art Nouveau-inspired ornamental detail expresses the spirit of drama.

The Clients

By the beginning of the 20th century, New York's theater district had moved uptown to the Time Square area, continuing a northward shift which had prevailed throughout the 19th century, and many theatrical producers commissioned new theaters to meet an expanding need. Among them were the producing partnership of Klaw & Erlanger.

Marc Klaw (1858-1936) and Abraham L. Erlanger (1860-1930), both of whom had served as advance agents and managers of touring companies, joined forces in 1886 to buy the Taylor Theatrical Exchange, a New York booking agency. By 1895 the Klaw & Erlanger agency was the second largest in the nation, controlling nearly 200 theaters. In 1896 they joined with Charles Frohman, Al Hayman, Samuel F. Nixon, and J. Frederick Zimmerman to organize the Theatrical Syndicate.

The Syndicate avowed its intention of bringing about needed reforms in the booking of shows, but in the process created a monopoly with exclusive control of bookings for more than 500 theaters throughout the country. The firm of Klaw & Erlanger was made responsible for all attractions presented in theaters controlled by the Syndicate. Beginning about 1910 the Syndicate was challenged by the growth of the organization of the Shubert brothers, and it was formally dissolved in 1916. Klaw & Erlanger retained its dominant position as a booking agency, and the partners continued their roles as managers and producers. It was in the role of producer that Klaw & Erlanger purchased, in 1902, a parcel of property west of Seventh Avenue and extending through the block between 41st and 42nd Streets and commissioned the noted firm of theater architects, Herts & Tallant, to design a multi-use theater structure, incorporating two theaters and a ten-story office tower to house their booking and producing enterprises.

The Architects

By 1902 Henry Beaumont Herts (1871-1933) and Hugh Tallant (1870-1952) had begun to achieve a reputation as theater architects. Herts, the son of Henry B. Herts who had established the decorating firm of Herts Brothers, had studied at the Columbia University School of Mines, while Tallant received two degrees from Harvard College. They became friends while students at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and worked together on student projects. Also a talented painter, Herts exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1898. Returning to New York, the two formed the firm of Herts & Tallant in 1900 which quickly began to achieve a reputation in theater architecture. In addition to the New Amsterdam, other theaters which the two designed were: the Lyceum (1903, for Daniel Frohman, brother of Charles Frohman, a member of the Theatrical Syndicate), the Liberty (1904, also for Klaw & Erlanger), the Gaiety (1909, now the Victoria), the Folies-Bergere (1911, later the Fulton and now the Helen Hayes), the Booth (1913, Henry B. Herts alone), the Longacre (1913, Henry B. Herts alone), the Shubert (1913, Henry B. Herts alone), all in Times Square; and the Brooklyn Academy of Music (1908). In the New Amsterdam, they pioneered the use of cantilever construction to create theater balconies without supporting pillars that would obstruct the vision of those in the lower seating area. This innovation is generally credited to Herts.[1] The partners were also talented acousticians, and Tallant wrote extensively on the subject.[2] Careful attention to fireproof construction and extensive stage facilities were other hallmarks of Herts & Tallant theaters. Tallant also wrote a series of articles on "The American Theater: Its Antecedents and Characteristics."[3] As an architect Tallant was especially anxious to understand the precedents offered by Greek, Roman, and Renaissance theaters and to incorporate these precedents into the firm's designs. The firm dissolved in 1911, and each partner went on to other architectural associations.

The New Amsterdam as a Playhouse

Construction of the New Amsterdam Theater began in the summer of 1902, but political difficulties arose in 1903. The ornamental portions of the building were designed to project beyond the building line, and the Manhattan Borough President ordered work stopped. Klaw and Erlanger asserted that the owner of the adjacent property, former Parks Commissioner Samuel McMillan, was exerting his influence because they had refused to buy McMillan's property. The partners noted that a number of new buildings, including several theaters, projected beyond the building line and that the New Amsterdam should not be discriminated against. In response to the controversy, the Board of Aldermen passed an ordinance allowing ornamental projections four feet beyond the building line. Thus the exterior of the New Amsterdam Theater was able to be completed as planned.[4]

The New Amsterdam Theater officially opened on October 26, 1903, with a production of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream accompanied by Mendelssohn's incidental music, additional music by Victor Herbert, and starring Nathaniel C. Goodwin as Bottom.[5] While home to serious drama in its early years, the New Amsterdam quickly became very highly regarded as a musical comedy house. Among early productions there were: George M. Cohan's Forty-five Minutes from Broadway with Fay Templeton and Victor Moore; Her Own Way with Maxine Elliott and Charles Cherry; Richard III and Peer Gynt, both starring Richard Mansfield; the American premiere of Franz Lehar's The Merry Widow in 1907; Sardou's The Sorceress with Mrs. Patrick Campbell; Kitty Gray with Julie Sanderson; The Pink Lady of 1911 and The Little Cafe, both starring Hazel Dawn; Margaret Schiller with Elsie Ferguson; and Irving Berlin's first musical, Watch Your Step, in 1914, starring the dance team of Vernon and Irene Castle.[6]

In 1913 Florenz Ziegfeld (1869-1932), the world-famous theatrical producer, began an association with the New Amsterdam Theater which lasted until his death. Ziegfeld had entered the entertainment business in 1893 at the Chicago World's Columbian Exhibition. In 1896 he introduced Anna Held to the American stage in A Parlor Match; this was quickly followed by a series of lavishly mounted musical comedies. Their success led him to produce a 'revue' which he called The Follies of 1907. The show proved so popular that he produced a new Follies each season for over 20 years. The stage facilities of the New Amsterdam were ideal for these productions, and Ziegfeld presented the Follies there between 1913 and 1920, from 1922 to 1925, and in 1927. Among the notable performers Ziegfeld featured in the Follies were Ann Pennington, originator of the Black Bottom dance, comediennes Fanny Brice and Ina Claire, Ed Wynn, W.C. Fields, Will Rogers, Eddie Cantor, and Marilyn Miller. Beginning in 1915 Ziegfeld used the rooftop theater of the New Amsterdam to produce his Midnight Frolic. Ziegfeld also produced other shows at the New Amsterdam, even after he opened his Joseph Urban-designed Ziegfeld Theater in 1927 on Sixth Avenue.

Other productions added to the luster of the New Amsterdam: Sunny (1925) and Rosalie (1928), starring Ziegfeld's discovery, Marilyn Miller; Whoopee (1929), a Ziegfeld production starring Eddie Cantor; Trelawney of the Wells (1927) with John Drew, Pauline Lord, Helen Gahagan, Estelle Winwood, and Peggy Wood; The Bandwagon (1931) with Fred and Adele Astaire; Irving Berlin's Face the Music (1931) with Mary Boland; also in 1931, Eva Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory productions of The Cherry Orchard and Alice in Wonderland; Jerome Kern's Roberta (1933) with Fay Templeton and Bob Hope; and George White's Scandals of 1936 with Bert Lahr, Eugene and Willie Howard, and Rudy Vallee. Othello (1937) with Walter Huston was the last legitimate theater production at the New Amsterdam.[7]

With the onset of the Depression, many Broadway theaters fell onto hard times and were converted for use as movie houses. The New Amsterdam proved no exception. The mortgage on the property was foreclosed in 1936.[8] The building was sold in 1937, and the new owner began showing motion pictures in the theater. Ironically the first presentation was a film version of A Midsummer Night's Dream, echoing that opening night of 1903.

The Building and its Design

The New Amsterdam had opened to widespread praise for its facilities, innovative features, and beautiful design. Stylistically the theater is a rare example of Art Nouveau architecture in the United States. Critic Theodore Waters headlined the New Amsterdam as "A Triumph for the New Art."[9] While the Art Nouveau style had been popularized in France and Belgium in the last years of the 19th century, where Herts and Tallant surely must have discovered it firsthand, the style was little used in the United States. Most French-trained American architects preferred to use the classical forms they had learned at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Herts and Tallant, too, were adept at using Beaux-Arts forms, but the design for the New Amsterdam Theater offered them an unparalleled opportunity to create a total unified statement--one of the fundamental principles of Art Nouveau--expressing the excitement and artistry of the theater.

The form of the building resulted partially from the constraints of the site and partially from the requirements of Klaw & Erlanger. The major portion of the building, located on 41st Street on a site approximately 150 by 100 feet, houses the two theaters. However, Klaw & Erlanger wished to have the theater entrance on the more important 42nd Street, so they purchased a narrow piece of property 25 by 100 feet facing on 42nd Street. This enabled the architects to create a major entrance, and to build above the entrance the tall office tower which was desired by Klaw & Erlanger to house their booking and producing activities. Because the side walls of the tower were built to the lot line they were faced with plain brick in anticipation that other towers would soon rise along side of them. To meet the dual requirements of the building--theaters and offices--the architects made extensive use of structural steel in the framing--

2000 tons. The roof theater is supported by a 70-ton girder, 90 feet in length and 14 feet high.[10] Even though the stage doors were located on the 41st Street side, it was anticipated that the general public would not normally see that facade, so it, too, was faced with plain brick. The main focus of attention was the 42nd Street facade, and on it the architects lavished their artistic efforts.

Ten stories high and three bays wide, the facade is of gray limestone and is topped by a sloping red tile roof. Projecting from the roof is a central dormer with stylized pediment incorporating a garlanded, carved mask at the peak; this is flanked by two smaller dormers. Originally freestanding figures representing Music and Drama surmounted the center dormer. The roof level is separated from the floors below by a projecting carved cornice with carved heads and floral ornament. An elaborate carved frieze with the date "1903" surmounts the ninth story windows which are flanked by stylized pilasters. At the seventh floor the windows, which are taller than those on the other office floors, are set off above a frieze incorporating winged heads, and the center window is flanked by stylized pilasters with floral capitals. Arches above the windows are filled with terra-cotta panels executed by the architectural sculptors Grendellis and Ricci.[11] The panels with their trios of cupids represent Dance, Declamation, and Song. This ornamental detail and sculpture on the upper stories is inspired by Art Nouveau principles, especially the abstraction of classical motifs and the lush and realistic depiction of floral and foliate forms. The various carved heads and figures personify aspects of the theater.

However, the architects lavished the most ornament and sculpture on the lower three floors, which encompassed the theater entrance and were visually handled as a unit. The segmental-arched entrance was flanked by rusticated piers which supported paired columns of Monreale Sicilian marble at the second floor. Bronze capitals, designed by sculptor Enid Yandell (1870-1934),[12] displayed heads representing the four ages of drama. These columns in turn supported a massive arch encompassing the third floor windows: The arch was outlined by a modillioned cornice with a keystone displaying the escutcheon of the New Amsterdam Theater executed by Grendellis and Ricci. Resting on the cornice were a group of freestanding sculptured figures by the noted sculptor George Gray Barnard (1863-1938).[13] The central figure was a woman personifying Drama, holding a mirror in one hand and a mask in the other. The draped baldachino above her head represented the stage. Four other figures represented various aspects of drama and theater. All were linked by garlands of fruit and flowers. Although not specifically credited in any of the sources examined, Barnard probably also designed the figures at the roof level. Stylistically they appeared very similar to those which surmounted the arch. The second and third story windows were framed in bronze modelled in curvilinear flower and vine forms. This type of motif is one of the hallmarks of the Art Nouveau style.

Various changes had been made to the marquee and signs of the theater through the years, but when Anco Enterprises, Inc., acquired the New Amsterdam in 1937, the entrance was drastically altered[14] to accommodate the theater to its new purpose of showing movies. Virtually all sculptured detail at the first three stories was removed to be replaced by a new marquee and vertical electric sign. Both displayed the streamlined motifs associated with Art Deco architecture of the 1920s and '30s. The marquee and vertical were again modified in 1955.[15] Fortunately the basic form of the arch encompassing the second and third story windows survives as does the intricate bronzework framing those windows. Also in 1937 the original entrance doors were removed, and the original enclosed vestibule is now open to the sidewalk. The walls have been faced with polished marble, and an inlaid terrazzo floor with Art Deco motifs was installed. A "streamlined" box office is at one side.

Despite changes to the building through the years, significant Art Nouveau elements survive to remind us of the major artistic statement made by Herts & Tallant. The form of the building still embodies the dual function of office tower and theater. Most importantly, the illustrious history of the New Amsterdam, which was facilitated and enhanced by its design, cannot be erased. Its survival evokes the spirit and the history of the theater.

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Typed by Loretta Burnett

FOOTNOTES

1. New York Times, March 28, 1933; Joel Lobenthal, "The New Amsterdam Theater," The Theatre Historical Society Annual, No. 5 (1978), 2.

2. Hugh Tallant, "Hints on Architectural Acoustics," The Brickbuilder, 19 (May 1910), 111-116; (July 1910), 155-158; (August 1910), 177-180; (September 1910), 199-203; (October 1910), 221-225; (November 1910), 243-247; (December 1910), 265-270. Hugh Tallant, "Architectural Acoustics," The Brickbuilder, 22 (October 1913), 225-228.

3. Hugh Tallant, "The American Theater: Its Antecedents and Characteristics," The Brickbuilder, 23 (December 1914), 285-290; 24 (January 1915), 17-22.

4. The controversy is detailed in newspaper clippings in the Erlanger Collection Scrapbooks, New York Public Library, Lincoln Center, Reel 12, N.C. 459.

5. Newspaper clipping in Erlanger Collection Scrapbooks, Reel 12, N.C. 459.

6. Lobenthal, p. 14.

7. Lobenthal, pp. 7, 9.

8. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds, Liber 3927, page 199.

9. Theodore Waters, "The New Amsterdam Theatre, A Triumph for the New Art," clipping in Erlanger Collection Scrapbooks, Reel 12, N.C. 459.

10. "Another Addition to New York's Theatres," New York Commercial Advertiser, October 24, 1903.

11. Nothing is known about Grendellis; he does not appear in any city directories of the period. In a published photo of one of the plaques the name appears to be spelled "Grendelli," which also does not appear in any city directories. Ricci may be Ulysses A. Ricci, a member of the National Sculpture Society from 1914, and active in New York until 1934. He also executed architectural sculpture in Washington, D.C. between 1930 and 1960. See James M. Goode, The Outdoor Sculpture of Washington, D.C. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974).

12. Enid Yandell, born in Louisville, Kentucky, studied with Philip Martiny in New York and Frederick MacMonnies and Auguste Rodin in Paris. Among her important works are the Carrie Brown Memorial Fountain in Providence, R.I. (1900), the Emma Willard Memorial in Albany, and the Hogan Fountain (1905) and the Daniel Boone Monument (1906) in Louisville. In 1907 she organized the Branstock School of Art at Edgarstown on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

13. George Gray Barnard, born in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, studied at the Chicago Art Institute and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. His work of the 1880s and '90s reveals the influence of Rodin, a potent force for many Art Nouveau sculptors. He set up his studio in New York in 1896 and taught at the Art Students League in 1900-04. The largest commission of his career was a sculptural group for the Pennsylvania State Capitol (1902-11). During his years in France, Barnard formed a collection of medieval antiquities which became the basis of the Cloisters collection, now a part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

14. New York City, Buildings Department, Manhattan, Electric Sign applications 1613 and 1614 - 1937.

15. New York City, Buildings Department, Manhattan, Electric Sign application 605 - 1955.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the New Amsterdam Theater has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the New Amsterdam Theater is a rare example of Art Nouveau architecture in New York City; that it was designed by the noted theater architects Herts & Tallant; that among its important features are the sculpture, ornament, curvilinear bronze window framing, and the arch form on the facade of the tower; that the form of the building vividly expresses the dual functions of office tower and theater, which resulted from the requirements of Klaw & Erlanger for two theaters and facilities to house their varied theatrical interests; that its facilities, innovative features, and beautiful design made the New Amsterdam one of the most desirable theaters on Broadway; that many notable theatrical personalities, especially Florenz Ziegfeld, have been associated with the New Amsterdam; and that its survival evokes the spirit and history of the theater.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the New Amsterdam Theater, 214 West 42nd Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1013, Lot 39, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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AMSTERDAM
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1903 view

1973 view

NEW AMSTERDAM THEATER

214 West 42 St