

**REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON HISTORIC DESIGNATION
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

**Thomas Sugrue, Ph.D., Acting-Chair
Commission Conference Room, One Parkway, 1515 Arch Street, 18th Floor
21 March 2002**

Present

Thomas Sugrue, Ph.D, Acting-Chair
Warren Huff, City Planning Commission
Janet Klein, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission
Bruce Laverty, The Athenaeum of Philadelphia
Hyman Myers, AIA
Harris Steinberg, AIA

Diane M. Hughes, Executive Secretary
Laura M. Spina, Historic Preservation Planner
Richard Tyler, Historic Preservation Officer

Larry Copeland, Senior Attorney, Law Department

Also

Richard A. Sprague, Esq., Sprague and Sprague
Geoffrey R. Johnson, Esq., Sprague and Sprague
Ira Kauderer, Esq., Preservation Alliance
Leslie Smallwood, Chestnut Theater Association, L.P.
John Gallery, Preservation Alliance
Judith Eden, Center City Residents' Association
Jacob Eden
Anne Castelli

Thomas Sugrue, Acting-Chair, called the meeting to order at 10:10 a.m. Mr. Sugrue noted that the Committee on Historic Designation acts in a technical and advisory capacity to the Commission which is the decision-making body.

1908-10 Chestnut Street, aka 1911-23 Sansom Street, Boyd Theater

DATE: 1927, Hoffman and Henon Architects

Ms. Spina gave an illustrated presentation of the nomination to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places of the Boyd Theater. The Boyd Theater, presently known as the United Artists Sam Eric Theater, is a unique and fine example of an Art Deco "motion picture palace" in Center City Philadelphia and is the finest remaining movie theatre of the architecture firm of Hoffman and Henon. It has significant character, interest or value as

part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation. It is characterized by a distinctive architectural style, the Art Deco, and embodies elements of that style. The Boyd Theater is the work of architects whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social and cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation. The Theatre contains elements of design that represent a significant innovation or singular physical characteristics, the theatre represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community and City. Finally the Boyd Theater exemplifies the cultural, economic, social and historical heritage of the community. This theater is the last remaining example of a “motion picture palace” in Philadelphia.

The firm of William Hoffman and Paul Henon only existed for nine years, starting in 1921. While most of their designs were in the Classical Revival style, they broke from their roots to design the Boyd Theatre in the Art Deco style. The Boyd is the only Art Deco theatre designed by Hoffman and Henon and is the finest example of their work in Philadelphia. It possesses many elements of the Art Deco style, including a curled gable, low relief ornamentation, and etched and gilded glass.

Ms. Spina concluded that the Boyd Theatre meets criteria a, c, d, e, f, and j of Section 14-2007 of the Philadelphia Code for designation.

Ira Kauderer, speaking on behalf of Preservation Alliance, responded to information submitted by the owner, which he believes are misconceptions about the Art Deco detailing of the façade. He noted that some Art Deco buildings have restrained characteristics. Mr. Sprague’s brief stated that the Boyd only has a few of the eighteen characteristics of the Art Deco style, as described by John J. G. Blumenstein. Mr. Kauderer explained that the Boyd is a descendent of the Nickoldean and, he presented examples of motion picture palaces in other cities rendered in various types of architecture. He also noted that all the other Hoffman and Henon theatres in Philadelphia have been torn down. He said that the Boyd Theater clearly influenced the cultural and social development in the history of the city and compared it to the palatial surroundings of the Wanamaker store for all classes of people. Therefore, the social context is an important basis for designation.

Richard Sprague and Geoffrey Johnson, counsel for the owner, attended the meeting. Mr. Sprague requested that any documents presented to the Committee and the numbered slides be included as part of the record. He noted that the previous attempt for designation in 1987 had failed and that it is his belief that the Commission is ignoring evidence from those meetings. He read Mayor Street’s testimony in which then City Councilman Street voted against the designation and said that the testimony clearly explains why the designation proposed today should not move forward. Mr. Sprague also believes that the written nomination is the same as the previous one but without the inclusion of the interior. In addition, he believes that the basis for the theater’s designation revolves around the interior, which cannot be a basis for designation. He reiterated his belief that the Committee has a pre-determination as far as this designation

goes. Mr. Myers objected to Mr. Sprague's assertion of prejudice and stated that this nomination will be taken on its own merits.

Mr. Kauderer offered a rebuttal to Mr. Sprague's statement about the nomination's being the same as the previous one, and emphasized the theater's importance in social history, a consideration not fully a part of the original nomination.

Mr. Myers thought the nomination should be modified to include the building's concept as a whole. He believes the nomination should elaborate on such facts as the main façade is on Chestnut Street with all of its ornamentation, the Sansom Street façade with its fire escapes and office windows, and the water tower which shows the important aspect of fire protection. He also noted that corrections are needed to identify changes to the original design, such as the ticket booth, which does not follow the geometry of the original ticket booth, and the recessed entry's flooring. He believes more emphasis should be put on parts of the construction now hardly mentioned, such as the Sansom Street façade. Mr. Myers compared the design of the Boyd with those of the Mastbaum and Erlanger Theaters on Market Street.

Ms. Klein agreed, stating that the form of the Boyd proves important.

Mr. Sugrue stated that he has never set foot inside of the building but believes two significant features are its location in the middle of the block of a premier street and the vastness of the Sansom Street façade, giving a sense of grandeur not found on Chestnut Street. He referred to the comments of the previous owner, Merton Shapiro, on the deteriorated portions of the theatre, and stated that on the Chestnut Street façade, the stonework remains intact with a slight portion of the recessed area missing, and the original recess remains up to the glass doors, and the original baroque top. The Sansom Street façade remains intact with the exception of the missing cover over the exit stairs.

Mr. Steinberg commented on the building as a whole and its relationship to urban planning. The building clearly depicts its volume and the exposed fire stairs express the objective of saving interior space. He noted that each generation perceives things differently or even unattractive, but he thought the subtleties of the brickwork on the Sansom Street façade, a significant reflection of urban design. Unlike the Midtown theatre, the Boyd retains its Art Deco design despite the slight modifications to the façade.

Mr. Tyler noted that the history cards at Licenses and Inspections are worth pursuing for documentation of building permits issued for alterations to the property. He also stated that the Committee seems to have reached a consensus that the nomination in its present state requires re-writing and additional research. The description needs amplification and the significance should contain an explanation in connection to the theme of the theater. In addition, a discussion, which differentiates the Boyd, from the Erlanger and the Mastbaum should be included. The difference in the urban context should also be mentioned.

Mr. Huff stated that he is less compelled by the architecture than by the solution to the problem posed by the site. The form follows the function of the building.

Mr. Sugrue said that the nomination could be approved, rejected or returned to the preparer for revision.

Mr. Sprague asked that the record reflect his opposition to any action other than an approval or a rejection.

Ms. Klein clarified that this is not the first time that a nomination was sent back to the preparer for revisions.

Mr. Myers made a motion to return the nomination to the preparer for revision. Mr. Huff seconded the motion which carried unanimously.

Mr. Steinberg made a motion to adjourn. Ms. Klein seconded the motion which carried unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at 11:25 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Diane M. Hughes
Executive Secretary