

HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

PABST THEATER

(Written Spring, 1982)

Amended Per Common Council File Number 82-1345 Adopted December 7, 1982

I. NAME

Historic: Pabst Theater

Common: Same

II. LOCATION

Street Address: 144 East Wells Street

Legal Property Description: Subdivision of Block 1 and Lot 8 and 9, Block 54 in NE ¼, Section 29-7-22. Block 54 Lots 1 to 12 including exc. that party lying ELY of the re-located WLY L1 N. Water St. DESC as COM N L1 E. Wells St. and 185.22' E. of ELY L1 N Edison St.-TH N 30D EG 27 MIN 33 SEC W 27.56'-TH NWLY along a curve R-613' C to NE CHORD BEARS N 25 DEG 4 MIN 3 SEC W 118.75' for Street.

III. CLASSIFICATION

Building

IV. OWNER OF PROPERTY

City of Milwaukee
841 North Broadway, Room 912
Milwaukee, WI 53201

V. DESCRIPTION

The Pabst Theater is a rectangular structure measuring 80 feet wide and 147 feet long. It is four stories high with a tarred gambrel roof over the auditorium and a convex slate mansard roof over the stage. The gambrel roof is topped with wrought iron cresting. The first floor is faced with light gray limestone. The remainder of the wall surfaces are covered with brick. The south and west sides are covered with the original pale orange St. Louis pressed brick, the north elevation with cream brick and the east elevation with new brick and stone, which is compatible to the original façade materials in color and texture. Pink terra cotta spandrels, banding, arch surrounds, ornamental balustrading, drip moldings, and cornices enrich the south elevation, which is the buildings façade.

The façade is architecturally articulated into three distinct sections with a low, symmetrical, center portion flanked by tall pavilions. The east pavilion contains the main entrance. It has two sets of double doors of pressed metal in a variety of foliated forms sheltered by a finely detailed wrought iron porch, which extends along two-thirds of the street level of the front of the theater. The entries have arched transom lights and are flanked by polished black granite columns. The upper portion of the

entrance pavilion of the theater is articulated with four brick pilasters with terra cotta composite capitals surmounted by a decorative blind balustrade flanking a bold relief, terra cotta, wreath-enframed cartouche emblazoned with the letter “P”. Above the terra cotta modillion cornice are the words “Pabst Theater” in high relief terra cotta crowned by a foliated pediment surmounted by a gilded harp flanked by two urns.

The middle section of the façade is divided into a central, projecting bay flanked by single, arcaded side bays with blind fenestration. The bowed central bay contains a pedimented door leading to the porch roof at the second story level. The third story level is ornamented with banded brick masonry and paired terra cotta columns cantilevered out from the arcade on plinths flanking a curving balcony with an elaborate wrought iron railing. Above the balcony door a shallow arch shelters a terra cotta bust of a female figure set in front of a blind fan. Above the terra cotta modillion cornice is a parapet balustrade.

The west pavilion is divided into three blind arcades extending from the second through the third stories above the plain, limestone-clad, first story level. It is unified with the central section of the façade by the continuation of the terra cotta cornice and banded brickwork across the upper part of the elevation. Above the cornice, a low attic story with blind fenestration is topped by a convex mansard roof.

VI. SIGNIFICANCE

Date Built or Altered: 1895

Builder/Architect: Otto Strack, architect
Graham Brothers, builder

The Pabst Theater is significant as Milwaukee’s only remaining nineteenth century legitimate theater. It is also significant for its association with Frederick Pabst and the Pabst Brewing Company, for its contributions to the City’s cultural development and as a unique example of late Victorian period architecture.

VII. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends to the Historic Preservation Commission the designation of the Pabst Theater as an historic structure as defined in Section 2-335 of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances.

This recommendation is based on the previous recognition received by this building and on the areas of significance enumerated above.

VIII. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

The following preservation guidelines represent the principle concerns of the Historic Preservation Commission regarding this historic designation. However, the Commission reserves the right to make final decisions based upon particular design submissions. These guidelines shall not be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

A. Roofs

The existing building height, rooflines, pitch, dormers, gables, and cresting shall not be changed or modified. Subject to approval of the Commission, dormers or skylights may be added to roof surfaces facing north if they do not visually intrude upon the east, west or south street elevations.

B. Openings

The location, style and material of window and door openings, and the number and configuration of panes, shall be retained on the south, east and west elevations. Additional openings, or changes in the size or configuration existing openings shall not be permitted, unless approved by the Historic Preservation Commission, except that restoration to the documented original condition shall be permitted. Approval for changes shall be based on the compatibility of the proposed changes with the style and period of the building.

C. Additions

No additions may be made to the west or south street elevations of the building. Additions to the north or east elevations shall require the approval of the Commission. Approval shall be based upon the terms of height, roof configuration, fenestration, scale, design, and materials, and the degree to which it visually intrudes upon the existing east, west and south elevations.

D. Porches, Trim and Ornamentation

There shall be no changes to the existing porches, balconies, trim or ornamentation except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. Replacement features shall match the original member in scale, design, color and material.

E. Materials

Unpainted brick, terra cotta or stone shall not be painted or covered. Any repairs, including repointing of defective mortar, shall match the original in color, style, texture, and strength characteristics. Masonry shall be cleaned only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible approved by the Commission.

F. Fire Escapes

Additional required fire escapes shall be located on the north or west elevations if at all practical, and shall be designed and located so as to minimize their visual impact.

G. Signs

The installation of any permanent exterior sign shall require the approval of the Commission. Approval will be based on the compatibility of the proposed sign with the historic and architectural character of the building based upon the Commission's review of scale drawings of the proposed design and samples of the proposed materials and colors.

IX. HISTORY

Frederick Pabst was one of Milwaukee's leading industrialists. He became a partner in the Best Brewing Company in 1864, and assumed its presidency in 1873. Later renamed the Pabst Brewing Company, it became one of the largest breweries in the nation. In 1890, Pabst purchased the Nunnemacher Grand Opera House, which had been built on the present site in 1871. It was severely damaged by fire in 1895 while Pabst was vacationing in Europe. Upon hearing the news, Pabst cabled

home with orders that a new theater be built immediately. Within seven months and at a cost of over \$300,000, the Pabst Theater opened with the American debut of the German comedy, "Zwei Wappen."

The Pabst Theater was important to the cultural life of Milwaukee's large and influential German community. It presented a wide variety of operas, symphonies, revues and plays, although the latter were only given in German until World War I. The period from 1890 to 1915 was the Golden Age of Milwaukee's German-American community in the arts and letters. Appropriately, Milwaukee was known as the "Deutsch-Athens". The Pabst Theater was the premier cultural facility for the German community during this period.

Architecturally, the Pabst Theater is significant as a visual expression of the community's German heritage. It was designed by Otto Strack, a German-born and trained architect who specialized in ornate structures with distinct German Baroque overtones. Among his known works in Milwaukee are the Joseph B. Kalvelage House at 2432 West Kilbourn Avenue and various structures at the Pabst Brewery on West Juneau Avenue.

For the new Pabst Theater, Strack designed a German Baroque influenced structure of highly original composition. Responding to difficult site constraints and functional requirements, Strack satisfied his patron's desire for a dignified, but imposing structure through the liberal application of classically inspired ornament and design motifs to a balanced, but asymmetrical, façade composition. The building's design and materials complement the neighboring City Hall and the Edison Electric Railway and Light Company power plant, which were all built about the same time.

The theater continued in operation under the ownership of the Pabst family until 1953 with only minor exterior alterations. From 1953 to 1961, it was owned by a private foundation, which, in turn, transferred it to the City in 1961. It has remained continuously in operation as a theater. In 1976, an extensive project was undertaken to restore the building to its original appearance. At that time, the previously blank east wall was given its present architectural treatment.