

rev. 6/11/98

## HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

### SECTION I. NAME

Historic: Uptown Theater

Common Name: Uptown Theater

### SECTION II. LOCATION

2317-2327 North 49th Street

17th Aldermanic District  
Alderman Willie L. Hines

Legal description: Tax Key No.: 328-1504-000

REPUBLIC SUBD NO 1 in SE 1/4 SEC 14-7-21  
BLOCK 2 LOT 7  
BID #16

### SECTION III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

### SECTION IV. OWNER

Uptown Arts & Education Inc.  
P.O. Box 08700  
Milwaukee, WI 53208

### SECTION V. YEAR BUILT: 1927

ARCHITECT: Rapp & Rapp, Chicago

## SECTION VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Uptown Theater is located on Milwaukee's west side near the intersection of North and Lisbon Avenues approximately three miles from the Central Business District. The area can be characterized as a neighborhood commercial district with numerous one to three story buildings lining the thoroughfares. To the north and south of this district are residential areas. The Uptown occupies a trapezoidal lot between Lisbon and North Avenues and 49th and 50th Streets that is approximately 291 feet by 82 feet in dimension and is flanked by alleys to the north and south. The building occupies most of its lot and is built up to the sidewalk at its principal facade along 49th St. The rear of the building fronts onto 50th St. and is set back from the public right of way behind a small, unpaved area.

The Uptown Theater is a large, brick structure of Mediterranean design whose principal feature is the tall lobby wing featuring a shaped parapet, a large three-part window opening, lobby entrance and metal marquee. This lobby wing is flanked by one story storefronts. Stepped back from the storefronts and the lobby wing is the main auditorium block. The facades fronting 49th St. are clad with yellow scratch brick while the north, south, and rear elevations are clad in common red brick. Service entrances for the storefronts are located behind the storefront wings. A large chimney extends from the north elevation of the lobby wing.

Architects C. W. and George Rapp used ornamental detail sparingly on the Uptown Theater. Cast stone is used for the decorative panel and medallions at the facade and copings; matte glazed green Batchelder tiles clad the bulkhead area below the storefronts, simple panels framed in brick articulate the large blank walls of the front and rear elevations. The north and south elevations are utilitarian in character, featuring a variety of exit doors, some windows, metal fire escapes and buttress-like brick-clad iron piers.

Historic photographs indicate that the storefronts were originally crowned with a ten-foot parapet wall in with recessed plaques and that these were sometimes used for advertising or signage. These parapet walls helped to give scale and balance to the facade. Permit records do not indicate when the parapet walls were removed but it was believed to be after World War II. Like many theaters of its era, the Uptown also had a large vertical sign at the center of the facade which spelled out "Uptown" and cascading chaser lights alongside each end of the marquee. The marquee itself was framed with bands of individual lights. It is said that various city ordinances resulted in the removal of the cascading lights and chaser lights. While the framework for the cascading lights has been removed, the sockets for the chaser lights are still visible on the marquee. It is not known whether or not the enameled metal panels now framing the front entrance are original. The large three-part window opening on the facade has been filled in with brick, probably in 1950 when permit records reflect some partition work was being done on the second floor lobby.

The Uptown was last used as a second run theater and passed out of the management of United Artists in September, 1980. Following sporadic special showings and rock concerts in the early 1980's the building has sat vacant for over a decade.

## SECTION VII. SIGNIFICANCE

The Uptown Theater is important as one of the last of Milwaukee's neighborhood movie theaters from the era of the grand movie palace. Of the approximately 163 movie theaters that once operated in the city, most were small scale structures that had been built in the early pre-World War I era and a number of these survive since they were easily converted to other uses such as stores and warehouses. Today, only a handful of the large, movie palaces from the 1920's survive, some like the Venetian and the Tower and the Garfield are used for other purposes while only the Oriental, Avalon, and Modjeska still show films. The Uptown is also one of three remaining movie theaters in Milwaukee designed by the prestigious firm of Rapp & Rapp of Chicago.

The Uptown was once the premier theater on the city's West Side and is one of few extant theater buildings that can be associated with brothers John and Thomas Saxe. The Saxe brothers are responsible for introducing Milwaukeeans to the concept of the movie house as picture palace. The amenities they offered drew thousands of moviegoers who willingly paid higher admission to bask in the exotic settings and air conditioned comfort of the Mediterranean, Moorish and Venetian style structures. More than any other exhibitor in Milwaukee, the Saxe brothers helped to make movies the

dominant popular entertainment form in the city during the first 25 years of this century and set the local standard for opulent movie theater design. As the dominant structure in the commercial area surrounding the intersection of North and Lisbon Avenues, the Uptown was specifically sited here as part of the Saxe marketing strategy to take advantage of this important transit transfer point.

## SECTION VIII. HISTORY

The Uptown Theater neighborhood was once part of the Town of Wauwatosa and outside the city limits of Milwaukee. Land sales were spurred by the development of the Lisbon Plank Road which was laid out in 1850 but the area remained open land for decades and subdivision development did not occur until World War I. One early institution, however, did get established here in 1879 and remained a presence until the early 1920's. This institution was known as the House of the Good Shepherd and was run by Sisters of the Good Shepherd/Sisters of the Cross. On a multi-acre site located west of the intersection of Lisbon and North Avenues the institution provided a home for "wayward girls" and unwed mothers and gave them some occupational training before their release back into society. The House of the Good Shepherd subsequently moved to 8800 W. Blue Mound Road in 1927 by which time their old site had been sold off to various developers. Columbia Finance and Realty Company purchased some of the land and in turn sold to Republic Building Company in 1924. Principals of Columbia Building Company included real estate mogul Oscar Brachman and theater entrepreneur Thomas Saxe. They subdivided their parcel into two blocks that include the triangular portion at the intersection of Lisbon and North and the block bounded by 49th St., 50th St., Lisbon and North Avenues. The lot on which the Uptown Theater would be built was the largest parcel in the small subdivision and trade publications announced as early as March 1, 1924 that the Saxe Operating Company would be erecting a four to six story \$500,000 building on Milwaukee's "Northwest Side" which was to include a 3,000 seat theater, ballroom and stores and offices and would be "the largest of its kind in that part of the city".

Actual construction of the theater complex did not begin until 1926, however, when permits were issued for a \$350,000 fireproof, steel skeleton building on December 8, 1926. The new structure was smaller than what had been first announced. The offices and ballroom were eliminated, seating capacity was reduced to 1,800 and only the stores and theater auditorium remained from the original proposal. Final costs are estimated to have reached \$1,100,000 of which \$25,000 was spent on the latest in ventilating equipment. The Uptown opened on September 3, 1927 and featured a newsreel, an organ performance on the Barton organ, a stage presentation, a technicolor short and a photoplay entitled "The Poor Nut". Some 9,000 people lined up for almost three blocks to gain admission.

Brothers Thomas and John Saxe established the most successful movie theater operation in Milwaukee. Their efforts began with a dime museum at the turn of the century, expanded to a penny arcade and soon encompassed a franchise, the Hales Tour, which they operated out of the Scenes Around the World theater. Small photoplay houses followed and they incorporated as Saxe Amusement Enterprises in 1908. Their original strategy included the acquisition and remodeling of existing nickelodeons and they introduced Milwaukeeans to the first luxury movie theater, the Princess, in 1909 and made movie going a prestigious affair by scheduling opening night as a special "invitation affair" with many dignitaries and politicians in attendance. This effort to secure the patronage of a "better class of people" was applauded in a trade paper, The Nickelodeon, and helped legitimize the new entertainment novelty with city fathers, concerned citizens and religious organizations who saw motion pictures as a threat to public morality. Over time, it was the Saxe brothers who introduced the first air conditioned theaters and such services as uniformed ushers, free baby-sitting, and restroom attendants.

The Saxe chain by the mid-twenties controlled over 40 theaters, dominating the Milwaukee market and controlling the exhibition market in Waukesha, Kenosha, Racine, Green Bay, Marinette, Madison, Antigo, Appleton, Oshkosh, Beloit, Fond du Lac, Janesville, Menasha, Neenah and Wausau, Wisconsin. It was one of the largest theater circuits in the United States. By 1927, the Saxe's empire included 12 Milwaukee theaters, in addition to the Garfield and the Uptown which were under construction at that time. Other theaters included the Savoy, Tivoli, Tower, Oriental, Wisconsin, Strand, Miller, Princess, Merrill, Modjeska, Mirth, Plaza. Of these only the Oriental and the Modjeska survive as movie houses. The Mirth and the Tower still stand but are no longer theaters. The grand flagship of the chain,

the Wisconsin, was located in the Carpenter Building and has been razed along with the other theaters in the once prominent chain. The Saxe's closest rival, Universal, had 11 theaters in the city. An article in Exhibitors Herald in 1927 indicated that overbuilding of theaters in some districts was leading to the closing of some of the smaller theaters but that the big chains, Saxe and Universal for example, were continuing to expand. The northwest side, which included the Uptown neighborhood, had 6 theaters within the radius of a mile, three controlled by Saxe and three controlled by Universal. Saxe's policy of treating customers with luxury paid off in the long run; the larger and more elegant theaters enabled the Saxe brothers to charge somewhat higher admission than their competitors and continue to draw capacity crowds. Following the lead of the successful Chicago chain of Balaban & Katz, the Saxe's found they needed to control only key theaters, of large size and at major intersections of mass transit lines in order to dominate the market. They also adopted Balaban & Katz's resident architects, C. W. and George Rapp, to design some of their movie palaces here. Among the theaters the Rapp brothers designed for the Saxe's were the Wisconsin downtown, the Modjeska on Mitchell Street and the Uptown at the intersection of Lisbon and North Avenues. Only the Modjeska and the Uptown survive.

The Saxe chain, facing the onslaught of major producer-distributors (Paramount, Loew's, Fox, Warner Brothers) who were taking over independent theater chains, sold out to Midwesco Theaters Inc., a California chain of 200 theaters, in December, 1927 just three months after the Uptown opened. Midwesco became a subsidiary of Fox Film Corporation shortly thereafter and Fox-Midwesco controlled the Milwaukee and Wisconsin film market for the next 25 years. Members of the Saxe family then turned to other pursuits like the White Tower hamburger chain and Thomas Saxe would re-enter the film exhibition business in 1933 with Warner Brothers.

The Uptown Theater, once the most opulent theater on the city's west side, eventually came to operate as a second run theater. During the Depression, in 1936, the Uptown served as a test case for the legality of "bank night" games in Wisconsin. It was probably around 1950 that the second story parapets were removed and the large lobby window bricked in. The Uptown was eventually acquired by United Artists beginning around 1971. The Uptown showed its last regular features in September, 1980 and operated only occasionally thereafter with special movies and rock concerts. It pioneered locally the midnight movie. The Uptown has not been used for any public functions for at least a decade. The storefronts, which once housed barbershops, a ladies lingerie shop, candy stores, office for home insulation sales, linoleum store, and beauty parlor, are now vacant.

### The Architect

The designers of the Uptown Theater, C.W. Rapp (d. 1926) and George L. Rapp(1878-Sept. 17, 1941) began their architectural career in Chicago around the turn of the century and began specializing in movie theater design in 1906. Their first significant theater building was the Central (Park) Theater on Roosevelt Road in Chicago. This was followed by Chicago, Oriental, State-Lake, New Palace, Tivoli, Piccadilly, Uptown, Norshore and Central Park theaters, all in the Chicago area. Rapp & Rapp became the resident architects of theater moguls Balaban & Katz and were known for designing flamboyant exteriors and interiors. Research indicates that Rapp & Rapp, Thomas W. Lamb of New York and John Eberson of Chicago, were considered the top three movie theater designers in the United States. Theaters designed by Rapp & Rapp can be found in 23 states, the District of Columbia and Ontario, Canada. The largest concentration of documented theaters can be found in Illinois, with the second largest in Wisconsin. Many of these have been razed. As stated above, the Saxe chain, headquartered in Milwaukee, commissioned three movie palaces from Rapp & Rapp: the Modjeska (1924, 2,000 seats), the Uptown (1927, 1,818 seats), the Wisconsin ((1924, 3,275 seats). Rapp & Rapp would later design the Warner (a.k.a. Centre, Grand)in downtown Milwaukee (1931, 2,431 seats) for Warner Bros. Two of their notable theaters outside the midwest included the Paramount Theater in New York and the Ambassador Theater and office building in St. Louis.

The Rapp brothers were versatile in their design work and their motion picture palaces ranges from Classical Revival to Rococo Revival and frequently reminded theatergoers of European palaces. David Lowe in "Lost Chicago" stated that "the Rapps were unequalled when it came to the presentation of stunning opulence without vulgarity." It is not known how many of their theaters survive across the United States although there is documentation of known buildings that have been razed. In addition to their high profile theater work the Rapps also had many commissions for other

buildings as well including the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., the Leland Hotel in Detroit, schools, factories and office towers.

Milwaukee's Uptown Theater was not one of the major commissions of the firm and has not been cited in any of the periodical literature about the firm. It is not known at this time if the plan of the Uptown was unique or if it was a design the Rapps used and modified for other commissions. The Uptown can be classified as Mediterranean Revival although in its day it was referred to as Italian. Historic photos show that the interior differed from most of their documented work. More like the atmospheric theaters of John Eberson, the Uptown featured views of an idyllic Italian landscape as seen through open veranda-like projecting boxes; unlike the true atmospheric theater, however, the Uptown lacked the star-studded sky and cloud machines that were common. Much of the Uptown's interior has been painted over and the chandeliers have been removed. Many of the Rapps' interiors were based on the interiors of European palaces from the 17th and 18th centuries although they moved into the Art Deco style by the late 1920's.

That the Saxe brothers were able to retain the Rapps for several commissions is indicative of their clout in the movie distribution business. As far as can be determined from the research available, the Rapps were the only out-of-town firm to design theaters in Milwaukee during the early decades of this century. Such local firms as Kirchhoff and Rose, with 11 theaters, Dick and Bauer, with 6 theaters, and Charles Lesser, with 9 theaters - mostly moderate size, were the traditional choice for local theater design. Other firms such as Brust and Philipp, Grassold and Johnson, Peacock and Frank, Wolff and Ewens, George Zagel and Russell Barr Williamson also produced theater designs in a variety of styles that reflected the eclectic tastes of the time and included everything from Egyptian mummies to gilded Buddhas and Venetian polychromy. Most incorporated some retail space in the ground story and some like the Avalon were built as part of an apartment complex as well. Some 30 theaters were built in the city capable of seating over 1,000 patrons and while the biggest were located downtown, there were neighborhood theaters like the Avalon, the Uptown, the Modjeska, the Tower, the Colonial and the Garfield which each exceeded 1,500 seating capacity.