

**The Gem Theater
3940 Thalia Street**

Landmark Designation Report

Construction Date:

1952

Architect:

Unknown

Site Description:

Square 482, lots 12 and 13 on Thalia Street
measuring 32' X 132'

Municipal District:

1

Assessment District:

1

Owner:

David Goldberg

Date Nominated:

December 10, 2002

The nomination of this property was based upon its architectural and historical significance. City Ordinance No. 5992 MCS defines a Landmark or Landmark site as: An unimproved parcel of ground (landmark site) or such parcel with improvements or such improvements without grounds (landmark), wheresoever located in the City of New Orleans, subject to the jurisdiction of the Historic District Landmarks Commission, of particular historic, architectural, or cultural significance, which said parcel or parcels, plus its improvements, if any, 1) Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community; or 2) Are identified with historic personages or with important events in national, state, or local history; or 3) Embody distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type, specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or indigenous materials or craftsmanship; or 4) Are representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer, or architect whose individual ability has been recognized.

~~Not researched~~
5/2
Before 30 years
After 30 years
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History of the Property

This masonry building was constructed in 1952 as the Gem Theater. It was one of the last traditional neighborhood theaters built in New Orleans, and was also the last "all colored" theater to be built in the city. It was aimed at an audience drawn from the adjacent Melpomene Housing Project. The theater had a large stage with two dressing rooms and was used for both live shows and films. Unfortunately, the theater was built just as television was taking a major portion of the audience away from theaters and the Gem's years of profitability were short. The theater closed in 1960.

Plans from January 1, 1961, by architects Benson and Riehl to level the floor, double the mezzanine and lower the ceiling for what appeared to be a retail space did not materialize. Likewise, plans by architects Freret and Wolf, dated May 20, 1963, to remove twenty-five per-cent of the seating, install a bar area, and add additional offices in an expanded mezzanine did not occur either. Instead, the theater became a warehouse for Meyer's Auto Parts, connected to their adjacent store through the backstage area.

The front façade is covered in smooth stucco, although on the sides, the bare brick is visible. A three sided marquee projects out over the entry. The marquee is clad in aluminum. The ground floor façade is trimmed with red and yellow ceramic tile. There are movie poster display cases on either side of the doors. The center of the building is highlighted with a large section of molded vertical banding in a design reminiscent of Art Deco styling.

Landmark Basis:

Criteria:

1) Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state, or community.

For some, the movie going experience was limited to some few "movie palaces" usually clustered together in the downtown districts of major cities. In the 1940s and 50s, developers brought the movies to the people in the form of smaller, but no less elegant, neighborhood theaters. This theater also has its place in the history of segregation in the city of New Orleans. The staff of the HDLC finds that the Gem Theater meets one of the four landmark categories in that it reflects the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state or community.

GEM THEATER
"BLONDE DYNAMITE"
With the "Beverly Hills" and

Times Picayune
4/2/1950
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