United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Multiple Property Documentation Form

This form is used for documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in How to Complete the Multiple Property Documentation Form (National Register Bulletin 168). Complete each item by entering the requested information. For additional space, use continuation sheets (Form 10-905-a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

[ X ] New Submission  [ ] Amended Submission

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

Historic Movie Theaters in Nebraska

B. Associated Historic Contexts

(Name each associated historic context, identifying theme, geographical area, and chronological period for each.)

Development of Movie Theaters in Nebraska, 1896-1979

Evolution of Movie Theater Design, 1900-1970s

C. Form Prepared by

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Organization     Alley Poyner Mscchietto Architecture
Street & Number  1516 Cuming Street
City or Town     Omaha
State            Nebraska
Zip               68102

D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register Criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archaeology and Historic Preservation. ([ ] See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature and title of certifying official

Date

History Nebraska – State Historic Preservation Office
State or Federal agency and bureau

I hereby certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action
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Provide the following information on continuation sheets. Cite the letter and the title before each section of the narrative. Assign page numbers according to the instructions for continuation sheets in How to Complete the Multiple Property Documentation Form (National Register Bulletin 16B). Fill in page numbers for each section in the space below.

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F. Associated Property Types
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I. Major Bibliographical References
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E. Statement of Historic Contexts
(if more than one historic context is documented, present them in sequential order.)

I. Development of Movie Theaters in Nebraska, 1896-1979

NARRATIVE DISCUSSION

Entertainment in Nebraska before Moving Pictures, 1867-1896

Nebraska, which became a state in 1867, is in the Central Plains region of the United States. It is a primarily rural state with most of the population concentrated at its eastern end, within or near the two major cities of Omaha and Lincoln, the state capital. But the state also has hundreds of smaller cities, towns, and villages spread across 93 counties. The construction of railroad lines beginning in the 1860s increased the state’s population and often determined the location, and success, of communities. In this era before automobiles and a dense highway network, the railroad lines brought not only people and goods to communities scattered throughout the state but were the primary transporters of entertainment as well.

For the first two decades of statehood, moving picture technology was not yet invented. For amusement, people depended upon live entertainment such as plays, musical shows, rodeos, or county fairs. When this entertainment took place indoors it was often held at a town or city’s opera house. Opera houses were the primary mass entertainment venue prior to the introduction of motion pictures. Nebraska’s opera houses have been previously studied as part of the Multiple Property Submission, “Opera House Buildings in Nebraska 1867 to 1917.”

At least 310 communities in Nebraska had an opera house between 1867 and 1917. From the late 1890s through the late 1920s, live entertainment and the newly emerging motion pictures often co-existed within the same building, with the motion pictures often being shown during the intermission period of live performances. One of the first motion pictures exhibited in Nebraska took place in conjunction with a play titled “Woman Against Woman” at Boyd’s Opera House in Omaha in December 1896.

Although given a genteel moniker, many of Nebraska’s opera houses did not specialize in opera but instead featured a variety of shows to appeal to a wider audience. The events within an opera house during any given year could range from vaudeville to dances, lectures to political rallies, and sometimes even sporting events. The opera house was often the largest gathering spot in a community and acted as a de facto community hall. The performances were determined by the locale’s proximity to a railroad. Communities like Omaha, Lincoln, and Grand Island, that were more readily accessible by rail, benefited from a fuller, more diverse lineup. By the early 1900s, the new moving pictures were increasingly incorporated into an opera house’s weekly program as an extension of this varied line-up.

3 Omaha Daily Bee, “Amusements: The vitascope continues to be...,” December 16, 1896.
Opera houses in Nebraska exhibited many features that came to define the movie houses during the first half of the twentieth century. They were situated prominently along main streets or metropolitan downtowns. Opera houses in smaller communities, or those that wanted to ensure diverse income streams, were designed to be flexible, with a stage at one end and the remainder of the space open to allow for movable seating, banquet tables, or left vacant, as the event demanded. When theater purveyors did install permanent seating, it showed they intended the building for a narrower type of use, and as the new century advanced, that they might intend the building to show movies in conjunction with live entertainment.5

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, live entertainment began to decline in favor of motion pictures, which were becomingly increasingly sophisticated in length and subject matter and were typically more affordable for both exhibitors and audience members. Other factors, discussed in more detail in the Opera Houses in Nebraska MPD, played an influence too, including a controlling Theatrical Syndicate that made it harder for communities to secure quality live entertainment, as well as the introduction of the affordable automobile that altered how and where people lived. But before movie theaters could usurp opera houses as the primary destination for entertainment in Nebraska’s towns and cities, the motion picture had to be invented.

MOTION PICTURES COME TO NEBRASKA, 1896-1915

The origin of motion picture exhibition extends back to 1893, when Thomas Edison and his assistant William Dickson, benefitting from the experiments of others as well as their own technological innovations, unveiled the Kinetoscope. This device, housed within a wood box, showcased a moving picture on perforated, celluloid film for a sole paying customer who looked down at the show through a magnifying lens at the top. The first movies were not yet a communal activity and their content, which was short due to the limitations of the film length, usually presented everyday activities, such as a man sneezing or a group of factory workers leaving their workplace. But still the Kinetoscope was new, showing fluid movement that was so much more dynamic than the optical viewing devices that preceded it. As a result, its popularity spread far and wide, but only for about a year.6

By 1895, the exhibition of motion pictures as we know them today stepped closer to becoming a reality. Led by the Lumiere Brothers of France, various inventors began to harness the power and unravel the intricacies of projecting films for a bigger viewing audience. Several companies in the United States emerged to produce and sell motion picture equipment and films including Cinématographe, American Mutoscope Company (later called Biograph), and the Edison Company. In the coming years, infighting over patents and film rights, primarily led by Edison to reduce competition, was a constant amongst these major companies and made it difficult for new entrepreneurs to squeeze their way into a prime position.7

5 Ehlers, 6, 13; “Opera House Buildings in Nebraska, 1867 to 1917.”
7 Ibid., 101-102.
On April 23, 1896, the first theatrical exhibition of a projected movie occurred at Koster and Bial’s Music Hall in New York City using the Edison Company’s Vitascope. It took seven months but on November 19, 1896, Nebraska received its first documented Vitascope picture, at Boyd’s Opera House in Omaha. By early January 1897, Boyd’s featured a show using Lumiere’s Cinématographe. That same month in Lincoln, a performance of Carmen at the Funke Opera House ended with a “realistic moving picture of a bull fight given by the Eidoloscope,” a short-lived motion picture system.

During the late 1890s and the early 1900s, moving pictures were shown throughout Nebraska. Several factors influenced the rise in popularity on both a national and statewide level. Early films were affordable to secure, admission was low, and they were short, which made it possible for people of all economic classes to spend an hour or more catching a show multiple times a week, if they so desired. Artistic and technological innovations that expanded the length, scope, and narrative of films ensured that audience members kept coming back even after the novelty wore off and, in time, meant that they would pay more for the pleasure. Lastly, there was variety in motion picture entertainment. New films could be shown every week, if not every day. This was particularly attractive to people who lived in remote areas, where access to entertainment was more limited.

The first exposure many rural people had to motion pictures was often through a touring exhibitor or lecturer, who incorporated moving pictures into their usual program of photographic slides or magic lantern, sometimes at a local opera house or church but other times outside in a more carnival-like atmosphere. In Grand Island, for example, which was Nebraska’s fourth largest city by 1900, the first moving pictures were of the street-fair variety. Only in October 1897 was this novel form of entertainment given an air of respectability by being shown at the well-regarded Bartenbach Opera House (NeHRSI# HL06-153; National Register # 100001800).

Moving pictures in Nebraska were often limited to those who could afford admission to opera houses and theaters or to the locales ability to entice traveling shows that incorporated the new technology. But, in these early days of film exhibition virtually anyone could be an operator of the novel entertainment, if they could afford the equipment. A 1900 advertisement in Lincoln’s Nebraska State Journal called for, “A few good men to operate motion picture machines and give exhibitions in churches, school houses [sic] and halls in your own locality.” The ad promised respondents that experience was unnecessary, and they had the potential to make “big money.”

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8 *Omaha Daily Bee.* "Amusements: After months of waiting...,” November 19, 1896.
9 *Omaha Daily Bee*, “Coming Events,” December 27, 1896.
10 *The Nebraska State Journal*, “At the Funke,” January 26, 1897; Robinson, 55, 63.
For those interested in traveling to various locales, itinerant exhibition was another option. In Nebraska these traveling exhibitors included Frank E. Goff, Nick Amos, and Ed Gregg.\textsuperscript{14} Goff’s first film exhibition, in 1900, took place in Randolph under a blacktop tent showing one-reel films for 25 cents a ticket.\textsuperscript{15} For the next five years, he traveled via railroad, boat, or stagecoach to towns throughout Nebraska, the Dakotas, Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, Idaho, Washington and New Mexico showing films on main streets as well as at fairs, ranches, mining camps, and Native American reservations. Sometimes he had musicians join him on his travels to provide accompaniment to the pictures.\textsuperscript{16} Other seasonal, typically transient, venues that exhibited films in these early days were rodeos, amusement parks, and carnivals. In David City, the annual Chautauqua lineup in 1904 included a transient motion picture company showing “hundreds of scenes from all over the world, all phases of human life from highest to lowest from humorous to pathetic.”\textsuperscript{17}

Wherever they were exhibited, these early motion pictures were limited to one reel, giving them a maximum length of ten to fifteen minutes. Their scope was narrow, focusing on single shots of real-life subjects, with little depth or story line and no sound. As the novelty wore off, the public began to expect more from motion pictures and so early filmmakers sought out real life subjects like the Spanish-American War or an exotic far-off destination for their movies. Some filmmakers were not above re-enacting scenes from conflicts such as the bombing of a ship in Cuba to bolster interest in their films. But the novelty of these subjects also wore off in short order and the search for attention grabbing films led to a wholly new type of movie, one that told a story.\textsuperscript{18}

The advent, and long-lasting success, of dedicated motion picture houses only came about with the development of films that told an exciting story by linking scenes together. As Frederic J. Haskin noted in 1914, to meet “the insatiable thirst of the nickelodeon patrons...a coherent story must be unfolded before their vision, which means that the up-to-date maker of films must have plays written and acted before the cameras.”\textsuperscript{19} Such early story films included \textit{A Trip to the Moon} (1902), \textit{The Great Train Robbery} (1903), and \textit{The Bold Bank Robbery} (1904).\textsuperscript{20} When \textit{The Great Train Robbery} debuted at the Orpheum Theater (DO09:0123-024; NR #73001061) in Omaha in 1904, it had “the distinction of being the first motion picture that created a demand great enough to recommend a return engagement.”\textsuperscript{21} Other types of movies that proved popular were prizefights, in which filmed footage of boxing matches were showcased, and various incarnations of the Christian Easter Passion play, which attracted religious groups in droves, particularly during Lent.\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} \textit{Omaha World Herald}, “Pioneer of the Movies, "Daddy" Goff of Omaha,” May 24, 1914; Barry Oldfield, "Theater Topics," \textit{The Nebraska State Journal}, September 19, 1937; \textit{Beatrice Daily Sun}, “Operated First Motion Pictures,” January 8, 1936.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Goff’s ticket prices were higher than the nickel theaters that soon appeared (25 cents versus 5 to 10 cents). This could have been due to a lack of competition during these very early days of film exhibition.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} \textit{Omaha World Herald}, “Pioneer of the Movies, "Daddy" Goff of Omaha.”
  \item \textsuperscript{17} \textit{The Banner Press}, “Chautauqua Features,” June 23, 1904.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Robinson, 76-81, 89.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Frederic J. Haskin, "Some Things You Want to Know," \textit{Omaha Daily Bee}, February 10, 1914.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Robinson, 89.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} \textit{Omaha Daily Bee}, "Coming Events," March 13, 1904.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Robinson, 82-87.
\end{itemize}
Enterprising businessmen like Harry Davis, a vaudeville house operator in Pittsburgh, saw opportunity in the draw of these growing categories of films. In 1904 Davis opened what is purported to be the first nickelodeon in a small room at the back of a penny arcade in Pittsburgh. When that building burned down, Davis went on to open a cinema in a converted store in June 1905. He named it Nickelodeon, borrowing a name previously used for 5-cent entertainment shows and applying it for the first time to a motion picture house. Nickelodeons (also called nickel- or five-cent theaters) soon swept across the nation.

Nickelodeons were usually situated in converted storefronts and had the reputation of attracting a lower-class crowd. The nickel show price was also used to attract patrons to movies at converted live entertainment theaters and a new, but short-lived, movie exhibition type, the air dome. Purpose-built theaters, which were a step above the pieced together quality of the nickelodeons due to their intentional design as entertainment spaces, began to appear by the latter half of the twentieth century’s first decade. These purpose-built theaters really flourished by the late 1910s and thereafter, as movies became more of a mainstay in the entertainment realm.

The rapid rise of exhibition spaces in turn led to an increased demand for films. These films came from locales across the United States, as well as abroad. It was not just that American filmmakers could not keep pace with demand, but that many were prevented from even getting into the act due to Edison’s zest for patent infringement filings.23

During the 1910s, exhibitors dealt with several limitations in clever ways. One issue was keeping houses open during warmer months at a time when mechanical air conditioning did not yet exist. Prior to its appearance, theaters utilized other cooling methods such as fans or fans blown over ice or they closed their doors during the hottest months of the year, which was typically July and August in Nebraska. In Lincoln, the operator of the Majestic (a combination movie and vaudeville house) used this “off season” to undertake renovations.24

Another issue was incorporating sound into the era’s silent films. While music, song, or a lecture could accentuate the films, many exhibitors sought ways to enliven the picture by adding realistic sound. This included incorporating objects to coincide with the scene being shown, such as a whistle when a train appeared, striking coconut shells together to mimic a horse’s hooves, or having people behind the screen voicing dialogue.25 By the 1910s, sound effect machines were on the market, which simplified the use of various objects to the push of a button. Edison and others also released a variety of movie-specific phonographs, which attempted to synch with the action on the screen. But none of these inventions proved adequate as they were faulty in their execution or lacked the nuances of sound as it should be when accompanying the images shown on the screen.26

While many people eagerly embraced the motion picture houses in their various forms, others were quick to criticize them or point out their deficiencies. A journalist writing in The Nebraska State Journal believed Lincoln’s cheap movie

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23 Robinson, 96.
24 The Nebraska State Journal, "In the Theaters: Majestic Also Closes," July 11, 1909.
26 Robinson, 166, 174-175.
houses could not compare to purpose-built live theater attractions like Lincoln’s Majestic Theater, which, by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, offered moving pictures seasonally in addition to live entertainment. The writer described how, “The roominess of the house and its good air tempt hundreds to see the pictures who would not venture into an ordinary ‘Nickelodeon.’”27

In a bit of perhaps sensational journalism, the story of an avid movie fan in Omaha who went blind in one eye, supposedly due to aggravation on an existing condition caused by the flickering of the moving pictures, was printed throughout many Nebraska newspapers.28 In addition to concerns about the physical impact of movie viewing, there were those who feared the ill-effects of movie content, both in Nebraska and elsewhere. Often led by church groups or others concerned with society’s ills, these advocates pushed for censorship laws so that only clean, wholesome stories would be exhibited. Hollywood’s self-imposed censorship arrived by the 1930s, but exhibition house owners also had the ability to self-censor which movies they played at their theaters. 29

Little could stop the rising popularity of moving pictures during the early twentieth century. This might be represented by no less a fact than that a high-class theater like Lincoln’s Majestic began to incorporate movies as the main bill in their lineup by 1909. In short order, movies were shifting from a cheap amusement to an activity worthy of high society. The diversity of exhibition spaces for motion pictures during this time, from nickelodeons to opera houses, ensured people of all classes soon caught the movie-going bug, making movie theaters a fixture in communities large and small by the 1910s. The purported number of movie theaters in the state varied widely during this time. In 1912, one Nebraska newspaper article discussing fire safety at movie theaters reported that the state had “at least 1,200 moving picture houses in operation” whereas another article discussing the Motion Picture Exhibitors League of Nebraska put the number at 210.30 The discrepancy may be due to the makeshift quality of many of the theaters at the time, or the possibility that the League only included member exhibitors in its determination of total theaters.

The Motion Picture Exhibitors League was founded in 1912 in Nebraska as an offshoot of the Motion Picture Exhibitors League of America. The group’s goal was to unify the state’s exhibitors and advocate for their best interests when it came to laws and business. Founding members included William Stoecker, who was said to have opened the first picture theater in Omaha, and P.L. McCarthy, who operated the Lyda Theater in Grand Island.31

Although the movie industry generally, and the exhibition business specifically, was a male dominated field, women did own and operate movie theaters in Nebraska during the early twentieth century. Some of these women became involved independently while others followed their husbands into the business. A 1914 article in the Omaha World Herald identified some of these female movie house entrepreneurs. They included Lillian M. Linstrom, who quit her job

in stenography and purchased a movie theater on Leavenworth Street in Omaha (address unknown). Mrs. Nicholas Amos joined her family in the exhibition business, first in Kansas and then in Lincoln, some small Nebraska towns, and Omaha, where they opened many of the city’s first theaters. By 1914, Mrs. Amos was the only one of her family still involved in exhibition and operated three theaters in Council Bluffs, which is just across the Missouri River from Omaha. Mrs. F.E. Goff first joined her husband “Daddy” Goff, said to be “the pioneer of movies in Nebraska, and one of the oldest movie men in the country.” When Mr. Goff retired from the exhibition business in 1912, he gave control of a theater in north Omaha to Mrs. Goff where, “She runs the whole show,” according to a statement from Mr. Goff at the time. Elsewhere in Nebraska, female movie exhibitionist included Mrs. George Thurman, in Lincoln; Mrs. George M. Watradt, in Stanton; Mrs. Florence Davis, in Madison; Mrs. G.V. Higgins in Crawford; Miss Hoffman, in Elm Creek; Mrs. A.K. Ackyrod, in West Point; and Mrs. Elsie Ouderkirk, in Franklin.32

Particularly ambitious exhibitors operated local and even regional chains (also called circuits) of theaters during this period, but they were nothing on the scale of what would appear by the 1920s, when Hollywood studios exerted increasing control over all facets of the industry. Even at this early stage, chain theaters often proved to be the most economical approach to exhibition ownership. Exhibitors could recycle films amongst their theaters and buy certain materials in bulk, allowing them to distribute costs across multiple buildings. In Nebraska, chain owners included Nick Amos, whose wife is referenced above. Amos operated a chain of theaters during the first two decades of the twentieth century, many of them given the name Elite. In Nebraska he ran theaters in Lincoln, Omaha, and South Omaha. He also had theaters in Council Bluffs and Burlington, Iowa; Wichita, Leavenworth, and Topeka, Kansas. After getting out of theater operation, he sold film rights to theaters, until his death in 1937.33 In 1911, a chain dedicated to the unique air dome theater type was established by Roy Crawford and the Crawford, Kearney and Wells circuit. It had theaters in eight Kansas towns as well as eight communities in Nebraska: Beatrice, Hastings, Kearney, Grand Island, York, Fremont, Nebraska City, and Falls City.34

The inexpensive theaters that predominated during the first decade of the 1900s and into the second greatly benefited the movie industry overall by showing the profit and audience that movies could attract. During this time, the industry became increasingly organized and standardized. Film exchanges rose in popularity, acting as a middle-man between the manufacturer and the exhibitor and allowing a proprietor to rent rather than purchase new films.35 The dueling major film manufacturers made peace and formed the Motion Pictures Patents Company (also known as the Edison Trust) in 1909, which tried to control film producers, exchanges, exhibitors, and even raw film stock, through licenses.

A rival group of “Independents” arose in reaction to the Trust and was part of the legal efforts that forced the Trust to disband in 1915 for restraining trade. Changes that occurred either because of, or in reaction to, their tight grip included

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33 Oldfield, "Theater Topics."
34 Fremont Tribune, “Fremont on Air Dome Circuit Just Formed,” February 14, 1911.
35 Robinson, 95.
the increase of film production in the United States and the movement of the industry west to Hollywood, where Edison had less control. The United States was thus on its way to becoming the epicenter of the film industry.  

A major advancement in movie technology that occurred toward the end of the nickel theater’s heyday was the appearance of multireel films, which made it possible to extend the length of a motion picture. This allowed for more complex subject matters and the ability to hold patrons’ interest for longer periods. The first multireel film was released in Australia in 1906 (The Story of the Kelly Gang) but it took a few years for this longer film type to gain popularity in the United States. The first American-made multireel films were created in 1909, but the Trust wanted to control their distribution and only allowed them to be released one at a time.  

The public’s preference for longer films and their willingness to pay more for them helped this format flourish as the 1910s advanced. These longer films became known as “features,” a term still used for them today.  

A new film genre that emerged during this period, and remained popular until the 1960s, was the newsreel. Introduced to the United States in 1911 by the French Pathé Company, the newsreel grew out of the non-fiction actualities that preceded them. As Douglas Gomery explains, the newsreel was “a regular compilation of news footage organized as stories as in a magazine.” Newsreels provided viewers with moving pictures of current events and notable people. They were typically played at the beginning or during the intermission of a film. While the events showcased during a newsreel were based on fact, they were carefully edited and sometimes staged or sensationalized, for entertainment or propaganda purposes. Newsreels proved particularly enticing during times of conflict, such as World War I and World War II. They disappeared in the 1960s, by which time news television was on solid footing.  

The changing nature of movie going necessitated a totally different type of showroom from what the nickelodeons, converted theaters, and air domes could offer. By the 1910s, ambitious theater operators began to build commercial block theaters and dedicated movie houses that greatly improved the viewing experience. These theaters were often larger and more comfortable for patrons attending feature length films. This in turn allowed the exhibitors to begin charging a higher admission price. But they were also more expensive to operate than the nickel theaters and thus narrowed the competition on theater ownership.  

Movie Theaters of this Era  

The Nickelodeon  

Although there was little uniformity among nickelodeons in terms of their size or appearance, the features that defined them were their inexpensive entry fee (five cents) and their elevation of the moving picture as the main draw. This contrasted with more respectable entertainment venues, such as opera houses and live theaters, which featured moving pictures only as an accompaniment to the live show. Nickelodeon’s benefitted from their low price and a strong national

36 Robinson, 101-102, 113-115, 139; Gomery, 33.
37 Robinson, 141-143.
38 Ibid., 141-145.
39 Gomery, 141-154.
economy, which led to an increase in a variety of popular entertainment options besides the nickelodeon, including vaudeville theaters and amusement parks.40

Nickelodeons were essentially a makeshift theater, often situated in a commercial storefront that had been designed for another use. Depending on how much an owner wanted to invest in his new theater, the exterior façade might be simply embellished with a new sign or more ornately with art nouveau ornamentation. For the more lavish fronts, terracotta decoration could be purchased from the catalog of a manufacturer like Decorator Supply Company of Chicago.41

Because they were such a new use, they were governed by few, if any, special taxes or zoning laws. Statewide efforts to ensure fire safety did not exist either. Only in 1911 did Nebraska pass legislation to regulate fire safety and inspection of movie houses and other similar places of assembly. By 1912, this included a required number of egress points, as well as fireproof materials at the projection room and a special device to automatically close the door to that room, should a fire start.42

Nickelodeons were relatively inexpensive for an entrepreneur to set up and, since they were also cheap to attend, if the offerings proved enticing enough, they could draw frequent, large crowds and bring in a significant rate of return for their owner. Due to their low price, they frequently attracted patrons of low income and the emerging middle class, the latter of which had more leisure time on their hands to spend frequenting the nickelodeon. Shows lasted for about an hour and were typically a compilation of various, unrelated themes, including news, documentary, comedy, fantasy, and drama. Other entertainment may be present, such as a song to start off the show or keep the audience entertained during reel changes, a piano or larger ensemble to accommodate the films, or a lecturer to expound upon what was being shown on the screen, but it was the motion pictures themselves that served as the main draw.43

Many of Nebraska’s communities opened movie houses during these first years of the nickelodeon craze. Larger cities might have many while smaller communities could only support one. In Lincoln, which had roughly 50,000 inhabitants, four nickel theaters within 600 feet of each other existed on O Street by 1907.44 Red Cloud, with a population under 2,000, appears to have had only one, the Tepee Theatre in a converted storefront in its downtown, by 1908. In April of that year, it held a one-week engagement of The Passion Play. Due to the “great length” of this movie, an early example of a feature film, admission was 25 cents. Attendees benefited from accompanying “sacred music” and a lecture by the Rev. Father Fitzgerald.45

40 Gomery, 20-21; Robinson, 90-91.
43 Robinson, 90-92; Gomery, 18-20.
45 The Red Cloud Chief, ”Engagement Extraordinary at the Tepee Theater,” April 3, 1908.
Because nickelodeon buildings were often not intentionally designed as theaters, their flaws became increasingly apparent by the early 1910s and few, if any, survived beyond World War I. Size constraints were one issue, as movies attracted ever growing crowds. The typically flat floors made it difficult for all audience members to see, the seating of wood chairs or benches was uncomfortable, and the interiors were often poorly lit, which was good for movie viewing but bad for navigating to and from the exit. Fire concerns were also high, due to the highly flammable composition of nitrate film and the fact that the building may not have been designed to accommodate the large crowds it might attract.

**Conversion Theaters**

Converted storefront nickelodeons were not the only movie houses that operated during the first decade of the twentieth century. Larger exhibition spaces that had previously featured live entertainment as their main draw, including opera houses, community halls, and vaudeville houses, began to heavily feature motion pictures as the popularity and profits became increasingly obvious. Conversion in these types of spaces often merely required the installation of a permanent screen at the stage end and a projection room in the balcony area. The theater name would be emblazoned on a large marquee on the exterior. To adequately compete with the nickelodeons, the admission prices would be similar, five to ten cents.

In New York City, this trend was in full swing by 1908 with a journalist claiming that, “Manhattan for the past two seasons has been exclusively a moving picture showhouse” with shows occurring at nickelodeons, converted live entertainment theaters, and traveling exhibitions. In Nebraska, it appears that the more popular choice was to convert live act theaters into combination houses where patrons could be entertained by films and live entertainers. The Majestic Theater in Lincoln and the Lyric Theater in Fremont were both converted into combination vaudeville and moving picture houses, in 1908 and 1914, respectively.

These “semi-vaudeville houses,” as some called them, were considered competition with the exclusive moving picture houses. Efforts were made to curtail them through such proposals as limiting the number of reels they could secure from film exchanges, for example, two reels in comparison to the four reels reserved exclusively for movie houses. However, such combination houses in converted live theater buildings remained active in Nebraska well into the 1920s, as demonstrated by the 1925 conversion of the Keir Opera House in Hastings into a combination vaudeville and moving picture house.

During the succeeding decades, the number of converted movie theaters paled in comparison to purpose-built movie houses. While it may have been cheaper to convert an existing theater into one focused on movie exhibition, there were features of live theaters that became increasingly undesirable as the century advanced. The predominance of stairs was a major factor, according to a movie theater operator in England. Speaking in 1911 about the failure of converted

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46 Davis, 24.
47 *The Nebraska State Journal*, "Engulfed By Picture Show."
48 *Fremont Tribune*, "May Reduce the "Movies," August 9, 1913.
The Air Dome
The air dome was a short-lived trend in motion picture exhibition during the early part of the twentieth century. It was an inexpensive way to exhibit pictures, with a setup much like the traveling exhibitors that roamed through towns around the turn of the century. The motion picture equipment was the most extravagant expense. Air domes were usually located on a vacant lot along the main street, the walls a metal framework supporting a canvas tent, the floors dirt, and the seating simple benches. Because there was little protection from the outside elements, their prime service time was during the warmer months. The movement of fresh air was particularly attractive during the hot summer months of July and August, a time when many indoor theaters closed their doors due to insufferable heat. They charged a similar admission price to the nickelodeon theaters, five to ten cents a show.

Many Nebraska communities of all sizes had air domes in operation between 1906 and 1926. These included Fremont, Alliance, Kearney, Plattsmouth, Omaha, Lincoln, Benedict, Eustis, Schuyler, and Columbus. They often featured vaudeville or other live entertainment as well as motion pictures. Air domes often represented a steppingstone for many theater operators. As soon as they could afford to, operators abandoned the open-air model in favor of a more traditional enclosed theater building. This was the case in Columbus, where proprietor O.S. Washburn closed his air dome theater in 1911 and erected a vaudeville theater on the same site.

Few, if any, vestiges of this theater type remain. But their predominance across the state makes them worthy of mention. Additionally, as an open-air exhibition model, they have links to the itinerant traveling shows that came before and the drive-in theatre that came later.

Commercial Block Theaters and Dedicated Movie Houses
Two types of purpose-built movie theaters, commercial block theaters and dedicated movie houses, began to appear in Nebraska on the eve of World War I but proliferated during the following era and will be discussed in more detail below.

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50 Nebraska State Journal, "Moving Picture Boom In England," March 26, 1911.
THE HEYDAY OF MOTION PICTURE ENTERTAINMENT: 1915-1946

The mid-1910s to the mid-1940s were the prime years of movie theater entertainment, when the exhibition of films transformed from being considered by some as a passing fad (or worse, a nuisance or social strain), to being a big business that attracted people across economic classes and age ranges. The movie industry inspired a nationalization of entertainment on a level never experienced. People throughout Nebraska, and the country, could all see the same movie with the same actors, in their own hometown theater. Control of those movie houses moved from being primarily locally focused to regional and then to national as big Hollywood companies saw the benefit in not only making the movies but also controlling their distribution and presentation.

During this time, movie going became a respectable pastime, entertaining for the audience and profitable for the theater owner. A rising middle class had more money to spend on entertainment and people of higher classes started to consider movie watching a dignified activity. By 1915, Omaha’s high society had begun to consider “the silent drama as legitimate entertainment and entirely dignified from the standpoint of parties. Box affairs are now the go there, and crowds are to be seen every night making their way to the Empress for their evening with the film stars.” Lincoln’s high society took note and began to do the same.53

At the beginning of this period, films became longer, and theater exhibitors began to charge more for them. In 1915, when D.W. Griffiths racially charged epic “Birth of a Nation” premiered, it ran for three hours and the New York exhibitor charged two dollars a ticket. The film premiered at Nebraska theaters later that same year. In Plattsmouth, the exhibitor was able to show the film for one dollar a seat, but only as a one-night showing.54 In 1915, the proprietors of Plattsmouth’s Grand and Gem Theaters increased the admission prices at the Gem Theater on Saturdays and Sundays from 5 and 10 cents to 10 and 15 cents. This, the managers argued, would allow them to give patrons a “longer and more extensive program…than is possible at present.”55

Theater operators began to build fancier theaters, called movie palaces when they were particularly ornate, to appeal to their expanding audience and provide comfort as movie times lengthened. With movie theater specific buildings, particularly the palaces, the focus became more about the building and the atmosphere than the movies. This was a shift from the nickel theater era, when people went to movies in droves for the novelty of what was being shown on the screen, not for the building in which they were housed. New York-based theater entrepreneur Samuel L. Rothapfel and Chicago-grown theater operators Balaban and Katz perfected the formula for the high-style movie palaces and their influence extended to movie theaters of all sizes during this era.56

Advances in transportation also influenced movie going during this period. Automobile ownership became increasingly affordable, and paved highways began to crisscross states. In Nebraska’s larger cities, mass transit lines continued to spread outward and improve their service. As more people were able to move further away from the city center by the 1920s, densification occurred, and commercial nodes sprouted up to cater to people’s basic needs and their hunger for

53 The Lincoln Star, "Lincoln society folks..." August 8, 1915.
leisure. Movie theaters, in the form of commercial block theaters or dedicated movie houses, became staples in many of these neighborhood commercial centers. Omaha was large enough that by 1926, the city contained nearly 40 theaters spread throughout its downtown and suburban commercial nodes, with some neighborhoods having two or three small movie theaters within a block of each other.\textsuperscript{57}

Movie attendance soared during the first part of the 1920s. It was estimated that fifty percent of the United States population attended a movie at least one day a week, compared with ten percent a decade previous. According to an article in the \textit{Omaha World Herald}, this “increasing attendance has caused greater demand for comfortable seats, beautiful auditoriums, pipe organs and ventilating systems, while these improvements have been themselves a cause of larger attendance.”\textsuperscript{58} To continue attracting customers, existing dedicated houses often underwent significant remodeling, improving their facades and adding new marquees. Examples of theaters remodeled in Nebraska during the 1920s include the Michelson in Grand Island (renamed The Strand when it re-opened in 1921); the Benson, the Lake, and the Grand in Omaha; the Gilbert in Beatrice; and the Orpheum in Red Cloud.\textsuperscript{59}

While the theaters thrived, some continued to voice their concern that the picture show was indecent and must be censored. Efforts to close movie houses on Sundays, which had arisen during the 1910s, persisted. These were part of the Blue Laws some locales, or entire states, enforced to prohibit certain activities on Sundays for religious reasons. In the early 1920s, the motion picture industry undertook efforts to prevent Blue Law bills from passing in several states, including Nebraska.\textsuperscript{60} While the state never enforced Blue Laws comprehensively, some Nebraska towns outlawed Sunday shows. In John Sorensen’s history of Grand Island’s movie theaters, he notes that that city’s lack of Blue Laws helped its theaters attract customers from nearby “restricted” towns like Hastings on Sundays.\textsuperscript{61} Through the late 1930s, Blue Laws were enforced in some Nebraska towns. In 1938, shows on Sunday were forbidden in Beatrice and Stromsburg, but no other cities or towns are mentioned in the \textit{International Motion Picture Almanac}’s national list of Sunday closures.\textsuperscript{62}

Until the late 1920s, theaters of this era typically provided a mixed bill, with live acts interspersing the action taking place on the screen. Vaudeville was a typical accompaniment. There were several reasons among which was as the industry became increasingly rigid during the first decades of the 1900s, it became difficult for smaller operators, or those without industry connections, to secure the best feature films. Another reason was that, without sound, silent films could become stale. To entice patrons, exhibitors had to offer a diversity of entertaining offerings. Even Balaban and Katz, successful operators of movie palaces in Chicago, which expanded into a national theater chain, only secured a deal for first run films with a big-time production house in the mid-1920s, after being in business for a decade. Prior to

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Omaha World Herald}, "New Neighborhood Theaters Opened," August 29, 1926.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Sorensen, 7; \textit{Omaha World Herald}, "New Neighborhood Theaters Opened;" \textit{Beatrice Daily Sun}, "Beautiful Theatre for Queen City," July 30, 1922.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Lincoln Journal Star}, "Blue Laws Menace Moving Picture Men," January 19, 1921.
\textsuperscript{61} Sorensen, 7.
this and until the appearance of sound films in the late 1920s, they brought in audiences with 150-minute productions that blended second rate movies with captivating stage shows.63

Sound films helped encourage a resurgence in movie theater attendance. By the late 1920s, attendance was in decline for the first time in its short history.64 Radio, which began broadcasting to the public in the early 1920s, allowed people to enjoy inexpensive entertainment from the comfort of their homes. It led to declining attendance at theaters, particularly live shows, but movie theaters as well. The coming of sound added excitement and comprehension to films. Sound movies, also called ‘talkies’ grew in popularity during the late 1920s, with early examples created by Warner Bros. studio using Vitaphone sound-on-disc technology. Some of these early sound films included Don Juan (1926), The Jazz Singer (1927) and The Singing Fool (1928). People responded with enthusiasm and a willingness to pay top dollar to see such films. Around the same time, Fox Film introduced sound to newsreels, using their own Movietone sound-on-film technology. Newsreels had always been a popular draw for theaters in the pre-television era but were greatly embellished with the addition of sound. By 1928, all the major Hollywood Studios were on board with sound. 65

Upgrades continued to be made to the sound technology thereafter. The sound-on-film system won out by 1930. To play these novel sound films and reap the accompanying profits, movie theaters needed access to equipment and connections to the big Hollywood studios. This put independent theaters at a disadvantage as studio-owned theaters secured exclusive contracts to be wired first and, in the case of Fox, they initially limited talking newsreels to their own theaters. If a town or neighborhood had only independent theaters, those theaters experienced a further decline in attendance because the automobile made it easier for affluent individuals to drive further afield to a theater that had sound technology. Western Electric and RCA were the chief manufacturers and installers of sound equipment. Other, smaller companies tried to compete, but their equipment was often substandard. While independent theaters waited their turn to have sound equipment installed, and saved up the necessary funds, some included more vaudeville programming to attract patrons. Only by 1931 could all movie theaters nationally boast of having sound.66

In Nebraska, theaters began to install sound equipment to allow for “talking motion pictures” by mid-1928. Omaha was first, Grand Island second, McCook third, and Lincoln fourth.67 In Omaha in July of 1928, the World Theater offered four shows in one, featuring Vitaphone (film with recorded music and some dialogue), Movietone (newsreels), vaudeville, and photoplays (silent films), proclaiming, “The stage, the screen, and the “talkies” all in one great entertainment combination.”68 At the Riviera, which had not yet been wired, an ad that same month promised “sound pictures soon.”69

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63 Gomery, 50-51
64 Sorensen, 23.
65 Gomery, 218-221.
66 Ibid., 220-223.
69 Ibid.
Smaller towns waited longer to be wired. In Snyder, which had under 500 inhabitants at the time, the Mars Theater had “talking motion picture equipment” installed in January 1930, over a year after they first came to Omaha.\footnote{Fremont Tribune, ”Movie Theater Gets Talkies,” January 15, 1930.}

Talkies helped movies attract patrons and in time allowed for the elimination of costly live stage shows, which was needed during the lean years of the Great Depression. Their early success also resulted in Hollywood’s own self-censorship known as the Motion Picture Production Code (or the Hays Code, after its founder William Hays), which the movie industry undertook to stave off government mandates some groups were pushing for at the time. Established in 1930, the Code’s mission was to “maintain social and community values in the production of silent, synchronized and talking motion pictures.”\footnote{Thomas Doherty, Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immortality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), Appendix A: The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, 347-367.} Thereafter, screenplays and films were reviewed and given a Code seal if they met the guidelines. A Code seal made it easier to distribute and screen a film at theaters throughout the nation.

During the Great Depression, theater operators had to expand the scope of their business to maintain revenue while also cutting back on expenses through the elimination of superfluous staff and services that had defined the boom years of the 1920s. According to Gomery, “from 1930 to 1932 box-office revenues declined by at least 25 percent. Recovery began in 1934, and in fits and starts the movie business improved through 1940.”\footnote{Gomery, 70.} To bring in patrons and more revenue during the lean years of the Depression, exhibitors began to sell concessions for the first time. Previously, patrons who wanted snacks while they watched their film purchased them from a confectionary prior to going into the theater. Food sales proved to be a big money maker for theaters and has remained a defining feature of the theater going experience.

Double features were another trend that became standard during the Depression and remained popular into the 1940s. At first the showing of two movies for the price of one was only embraced by the independent theater owners and looked down upon by the big Hollywood chains and certain social advocates. But by providing more options to patrons, independent theater exhibitors found another way to make their shows more attractive, especially since they had a harder time getting access to first run films in a desirable time frame. By the end of the 1930s, with their profits suffering, some of the big Hollywood chains, including Paramount, understood the appeal and adopted this approach.\footnote{Ibid., 77-79; The Nebraska State Journal, "Hollywood Happenings," July 21, 1935.}

A short-lived trend that many theaters experimented with during the Great Depression were giveaway nights, in which people had a chance to win various items like dinnerware, groceries or money. The Nebraska Theaters Corporation, a chain of theaters in Omaha, came up with a particularly exciting reward, offering free vacations to select lucky patrons at five of their movie houses in the summer of 1932.\footnote{Omaha World Herald, “Theaters Awarding Free Vacation Trips,” August 10, 1932.} Bank Nights, in which people could win hard cash by lottery, and Race Nights, in which a theater showed a film of an actual horse race and allowed people to place bets, were popular at many theaters. Although some looked down upon this as gambling, the theaters managed to avoid legal trouble when they did not require patrons to purchase tickets, but rather only required that they register themselves and be present...
on the night of the drawing. The independent operators, not associated with the Hollywood chains, were more desperate for patrons and it was thus under them that this additional form of entertainment at theaters thrived during the Depression. However, in Nebraska, there were continual attempts to outlaw bank nights at a local, county, and state level. In 1937, bank nights were ruled illegal by the state supreme court and so the theater owners like those of the Sioux Theater in Crawford and the Liberty Theater in Loup City decided to end the practice. Bank nights appear to have disappeared from Nebraska theaters by the end of 1937.\(^75\)

Surplus costs were curtailed by scaling down the staff, with some ushers and most door attendants eliminated, as well as nannies that were once present at the upscale movie houses. Live shows largely disappeared during this time as it was expensive to pay for the sets and the salary of the entertainers. The stripped-down approach also applied to theater architecture, which lost much of its excessive ornamentation in favor of a more streamlined appearance. The International Style of architecture began to predominate.\(^76\)

The 1934 census listed a total of 222 movie theaters in Nebraska, which reflects just a small growth from the 1910s, where the more conservative number of active theaters was given as 210.\(^77\) By the late 1930s, as the Great Depression subsided and World War II was on the horizon, new theaters began to open again. In 1937, the Grand (HL06-145; NR # 100001800) opened to great fanfare in Grand Island. On opening night, its marquee heralded it as “Nebraska’s finest and most modern theater.”\(^78\) In Schuyler, the remodeled and newly christened Colfax Theater (CX06-091; NR # 16000478) opened in October 1940. A journalist discussing the opening night claimed, “It is believed to be one of the most modern little theaters in this section of the state.” A celotex material was used to cover the walls and ceiling of the theater space, Western Electric installed the sound, and a neon sign was hung at the exterior.\(^79\)

By the 1940 census, Nebraska had a total of 284 movie theaters listed.\(^80\) Between 1941 and 1946, movie theaters and theater attendance experienced an unparalleled success that has never been replicated. During World War II, while few new theaters were built and projection and sound equipment was harder to come by due to government-imposed restrictions, the movie industry was recognized as an essential service that boosted public morale and compliance. Maggie Valentine notes that the theaters played an essential role, “keeping the public informed, selling war bonds, and showing propaganda films.” People went to the movies in droves because it was marketed to them as being patriotic, plus there were few other amenities to spend money on while shortages and rationing were in effect.\(^81\) Attendance peaked in 1946 and was on the decline thereafter. After World War II, a baby boom, suburban migration, and cheaper


\(^{76}\) Gomery, 69-82.


\(^{78}\) Sorensen, 1.

\(^{79}\) The Schuyler Sun, "New Movie Theater Will Open With Its First Show Tonight," October 24, 1940.


home-entertainment options, in the form first of radio and then of television, caused a decline in theater attendance and a surge of novel theater building types on new sites on the outskirts of cities and towns.\(^{82}\)

**Major Movie Theater Chains**

Theaters in neighborhoods and small towns, with populations under 2,500 constituted most of the nation’s exhibition spaces but were not the main revenue makers. It was the big picture palaces, typically situated in downtowns and with a seating capacity over 1,000 that made the money and that industry leaders sought to influence. Increasingly after World War I, control of film production, distribution, and exhibition was seized by a small number of big businesses who monopolized the American film industry.\(^{83}\) They ran the Hollywood studios, oversaw the exchanges that controlled distribution, and constructed or purchased theaters to ensure they could show their movies where and how they wanted to, while also collecting the box-office revenue.

At a national level, control of the industry rested in the hands of eight Hollywood companies between 1925 and 1948. The Big Five, first-tier firms were Paramount (whose chain of theaters was often referred to as Publix or Paramount-Publix until the mid-1930s), Fox (Twentieth Century Fox by 1935), Warner Bros., R.K.O. and Loew’s (parent company of MGM). There were also the Little Three, second-tier firms that exerted less control: Universal, Columbia, and United Artists. Most of the Hollywood-owned movie theater chains were operated by the Big Five but the Little Three also owned theaters, in addition to producing and distributing films.\(^{84}\)

The power these monopolies wielded, particularly the Big Five, had widespread repercussions for movie houses large and small between the 1920s and 1940s. Although they only owned or operated one-fifth of the theaters in the United States, they controlled which films most theaters received, when, and for how long.\(^{85}\) As Gomery notes, the studios perfected an approach known as the “run-zone-clearance system” to control distribution and exhibition.\(^{86}\) A new, first run film, was shown first at the movie theaters controlled by its respective studio. Only after they had adequately exhibited it would the movie move on to second and third tier theaters, which if not independently managed, were also owned by the chains. Independent theaters owners were usually forced to acquire films by block-booking, meaning they received one or two highly desirable films and a larger amount of lower grade films.

This could put a movie operator out of business, if he or she could not figure out other means to bring in revenue, such as the lure of live entertainment. The entrepreneurial Grand Island theater operator, Tyne Hyman, who managed the

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\(^{83}\) Gomery, 34; Sklar Introduction in Putnam, 7.


\(^{85}\) Sklar Introduction in Putnam, 5.

\(^{86}\) Gomery, 67.
town’s three best movie houses in the 1920s, learned this lesson the hard way. The opening of the Publix’s chain Capitol Theater in 1927, which was Grand Island’s first picture palace, led to the closure of his three theaters by 1930.87

Nebraska had theaters owned by some of the studio chains (also known as circuits) spread throughout the state. These included theaters connected to three of the Big Five companies: Paramount, Fox, and R.K.O. In the state, the Paramount-Publix chain of theaters operated under the name Publix Nebraska, Inc. The Fox chain was referred to as Fox West or Fox West Coast in newspaper articles. There were also theaters owned by an arm of the Little Three firm of Universal.

For some of their theater holdings, the national chains were involved from the beginning, when the theater was under construction. This was the case for the Lincoln Theater in Lincoln, the Capitol Theater in Grand Island, discussed above, and the Stuart Theater in Lincoln (LC13:C09-003; NR #03001341). For these scenarios, local businessmen provided the financing and the national chain, which was Publix in the case of the three above, oversaw operation.88 But it appears that more often, the chains acquired existing theaters to add to their holdings. Some of these may have been built by independent theater operators but many were previously part of smaller state or regional chains.

During the late 1920s, Publix and Fox vied to dominate the state’s market. Universal expanded into the Nebraska market in the 1920s by buying out the regional Hostettler chain. In October 1929, Publix purchased Universal-Hostettler’s 15 Nebraska theaters. These were the Swan (PT01-097; NR #96001353) in Columbus; the Bonham (JF04-063; NR #97000610) and Majestic (JF04-066, non-contributing to NR #97000610) in Fairbury; the Barthenbach, the Capitol, the Empress and the Majestic in Grand Island; the Crescent and the Empress in Kearney; the Grand, the Grenada and the Lyric in Norfolk; and the Keith in North Platte.89 A few months earlier, Publix had purchased three movie theaters in Columbus, Kearney, and Fremont from Omaha’s World Realty Company.90 As of 1930, Publix also operated theaters in Omaha included the Paramount (originally the Riviera); the World; and the State. By 1933, Publix had theaters in Omaha, Fremont, North Platte, Norfolk, Grand Island, Kearney, Columbus, and Fairbury, which were run by A.H. Blank, who is discussed in more detail below.91

Fox West Coast theaters began to add Nebraska theaters to its chain in 1929. This was part of a widespread procurement of theaters throughout the Midwest. In September 1929, Fox purchased seven theaters from World Amusement Company: the World, the Temple, and the Star in McCook; the Fox in North Platte; the World in Kearney; the Columbus in Columbus and the Fremont in Fremont.92 Two months later, Fox acquired the Sun Theater in York and the Ritz Theater in Beatrice.93 In 1931, Fox West bought Publix’s theater holdings in North Platte and Cheyenne.94

87 Sorensen, 9, 26.
89 The Columbus Telegraph, "Publix Acquires 20 Universal Theatres in Nebraska, Iowa." October 7, 1929.
90 Ibid.
91 The Lincoln Star, "Blank to Operate Publix Theaters," May 19, 1933.
93 Lincoln Journal Star, "Two More Theaters are Leased to Fox," November 12, 1929.
R.K.O. owned at least one Nebraska theater, the Orpheum in Omaha. The Orpheum opened in 1927, primarily for live shows. By 1929 however, it was showing a mix of vaudeville and talkies.\(^95\)

During the early 1930s, some independent theater owners in Nebraska filed suits in federal court against the Omaha Film Board of Trade and the national chains and distributors that operated in the state. These particular independent theater owners directed their attack at Publix’s protection provisions that demanded the independent theaters must wait 10 to 15 days before showing particular films because of their adjacency to a first-run Publix theater (within 15 to 20 miles). One independent owner, William N. Youngclaus, owner of a theater in Madison, noted that, when he tried to renew his contracts with the major distributors, inserting provisions against protection, the distributors refused to do business with him. In July 1932, Youngclaus successfully won his case against the film distributing corporations. A federal judge in Lincoln ruled that the protection plan represented a “restraint of trade as defined by the Sherman [anti-trust] act.” A Lincoln journalist stated that this was the “first case of its kind in the country, and is regarded with great importance by the entire motion picture industry.” The lawyer for the distributors said that they planned to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.\(^96\)

In time, small theater owners organized at a national level into trade associations to form a unified political voice against the monopoly of the big Hollywood companies. To please their clientele, they needed more turnover in their film options than first-run big city houses did, but many found it difficult to secure appealing options. They wanted more control over how they secured and exhibited movies. In 1948, the United States Supreme Court sided with them, ruling in *United States v. Paramount* that Hollywood’s major studios had violated Sherman anti-trust laws. The big Hollywood studios were forced to sell off their theater chains because they were required to divorce production and distribution from the exhibition of films.\(^97\)

**Independent Chains in Nebraska**

A variety of independent theater chains operated in Nebraska during this time. Some of them concentrated their theater holding in just one city, while others had theaters across the state and adjoining states. The holdings of the chain operators varied in size, from two or three to dozens. At least three of the larger independent chain operators, A.H. Blank Theaters, Hostetter Amusement Company, and World Realty, eventually sold their holdings to a studio chain. Below are details of just some of the independent chains that thrived during the 1920s and 1930s.

A.H. Blank, who lived in Des Moines and opened his first theater in that city, opened the Riviera Theater in Omaha in 1927. He owned other theaters in Iowa and Nebraska at the time, known collectively as A.H. Blank Theaters. He was also involved in producing and distributing motion pictures as part of First National Pictures, Inc. In 1927, he merged his holdings with Publix Theaters, which enabled him to build the Riviera. He remained active in the Paramount-Publix

\(^95\) *Omaha World Herald*, "Radio-Keith Orpheum Advertisement," March 29, 1929.

\(^96\) *The Lincoln Star*, "Protection of Movie Houses Held Unlawfu," July 2, 1932.

theater operations through at least the late 1930s, acting as circuit operator for twenty theaters in Iowa and Nebraska and two theaters in Illinois cities.  

World Amusement Company, based in McCook, had a chain of at least seven theaters during the 1920s. These were sold to the studio chain Fox West Coast in 1929. Fred Glass, then manager of the World theaters, stayed on as district manager for Fox. The World theaters’ president, E.C. Chitwood, severed his connections after the sale to Fox.  

The Hostettler Amusement Company, based in Omaha, owned 35 theaters in Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, and Missouri. In 1923 the company owned all the motion picture houses in Lincoln and opened its first in Fremont, a combination motion picture and vaudeville theater in a remodeled building on East Fifth Street. In 1925, the firm was sold to the second tier Hollywood Studio Universal Film Corporation.  

World Realty Company was another Omaha based independent chain. It operated five theaters in Omaha, one in Fremont, one in Columbus, and in 1926 was considering building or acquiring ten to fifteen more in Nebraska. In 1929, World Realty sold its theaters in Omaha, Fremont, Columbus and Kearney to the Paramount Theater Corporation (Publix).  

In 1926, members of the World Realty joined with Samuel and Louis Epstein to create a new theater exhibition company, called Nebraska Theaters. At that time, the company’s holdings included the Orpheum and Roseland Theaters in South Omaha and the Corby Theater, then under construction. They continued to expand thereafter, focusing on acquiring or building small neighborhood theaters around Omaha. By 1930, their holdings included the Uptown (29th and Leavenworth), the Avenue (20th and Leavenworth), the Corby (16th and Corby), the Benson, the Muse (24th and Farnam), the Circle (33rd and California), the Roseland (24th and O), the Tivoli (24th and N), the Isis (24th and Franklin), the Maryland and the Magic. By that point, the company was run exclusively by the Epstein brothers. The Epstein Brothers had gotten their start in show business in Omaha in 1915. Their first movie theater was the old Palm Theater, later known as the Magic. By late 1938, Sam Epstein was listed in the International Motion Picture Almanac as presiding over the Epstein Theater Company, which operated six theaters in Omaha.

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100 *Fremont Tribune*, "Omaha Firm Will Operate Theater on Fifth Street," July 24, 1923.  
104 *Omaha World Herald*, "Launch New Theater Firm on South Side" January 1, 1926.  
106 *Omaha World Herald*, "Local Circuit Adds Other Houses."  
During the 1930s, a group called Allied Theater Owners, Incorporated represented independent theater owners of Iowa and Nebraska. As of 1938, the group's headquarters were in Eldora, Iowa.¹⁰⁸

**Specialized Theaters**

Since early in the history of movie exhibition, there have been specialized theaters to cater to certain tastes or groups of people. These have included theaters that specialize in a certain genre – such as westerns, action, cartoons, newsreels, or foreign films. Exhibitors might have specialized in certain types of films to draw a specific audience, set their theaters apart or put a fresh spin on their inability to secure first-run films. For example, western-themed movie houses were a trend that occurred in some rural American towns in the 1940s. Newsreel theaters showed reels of current events, but they were generally located in America’s largest cities and disappeared by the mid-century when television made filmed news more widely available. Foreign films early on catered to ethnic groups longing for a connection to their homeland or their native tongue, and to a lesser extent, the art house crowd of high-income, educated patrons looking for an alternative to the Hollywood fare. After World War II, foreign films became the domain of art house theaters, which experienced a golden age that peaked in the 1960s.¹⁰⁹

It is possible specialized theaters existed in Nebraska, yet the trend among the state’s theaters appears to have been the incorporation of such specialty programming into their weekly schedules. For example, in advertisements for theaters throughout the state, newsreels were advertised as an accompaniment to the main show. In Grand Island during the 1940s through the 1960s, the downtown theaters held special showings geared toward children or adults, as well as specific holidays. But there were no theaters specializing in just one genre, although Grand Island’s Island Theater did show many westerns.¹¹⁰ The diverse fare exhibitors chose to show in Grand Island was likely reflected at movie theaters throughout the state.

**Movie Theaters for African Americans**

One type of specialized theater, those for African Americans, existed not because of preference, but out of necessity. Prior to 1964, when the Civil Rights Act legally struck down segregation in public places such as movie theaters, legal and de facto segregation existed throughout the country. These theaters operated amid a culture of racism and injustice, giving many African Americans a safe place where they could actively participate in the movie going experience and would not be forced to give up their seat or be turned away at the door simply for the color of their skin.

While Nebraska’s only law enforcing racial segregation pertained to marriage, there was plenty of de facto segregation occurring in the state pre-1964,¹¹¹ including prohibiting and controlling African Americans access to certain jobs, housing, and places like parks, swimming pools, theaters, schools and even hospitals. In John Sorensen’s account of Grand Island theaters, he describes how in that town unspoken segregation took place in which black patrons were turned away or forced to sit in the balcony at movie theaters if the main level became crowded with white patrons. In

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 1101.
¹⁰⁹ Gomery, 137-145, 171-196.
¹¹⁰ Sorensen, 39-41, 43.
Historian Eric Lendell Smith has compiled a directory of African American theaters in operation between 1900 and 1950. The directory lists nearly 2,000 theaters throughout the country, which, in addition to movie houses, included nickelodeons, vaudeville houses, musical houses and drive-ins. Smith’s directory notes that all of Nebraska’s African American movie theaters, seven total, were concentrated in Omaha. All were within the city’s Near North Side neighborhood, which held most of the city’s African American population due to redlining. The theaters, none of which are extant, were Alhambra Theater (1814 N. 24th Street); Diamond Theater (2410 Lake Street); Franklin Theater (1624 N. 24th Street); Lake Theater (24th and Lake Streets); Loyal Theater (2410 Caldwell Street); Ritz Theater (2041 N. 24th Street). The Loyal Theater advertised itself as “the first and only colored theatre in Nebraska.”

These theaters showed many of the same films playing elsewhere in the city, but they also exhibited films that were produced by African Americans or featured African American filmmakers and actors. The Diamond Theater and the Loyal Theater featured advertisements indicating upcoming showings for films by African American author and filmmaker Oscar Micheaux’s The Homesteader (1919) and Within Our Gates (1920), along with A Man’s Duty (1919), a Lincoln Motion Picture Company film.

The Lincoln Motion Picture Company was established in 1916 in Omaha by George and Noble Johnson of Lincoln. This company was short-lived, folding in 1921, but important. It was the first all-black production unit in the country and made significant contributions to the genre of race films. Race films were made between the late 1910s and the 1940s. Many were independently produced, outside the confines of Hollywood, but some of the major studios, seeing potential profits, also backed some of these films during the 1920s. As historian Jeremy Geltzer notes, “These niche films tailored to the African American experience with black actors and stories that appealed to audiences of color.” The Lincoln Motion Picture Company created a total of five films that played at black theaters like those in Omaha, as well as at churches and assembly halls. The contributions made by African American producers, filmmakers and actors were significant.

112 Sorensen, 21.
113 Omaha had the state’s largest African American population during the early twentieth century. Many arrived in the 1880s and another population boom occurred during the Great Migration of the 1910s, during which time the city’s African American population increased from 5,000 to 10,000, thereby comprising five percent of Omaha’s population at the time. Jobs in the meatpacking houses and railroad industry lured many during the Great Migration. “African American Migration,” Nebraska Studies, accessed July 1, 2020, http://www.nebraskastudies.org/1900-1924/racial-tensions/african-american-migration/; National Register of Historic Places, “North 24th and Lake Streets Historic District,” Omaha, Douglas County, NE, National Register #16000159.
114 Smith, 135; The following webpage gives a good account of the history of these theaters and others that existed in North Omaha historically. Although it does not include references, it provides photos, building plans, and newspaper clippings: https://northomahahistory.com/2015/09/09/a-history-of-20-movie-theaters-in-north-omaha/.
117 Geltzer, 109.
118 Ravage, "Lincoln Motion Picture Company," "The Lincoln Motion Picture Company," Norman Studios, accessed [source].
an important counterpoint to the accolades then being received by films such as the overtly racist “Birth of a Nation” and to the segregated theaters discussed above. Such films added diversity to the industry and allowed early twentieth century black moviegoers to see people like themselves represented on the screen.

Movie Theaters of this Era
Commercial Block Theaters and Dedicated Movie Houses

The development of commercial block theaters and dedicated movie houses occurred simultaneously during this era. These types of theaters appeared on a smaller scale before 1915 and after 1946 but the majority were built during the 1915 to 1946 era. Both were purpose-built movie houses that were a step above the nickelodeons that had predominated earlier in the twentieth century and a step below the movie palaces that developed contemporaneously. They were located within dense commercial strips but usually functioned more as neighborhood theaters than the high-class affair associated with movie palaces. Because they were intentionally built as theaters, they included the features desirable for such a function with a welcoming entry, a sizable lobby, and, within the main theater space: sloped floors, comfortable seats, good ventilation, and well-positioned, subtle lighting. A stage and space for musical accompaniment, such as a pipe organ, were most typical before live shows to accompany the movie program declined in popularity during the 1930s. Other amenities, such as lounges and cry rooms, which were more typical of the movie palace type, might also be present.

These theaters could often blend in with their commercial building neighbors. The feature that usually set them apart were their large marquee spelling out their offerings and perhaps incorporating their name, and a box office situated prominently at the front façade. The defining feature of commercial block theaters was that they included other uses within their footprint. This might be reflected in flanking retail bays at the ground floor, with offices or apartments above, depending on how large the building was. Dedicated movie houses, on the other hand, included no additional program besides those pertaining to the theater function. Within the theater footprint for both these theater types, the design varied due to the budget and vision of the owner and the perceived needs and desires of the audience. The design also shifted with the changing times.

The first purpose-built movie theaters were constructed during the previous era, prior to 1915. Two early examples were the Michelson Theater, which opened in 1908 in Grand Island, and the Empress, which opened in 1914 in Kearney.119 Both of these buildings were built as dual vaudeville and motion picture houses. They are non-extant, but had new theaters built on their sites during this second era. In Grand Island, The Strand (HL06-154, NR #100004141) replaced the Michelson Theater in 1921, but it stopped functioning as a theater just a few years later. In Kearney, the Fort Theater (BF05-176, NR #06000607) replaced the Empress after a fire destroyed it in 1940.

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By the 1930s and 1940s, these theaters would have been stripped of many of their excesses as part of the pared down approach that defined theater architecture thereafter. A concession stand also would likely have been added, to take advantage of that new revenue stream embraced during the Great Depression.

A typical example of a commercial block theater is the Ritz Theater (GA03-310; NR # 16000481), which opened in Beatrice in 1928. A barber shop and a salesman’s office were both listed as occupying space in this building in the late 1920s. The Rivoli (RH03-217; NR # 13001023) in Falls City, built in 1927, is another example of a commercial block theater. The building had two bays. A large marquee and sign once dominated the north bay (since removed) while the south bay appears to have functioned for commercial purposes.

An example of a dedicated movie house that opened in Nebraska towards the end of the movie theater’s most prosperous era was the Holly Theater in Beatrice. The Holly is located across the street from the Ritz in Beatrice’s commercial district. It opened in 1941, a simply detailed building one-story in height. The façade is dominated by a large marquee.

By the late 1940s, few new theaters opened in early twentieth century commercial districts. But some still did in Nebraska, at least until the mid-1950s. Post-World War II theaters included the Sky Theater in 1948 in Schuyler; the Pioneer Theater in 1949 in Nebraska City; the Fox Theater in 1949 in Beatrice; the Star Theater in 1950 in Curtis; the Center Theater in 1951 in Omaha; the Crest Theater in 1951 in Superior; the Fox Theater in 1951 in Sidney; and the Circle A Theater in 1953 in Ashland. Like the commercial block and dedicated movie houses of the previous era, these theaters had simple exterior embellishments, and typically mimicked the appearance of their downtown neighbors. Prominent signage on the exterior façade was the main indicator of their purpose.

When the Fox Theater opened in Beatrice in 1949, the manager, Jerry Hayes, held an open house to show off the new theater’s modern features. The theater was a complete rebuild of an existing movie house previously on the site. The exterior and interior were updated to be thoroughly modern, with a new air conditioning system and new projection and sound equipment. An article discussing the new theater praised the concession bar, calling it “one of the brightest and most attractive parts of the theater.” The concession bar sold candy, popcorn, ice cream, and (a first for Beatrice) Coca Cola.

Interestingly, some of these post-World War II theaters continued to incorporate features more typical of their predecessors, such as stages in the main theater space and amenities like cry rooms and lounges. The Pioneer Theater in Nebraska City, for example, was designed with a “stage large enough to handle any stage show” as well as a shared lounge connected to the restrooms. The Crest Theater in Superior had a cry room and its main theater space was used

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122 Beatrice Daily Sun, History Chronicled in Beatrice Theaters, August 22, 1952.
to host pageants, magic shows and other activities, in addition to movies. In Nebraska’s many small communities, the movie theaters remained multi-purpose to better serve the community and ensure a diverse income stream for their owners.

**Movie Palaces**

Movie palaces first appeared in the early 1910s but really thrived during this second era in movie going. With the advent of the movie palace, the experience of going to the movies became as much about the building as the show. The first and most notable movie palaces were built in New York City, designed by architect Thomas Lamb and their programming and detailing was overseen by theater entrepreneur Samuel L. “Roxy” Rothafel. These included the Regent (1913), the Strand (1914), the Rialto (1916), the Rivoli (1917), and the Capitol (1919). Where Rothafel was not initially involved, as was the case for the Regent and the Capitol, he soon was called upon when the new dedicated deluxe picture houses needed help drawing audiences.

Rothafel’s philosophy was, “The people themselves don’t know what they want. They want to be entertained, that’s all. Don’t ‘give them what they want’ — give ‘em something better.” Rothafel’s theaters emphasized service, elegance, and a first-rate show with a talented orchestra, musicians, actors, and dancers to accentuate and enliven the short shows and features that played on the screen. The seats were numerous, numbering in the thousands, and comfortable. The interiors were illuminated with subtle lighting, a stipulation requested by the Moving Picture Theater Code around 1913. The sight lines were good without support columns to block views. These theaters helped to elevate movie going and push aside the competition of vaudeville theaters that were also popular at the time.

The movie palace, like the movies shown on the screen, whetted people’s appetite for fantasy. The movie palace elevated movie going to a higher form of entertainment simply by the design of the building and the thoughtful details. Many were overly excessive in their ornament and reflected a mixture of various architectural styles. They were intended to be a democratic showplace, open to all classes where all patrons might feel like special guests.

In their ornateness, they borrowed from the lavish opera houses and music halls of the late 19th century. Many focused upon providing services not previously found in movie theaters. They frequently included such amenities as ushers, orchestras, air conditioning, a smoking lounge, a women’s lounge, and playrooms for children to be supervised while their parents attended a show. Some movie palaces were built as standalone buildings while others were incorporated into buildings that also included commercial and residential functions. A typical show might open with singing or music, then the curtain would rise to reveal a live show of dancing girls or a jazz band, before moving on to a series of shorts (newsreel, comedy, travelogue, or educational documentaries), previews of upcoming attractions, and culminating with a feature.

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127 Hall, 30-60; Naylor, 40-41.
128 Hall, 24.
What distinguished movie palaces from a simply outfitted downtown or neighborhood movie theater was their size, their wider range of amenities, and their higher level of detailing. The exuberant architecture that defined movie palaces meant they stood out from the commercial buildings that surrounded them whereas a downtown or neighborhood movie theater might only be distinguished by its large marquee. Movie palaces were expensive to build so they had to draw a substantial enough audience to warrant the expense. Their auditorium space was typically capable of seating at least 1,000 people, although some neighborhood movie palaces seated less than that and downtown movie palaces might accommodate two to three thousand. The presence of a stage and large orchestra pit ensured a well-executed variety show. Some critics derided the movie palaces for their excesses. By the 1930s and 1940s, desires to shed the lavishness of the 1920s resulted in a move toward modern, stripped down architecture, leading to the movie palace’s demise.

Although movie palaces are most often associated with bustling urban areas, they could be found in smaller locales as well. This was the case in Nebraska, which had just 17 cities that achieved or maintained a population over 5,000 and only one city, Omaha, whose population reached 200,000 between 1910 and 1940. In Omaha, which had the population to support an array of theaters, there were neighborhood as well as downtown movie palaces. Some movie palaces in Nebraska, and nationally, were built as standalone buildings while others were incorporated into buildings that also included commercial and residential functions. Omaha, Lincoln, Alliance, Beatrice, Fairbury, Fremont, Grand Island, Hastings, Kearney, McCook, Norfolk, North Platte and York all had movie palaces.

Nebraska’s first movie palace appears to have been the Strand, which opened in 1915 within the remodeled American theater building at 18th and Douglas Streets. A newspaper article describing the new theater declared that it, “is an innovation as far as Omaha ‘movie’ theaters are concerned. Other cities have their picture palaces where exclusive feature films are given but last night was the first time Omaha has seen anything quite so pretentious.” Other movie palaces soon followed in Omaha, including the Rialto, part of the Publix chain, in 1918.

Lincoln also had multiple movie palaces. The Lincoln, opened in 1925, and the Stuart, opened in 1929, were both part of the Publix chain. The Stuart theater was distinct as it was located within a large office building. The World Theater (BF05-471; NR #9000903) in Kearney, was also located within a much larger building, on the ground floor of the city’s new four-story Masonic Temple, completed in 1927. Within its footprint, the theater held seating for 1,100 people, a

130 This is a preliminary list of Nebraska cities with movie palace. Sources used were historic newspapers on the Newspapers.com site and the theaters listed on the Cinema Treasures website (cinematreasures.org).
lobby, a ticket booth, an orchestra pit, organ space, dressing rooms and a projection booth. The Masons included a theater within their building to ensure income generation and outsourced its operation to World Realty Company.\textsuperscript{134}

The way that movie palaces changed in appearance between the 1920s and 1930s is visible at two Nebraska theaters. The Sun Theater in York, built in 1929, had a Spanish Revival appearance while the Alliance Theater in Alliance, which opened in 1937, exuded the Art Moderne style.\textsuperscript{135}

\textit{Atmospheric Theater}

A subset of the movie palace type was the atmospheric theater, which claimed John Eberson as the father of this movement. The first atmospheric theater was the Eberson-designed Holblitzelle’s Majestic Theater in Houston, Texas. Eberson went on to design hundreds more, including at least two in Nebraska. He also drew imitators who created their own version of atmospheric theaters for clients.

The theaters had the appearance of an outdoor amphitheater, with the plaster vaulted ceiling painted to look like the sky, incorporating twinkling lights to mimic stars and plaster-cast gazebos, trellises, columns, and arches adorning the walls. These dreamy theaters proved popular and not just because of their magical atmosphere. They were cheaper to build, costing about one-fourth the price of “standard” movie palaces, which more readily mimicked traditional theaters and favored marble stairs, classic domed ceilings, and ornate chandeliers.\textsuperscript{136}

John Eberson-designed atmospheric theaters in Nebraska included the Riviera in Omaha, which opened in 1926. Its style was a combination of Moorish and Italian Renaissance architecture. The other was the Capitol in Grand Island, which opened in 1927. According to Sorensen, Grand Island was the first city in the United States with a population under 150,000 to have an Eberson-designed atmospheric theater.\textsuperscript{137}

An Eberson knock-off, designed by local architect Charles W. Rosenberry, was The Uptown, at 28th and Leavenworth in Omaha. This neighborhood atmospheric theater, which could seat 650, had a Spanish Revival design, a two-story balcony with wrought iron railings and an auditorium ceiling painted to resemble the sky.\textsuperscript{138}

\textbf{ARRIVAL OF NEW MOVIE THEATER FORMS – 1946-1979}

The latter half of the 1940s through the late 1970s was a period of change for the movie theater business. The studios were forced to divest of their theater chains, which had various implications to the independent owners who took over control. Theaters had to compete with emerging entertainment options and different lifestyle preferences. As attendance began to fall steadily, from a high point in 1946, exhibitors sought new ways to economize their buildings and increase other money-making services while still attracting customers. During this time, the theater going experience became less about the building and more about what the quality of the screen and the sound system, as well

\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Nebraska State Journal}, "York Has a New Theater," March 23, 1929; Cinematreasures.org.
\textsuperscript{136} Hall, 100.
\textsuperscript{137} Sorensen, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Omaha World Herald}, "New Neighborhood Theaters Opened."
as what could be purchased at the concession stand. Two new exhibition types succeeded during this period: the drive-in and the multiplex. Although there were exceptions, both these exhibition types were primarily geared to a suburban, automobile-oriented population and thrived at sites on the periphery of a city or town.

Between 1949 and 1952, the major Hollywood studios relinquished control of their theaters to independent operators. But while this move was long desired by many independent operators, it did not ease their concerns. As Maggie Valentine points out, “exhibitors were freed from block-book requirements but also lost the advantages of subsidized film leasing, advertising, and construction and maintenance costs.”139 All exhibitors now had to pay their own way. Studios charged higher rates for films and made less of them. The movies being made were perceived by many exhibitors and critics to be of poorer quality than what had come before.140 The exhibitors had to find other ways to make money on customers coming to the movies, and so during this period they focused upon selling more concessions at an ever increasing profit margin. Between 1954 and 1972, concession revenues per customer at conventional and drive-in theaters increased from 12.8 cents to 26.3 cents.141

Other non-industry factors weighed heavily on the fate of movie theaters as well. Television is the most often blamed - and it did certainly play a major part - but more so by the 1950s. Suburbanization and the post-war baby boom impacted movie theater attendance during the late 1940s by pulling people away from dense neighborhoods and downtowns where most theaters were located. After World War II, educated young people, who had previously been the main demographic to attend movies, chose instead to focus their income and savings upon housing, children, and automobiles. The postwar surge in automobiles allowed for increased mobility and an exploration of auto-oriented leisure. For those families who sought cheap entertainment at home, radio was the preferred option during the late 1940s. But by the 1950s, and thereafter, television sets became cheaper and the content expanded and improved, causing television to gain hegemony as the preferred entertainment option for most Americans.142

To compete with television, by the 1950s the studios focused more on creating big, audience-grabbing pictures (these would later be called blockbusters). While this did help attract more customers, it hurt the small exhibitors who paid less for films but had to wait until after they had made their rounds at first run theaters. Just as during the previous era, exhibitors that only owned one or two theaters and could not afford to secure first-run pictures, depended upon a high rotation of films to fill seats.143 Another blow to theater operators during the 1950s and 1960s was when some of the Hollywood studios began selling or renting their older films to television studios or premiering new movies on television rather than in theaters.144

139 Valentine, 163.
142 Gomery, 83-88; Conant, 1-12.
143 Fremont Tribune,"Movie Attendance on Upgrade But Small Theaters Complain."
144 Aline Mosby, "Business Not So Good at Film Studios," The Columbus Telegram, July 27, 1956; Valentine, 164-165.
Existing downtown and neighborhood theaters suffered during this period as towns and cities lost population and short-sighted urban renewal policies led to the demolition of older buildings and sometimes the clear-cutting of entire city blocks. Between the end of World War II and 1960, about 6,000 out of 18,500 movie theaters closed nationally. In Nebraska, the hardest hit areas for theater closings were likely the more populated cities, which had the most theaters, and small towns that experienced population loss or were in close proximity to larger towns with one or more theaters. Omaha, for example, experienced four closings in late 1950 alone, with a journalist stating that the “mortality of neighborhood theaters is increasing.” Lincoln, on the other hand, had not closed any theaters by 1957.

Although these types of theaters were increasingly an anomaly, a few new post-war theaters opened in Nebraska’s historically dense areas. All appear to have been constructed by 1953. When they opened, they were celebrated in much the same way as new theater openings had been in the past. The importance the downtown theater still held in many people’s minds is reflected in the story of Ashland’s new Circle A Theater, which the community pitched in to re-build in 1953, after the town’s only movie theater was destroyed by a fire. But more often by the mid-1950s and thereafter, when new movie theaters opened they did so on the outskirts of town within strip malls or enclosed shopping centers.

The theater type that experienced significant growth in this period were drive-in theaters. Richard Hollingshead opened the first patented drive-in theater in the United States in 1933 in Camden, New Jersey. Others followed but there were less than 100 by the end of World War I. This exhibition format did not truly hit its prime until the end of the 1940s, aided by post-war suburbanization and the end of the big Hollywood monopolies influence on exhibition, which allowed drive-in operators access to better films. By the early 1950s, there were approximately 2,000 drive-ins and the number grew to over 4,500 by the late 1960s. Concessions were a big money maker for drive-ins and they sold roughly four times as many refreshments as conventional theaters. In the coming years, concessions would continue to grow as a major revenue stream for all theater types.

Harkening back to the itinerant outdoor shows and air domes of the early 1900s and the enclosed atmospheric theaters of the 1920s, the drive-in allowed people to experience movies under the stars but with a modern spin. Rather than sit on benches arranged in front of a makeshift screen, patrons sat in their cars and watched films exhibited on a huge screen tower. The drive-in represented a clever approach to attracting the growing classes of auto dependent Americans. Particularly during the 1950s and early 1960s, the drive-in was a big moneymaker for the movie industry.

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149 Gomery, 94-95.
150 Valentine, Appendix A, 196; Luther, 401-411.
151 Luther, 401.
152 Gomery, 91-102, 116.
while many conventional theaters struggled to stay afloat. During the early 1950s, drive-ins accounted for fifteen percent of the total theaters in the country and twenty percent of total theater receipts.\textsuperscript{153}

Faced with a variety of obstacles, exhibitors of both new and existing movie theaters throughout the country came up with new ways to attract customers. One early way was by bringing the television into the movie theater, which was known as “theater television.” In some theaters, television was broadcast as supplemental programming to the featured show in the main auditorium or a separate television lounge was incorporated. As more people acquired television by the late 1950s, this proved a less appealing draw. The exception was major sporting events, which were not yet shown on television, and so still might have the ability to fill a theater auditorium.\textsuperscript{154} In early 1951, for example, H.I. Phillips described how three theater chains, Lowes, Paramount and Fabian, secured exclusive rights to exhibit “the next big outdoor heavyweight fight.”\textsuperscript{155}

While bringing the actual television into the theater proved ineffective as a long-term money maker, other innovations were tried to varying levels of success. These were driven by a desire to give audiences something they could not get from the television. Valentine notes that several strategies were undertaken, including “wide screen projection, simulated three-dimensional (3-D) effects, and stereophonic sound.”\textsuperscript{156} Cinerama, which for exhibitors required a huge curved screen to give the illusion of three-dimensionality, was released in 1952. It proved cost-prohibitive to film and exhibit and many of the theaters designed for the technique did not actually exhibit films made using the process. One year later, CinemaScope premiered, as a similar, but cheaper approach to a more engaging movie going experience. Other contenders for this type of wide-angle technology were Paramount’s VistaVision, Todd A-O, and Ultra-Panavision.\textsuperscript{157} 3-D films appeared in 1953 with initial enthusiasm and some predating that most films would premiere in 3-D moving forward. However, the technology was dismissed as early as November of that year because of the expense to film and exhibit them, and the higher ticket prices and awkward-fitting glasses required for attendees.\textsuperscript{158}

Nebraska theaters displayed a willingness to experiment with many of these new technologies. In 1953, one of the first feature length 3-D films, the badly-received horror film \textit{House of Wax}, opened at the Fox Theater in Beatrice.\textsuperscript{159} The Cooper Theatre in downtown Omaha advertised itself as the “Nebraska Home of Cinerama” in 1962, and other Omaha theaters showed Cinerama and CinemaScope films.\textsuperscript{160} That same year, Indian Hills Theater opened in what was then suburban west Omaha, boasting a circular auditorium that better melded with the enormous Cinerama screen. Its screen, measuring approximately 35 feet high by 105 feet wide, was declared the “largest ever installed.”\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{153} Luther, 401.
\textsuperscript{154} Valentine, 165.
\textsuperscript{156} Valentine, 166.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 166-168.
\textsuperscript{158} Bob Thomas, "Brief 3-D Popularity Cycle is Ending," \textit{The Lincoln Star}, November 8, 1953; \textit{The Lincoln Star}. "Movies With 3-D." February 11, 1953; Valentine, 168.
\textsuperscript{159} \textit{Beatrice Daily Sun}, "3-D Picture Opens Here," July 8, 1953.
Many of these innovations necessitated that exhibitors purchase new equipment – projectors, speakers, screens – and remodel their theaters to accommodate a larger screen. But, according to Valentine, “the investments paid off as the public began to respond: by the mid-1950s movie attendance had leveled off to about half of what it had been a decade earlier.”\textsuperscript{162} An additional factor that benefited theater operators was a reduction of the federal tax on admissions from 20 percent to 10 percent. While ticket prices remained the same, the reduced tax allowed exhibitors to retain more of the revenue they earned from admissions. Journalists of the era claimed that the studios were once again producing better quality movies.\textsuperscript{163} Those same journalists also argued that the “novelty” of television began to wear off by the mid-1950s, but hindsight has shown this to be false. Television offerings continue to compete with those available at movie theaters up to the present.

Until the mid-twentieth century, most movies and television programs were shown in black and white. During the 1950s Hollywood studios became interested in increasing the number of color films, to differentiate the medium from television, which was still all black and white. But color films only began to roll out in earnest by the 1960s, after television embraced color fully. Color film technology, pioneered by Technicolor, had temporarily flourished during the 1920s prior to the Great Depression, but the company wielded a monopoly that made it unaffordable on a mass scale until that monopoly ceased by government ruling in 1950. Incorporating color into films became more affordable and a variety of companies emerged to fill the gap, with Eastman Color gaining the upper hand.\textsuperscript{164} The novelty of color films during the early 1960s is reflected in Omaha’s 1962 movie listings, where less than half of films advertised as being in color and some of these were cartoons that accompanied the black and white main feature.\textsuperscript{165} But by the end of the decade, this had changed, with all Hollywood films being made in color. Black and white films became a rarity, associated with a bygone era.\textsuperscript{166}

Another change that occurred during this period was in the content of films. By the 1960s, films containing subject matter previously considered taboo became more acceptable and movies that were once regulated to the art house because of their unethical social or sexual content were increasingly shown at mainstream theaters. During the late 1960s, a survey by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) found the majority of movie goers were teenagers or young adults and most attended alone.\textsuperscript{167} This type of audience embraced the more permissive movies and helped lead the way for their wider distribution.

As film content changed, the Production Code, which had regulated films since 1930, became viewed as outmoded and was eliminated in 1968, replaced by the much less restrictive ratings system that remains in place today.\textsuperscript{168} While plenty

\textsuperscript{162} Valentine, 168.
\textsuperscript{164} Gomery, 234-237.
\textsuperscript{165} Omaha World Herald, "Movie Theater Advertisements."
\textsuperscript{166} Gomery, 234-237.
\textsuperscript{168} Margaret Herrick Library Digital Collections, "Motion Picture Association of America. Production Code Administration
of family appropriate movies were still being made and shown, some movie houses began to focus their programs more heavily on exhibiting these newly acceptable movies. In 1968, at the Orpheum in downtown Omaha, for example, scheduled movies included *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, which was advertised as a “swinging movie” with “far-out movie scenes,” featuring Playboy model Barbara McNair and restricted to those 17 and older.169 Not all embraced the growing liberalness of movie fare. In his book, Sorensen quotes a movie manager from the late 1960s who said, “Today some of the things they show on the screen make me want to hide in my office.”170

In the early 1960s, the movement of the enclosed theater to the outskirts of town, generally within a shopping center complex but at other times free-standing, occurred in conjunction with the arrival of the multiplex. As with the drive-in, this new theater location was linked to the post-war popularity of suburban living and increased dependency on the automobile. The shopping center, which had expansive parking, was a concept that had gained ground in the 1950s, with theaters becoming part of their footprint in growing numbers during the early 1960s. General Cinema, a company that had great success with drive-ins during the late 1940s and 1950s, became the predominant chain operator of shopping center theaters during the 1960s.171 In 1963, they were considered a “new force in the [movie theater] industry,” as one journalist put it, with 143 new shopping center theaters constructed in that year.172 By the late 1960s, suburban theaters made up 60 percent of the nation’s motion picture houses.173

Not all theaters located on the periphery or within shopping centers immediately made the jump into multiple screening rooms. The suburban theaters of the early 1960s had either single or dual auditoriums, and, by the end of the decade, some were built with even more auditoriums.174 The idea of having multiple screens within a single building, also known as a multiplex theater, was a concept that the Kansas City-based Durwood Enterprises claimed to have invented with their twin cinema, the Parkway Twin, in 1963. Originally the Parkway theater, located in a Kansas City suburban shopping mall, was envisioned as a large single screen auditorium but structural constraints necessitated its revision into two smaller auditoriums. Durwood was renamed American Multi Cinema (AMC) in 1968. The theater’s success led Durwood/AMC to quickly expand, operating or building 203 theaters, with either two, three, four or six screens, in 30 cities in 5 states by 1971.175

The multiplex had economic appeal, with just one lobby, concession stand, and other services, but the ability to attract a variety of customers with different tastes. In 1971, the multiplex concept was lauded for being closer to television in that, as one journalist noted, it gave “the public a choice, like channels on television.”176 Multiplexes owned by AMC and

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170 Sorensen, 42.
174 *Lincoln Journal Star.* "Hiked in 1963."
176 *The Lincoln Star,* "Kansas City Chain is Betting on Multiple-Theater Concept."
others expanded swiftly throughout the nation thereafter, with exhibitors continually increasing the number of screens within a single building, and the multiplex gained the upper hand as the preferred exhibition model.

By the end of this period, older downtown and neighborhood theaters had to compete not only with television, but with suburban drive-in and multiplex theaters as well. Older theaters that could afford to began carving up their auditorium and other available space into two or more viewing spaces. Others managed to hang on with their single screen, but often modernized by covering over or removing historic features so they might better mimic the somber interiors of the multiplex. Still others closed and were repurposed for new uses such as religious services or demolished to make way for parking lots or new buildings. One type of building constructed on some demolished theater sites were new multi-plex theaters. For example, in downtown Lincoln, the Plaza Four Theater complex was built on the site of the Nebraska Theater Building.

By the close of the 1970s, movie theaters remained a significant part of American life, but their form and setting changed dramatically from what they had been during the first half of the twentieth century. Television continued to be the primary competitor, but people still went to the movies in Nebraska and elsewhere. The big box office hits were the main attractors and they might sometimes remain the top bill for weeks on end, such as when Star Wars played for 26 weeks at Lincoln’s downtown Stuart Theater. Speaking in the late 1970s, Lincoln theater operator Bruce Smith believed, “People are getting tired of staying at home night after night watching TV. We offer entertainment to get them out of the house.”

National Theater Chains

Four national chains, each operating hundreds of theaters apiece, thrived during this era. Two were General Cinema and American Multi-Cinema (AMC), both mentioned above as leaders in the suburban movie theater and multiplex theater types. The two others were United Artists Communications and Plitt Theaters. While the former two built their chains from the ground up, the latter two benefited from having many of their older theater holdings assembled during the era of Hollywood control. All had multiplex holdings, but only General Cinema and United Artists also owned drive-ins. Gomery describes these four national chains as the “successors to the chains of the Big Five.” Unlike their predecessors, they focused on operating multi-screen theaters, with an average auditorium size of 200 seats, and complexes of anywhere from two to twenty screening rooms. Rather than focus their holdings regionally, as the Big Five had, all four of the new national chains had theaters spread throughout the country. By the late 1970s, they faced accusations of preferential treatment from the studios and monopolistic practices. In 1978, they were under investigation by the Department of Justice. An independent theater operator in Georgia accused them of getting insider information prior to bidding on films for exhibition.

Within Nebraska, AMC’s predecessor, Durwood Enterprises, built the six-plex Cinema West at the Westroads Shopping Mall in 1968. It was described as the world’s first six-plex when it opened. In the early 1980s, AMC purchased the

177 David Meisenholder, "Lincolnites are Lining Up to See Movies." The Lincoln Star, January 18, 1979.
178 Gomery, 98-99.
adjoining Fox Westroads Theater, with plans to eventually combine the two to create an eight-screen theater. Another theater they operated in Nebraska during this period was the Conestoga Four Theaters in Grand Island’s Conestoga Mall.¹⁸¹ General Cinema also owned a handful of theaters in Nebraska. These included the Cinema I and II complex in Omaha, which was built in 1968 and co-owned and operated with Central States Theater Corporation of Des Moines. A drive-in that formerly occupied the site was razed and rebuilt on land near Offutt Airforce Base owned by General Cinema and Central States.¹⁸² The presence of any theaters operated in Nebraska by Plitt Theaters and United Artists during this era is unknown.

**Nebraska-based Theater Chains**

There were several successful regional chains operating out of Nebraska during this time. All became involved in multiplex exhibition and some operated drive-in theaters as well as enclosed theaters. These included Cooper Foundation Theatres, Dubinsky Brothers Theater, Douglas Theater Corp, Nebraska Theaters Corp and Central States Theater Corporation.

Cooper Foundation Theaters was a movie circuit run by of the non-profit Cooper Foundation. The Foundation was started by Joe Cooper, a chain theater operator, in 1934 and based in Lincoln. The Foundation benefited from revenue from Cooper’s theaters and took over the theater business after his death in 1946. Cooper Foundation Theaters thrived thereafter, and had theaters in Nebraska, Colorado, and Minnesota by the 1960s. Their Nebraska holdings included theaters in Omaha and Lincoln. They pioneered the Cinerama type theaters, which included movie houses in Omaha (Indian Hills Theater), Denver, and Minneapolis. The Foundation sold the movie business in the mid-1970s.¹⁸³

Dubinsky Brothers Theater was a Lincoln-based family owned chain operating in Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, and North Dakota. The Dubinsky Brothers operated both conventional enclosed houses and drive-ins. Their Nebraska holdings included theaters in Grand Island and Omaha.¹⁸⁴ Douglas Theater Corp. was based in Lincoln, established in 1952, and headed by Russell Brehm and U.S. Senator Roman Hruska. Their Nebraska holdings included drive-ins in Omaha and Lincoln. In 1967, they opened Cinema Center in Omaha, their first enclosed theater and in 1973 they opened Douglas 3, their first enclosed theater in Lincoln.¹⁸⁵ Central States Theater Corporation operated theaters in Nebraska and Iowa. They joined with General Cinema on the construction of some theaters in Nebraska, including Cinema I and II at 76th and Dodge Streets in Omaha.¹⁸⁶

**Movie Theaters of this Era**

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¹⁸⁶ Snodgrass, "Two Indoor Theaters to Replace Drive-In."
Drive-In Movie Theater

Drive-ins were typically located in rural or suburban areas, on a wide expanse of open land and with easy access from major roadways. Unlike conventional, enclosed theaters, which focused their exterior and interior on attracting individuals, drive-ins were designed with the automobile in mind. During their heyday, their prime audience were automobile-driving families. Without a building, and the comfortable seats that often accompanied it, the drive-in focused upon providing other amenities, charging admission by the carload, letting children in free, providing a variety of concessions, and including playgrounds or other amusements for children.

In the late 1940s, Time Magazine discussed the attraction of the drive-in. “For moviegoers, the Drive-In Theatre offers innumerable luxuries. It is a solution for the moviegoer’s car parking problem, for persons elderly, ill and crippled, for those who don’t like to dress for the down-town cinema, for parents with no one to mind the children, and for those who like to talk and smoke during a performance.”187 The drive-in appealed to people who might not go to a typical movie house building. Barb Benton, who frequently attended the drive-in in Nebraska City as a child with her parents and brother recalls that her father, a farmer in nearby Percival, Iowa, felt too enclosed at a conventional theater building, which is why he preferred the drive-in.188

The most notable movie-related feature at the drive-in was the large screen. These were often much larger than those found at conventional theaters. The one at Fremont’s Drive-In, for example, was 40 by 50 feet, roughly two and a half times larger than the screen at the downtown Empress Theater.189 The screen size continued to expand. When the 84th and O Drive In opened in Lincoln in 1955 it boasted a screen that was 44 by 100 feet.190 A prominent sign with the theater’s name, outlined in neon, would typically be situated right off the road to attract patrons. Parking would slope down toward the screen, to provide better sight lines. The projection booth along with services such as restrooms and the all-important concession stand, might be situated within a combined structure or various outbuildings. Many drive-ins often had a playground and perhaps other features for children. For example, the Drive-In in Grand Island, which opened in 1949, offered The Grand Island Non-Ferocious Zoo as an attraction.191 Portable speakers that patrons could hang inside their car appeared by the late 1940s.

Drive-ins were cheaper to construct than an indoor theater, with those in the late 1940s often four to five times less expensive.192 As time went on, drive-ins became more luxurious and thus more expensive. As was the case with enclosed theaters in their infancy, early drive-ins required far less investment and design considerations than those that managed to thrive during the height of this exhibition type. Drive-ins ranged in size, providing space for anywhere from 200 to 2,000 cars, covering an area of 3 to 30 acres. While most drive-ins had just one screen, some began to add a

188 Benton, Barb, interview by Caitlin Benton. Interview with author (January 21, 2020).
189 Fremont Tribune, "Fremont Drive-In Theater." July 20, 1949.
191 Sorensen, 39-40.
second screen as early as the late 1940s. This was about 15 years before the first enclosed multiplex appeared. At the drive-in, multiple screens allowed an exhibitor to show more shows each night, a necessity when the start time was determined by the setting of the sun. The first dual screen drive-in in Nebraska was the Q Twin Drive-In Theater at 120th and Q in Omaha, which opened in 1961.

The amenities offered at the drive-in varied. Some had uniformed attendants on foot or bicycle to attend to the automobile-encased patrons. Others had on-site babysitters to watch children while the parents took in a show, a modern approach to the movie palace playrooms of the 1920s. To attract patrons in wet weather, drive-ins might offer attendants to wipe glycerin-soaked sponges on the windshields to keep the rain from marring the picture. In-car heaters might be offered during the cooler months, and cooling mechanisms during the particularly hot days.

Many Nebraska communities had access to a nearby drive-in starting in the late 1940s, with approximately 50 at the peak of this exhibition type. The River Drive Theater, which opened in Beatrice in 1947, claimed to be the state’s first drive-in. It was located a few blocks south of downtown Beatrice, on Memorial Drive. Others soon followed. Some of these theaters had names that incorporated aspects of the natural environment, such as Star View, while others were simply called the Drive-In. They were located on the outskirts of the communities of Albion, Alliance, Beatrice, Bridgeport, Broken Bow, Chadron, Columbus, Falls City, Fremont, Gering, Gordon, Grand Island, Hastings, Hebron, Hartington, Holdrege, Kearney, Kimball, Lexington, Lincoln, Long Pine, McCook, Mitchell, Nebraska City, Neligh, Norfolk, North Loup, North Platte, Omaha, Oshkosh, O’Neill, Ogallala, Schuyler, Sidney, Scottsbluff, South Sioux City, Tekamah, Valentine, Valley, Wayne, West Point, York. Bigger cities, such as Lincoln and Omaha, boasted multiple drive-ins within city limits.

As a new exhibition type, drive-ins had to contend with social and political pushback from certain circles. Writing in 1951, Rodney Luther explained that these obstacles included municipal zoning regulations, highway commissions and moralists concerned about the impact drive-ins might have on minors. There was also the rest of the movie industry, which did not at first embrace this new contender to the conventional theater model. Conventional theaters blamed the drive-ins for taking their customers and the major producers did not at first want to provide them with first run, or even second run films. But by the 1950s, the profitability of this model won out and many chain exhibitors began to add drive-ins to their repository, or to specialize in the type. Natural forces, including weather and light were continual vexations that no amount of technological innovation could truly remedy. To get the best picture, drive-ins had to wait until dusk to begin their shows. This limited how many movies they could fit into an evening program and thus how many patrons they could accommodate on any given day.

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193 Luther, 405. Luther mentions twin drive-ins had opened by the time he published his piece in 1951. An example of a 1948 twin screen drive-in can be found on Cinematresures.org: the Twin Open Air Drive-In in Chicago.
196 This is perhaps the most readily identifiable movie exhibition type, as drive-ins nearly always included the term “drive-in” in their name.
197 Cinema Treasures website (cinematreasures.org) keyword search for Nebraska Drive-Ins.
198 Luther, 404-405.
The number of drive-ins began to steadily decrease by the 1960s, from a high of around 4,000 in 1958. As the drive-ins lost their novelty, it became more difficult to contend with their various shortcomings, which included low quality films, inadequate audio and video, weather, and a short viewing period every night. Rising gas prices coupled with the arrival of the multiplex led to the demise of many drive-ins. As many cities continued to expand outward, the land drive-ins occupied proved too valuable and was frequently sold for development. Only one drive-in dating to this era remains operating in Nebraska, the TK-Starlite Drive-in in Neligh, which opened in 1952.

**Suburban Single-Screen Theaters**

Suburban single-screen theaters appeared around the same time as the purpose-built multi-plex but soon became obsolete as the multiplex proved a more successful model. The suburban single-screen theaters had similar architectural and site features as the suburban multi-plex described below. An early suburban theater in Omaha was Indian Hills Theater at 86th and Dodge, built in 1962. It was the first enclosed theater built in the city since the Center Theater opened near the historic Field Club neighborhood in 1951. Lincoln’s first suburban theater, the Cooper/Lincoln, opened in Lincoln at 54th and O Streets in May 1967. It too was the first enclosed theater built in that city in a number of years, 38 years according to one source. By the end of that year two more single-screen suburban theaters had opened in Omaha, the Cinema Center at 82nd and Center and the Fox Westroads at the Westroads Mall Shopping Center. All of these had auditoriums that could seat over 800 people and large, wide angle screens with the most modern production equipment. The Cooper/Lincoln Theater also had doormen and ushers, vestiges from the theaters Golden Age that would disappear with the spread of the multiplex.

The reason these theaters did not have multiple screens from the beginning may have been tied to the owners desire for a large screen and an adherence to old theater forms, even while the landscape (urban versus suburban) had changed. These single screen suburban theaters often ended up adopting the multiplex approach, by either dividing up their interior or adding on to their footprint to provide additional auditoriums. Fox Westroads and Cinema Center both had done so, or planned to by late 1975, with Fox Westroads having two screens within its original footprint and Cinema Center adding on to its original building to have four screens. Musing on these developments in 1975, journalist Peter Citron said, “The day of the big screen in motion pictures is fading” while “smaller screens and fewer seats, are the trend.” Though not everyone welcomed the change in exhibition form, the economic allure of the multiplex model proved overpowering.

**Multiplex**

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205 Peter Citron, "Fox to Split; Cinema II, III Set," Omaha World Herald, November 7, 1975.
The multiplex, defined as any theater complex with two or more separate screening rooms, became the preferred exhibition model during this era, and remains so to the present day. They replaced any single screen suburban theaters constructed in shopping complexes or on solitary tracts of land during this era. They also appeared in older downtowns and historically dense neighborhoods, either within new buildings or renovated old theaters, where multiple screen screens were squeezed into the existing footprint.

The incorporation of multiple screens within a building was not a new idea when Durwood opened the Parkway Twin in 1963. Others had explored the concept of a multiple screen movie theaters some decades prior, including James Edwards, who twinned the Alhambra Theatre in Los Angeles in 1937. However, the twinning of the Alhambra and similar endeavors involved renovating existing buildings, often a commercial building adjacent to the existing theater, to fit the additional screens. As discussed above, multi-screen drive-ins also existed by the late 1940s. The Parkway is thus considered the first purpose-built enclosed multi-screen theater.

Multiplexes focused upon functionality and economy. With a shared box office, lobby, concession stand, and projection room, only a few employees were needed to run the operation on any given night. Screening rooms with a few hundred seats apiece were common, although some auditoriums opened with less than one hundred seats and others had closer to 1,000. Multiplexes with more screens tended to have smaller auditoriums but might have one larger auditorium where the blockbuster films could premiere and play for weeks on end.

While they were less exuberant in design than earlier theaters, thought was still given to aesthetics, but it was a pared down, modern approach. Some considered theaters of the day to be bland but the trade publication BoxOffice took a different approach in the early 1960s. Writing on modern theater design, they praised theater architects and designers for not designing theaters that resembled movie palaces of the past but that instead fulfilled people’s “esthetic desire...for space, light, soaring heights and harmonious colors.” It was a different era and architects had new materials and new design ideas to work with, plus less site constraints when working on suburban plots. Boxoffice writers also praised the modernization of older theaters, where “the architects have displayed great ingenuity in creating contemporary design and atmosphere within existing walls, and designing new fronts and marquees which, while compatible with neighboring buildings, are distinctly ‘theatre.’”

Early 1960s theaters often included a multi-height lobby, with either an integrated lounge or separate lounge spaces. The lounge or lobby might have an art gallery and there might be a separate playroom for children. The Cinema I and II Theater in Omaha, for example, planned to have an art gallery displaying the works of local artists in its lobby when it

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207 Gomery, 97-101.
opened in 1968. As the years went on, the design features became increasingly simplistic or non-existent and the focus became even less about the building and more about the quality of the presentation and the selling of concessions. By the 1970s, a modern theater section in *Boxoffice* focused on screen presentation and concessions, as well as tips for downtown exhibitors to attract customers during a time of urban renewal, a commercial focus on the suburbs, and perceptions of crime and parking in the urban core.

When located on the periphery of a city, multiplexes were positioned next to a major roadway for easy access and surrounded by ample parking. The suburban multiplexes could take advantage of their open sites, stretching out and lying low to the ground. For those multiplexes connected to shopping centers, it was most typical for them to have a separate entrance, either from the interior or exterior of the mall, and no retail bays within the actual theater footprint. Most new multiplexes in Nebraska were in suburban locations and, of these, the Omaha and Lincoln areas received the most due to their greater population sizes. Some multiplexes were erected on sites previously occupied by drive-ins, such as Cinema I and II in Omaha, which opened in 1970 on the site of the former 76th and West Dodge Drive-In. It appears that suburban multiplexes opened in Nebraska’s smaller towns and cities only by the late 1970s and thereafter, often within a shopping mall complex.

New urban multiplexes were more constrained by the surrounding building density and were most commonly part of a larger commercial building, occupying one or two floors of a multi-story building. Examples of the urban multiplex could be found in Lincoln, where all the early multi-screen theaters were in the downtown area. The city’s first twin theater, the Hollywood and Vine, opened in late 1972, at 12th and Q on the second floor of the Glass Menagerie shopping center. Between 1971 and 1973, three separate multiplexes were built on P Street: Cinema I and II (1971), Douglas 3 (1973), and the Plaza Four Theater (1973). All of these were situated within larger buildings, with retail or office spaces adjoining them.

Lincoln was unique in the state, and maybe even nationally, for its concentration of urban multiplexes. A Denver-based theater designer who served as a consultant on the Plaza Four Theater complex was quoted in a Lincoln newspaper as saying, “Lincoln is one of very few downtown areas in the country I would recommend building a theater.” He attributed its success to its organized and capable downtown business leaders.

To retain appeal as the multiplex model took hold, some older theaters in the state divided up their interior into multiple screens during the 1970s. It was most typical to carve out two auditoriums, but some added three. Examples include the Fox Theater in Beatrice, which converted to a two “mini-theaters” in 1970. The Empress Theater in

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210 Snodgrass, “Two Indoor Theaters to Replace Drive-In.”
214 *Lincoln Journal Star*. "Ceremony Will Mark Plaza Four Topping."
215 Ibid.
216 *Beatrice Daily Sun*, "Converting Fox Theater to 'Mini-Theater' Complex," December 9, 1970.
Fremont converted to three theaters sometime before 1976.\textsuperscript{217} The Pioneer Theater in Nebraska City converted to two theaters in 1978 and then even further into three theaters about a year later.\textsuperscript{218} Division of older downtown and neighborhood theaters into multiple screens has remained a trend that continues to the present.

The multiplex of the 1960s and 1970s did have its shortcomings. Multiple auditoriums lined up next to one another could create problems with noise filtering between the theaters if the walls were not properly insulated. Projection booths that served multiple auditoriums did not always line up with the screens, causing the picture to be distorted with one-half larger than the other. The small workforce meant that when issues arose, such as torn film, they might not be remedied as quickly as if a dedicated projectionist was on hand. The auditoriums became dirty and sticky because of all the popcorn, soda and candy being consumed by patrons. People accustomed to talking while watching television at home brought this habit into the theater, disturbing others viewing experience.\textsuperscript{219}

In the coming decades improvements would be made to the presentation and viewing of movies so that the multiplex model remained attractive to ticket buyers.\textsuperscript{220} Suburban theater complexes continued to grow larger, with more screens added, and it became increasingly common for the theater to be a separate building next to a retail complex, rather than attached to it. As they grew, multiplexes moved further to the periphery of the city in search of space. Many of the urban and suburban multiplexes built in Nebraska during the 1960s and 1970s have either been demolished or replaced with new buildings. The older neighborhood and downtown theaters that converted their interiors to a multiplex model during this period have suffered a better fate. The Fox Theater and the Pioneer Theater mentioned above continue to exhibit movies, as do other converted multi-screen theaters in small towns across Nebraska.

\textsuperscript{217} \textit{Fremont Tribune}, Empress Theater Advertisement, September 4, 1976.
\textsuperscript{219} Gomery, 99-102.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 103-118.
II. Evolution of Movie Theater Design

The basic physical attributes of a theater, whether it is used to house live performances or motion pictures, is consistent over time. The theater primarily includes a space for an audience to view an event and another space for that event to occur.

With that basic premise, one way to understand the evolution of movie theater design is to look at modifications made to those basic physical attributes over time. Such evolutions were made to enhance the audience experience and manifest as the result of three different factors: architectural trends, technological innovations, and safety improvements.

Early 20th Century Movie Theater Design – 1900-1930s

Architectural Trends

As stated earlier in this document, the architecture of the earliest movie theaters began simply with the conversion of existing spaces to provide space for live performance and silent moving pictures. Established in existing commercial spaces, the theaters were narrow and long spaces fitted with portable benches and/or chairs, a small stage, and a screen at the back wall of building. By the turn of the twentieth century some exhibitors used recessed lobby areas to “give the opportunity for decorative effects without the expense of decorating the entire front of the business house” making the patron feel “he is already within the theater, even before he has purchased his admission ticket.”

Early opera houses and other auditoria conversions included simply installing a screen at the back of the stage and a makeshift projection booth on the balcony.

As the industry grew, theaters were designed and constructed to primarily feature movies. By 1917 it was said that there were over 20,000 motion picture houses constructed in the United States, representing an investment of nearly $500,000,000. It is these buildings where the greatest changes in theater architectural trends become most apparent. To capture the attention of patrons from the street, distinctive facades, reflecting the architectural style of the time, became more prominent. Façade designs often included a lit marquee and/or vertical lit signage to indicate the presence of the movie theater. An accentuated entrance, visible ticket booth, lobby, and space to hold movie poster advertisements provided further visual attraction from the passer-by on the sidewalk.

On the interior, theaters designed specifically for motion pictures still reflected the lobbies, auditorium space, seating, and acoustics of past auditoria. Many newly constructed theaters also continued to incorporate basic features related to live performances such as stages, orchestra pits, dressing rooms, etc. Movie-theater specific components and spaces such as the screen, the projection booth, and adjacent rewinding rooms became more significant. Since these theaters were not conversion spaces, the screen and its position, along with the projection booth and location of the lens ports became driving factors in the overall theater’s design and were vital to the quality of the audience experience. Screens

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were positioned within the proscenium, set behind the opening to create a shadow box effect. Screens were made of numerous materials, such as plaster on metal lath mounted to a frame on non-combustible material or cloth. Most had a matte, roughened surface to diffuse light and reduce reflection. Projection booths were typically located opposite the screen. The rewinding room would be adjacent to the projection booth. Numerous publications outlined appropriate distances between the screen and the lens along with the location of the lens ports. Lens ports in the projection room needed to be situated at a right angle to avoid distortion. Observation ports used by the projection operator ensured they had full vision of the screen and the placement of the port was dependent on the location and size of the necessary equipment. The floors of a projection room and rewind rooms were constructed to be completely fire-proof and rigid. The rigidity prevented vibration due to the projecting equipment.

Following World War I and the national economic upturn, an increased demand for entertainment and studio commissions further spurred theater construction. Investment in architectural design to enhance the aesthetic experience was epitomized by the urban movie palaces of the time. Intended for a larger than life, grander entertainment experience, these buildings used architectural ornament and style to transport patrons from the real world. Romanticized exteriors, elaborate foyers, lobbies, grand staircases, lounges, and multi-level auditoriums related to efficient circulation patterns meant to move large crowds in and out of the complexes. The lobbies and lounges in these movie palaces were carefully designed to provide an enchanting space to wait for the upcoming show or as a social place to “see and be seen.” Some palace theater variations simulated an exotic, romantic outdoor courtyard complete with decorative windows, doors and the ceiling painted like an outdoor sky. These buildings were built for one purpose, to draw the audience to the box office using architectural ornament.

Technological innovations

Technological innovations impacting the theater experience during this period included advances in structural materials and methods, mechanical air conditioning, and film and sound technologies.

Advances in structural materials and methods used in building construction changed the way theaters were designed. Structural steel, reinforced concrete and the use of the cantilever arch increased the structural spans theater buildings had previously been limited to. Although cast iron and wrought iron beams were common in the early 1800s, the introduction of structural steel in the construction of St. Louis’ Eads Bridge in 1874 ushered in a new age of structural spans. Structural steel not only provided a greater weight-bearing capacity, but also had a higher tensile strength than previous means of construction and allowed for longer spans. Concrete, already proven robust in compressive strength, was deficient in tensile strength. Therefore, the imbedding of long metal bars within concrete added tensile strength thus increasing the spans of concrete beams too. In addition, the use of the cantilever arch in theater balconies, such as

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223 Kinsila, 105.
224 Ibid., 111.
225 Valentine, 61
New York’s New Amsterdam Theater in 1903, increased structural spans. Each of these methods of structural design eliminated the need for numerous columns and provided an unobstructed view of the screen.

Although ventilation systems and steam heat had been utilized in auditoria prior to the turn of the twentieth century, many locations reduced the number of events held or closed during the hot summer months. Prior to the development of mechanical air conditioning technologies, early cooling systems utilized blocks of ice and air movement to cool auditorium spaces. Such systems were expensive, labor intensive, and undependable at times. Prior to the early 1900s mechanical air conditioning had been developed and typically used for industrial applications such as manufacturing and food storage. It was not until later that theaters began to implement similar technologies. Two of the earliest theaters to utilize the technology were Chicago’s Central Park Theater and the New Empire Theater in Montgomery, Alabama, both opening in 1917.

These systems often required a lot of physical space for equipment, and the equipment was often located in the basement. The expense of such systems meant installation was often limited to large theaters or movie palaces. Despite the expense and space requirements, mechanical air conditioning allowed theaters to attract patrons throughout the year, regardless of the outdoor temperature.

Vital to the evolution of the film industry were advances in the properties of the film itself, impacting motion picture quality, necessary equipment, and flammability, which directly changed the space and materials used for projection rooms. The standardization of celluloid film, film sizes, and projection speed requirements insured that the projection equipment became more uniform. With such standardization, equipment redundancy could be avoided, therefore equipment costs and projection room space requirements could be lessened. Projection devices became more reliable and easier to operate for the mass market.

Prior to the mid-to-late 1920s, film was accompanied by live performances. Advances in sound technology changed the trajectory. Two different approaches to sound in movies emerged: sound-on-disc and sound-on-film. Sound-on-disc technology consisted of music and sound recorded onto phonograph disks. A phonograph turntable was connected by a mechanical interlock to a special film projector, which allowed for synchronization with the film. The sound-on-film system recorded sound on the edge of the film in terms of light and shade. Photo electric cells and amplifiers converted the light and shade on the film into electrical impulses which were then conveyed through amplifiers to powerful speakers installed behind the picture screen. As the technology continued to improve, more and more sound movies became available. Therefore, the popularity of movies with sound increased, forcing theaters to begin the conversion to sound if they had not already.

Safety Improvements

Chicago’s Iroquois Theater fire in 1903 brought to light the greater need for fire codes in theaters. In many municipalities throughout the nation, new fire codes required theaters to occupy the ground floor instead of the upper floors as many conversion theaters had. Emergency egress prompted careful consideration of exit door location, quantity, and adjacency to the street. Design standards even emerged for the number of seats between aisles for quick evacuation.

By the late 1920s building codes were fairly established for movie theaters nationally. Such codes addressed typical building requirements while others addressed specific movie theater components. General building construction required fire resisting roof materials, masonry walls, metal windows with wire glass, fireproof asbestos lined materials, and steel doors equipped with heat fusible links. The fusible links were a triggering system used to automatically close a door when the fusible alloy connecting metal chains melted due to heat. Fire suppression equipment was dependent on gravity tanks on the roof. Curtains separating the audience from the stage were made with fireproof asbestos materials. Fireproof materials were especially important in the construction of the projection booth, since potentially explosive nitrate film was commonly used during this time. Some theaters had duplicate projectors to avoid overheating, reducing the likelihood of an explosion.

Movie Theater Design – 1930-1950s

Architectural Trends

The impact of the Great Depression dramatically changed the architectural design and building aesthetic of theaters during this period. The elaborate ornamental revival styles used to attract crowds to theater buildings seemed less appropriate. The clean, streamlined aesthetic of the Modern Movement, Art Deco and Art Modern architectural styles became more common. Efficient design and simplified ornament became the prevalent trend. Floor plans with only a box office, sloped floor, screen, and projection booth replaced the elaborately ornamented processional spaces of the movie palaces. Lobbies were “closer to living rooms than to royal parlors...to create a homey environment.”

Constructed to showcase movies, theater buildings of this time often lacked the stage, orchestra pit and other live performance support spaces.

During the 1930s, following the arrival of talking pictures, more thought was given to the successful delivery of sound within the auditorium. Auditoriums designed in the pre-sound era were not conducive to transmitting a consistent and clear sound to movie goers, audio was often painfully loud and unintelligible. Considering and designing for acoustics manifested in many ways. Some techniques saw the implementation of angled walls, others outfitted walls with tactile woven or gridded textures to trap sound. Another interesting method was the employment of ornamentation to capture
and muffle soundwaves if the plaster used had greater acoustic qualities. The combination of improved loudspeakers and enhanced acoustic design made it possible for every section of the auditorium to receive clear and comfortable audio. The idea that sound could now be delivered with accuracy to all sections of an auditorium led to the design of generally larger auditoriums for talking films.

During this time, theater owners were looking for additional ways to increase revenue. Prior to the 1930s, most food was sold by vendors or businesses outside the theater, not inside the theater. Food inside the auditoria was not socially acceptable since many theaters wanted to present an upscale appearance without noisy chewing and the additional trash created by snacking patrons. Considering the financial setbacks of the time, proprietors began integrating small snack counters in the theater lobby. As the popularity of the concession stand increase, so too did their presence in the lobby of the theater.

With the rise of automobile use, theater design at the exterior of the building also changed. The shape, size and lighting of the theater marquee increased to attract potential patrons driving past. Larger in size with deeper projections from the façade of the building insured the theater would stand out from the surrounding structures more than before. With increased automobile use, larger parking lots were also required to accommodate the additional vehicles. This would further impact the theater’s separation from the street.

**Technological innovations**

Mechanical cooling technologies continued to make theater spaces more comfortable during the warmer months of the year. Although several different technologies had been competitive in the past, by the 1930s air conditioning via mechanical refrigeration became the dominant choice. Although Willis Carrier introduced as smaller centrifugal compressor that used a less flammable refrigerant in the early 1920s, it was not until Carrier began mass production of the less expensive air conditioning system that air conditioning in smaller theaters was possible.

The transition to sound was a matter of resources, both for the film companies and the theaters. During the 1930s, sound technology moved from the sound-on-disc systems to the more reliable sound-on-film technology. Such standardization allowed for simplification, requiring less variety of equipment. With the rise of “talkies,” more and more theaters undertook costly renovations to install the electrical systems, wiring, amplifiers, and speakers necessary to support the new technology. The conversion cost could be over $20,000, depending on the size of the theater. New theaters were built and wired for sound. In many of these buildings the orchestra pit disappeared completely.

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236 Valentine, 109.
238 Ibid., 97.
Safety Improvements

During this period fire codes continued to become more defined. Given financial restraints and less available staff, patron traffic patterns used the architecture of curving walls and indirect lighting to move people through the theater with minimal staff assistance. This provided a means to save money and provided a safer environment for the patron.

Movie Theater Design – 1950-1970s

Architectural Trends

With the passage of the anti-trust legislation in 1948, incentives for film studios to invest substantially in theater construction were eliminated. This had a dramatic impact on the stability and profitability of the film industry.\(^\text{241}\) Therefore, the economic emphasis shifted from capitalizing on the aesthetic experience of the movie theater to the production of films only. Studio magnates were no longer able to control the atmosphere their films were shown in or the number of theaters those films were exhibited in.

The major architectural trend in movie theater construction was further impact of the automobile. With suburban migration, the opportunity to build on larger plats of land became more and more possible. Although the first outdoor movie theater opened in New Jersey in 1933, the boom did not arrive until the 1950s.\(^\text{242}\) Drive-in movie theaters allowed patrons to bring their own chairs, i.e. their vehicles. The large outdoor parking area was flanked on either side with a huge screen and project booth situated opposite each other. Loudspeakers were located at each parking space. A concession and restroom facility were usually single story and simple construction.

Multiplex theaters also became more popular, often adjacent to or as a part of rapidly developing shopping centers. Equipped with multiple screens, the multiplex theater utilized space and staff efficiently. All screens utilized a shared lobby and box office, centrally located projection rooms, larger shared concession areas and shared restrooms. By the late 1960s most new theaters constructed were suburban multiplexes. Floor plans were simple and rectangular, constructed of concrete block walls containing two to eight separate theaters.\(^\text{243}\) Interiors were stripped of decoration on the sidewalls and around the screen. Lobbies were non-existent except for the concession stand, while movie patrons waiting to purchase a ticket extended into the circulation space of the shopping mall.\(^\text{244}\) This became the prevalent movie theater architecture throughout the 1970s.

Technological Innovations

To compete with the growing predominance of televisions in homes, 3-D and wide screen technology became more prevalent in theaters. Both technologies were a way to differentiate the theater experience from what could be seen on television at home.

\(^{240}\) Millard, America on Record, 158.
\(^{243}\) Monaco, 49.
Movies in 3-D gave the illusion of objects projecting from the movie screen. 3-D technology mimicked human vision, or the separation of two eyes, with the use of two cameras. Two projectors projected the images on a screen concurrently and those images were viewed through glasses or filters to achieve a three-dimensional effect. To exhibit these movies, theaters needed multiple projectors to work in sync, which impacted the size of projection rooms since additional equipment and projectionists were necessary to insure a working system. The 3-D movie boom was short lived. Complaints from distributors, exhibitors, critics, and audiences about the special glasses, the projection quality and the quality of productions led to the decline.

Already available by 1930, wide screen technology was delayed due to cost implications. With most theaters trying to implement new sound technology at that time, upgrading to wide screens concurrently did not make financial sense. With the rise of television use, the financial incentives to compete made the conversion to wide screen technology more profitable. Since these technologies required a wider screen, existing theater buildings had to be modified. The proscenium had to be widened and in historic theaters this may have also required modification of organ grills or decorative treatments. In some instances, a wider screen was simply set in from of the existing smaller screen. In newer theaters the proscenium disappeared in favor of a blank wall where the screen size could be interchangeable if needed.

Cinerama created the illusion of being in the center of the movie with a large, interlocking wrap-around screen. Three cameras were used while filming to simulate a view close the human field of vision. Each camera was angled to capture a different part of the field of vision, the left side, straight ahead, and the right side. Thereby the cameras crisscrossed over each other to capture the full and peripheral view. In the theater three projectors in separate strategically located booths were needed to project each camera’s view along with newly evolving multitrack magnetic sound to capture the feel of surround sound. A deeply curving screen was also required. Because so much more space was necessary to accommodate the curving screen and two additional projection booths were necessary, some existing theaters were not able to make the conversion. Other theaters were specifically constructed to accommodate Cinerama movies.

CinemaScope was another widescreen process that used anamorphic camera lenses that changed the aspect ratio of the image, in this case making it much wider than the standard image size. This process required less investment in the production of making a movie since the anamorphic lenses could be attached to standard cameras and projectors. Theater owners shouldered the burden of the cost because in addition to supplemental audio equipment, larger, wider and slightly curved screens were required to exhibit the CimamaScope films. Other widescreen technologies such as VistaVision, Techniscope and Todd-AO also had success. The expense to produce movies using these widescreen technologies and the hesitation of exhibitors to renovate their existing theaters to accommodate wider screens and

245 Lev, 109.
246 Ibid., 112.
247 Gomery, 238.
248 Lev, 112.
249 Ibid., 114.
250 Ibid., 116.
multiple projectors led to the drop in popularity. In addition, a new filmmaking process developed by Panavision Corporation became the industry standard and required less investment from movie makers and theater owners.\textsuperscript{251}

Although some of the technologies required specialized theaters or larger screens for specific movie types, advances in automation of projection technologies during this time changed the size of projection rooms necessary to show standard movie formats. The switch from the changeover projection system to the platter system and advances in light source technology reduced the amount of staff needed to operate the projection room. For some theater projection rooms, the size of the platter equipment required additional space.

Converting from the changeover projection system to the platter system increased efficiency and reduced the need of multiple projectionists.\textsuperscript{252} The platter system consisted of a horizontal revolving turntable that fed the film reel through the projector and an empty platter below to take up the viewed film and rewind it. This allowed the entire feature length film, advertisements and trailers to be spliced together onto one reel and then rewound as it played. Before the platter system was used, projectionists used a changeover system. The changeover system worked with the multiple film reels used for a single feature length film. It required changing from one projector to another multiple times without the audience being aware of the change. It also required duplicating equipment along with staff able to monitor, change over, and then rewind multiple reels.

Longer lasting projection bulbs also lessened the need for projectionists. Older carbon arc lamps did not last as long and required more attention to ensure the bulb did not burn out during the showing. Although xenon gas was discovered in 1898, it was not used in movie projection as a light source until 1950 and was not commercially introduced until the following year and were not common in theaters until the 1970s. These longer lasting xenon bulbs required much less attention.\textsuperscript{253}

\textit{Safety Improvements}

Changes in film stock eased restrictions for fireproof construction in projection rooms. The use of cellulose tri-acetate film provided a safer alternative to the highly flammable cellulose nitrate film used previously. Historically if the cellulose nitrate film became caught in the film gate due to loose splices or torn film, it would ignite due to the heat of the projection light.\textsuperscript{254} The conversion to cellulose tri-acetate film reduced the fear of fire and explosions in projection rooms. Introduced by Eastman Kodak Company and the Kodak Research Laboratories in 1946, the tri-acetate film was often referred to as “Release Positive Safety Film” or simply “safety film.”\textsuperscript{255} By the 1970s many municipalities and states no longer allowed the use of cellulose nitrate film. Although most theaters did not renovate their existing fireproof projection rooms, with the use of safety film, the size, construction materials and number of exits in new projection booths were no longer as strictly mandated.

\textsuperscript{251} Monaco, 72.
\textsuperscript{253} Haines, 103.
\textsuperscript{255} Ibid., 42.
F. Associated Property Types

(Provide description, significance, and registration requirements.)

Nebraska buildings significant for their association with movie theaters are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A in the areas of ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION, PERFORMING ARTS, SOCIAL HISTORY, and COMMERCE and under Criterion C in the area of ARCHITECTURE.

By nature of function, all Nebraska theater buildings within the window of significance are eligible under Criterion A in the area of ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION. Additional areas of significance are determined on a situational basis for the theater in question. To be considered significant under Criterion A in the area of PERFORMING ARTS, the theater’s historic function must have a substantial association with live performance mediums. This may include community performances, live musical entertainment, or talent productions. Similarly, to be considered significant under criterion A in the area of SOCIAL HISTORY the actions and functions of the theater must have had a broader influence into a community’s political, economic or cultural structures within the window of significance. This may include community gatherings, political rallies / political group meetings, fundraisers, or educational activities. To be significant under criterion A in the area of COMMERCE, the theater’s historic function must have included either related or unrelated commercial program that operated independently of the theater. Early theaters’ economic prosperity is often associated with, and in cases the theater’s success is attributed to, the inclusion of additional commercial space in the theater footprint. The inclusion of independent commercial space helped substantiate income, diversify the theater owner’s revenue stream, and densify commercial areas. Common examples may include retail bays on the ground level, leasable office space above, or internal restaurants.

A theater may be significant under Criterion C for ARCHITECTURE if the architectural style, engineering technology, or architect possess historical value and the building itself exemplifies said historical value in its physical form. Additionally, a building may be eligible if the construction method or material used in construction is unique to that specific community or culture and represents a case study by which to understand the development of the community or culture’s building practices.

Theaters are a unique building type that are tied directly to the development and evolution of a novel form of entertainment. The theater building type was evolving concurrently with the pace of technological advancements made in the film industry. As the film industry matured the focus shifted from a collective social experience among movie goers to an individual focused experience with the movie screen. This shift put the imperative on many theaters to consistently renovate the interior to match the growing expectations of patrons. Many existing theaters renovated their interior while maintaining the original exterior and primary façade. When examining a theater and attempting to assign National Register Criterion, it may be necessary to consider interior and exterior conditions independently and determine whether the interior or exterior has higher integrity and which elements, interior or exterior, have greater significance.
I. CONVERSION THEATERS

Description

Conversion theaters describe venues established in a pre-existing space not originally designed for the exhibition of movies. Conversion theaters were popular while the movie industry was still in its infancy and many smaller towns could not afford to dedicate an entire building exclusively to movies. Conversion theaters were typically indistinguishable from neighboring buildings in terms of massing. The earliest forms of conversion theaters were a natural fit for exhibiting films, the open floor plan only requiring the addition of cloth stretched over a simple wooden frame either tucked behind a performance stage or against an empty wall. Conversion theaters were typically indistinguishable from neighboring buildings in terms of massing. The earliest forms of conversion theaters were temporary attractions operated by itinerant exhibitioners who would rent out spaces to show their cinematic shorts. To entice customers to the new form of entertainment, the film proprietors would outfit the frontage of the makeshift theaters to varying degrees with music boxes, posters, and announcers to promote the new entertainment within the building. If a customer was interested in purchasing a ticket, they did not have to go far. Makeshift ticket booths, often a table with signage, were located either near the exterior’s primary entrance or tucked just within the threshold of the entrance. This served multiple purposes: to not take up valuable auditorium seats as well as being economical and adaptable when the show moved locales.

As cinema proved to be a stable form of entertainment many of the temporary fixings of early conversion theaters evolved to become permanent fixtures of a theater exterior. The makeshift ticket booth moved from town to town became a permanent “box office.” Loose sidewalk items like posters, music boxes, and barkers were replaced with elevated marquees or awnings covering the ticket booth. Internally, the level of conversion that took place varied depending on a multitude of factors. First and foremost, the existing building use or type. In the early stages of this period of cinema history, most venues could not rely on film alone from a monetary standpoint. This stems from a variety of reasons but may be predominantly attributed to the relative age of the new form of entertainment. Films were without sound, short (compared to contemporary runtimes), and the body of films available for screening was low (especially in smaller rural areas). To substantiate the movie going experience, early conversion theaters often incorporated live music, film narration, or independent live intermission acts. Depending on the building use, renovation might have entailed the inclusion of a stage and proscenium to host the live acts and frame the movie exhibition. The treatment of the auditorium space varied greatly depending on location and pre-existing building type. It is more common that spaces serving previously as town halls or public venues did not incorporate fixed seating wholesale as part of the initial transition to a theater to maintain flexibility. The necessity to maintain flexibility created a straightforward design language and sequence of spaces consistent across the conversion theater type. Conversion theaters typically had a small internal ticket booth near the primary entrance. Depending on the preexisting building

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256 Sharp, 70.
257 Ibid.
258 Valentine, 22-23.
259 Ibid., 6.
260 Sharp, 54.
type there may or may not have been an independent lobby space that shared space with the ticket booth. It is more common to see an independently articulated lobby in buildings that were designed as an opera house. More common in repurposed community spaces, the conversion theater was one continuous space with minimal or no sloping of the auditorium floor. At the farthest extent from the entrance is where the stage was typically located. Stages may have had a proscenium to further frame both live acts and the movie screen.

The **Sun Theater** (DS06-219; 1909) in Gothenburg is an example of a one-part commercial block conversion theater. Upon opening it served as a dedicated opera house for 17 years. The original design had features associated with opera houses including a fly loft, a balcony with box seats, and a full orchestra pit. Circa 1927, the Sun was converted to a movie theater by Glen VanWey, who operated it until 1981. The theater was used throughout the first half of the 20th century for all types of entertainment; vaudeville, standup comedy, and particularly during the Great Depression, lotteries and special themed nights to make ticket prices more accessible. Renovation of The Sun Theater was staggered according to the evolution of theater technology. In 1928, additional space was created for a more formalized screen and sound equipment. Later, sloping floors were constructed to allow for better sight lines, and subsequently (circa 1950) a refined projection booth was constructed to allow for greater cinema quality. While starkly different from the original opera house, the changes made to the Sun Theater corresponded with the evolution of theater design and the movie industry itself, therefore maintaining historic integrity.

Today, the Sun Theater is home to both live performances and cinema.

The **Martha Ellen Auditorium** (MK02-008; NR # 88000944; 1917) in Central City (currently the State Theater) is an example of a one-part commercial block conversion theater. The building is constructed of multiple masonry types and employs various brick motifs throughout. The theater was originally opened as an opera house under the name Martha Ellen Auditorium. The auditorium had three seating areas; the primary auditorium floor, a horseshoe shaped balcony and elevated box seats flanking the stage. The box seats are articulated as cylindrical walls that continued to finish floor and framed the entire stage. The date that the Martha Ellen Auditorium was renamed the State Theater and began showing movies is unknown. Currently, the State Theater is open to the public and still shows movies. The main floor has been renovated,

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261 TRIBUNEscape, “Gothenburg Sun Theater - Still Shining After All These Years,” July 30, 2009, 2-4.
262 Ibid.
264 Republican Nonpareil, “State Theater to open Friday in Central City,” April 7, 1988.
including updated seating and projection technology, but the balcony remains relatively untouched since closure to the public.265

Significance

Conversion theaters are significant to the historic context outlined in Section E of this multiple property documentation form under Criterion A in the area of ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION, SOCIAL HISTORY, PERFORMING ARTS, and COMMERCE as they reflect the evolution of popular entertainment. A conversion theater may also be significant under Criterion C for ARCHITECTURE as an example of an architectural style, a vernacular adaptation of an architectural style to a distinct property type, or as a design by a recognized architect.

Registration Requirements

To be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as a conversion theater, the building in question must maintain qualities that differentiate it from contemporary buildings or other theater types. The building form will most likely be either a one-part or two-part commercial block, as this was the prevailing types of commercial buildings from the mid-nineteenth century onward for towns in the early stages of development.266 The conversion theater should presently have a similar interior layout to the layout at time of operation as a movie theater. Typical interior features include a flat floor, flexible seating, the original stage and proscenium, where applicable. Equally important, the theater should have documentation of its construction and use in the early 20th century for some other purpose before evidence relating to the exhibition of films. The interior of the theater should have stylistic detailing that reflects known design movements over the course of the theater’s lifetime. Those buildings that were first designed as opera houses, should first be considered for nomination in that area of significance, if sufficient integrity remains.

The building should retain the features specific to theater design that render the conversion theater as a unique and distinct theater style. Both the interior and exterior of the building must retain integrity of design, materials, and workmanship as they pertain to the key elements of a conversion theater as described above as each are essential to communicate a theater’s association within the historic context and stand testament to the building’s historic function. Since conversion theaters were prone to renovation over time, modifications that reflect the continued use and evolution of theaters should be considered historic if said modifications occurred within the period of significance and coincided with regular theater use. Themes that associate a building with the specific historic context required to be a conversion theater are not strictly architectural. Therefore, documentation of a building’s specific use as a theater is necessary to ensure significance.

265 “State Theater 706 C Avenue, Central City, NE,” accessed July 2, 2020, cinematreasures.org.

II. COMMERCIAL BLOCK THEATERS

Description

Commercial Block Theater refers to a building that contained a movie theater as its main feature but also included separate areas for commercial or private use within its footprint. Commercial block theaters appeared as early as 1910 and were typically located near the main street of a commercial district. The form of the movie theater was typically either a two-part commercial block or two-part vertical block. Commercial block theaters commonly had similar proportions to surrounding buildings as well as a similar material palette. During the height of vaudeville, some Commercial Block Theaters also included small stages to showcase live performances. This use, however, was secondary to the building’s primary, and often longer standing, use as a movie theater. Multi-leveled buildings became standard to allow for the inclusion of a more formal auditorium with a raked floor and a designated projection booth. To protect against the risk of fire associated with early projection equipment, commercial block theaters incorporated concrete and steel structural systems to prevent internal collapse in the event of a fire. Masonry façades and demising walls helped prevent the spread of accidental flames to adjacent buildings.

The floor plan of commercial block theaters followed a similar formula. Much of the language and convention for commercial block theaters are a direct descendent from conversion theaters. A notable distinction from its predecessor, the primary façade of commercial block theaters housed multiple tenants, all of which needed the valuable sidewalk space to advertise goods and services. Elevated marquees became standard as did exterior ticket booths. The two worked in unison, the marquee served to attract and excite and an exterior ticket booth promoted spontaneity. Beyond the entry, patrons walked into a small lobby. Lobbies began to incorporate more extravagant fixtures to continue the narrative presented on the building’s exterior. With the introduction of more formalized lobbies of varying levels of accommodation, the relationship between auditorium and lobby changed. Before, the screen was in a direct path from the entrance. Now, to reduce the amount of noise and light pollution coming from the lobby, theaters began to incorporate “light traps.” A light trap made for an off-axis entry from the screen so internally there was no disruption within the auditorium when a late comer arrived or a patron departed for a restroom break. Commercial Block Theaters still retained features of more traditional theaters, including prosceniums and stages. This enhanced both the presentation of the movies and the financial success of the theater. During movies, the proscenium served to frame the screen, presenting it as the actor in a play, and in some cases helping to shelter it from isle lighting. As a natural gathering space for audiences, movie theaters that incorporated stages were able to generate additional income from vaudeville shows and rental to small groups of local performers for recitals, speeches, etc. This function was still secondary however, to the building’s primary use as a movie theater.

267 Sharp, 54.
268 National Register of Historic Places, “Historic Theaters and Opera Houses of Kansas MPS,” National Register # 64500911.
269 Ibid.
270 Valentine, 24.
271 Ibid., 106.
Masonic Temple and World Theater (BF05-471; NR # 09000902; 1927) in Kearney is an example of a two-part vertical block theater. While the theater is four floors, the building’s major distinction is made between the first and second floor, with little distinction made between the second through fourth floors. The theater’s main entrance is flanked on either side by small retail shops. The second through fourth floors hold office space and the Free Masons’ lodge.

The USA Theater (CN09-065; NR # 94001233; 1919) in Sidney is an example of a vaulted two-part commercial block theater. The vault motif was commonly used for financial institutions in the early 19th century, but by the second decade of the 20th century the motif made its way to theaters. The USA Theater illustrates an evolution in theater design. With generalized allusions to an architectural style the main purpose of the vault motif utilized in theater design was to invoke an aspect of fantasy and grandeur. The USA Theater’s original design included pressed terra cotta and ornamental exterior lights incorporated into the façade. Small retail shops flank either side of the central theater entrance. The theater’s auditorium included 1,100 floor seats and an additional 400 balcony seats.

Significance

Commercial block theaters are significant to the historic context outlined in Section E of this multiple property documentation form under Criterion A in the areas of ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION and COMMERCE. They may also be significant under SOCIAL HISTORY or PERFORMING ARTS, if they have a proven association with vaudeville or other local performances. They reflect the evolution of popular entertainment and advances in technology. A commercial block theater may also be significant under Criterion C for ARCHITECTURE as an example of an architectural style, a vernacular adaptation of an architectural style to a distinct property type, or as a design by a recognized architect.

272 Longstreth, 82.
273 National Register of Historic Places, “Masonic Temple and World Theater Building,” Kearney, Buffalo County, NE, National Register #09000903, Section 7, 2.
274 Longstreth, 109-110.
275 Ibid.
276 Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office, Historic Resources Inventory Form: CN09-065, U.S.A. Theater, Sidney, Cheyenne County, NE, 3.
Registration Requirements

To be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as a commercial block theater, the building in question must maintain qualities that differentiate it from contemporary buildings or other theater types. The theater should front, or have a near adjacency to, a street relevant at the time of theater construction/operation. The primary façade should indicate multiple uses, either through the employment of a storefront system or multiple floor levels. The theater should have an elevated marquee located on the primary façade and a ticket booth located near the primary façade. The interior of the theater should have stylistic detailing that reflects known design movements over the course of the theater’s lifetime. The auditorium should be a formalized space distinct from the lobby. The auditorium may have additional elements such as a raked floor with fixed seats, a dedicated projection booth or a small stage framed with a proscenium.

The building should retain the features specific to theater design that render the commercial block theater as a unique and distinct theater style. Both the interior and exterior of the building must retain integrity of design, materials, and workmanship as they pertain to the key elements of a commercial block theater as described above as they are essential to communicate a theater’s association within the historic context and stand testament to the building’s historic function. Properties that have been renovated are acceptable if the renovation does not alter the overall interpretation of the building. Since commercial block theaters were prone to renovation over time, modifications that reflect the continued use and evolution of theaters should be considered historic if said modifications occurred within the period of significance and coincided with regular theater use.
III. DEDICATED MOVIE HOUSES

Description

Appearing concurrently with commercial block theaters, dedicated movie houses differ only in that they housed no additional program within their building footprint. Dedicated movie houses typically took the form of two-part commercial blocks or false front commercial blocks to incorporate the additional height associated with a formalized theater auditorium. Like commercial block theaters, dedicated movie houses utilized nonflammable structural systems like steel and concrete due to the inherent fire risk of contemporary projection equipment. Dedicated movie houses relied heavily on the expression of the primary façade while still having a rectangular footprint and contextually appropriate block form. Stylistically, the primary façade expressed the popular architecture of the time as well as Nebraska specific vernacular adaptations. The interior employed similar motifs to those expressed on the façade throughout though execution varied. As movies continued to grow in popularity, theaters became a more consistent and reliable source of income. It was not uncommon for existing commercial block theaters to renovate or expand into the territory originally designated for other commercial programs and functionally serve as a dedicated movie house. Theaters that changed in this way should not be excluded from consideration for the National Register, as the act of transitioning structures from multiuse to dedicated movie houses illustrates the cultural evolution of film from the 1920s to the 1970s and how theaters responded.

With dedicated movie houses, the consideration of a movie goers experience extended to an entire façade as opposed to a singular bay. Commonplace for a dedicated movie house façade was the inclusion of an exterior lobby situated beneath the large marquee that served to entice pedestrians with posters previewing the current films.277 From there the passerby was usually equidistant from either an exterior ticket booth or the primary doors of the theater. The human scale of the exterior lobby allowed the elevated marquee to undergo drastic changes. As cars became more commonplace, marquees became much larger, multi-dimensional, and the information they displayed was rendered at a scale appropriate for an automobile traveling upwards of 20 miles per hour.278 Internally, features such as a raked or tiered floor, fixed seating, a projection booth and a light trap carry over from Commercial Block Theaters. Dedicated Movie Theaters often also incorporated, acoustical considerations in the auditorium, and small concession stands in the lobby area.279

277 Valentine, 97.
278 Ibid.
279 Ibid., 105.
The Fox Theater (CN09-147; NR # 04001086; 1951) in Sidney is an example of a vernacular adaptation of a two-part commercial block.\textsuperscript{280} Designed by James E. Strong, the design most notably features the utilization of Quonset hut for the main auditorium. The Quonset was overstock from the construction of the neighboring Lowry Army Air Force Base.\textsuperscript{281} While the Fox Theater is stylistically vernacular, the movie theater still incorporated important design features and ideas of dedicated movie houses. The elevated marquee juts off the primary frontage to be visible to automobile traffic and creates an informal exterior lobby beneath the overhang. A recessed entry flanked by an external ticket booth helps to pull pedestrians off the street and into the theater.

The Grand Theater (HL06-145; NR # 100001800; 1937) in Grand Island is an example of a two-part commercial block theater converted to a dedicated movie house.\textsuperscript{282} The Grand Theater was designed by L.P. Larsen and illustrates the Art Deco style. The original design featured commercial bays flanking the theater’s central entrance.\textsuperscript{283} Later the commercial bays were sealed and covered with stucco to expand the theater. Presently, black panels and poster casements with art deco detailing have replaced generic construction to improve stylistic coherence. Geometric/mosaic tile applications, material treatments that reinforce verticality, and pastel colors are all indicators of Art Deco/Moderne design. The Moderne style introduced new materials to theater design and emphasized the consideration of light in determining how a theater would look and what images it would evoke after the sun set.\textsuperscript{284} The Grand Theater embodies this development in theater design, illustrating the use of fantasy and grandeur within an architectural typology.

\textsuperscript{280} Longstreth, 24.
\textsuperscript{281} Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office, Historic Resources Inventory Form: CN09-147, Fox Theater, 3.
\textsuperscript{282} Longstreth, 53; Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office, Historic Resources Inventory Form: HL06-145, Grand Theater, Grand Island, Hall County, NE.
\textsuperscript{283} Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office, Historic Resources Inventory Form: HL06-145, Grand Theater.
\textsuperscript{284} Valentine, 97.
Valley Cinema (VY04-002; 1947) in Ord is an example of a vernacular adaptation of an Art Deco two-part commercial block theater converted to a dedicated movie house.\textsuperscript{285} The composition of the primary façade closely resembles the vault style, with marquee and brick ornamentation creating vertical emphasis at the central bay and theater entrance.\textsuperscript{286} Originally, the outermost bays had storefront glass with entrances to additional businesses.\textsuperscript{287} The outermost bays have comparatively subtle ornamentation, which served to differentiate the original theater entrance from the other commercial tenants in the building. Over time the adjacent storefronts were integrated into the theater.\textsuperscript{288} Valley Cinema has been renovated/restored and now functions as a multipurpose entertainment venue under the name “The Golden Husk.” Much of the renovation addressed deterioration that the theater had undergone over time and restored the original art deco design intention.

**Significance**

Dedicated movie houses are significant to the historic context outlined in Section E of this multiple property documentation form under Criterion A in the areas of ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION, SOCIAL HISTORY, and COMMERCE. They reflect the evolution of popular entertainment and advances in technology. A dedicated movie house may also be significant under Criterion C for ARCHITECTURE as an example of an architectural style, a vernacular adaptation of an architectural style to a distinct property type, or as a design by a recognized architect.

**Registration Requirements**

To be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as a dedicated movie house, the building in question must maintain qualities that differentiate it from contemporary building types or other theater types. The theater building should retain as much of the original primary façade design and detailing as possible to render it a distinct style. The primary façade should have details and an overall composition that alludes to the pedestrian scale as well as vehicular scale. Commonly, ticket booths were located on the primary façade near the main theater entrance beneath an elevated marquee. Detailing beneath the marquee was often human scale, while detailing in line with and above the marquee was larger to be legible from a distance. The interior of the theater should have stylistic detailing that corresponds with known design movements over the course of the theater’s lifetime. In addition to stylistic ornamentation, theater innovations such as the inclusion of a formalized concession stand within the theater lobby space and acoustical treatments in auditoriums are good demarcations of dedicated movie houses. The auditorium should be preserved and have a raked or tiered floor with indication of fixed seats.

\textsuperscript{285} Longstreth, 24.
\textsuperscript{286} Ibid., 117.
\textsuperscript{288} Ibid.
The building should retain the features specific to theater design that render the dedicated movie house as a distinct theater style. Both the interior and exterior of the building must retain integrity of design, materials, and workmanship as they pertain to the key elements of a dedicated movie house as described above. Integrity of design, material use, and workmanship are essential to communicate a theater’s association within the historic context and stand testament to the theater’s historic function. Properties that have been renovated are acceptable if the renovation does not alter the overall character of the building or if the renovation introduces stylistic elements contemporaneous with the time at which the renovation occurred. Theaters should be nominated within the movie theater type in which they have the highest integrity across both the interior and exterior. Key elements that indicate character specifically in dedicated movie houses include the auditorium, separated lobby, and primary façade. Critical examination should be applied more stringently to defining elements to ensure they reflect historical and architectural significance. Since dedicated movie houses were prone to renovation over time, modifications that reflect the continued use and evolution of theaters should be considered historic if said modifications occurred within the period of significance and coincided with regular theater use.
IV. MOVIE PALACES

Description

Movie palaces represent a trend in movie theater design from roughly 1910 through the late 1930s and are distinguished by their lavish, stylistic design on both the exterior and the interior. Physical elements large and small come together to create a wholistic design. The movie palace is a unique building type strongly influenced by the design elements of the Beaux Arts classicism, historic European opera houses, and European music halls. The exterior scale, massing, and forms of the movie palace set it apart from pre-established theater types, yet spoke a similar language to the existing offices and banks present in early 20th century urban areas. The movie palace illustrates the growth of film’s importance in American culture and the role of the movie theater as an important civic and social setting. Palaces are difficult to categorize within a singular aesthetic or stylistic rendition due to the adoption and interpretation of various traditional and exotic revival based stylistic treatments. Movie palaces were always designed by registered architects and usually the work of a nationally recognized firm that specialized in the design and construction of new larger theater palaces. Large movie corporations saw the opportunity to increase ticket sales and attract new business through the construction of more fantastical and lavish buildings in the wake of theater entrepreneur Samuel Rothafel’s Regent Theater, designed by architect Thomas Lamb. Architectural offices had the resources and knowledge required to design the complex structures and formal design education required to detail lavish revival elements.

Movie palace design can be classified into two broad categories based on geographic location and scale. “Downtown palace” refers to a palace located in a higher concentrated urban environment. Downtown palaces were large multistory buildings that incorporated spacious interiors, live entertainment, and first-rate films. Downtown palaces included dressing rooms, stylistic prosceniums, and orchestra pits of varying degrees to accommodate the live musical or theatrical performances. These features were present because the earliest palaces preceded the advent of “talkies,” so musical accompaniment, intermission acts, and full vaudeville arrangements were very much a part of the program. “Neighborhood palaces” were satellite to the concentrated, urban districts of a city. Neighborhood palaces, compared to downtown palaces, were much smaller in overall form but still employed heavy ornamentation associated with a stylistic revival and premiered exclusively first- or second-rate films. While some neighborhood palaces incorporated formal stages and proscenia, large-scale theatrical and musical performances were less common. Internally, palaces bestowed lavish treatment on features and spaces such as lobbies, stairs, balconies, and the auditorium.

289 Sharp, 7-8, 74; Edwin Heathcote, Cinema Builders (Chichester, NY: Wiley-Academy, 2001), 16-19.
290 Valentine, 34-35.
291 National Register of Historic Places, “Historic Theaters and Opera Houses of Kansas MPS,” 68.
292 Ibid., 67; Valentine, 34-35.
293 Ibid., 38.
294 Ibid., 35-38.
295 Ibid., 34.
The Riviera/Astro/Rose Theater (DO09:0124-012; NR # 74001108; 1927) of Omaha is a palace designed in the Venetian/Moorish Revival style. It fits within the atmospheric subset of movie palaces. The exterior is treated thoroughly with intricate details, but special attention is paid to the primary theater entrance. The entirety of the theater form builds up and highlights the entrance with a tower trimmed in stone and capped with a distinct cupula. Flanking the primary tower is smaller vertical detailing that demarcates the extents of the entrance lobby. The original design created a soft exterior lobby that allowed patrons to purchase tickets from the corner and then pass through a colonnade into the internal lobby. The interior employs similarly lavish ornamentations and motifs. This includes unique sculptures, intricate custom mosaic flooring, and Mediterranean style murals. The auditorium could house 2,776 attendants at once and included a full stage with an orchestra pit, dressing rooms, and an ornate proscenium. The auditorium ceiling was outfitted with electric light stars and clouds enhancing the palace narrative of an escape from the mundane.

City National Bank Building and Creighton Orpheum Theater (DO09:0123-024; NR # 73001061; 1927) of Omaha is a unique instance of a movie palace in that it is composed of two distinct masses. The mass associated with the City National Bank Building follows the standard tower typology. The mass associated with the Creighton Orpheum Theater follows a three-part commercial block building structure with the lower blocks detailed in vernacular Beaux Arts style, and the top block in a Venetian Revival style. Mixing office buildings with movie palaces was actually a common practice through the mid to late 1920s. The financial burden of constructing a new office building was greatly relieved by the lucrative income provided by the palace. The exterior of the building has been altered significantly since the Orpheum’s grand re-opening in 1927. The exterior, at the ground level, features little ornamentation and embellishment, consistent with Beaux Arts rusticated masonry. Upon opening, the Orpheum had multiple retail bays along Harney Street. Some of those bays are visible today; others have been altered or infilled with masonry. The theater entrance is demarcated by a shift in vertical

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297 Ibid.
298 Blumenson, 66-67.
299 Valentine, 35.
300 Modes and Manners Magazine (February-March 1927), 2 accessed from Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office, Site file for DO09:0123-024, Orpheum Theater, Omaha, Douglas County, NE.
301 Blumenson, 66-67.
parapet height and a subtle stone pediment. Historically, the top block with Venetian detailing was further offset from Harney reinforcing the human scale of the first and second levels. Upon entering the Orpheum, the human scale vanishes. The Orpheum’s Grand Lobby is a double height space with ornate barrel-vaulted ceilings detailed with French Renaissance elements. The auditorium includes a large raked floor with orchestra pit, floating box seats, and a large projecting mezzanine. The auditorium has a total of 2,650 seats excluding orchestra pit capacity. Within the auditorium there is much ornate detailing, but perhaps the most extravagant is the sloping vaulted ceiling, a grand central light cove and three ornate chandeliers.

Significance

Movie palaces are significant to the historic content outlined in Section E of this multiple property documentation form under Criterion A in the areas of ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION, SOCIAL HISTORY, PERFORMING ARTS, and COMMERCE. They represent a distinct period and type within the evolution of popular entertainment and culture. Movie palaces are also eligible under Criterion C for the area of ARCHITECTURE for their architectural design and/or as a design by a recognized architect.

Registration Requirements

To be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, the characteristics and qualities described above must remain sufficiently intact and retain a sufficient quality of integrity to support the significance of the building to the historic context. While movie palaces share the essential form and configuration of spaces, the movie palace is distinguished from the dedicated movie house and commercial block theater by its high style architecture, large size, and inherent stylistic embellishments across multiple scales of design. The interior and exterior design, materials, and workmanship convey the design theme, historic appearance, and function of the movie palace. Integrity of these features is critical to maintaining the historic feeling and associations of the resource. Extra consideration should be given when determining the historic integrity of the palace type. While renovations are inevitable for theater constructed within this time frame, the building must retain, to some extent, the historic décor that distinguished the palace at the time of construction from the dedicated movie house. Existent décor should be sufficient to provide a narrative of extravagance and fantasy paramount to categorization as a palace. Key features where lavish ornament is found would be overall building exterior, interior lobby and balconies, and the stage. Other historic elements that communicate the historic function of the movie palace will include the marquee, or other exterior signage, and the arrangement of the lobby, lounge areas, and staircases.

V. DRIVE-INS

Description

Drive-in theaters refer to a type of outdoor theater that utilize personal automobiles as seating for collective film watching. The first patented drive-in opened in 1933 but had issues surrounding viewing quality, poor sound projection, and other environmental concerns. These obstacles, coupled with a relatively high admission price and lack of feature film presentations, stunted the early success of drive-in theaters.\(^{304}\) Technological and aesthetic advances during the 1930s addressed issues and saw the introduction of more formalized organizational systems including bumper frameworks to designate spots, permanent pole mounted speakers between parking spots, and improved layouts to increase the viewing quality for cars in peripheral parking spots. In the early 1940s the introduction of in-car audio for drive-in theaters effectively resolved the issue of thermal control and made drive-ins more bearable.\(^{305}\)

Post-World War II, drive-in theaters reached the pinnacle of popularity for a growing suburban population. With the increase of television ownership across the United States, Americans were looking for new ways to experience the movies. The relative ease and comfort associated with the drive-in, alongside the shift to an automobile centric culture and widespread suburbanization, created a successful formula that played off of growing contemporary cultural movements.\(^{306}\) As drive-ins became more successful the theaters incorporated amenities like concession stands that served full meals, playgrounds for children, and ushers on bicycles that provided such services as topping off automobile oil or checking a car’s tire pressure, making it possible for the entire family to stay occupied and fulfilled at the movies.

The defining elements comprising a drive-in theater at the peak of their popularity include an independent ticket booth that controlled vehicle flow onto the site, a projection screen tower typically built of wood with the actual screen constructed from fabric backed with metal lathe and plaster, and auxiliary buildings that housed restrooms and the concession booth. The outdoor auditorium could vary greatly by design, but typically included terraces and bumpers for car parking parallel to the movie screen and ramps that served the terraces running perpendicular to the screen.

\(^{305}\) Ibid., preface. 
\(^{306}\) Ibid., preface.
Panhandle Drive-In (KM00-099; 1954) in Kimball, is an example of a western Nebraska vernacular drive-in movie theater. The site is made up of a graded outdoor auditorium, projection house, projection screen, and ticket booth. All elements of the site are still existent but have undergone varying amounts of deterioration since theater closure circa 1980. The projection tower is a near A-frame style structure with exposed metal channel construction. Mounted near the top of A-profile facing the auditorium is a large panel wall of wood construction from which the viewing screen would have been attached. From the screen, the auditorium radiates outwards in successive arcs increasing in size the further back from the screen. At opening the theater had a capacity for roughly 250 cars.

TK-Starlite Drive-In (1952) in Neligh, Nebraska is the only drive-in theater still operating from within the mid-century heyday of this theater exhibition type. The theater is comprised of a graded outdoor auditorium, projection booth, projection tower, and a concession stand. The built elements of the site have a mid-century modern eclectic styling. From the road, there is a small marquee that includes the theater name and the films showing. The projection tower is a near A-frame shape structure with exposed metal rod construction. The projection screen is mounted to the tower with metal channels. The auditorium aisles radiate outward in successive arcs. Within the aisles are independent drive-up speakers for broadcasting film audio, a remnant before the technology existed to tune in with car radio. The concession stand has a low sloping roof with a large overhang on one side and horizontally oriented windows.

Significance

Drive-in theaters are significant to the historic context outlined in Section E of this multiple property documentation form under Criterion A in the areas of ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION, SOCIAL HISTORY, and COMMERCE. They reflect the evolution of popular entertainment and advances in technology. A drive-in may also be significant under Criterion C

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for ARCHITECTURE as an example of an architectural style, a vernacular adaptation of an architectural style to a distinct property type, or as a design by a recognized architect.

**Registration Requirements**

To be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as a drive-in theater, the characteristics and qualities that comprise a drive-in must remain sufficiently intact and retain a sufficient quality of integrity to support the significance of the site and built elements in relation to the historic context outlined. While the ability to determine architectural significance of a drive-in is dependent primarily upon the built elements and their arrangement within a site, it was commonplace for drive-ins to adopt a mid-century vernacular aesthetic. The mid-century vernacular aesthetic was not restricted to drive-in theaters, the style was widespread across many building types and building uses. The mid-century vernacular aesthetic included an emphasized horizontality in buildings, large scale graphic signage, and a commonplace material pallet for commercial structures. The theater site and the layout of components should display, with clarity, the organization of the drive-in at the time of its operation. The parking lot, or drive-in auditorium, should retain features that reflect its original use, such as the grading or tiering of the earth and organized drive aisles for circulation. The projection screen tower should be intact and retain some material integrity. Auxiliary buildings, such as a ticket booth or concession stand, vary in execution depending on the theater’s style and size. Auxiliary buildings should be present on site to help create a more cohesive understanding of the site. The specific function of these buildings is flexible, though it is preferred they had an active contribution to theater operation. Since drive-in theaters did not have what could be thought of as a built shared interior space, it is important that auxiliary buildings retain material integrity on the exterior. Framing and marking the landscape to make this use more obvious, the structures of the Drive-ins created the back drops for social interaction within the drive-in venue.

The site should retain the features specific to drive-in theater design that render the site as such. Since drive-in theaters are not singular buildings, but a collection of buildings among a site with limited function, consideration of the drive-in site’s integrity should deal primarily with the landscaping of the site and the historic organization of elements on it. Renovations or replacements of independent buildings within the site are acceptable if they do not alter or create a new organization of elements in relationship to the site. The drive-in epitomizes a very specific episode in both American history and theater history, such that despite building renovation or replacement, renovated drive-in theaters still evoke the historic context outlined in this section.
VI. EARLY MULTIPLEX THEATERS

Description

An early multiplex theater describes a single theater building that housed more than one within a singular building footprint. Architecturally, the multiplex theater is fundamentally different than its predecessors in that its form, ornamentation, and aspirations are not derived from an architectural background. This is a result of various underlying forces in the film industry in the 1960s as well as larger cultural evolutions. Early multiplexes illustrate the shift of theater design from considering the experience of going to the movies to maximizing the experience of being at the movies, and a change from promoting movie going to more strictly considering profit margins for theaters. Additionally, multiplex theaters materialize the change that had taken place in how audience members relate to one another and how they relate to the movie itself. The dynamic had shifted from a shared social experience amongst viewers to an experience between a singular viewer and the story on screen. Most multiplex theaters are indistinguishable from one another and do not prioritize architectural expression. With early multiplexes, a design formula was achieved characterized by shared service spaces and small auditoriums lacking ornamentation and excess. Early multiplexes had cheap plastic seats, concrete or carpeted floors, and auditoriums holding around 100 people. Eliminated in this type of theater were any semblance of stages or prosceniums. While the design and experience of watching movies in the theater became comparatively minimalistic, attention given to design and function of lobby and concessions spaces was inversely heightened. Lobby design changed fundamentally from a place that promoted lingering and marvel, into a marketing strategy with an emphasis on quick turnover. The concession stand was given a primary location, though typically not central, to allow for an effective assembly line style of service that did not crowd the lobby or block auditoriums.

There are three general types of multiplex theater. First are theaters constructed with the design incorporating multiple auditoriums and screens classified within this document as a Type One multiplex. The first multiplex theater matching this description can be attributed to AMC theaters as early as 1962 with the opening of a two-screen house, and later a six-screen house in 1969. Type Two multiplex theaters were originally designed to have a single auditorium, but through substantial new construction added one or more auditoriums, bringing total screen count above two. Type Three multiplex theaters originally had a single auditorium that was later subdivided into, typically, two smaller auditoriums. Type Three multiplexes are much more common in smaller towns across Nebraska with independently owned theaters.


311 The term “type one multiplex” is used in this document to help differentiate theaters designed with the intention of having multiple auditoriums and screens from theaters renovated to have more than one screen or auditorium. This system of designation is not standard.

312 Valentine, 182.
Six West Theater (1969; non-extant) was a Type One multiplex theater constructed as a part of Omaha's Westroads Shopping Center. As the name implies, Six West was a six-screen theater. Including the auditorium count within the title of the theater was a commonplace convention during the introduction of multiplexes. When Six West was opened in 1969, it was the first theater in the United States to have six screens. \(^{313}\) Characteristic of theaters constructed at this time; Six West employed a quantity over quality mentality. Auditoriums were laid out so that every two screens shared a single projection booth. Six West Theater no longer exists.

Indian Hills Cinema (1962; non-extant) of Omaha, is a unique example of a Type Two multiplex. The original design had a single auditorium to exclusively show Cinerama. \(^{314}\) Cinerama required simultaneous projection between independent projectors and a separate system to coordinate audio. The design of Indian Hills theater emphasized the special projection technique by designing a drum shaped auditorium. The first additional auditorium was built in 1977. \(^{315}\) Two additional auditoriums followed in the coming decade. What makes the treatment of Indian Hills atypical, was that the additional auditoriums did not overshadow the original building design and incorporated materials from the existing to help meld the old with the new.

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\(^{315}\) Ibid.
Rivoli Theatre 3 (AD04-0057; 1927) of Hastings, is an example of a Type Three multiplex. The Rivoli opened as a part of the Alexander Hotel Complex, which was directly adjacent to the theater.\textsuperscript{316} The Rivoli and Alexander Hotel were similar in massing and ornamentation, distinguishable from the street only by the Rivoli’s lavish lobby. The Rivoli was like other theaters of its day, outfitted with a stage and orchestra pit for live performances in addition to movies.\textsuperscript{317} The Rivoli operated continuously up until the 1980’s when the theater closed its doors in 1984. In 1995 the Alexander Hotel was demolished in order to reopen the Rivoli as the Rivoli 3, a three-screen multiplex theater with the two new auditoriums built where the hotel once stood.\textsuperscript{318} Today, the Rivoli 3 still retains much of the original exterior detailing from 1927, and the new addition attempts to build off that language. The Rivoli 3 illustrates a transformation seen in many small-town theaters across Nebraska and chronicles the shift in public demand for cheaper tickets and greater variety at the box office.

**Significance**

Multiplex theaters are significant to the historic context outlined in section E of this multiple property documentation form under Criterion A in the areas of ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION and SOCIAL HISTORY. They reflect the evolution of popular entertainment and advances in technology. A multiplex may also be significant under Criterion C for ARCHITECTURE as an example of an architectural style, a vernacular adaptation of an architectural style to a distinct property type, or as a design by a recognized architect.\textsuperscript{319}

**Registration Requirements**

To be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as an early multiplex theater, the building in question must maintain qualities that differentiate it from contemporary building types or other theater types. Since multiplex theaters are fundamentally different in their architectural expression than previous theater types, there are less criteria to govern eligibility for registration from a strictly architectural standpoint. The theater must contain at least two auditoriums and at least two screens. While there is no cutoff on auditorium count; early multiplex theaters within the period of significance generally did not exceed 10 screens. The auditoriums should have a comparatively small footprint to previous theater types. The materials of a multiplex should be economical, easy to maintain, and provide acoustic control. Materials that fit these criteria often proved to be the least expensive both initially and overtime, as materials that could no longer be maintained were easily replaced or covered. Ornamentation and stylistic expressions throughout

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\textsuperscript{316} Adams County Historical Society, *Adams County Nebraska Historical society*, accessed August 31, 2020, adamshistory.org

\textsuperscript{317} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{318} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{319} National Register of Historic Places, “Historic Theaters and Opera Houses of Kansas MPS.”
the auditoriums should be sparse if they exist at all. The concession stand and lobby should have ample space with the predominant ornamentation or architectural expression of the theater relating to the concession stand. The ornamentation and architectural features surrounding the concession stand should retain a degree of integrity that illustrates the importance of the concession stand to the multiplex theater model. 

The building should retain the features specific to theater design that render the multiplex as a distinct theater style. Both the interior and exterior of the building must retain integrity of design and materials as they pertain to the key elements of a multiplex house as described above. Integrity of design, material use, and workmanship are essential to communicate a theater’s association within the historic context and stand testament to the theater’s historic function. Properties that have been renovated are acceptable if the renovation does not alter the overall character of the building or if the renovation introduces stylistic elements contemporaneous with the time at which the renovation occurred. Changes to carpet, acoustic panels, and acoustic ceilings are acceptable as long as they are in keeping with the overall character of the space. Since smaller multiplex theaters were generally rendered obsolete with the introduction of more contemporary 10 to 20 auditorium multiplexes, many were closed or converted to serve another purpose. Since early multiplex theaters did not have high architectural or aesthetic aspirations it may still be possible to nominate a renovated multiplex theater if it retains a similar hierarchy and sequence of space – a central lobby, branching hallways or corridors used for circulation, and distinct auditoriums – as well as period appropriate materials and finishes.
United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
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**Historic Movie Theaters in Nebraska**
Name of Multiple Property Listing

**Geographical Data**

This Multiple Property Documentation Form applies to the entire state of Nebraska as defined by its boundaries at the time of acceptance by the National Park Service.
Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

The Multiple Property Documentation form of movie theaters in Nebraska is based upon the state’s survey program - the Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey (NeHBS). The ongoing NeHBS began in 1974 and is a county-by-county survey effort that includes the documentation of over 85,000 properties that reflect the rich architectural and historic heritage of Nebraska. The survey is conducted by researchers who drive every rural and urban road in a county and record each property that meets certain historic requirements in the Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey Manual (May 14, 2010) largely based on the Register of Historic Places (NRHP) criteria. Surveyed properties include standing structures throughout the state that appeared to be at least fifty years old and retain a sufficient degree of architectural integrity, including those properties that are potentially eligible for the NRHP. Survey data was provided by History Nebraska and analyzed to detect trends within variables including, but not limited to, construction date, architectural style, building materials, construction methods, or an association with a historical context in the areas of entertainment/recreation, performing arts, social history, or commerce. This analysis was used in conjunction with archival research to identify and develop two associated historic contexts: Development of Movie Theaters in Nebraska, c. 1896-1979; and Evolution of Movie Theater Design, c. 1900-1970s. Both contexts are detailed in Section E of this document. Resources were obtained from multiple sources including, but not limited to, History Nebraska references resources, scholarly publications, and newspaper publications. The Multiple Property Documentation also draws information from NRHP nominations completed for various movie theaters throughout the state. The end date selected for this Multiple Property Document is left intentionally flexible. Many of the existing surveys were conducted during the 1980s through the early 1990s and consequently do not include sufficient information to adequately address trends in theater design post 1950. While theater construction in Nebraska continued beyond the 1970s, the successive time periods require further examination to fully document social and architectural trends in theater design. The identification and evaluation of resources and information is therefore subject to limitation. For example at the time of this document’s writing it is believed that historically there were ethnic theaters across Omaha and possibly other Nebraska cities. Further specific research is needed to determine a social context or architectural trends particular to ethnic theaters in Nebraska.
Major Bibliographical References


**United States Department of the Interior**

**National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places**

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National Register of Historic Places, "Historic Theaters and Opera Houses of Kansas MPS." National Register # 64500911.


Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office. Site Files & Historic Resource Inventory Forms.


United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  

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**Historic Movie Theaters in Nebraska**

Name of Multiple Property Listing

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