

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
National Register of Historic Places Registration Form**

**1. Name of Property**

Historic Name: Heights Theater  
Other name/site number: NA  
Name of related multiple property listing: Historic Resources of Houston Heights

**2. Location**

Street & number: 339 W. 19th Street  
City or town: Houston      State: Texas      County: Harris  
Not for publication:       Vicinity:

**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.

I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following levels of significance:  
 national  statewide  local

Applicable National Register Criteria:     A     B     C     D

Mark Wolfe      State Historic Preservation Officer      5/31/17  
Signature of certifying official / Title      Date  
Texas Historical Commission  
State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  
  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting or other official      Date  
  
\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

**4. National Park Service Certification**

I hereby certify that the property is:  
 entered in the National Register  
 determined eligible for the National Register  
 determined not eligible for the National Register.  
 removed from the National Register  
 other, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Keeper      Date of Action

Heights Theater, Houston, Harris County, Texas

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Private
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public-Local
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public-State
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public-Federal

**Category of Property**

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	building(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	district
<input type="checkbox"/>	site
<input type="checkbox"/>	structure
<input type="checkbox"/>	object

**Number of Resources within Property**

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions:** ENTERTAINMENT AND LEISURE: Theater

**Current Functions:** ENTERTAINMENT AND LEISURE: Theater

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification:** MODERN MOVEMENT: Art Moderne

**Principal Exterior Materials:** STUCCO, METAL, GLASS, NEON

**Narrative Description** (see continuation sheets 7-6 through 7-10)

Heights Theater, Houston, Harris County, Texas

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>A</b>	Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>B</b>	Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>C</b>	Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>D</b>	Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations:**

**Areas of Significance:**

**Period of Significance:** 1935-1967

**Significant Dates:** 1935

**Significant Person** (only if criterion b is marked): NA

**Cultural Affiliation** (only if criterion d is marked): NA

**Architect/Builder:** Unknown

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (see continuation sheets 8-11 through 8-17)

**9. Major Bibliographic References**

**Bibliography** (see continuation sheet 9-18)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested. (*Approved 8-29-2016*)
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State historic preservation office (*Texas Historical Commission, Austin*)
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other -- Specify Repository:

**Historic Resources Survey Number** (if assigned): NA

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## 10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of Property:** 0.19 acres

### Coordinates

#### Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

1. Latitude: 29.481127° Longitude: -95.241035°

**Verbal Boundary Description:** The property is within Houston, Block 90, and includes the eastern 2½' portion of lot 32, the entirety of lot 33, and approximately 22½' of the western portion of lot 34.

**Boundary Justification:** The boundary includes all property historically associated with the building.

## 11. Form Prepared By

Name/title: Marcel Quimby, FAIA  
Organization: Quimby McCoy Preservation Architecture, LLP  
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Date: February 21, 2017

## Additional Documentation

**Maps** (see continuation sheets Map 19-23)  
**Additional items** (see continuation sheets Figure 24-26)  
**Photographs** (see continuation sheets Photo 27-35)

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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**Photograph Log**

Heights Theater  
Houston, Harris County, Texas  
Photographed by Marcel Quimby  
January 30, 2017 and May 5, 2017.

Photo 1: West 19th Street Streetscape, looking northwest.

Photo 2: South facade, looking northwest.

Photo 3: South Facade, looking north.

Photo 4: East Facade, looking northwest.

Photo 5: North and partial west (right side) Facades, looking southeast.

Photo 6: First floor lobby and bar (at right); opening to Mezzanine above at left, and bar at right side of photo; looking west.

Photo 7: First floor lobby and bar; bar front at center and 'broken' ceramic tile relaid in new concrete floor, looking north.

Photo 8: First floor Lobby, bar at left, stair to Mezzanine behind wall with photos; front doors at right. Looking east.

Photo 9: Detail of broken tile re-laid at First Floor Lobby.

Photo 10: First floor Listening Room, looking to stage with Mezzanine balconies at both sides, looking north.

Photo 11: Mezzanine Balcony, overlooking Listening Room and stage, with Mezzanine balconies at both sides, looking northeast.

Photo 12: Mezzanine Balcony, overlooking Listening Room with east Mezzanine balcony across the room, looking northeast.

Photo 13: Mezzanine Lobby and Bar, looking east.

Photo 14: Mezzanine Lobby, looking southeast.

Photo 15: Mezzanine Lobby, looking northwest.

Photo 16: First floor corridor and stair to Mezzanine, in back: of: the: house areas, looking west.

Photo 17: Mezzanine Green Room, looking west.

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### Description

The Heights Theater is located on the north side of West 19th Street, between Ashland and Rutland Streets in the Houston Heights neighborhood of Houston, Texas, and approximately 4 miles north-west of Houston's Central Business District. The two-story theater was constructed in 1929 and its front (south) facade reflected a Mission Revival style. In 1935, the theater was renovated with this facade changed to a Moderne facade. A fire set by arsonists in 1969 destroyed the roof, balcony and much of the interior and the building remained open to the elements until it was renovated in 1989 and a new roof installed; amazingly the building's unique Moderne front facade remained intact throughout this twenty-year period. A recent rehabilitation, completed in late 2016, has returned the building back to its original use for performing arts as music venue that features local and regional music.

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West 19th Street is in the Heights' commercial area that dates from the 1920s with a collection of small buildings with a variety of sizes, shapes and styles—and typical of historic neighborhood 'downtowns' that served not only the immediate neighborhood but a larger region. This block face on the north side of W. 19th Street is predominantly comprised of one-story buildings, several larger two-story buildings and two vacant lots. Most buildings appear to have been constructed of masonry or concrete with tall parapets—typical of early 20th Century retail buildings; some maintain their original storefronts while others have been modified—many, during the post-World War II era, and replaced with larger glass storefronts. The block face on the south side of the street has the 8-story residential Houston Heights Tower (a non-profit affordable housing complex) at the east half of the block and a collection of earlier 20th-century buildings that remain, although many of these have been altered. The Heights commercial district extends from Yale Street (one and a half blocks to the east) to N. Shepherd Drive (two and a half blocks to the west) of the Heights Theater. Several blocks contain many historic buildings, including the 300 block of West 19th Street. The buildings range in age from early twentieth century to those constructed in the 1950s and 1960s, to newer stand-alone structures. The commercial district is vibrant with restaurants, small independent retail businesses, unique resale, jewelry and design stores, shops, and culinary stores.

The theater's rectangular site abuts West 19th Street, and is 50' wide by 132' in size; it sits largely on two 25' x 132' rectangular lots that face onto West 19th Street—lots 33 and 34 in block 90, Houston, Texas. Within this block several of the buildings (including the theater) are offset approximately 2½' from the east/west property lines in the block, which sits on 2½' of the eastern portion of lot 32 to the east, the entirety of lot 33, and approximately 22½' of the western portion of lot 34. The theater is set back approximately four feet from the front property line (along with adjacent buildings on the block face) and the rear portion of the building extends 12' into the rear alley; this is the only building on this block that intrudes into the public alley.

A one-story building is adjacent to the theater to the west and the lot to the east is vacant; this lot accommodates a vehicular drive that accesses a parking lot and adjacent properties at the east end of the lot. W. 19th Street has diagonal parking on the street along this block, leaving a 12' wide sidewalk in front the building. A public alley, approximately 30' wide, is located at the rear of the lot. There are no street trees or other vegetation on the site or public right-of-way on W. 19th Street or adjacent to the building in the alley.

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## Exterior

### *General*

The Heights Theater is considered a two-part commercial block, a building type that is characterized by a horizontal division (the marquee canopy) which separates the front facade into two distinct zones. The lower zone, below the canopy, serves as the building's public entrance and adjacent lobby space while the upper zone accommodates more private spaces-the mezzanine balcony level of the theater. The building's architectural style evolved from its original Mission Revival style (1929-1935) to the Moderne style after a 1935 renovation. Originally built as a two-story building with a balcony on the second floor, a fire in 1969 destroyed the balcony and roof at the front portion of the theater and much of the building's interiors. The roof was rebuilt after the fire, and a balcony added during a rehabilitation of the building completed in 2016.

### *West. 19th Street (South) Facade*

The building's primary, two-story high south facade faces West 19th Street and is clad in stucco, painted white. This Moderne Style facade includes typical features of this style, including rounded wall and parapet forms, smooth stucco wall surfaces, round windows, and limited ornamentation. The theater is composed of two distinct massing components-the first is the 2-story front portion of the building that extends from the south (front) facade approximately 10' into the remainder of the building and second is the rectangular building mass that comprises the remainder of the building to the rear. This rear building mass extends from the back of the first massing component to the north (rear) facade. The floor plan is rectangular with the west facade adjoining an adjacent one-story building. The rear facade adjoins and faces the alley at the back of the lot and the east facade adjacent to a vacant lot. Apart from a 4' setback at the front facade, the theater occupies the entirety of its urban lot.

A horizontal marquee canopy extends across the front facade at the second-floor level and provides protection for pedestrians on the sidewalk and theater entry. This marquee canopy divides this front facade into two zones-the first floor with its flat stucco wall, entry doors and glass block windows, and the upper zone with its flat stucco wall that is divided by vertical signs and pilasters, and has a stepped parapet with rounded forms. Below the marquee canopy, the walls at the two side bays align with the plane of the upper facade.

The center bay currently has two pairs of doors leading to the main lobby; each door is 2'-6" wide, and each has a large, semi-circular window that forms a completed circle when the pair of doors is closed. The doors date from the 1989 renovation, and are thought replicate the 1935 doors. The exterior wall at the side bays aligns with the upper stucco walls (above the marquee canopy) while the center bay is recessed about 2' from this building plane. There are several glass block windows at the first floor-a large glass block window at each side bay that steps up, away from the entry doors and smaller, vertical glass block windows at the angled portions of the wall that returns to the recessed wall in the center bay; these glass block walls are 'stepped' at their base and visually relate to each other. A horizontal glass block window is above the entry doors; this window is only two glass blocks high.

Above the marquee canopy, two vertical metal signs with neon lighting (in chevron patterns) separate the side bays from the wide center bay; these signs extend above the parapet and return to the roof several feet in a semi-round form, forming a stucco 'side' to the lower side bays. A third vertical element, clad in stucco, has the same form as the vertical metal signs and extends above the parapet. These vertical signs separate this facade plane into three bays, with the outside bays lower than the center bay, giving the facade a 'stepped' appearance. The marquee canopy is suspended from the building facade by five metal tie rod assemblies that are anchored into the front facade, and by five small (4" square) metal columns at the outside edge of the canopy. The marquee canopy is metal, with a simple, approx. 8" high, fascia on three sides. The marquee canopy dates from 1929 but was modified in 1935. The tie rods date from 1929, while the columns are thought to date from 1989 as they are not shown in Robert Morris' 1984 drawings that were used for the 1989 renovation; these columns are painted gray.

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The rectangular marquee canopy vertical sign includes two rows for information to announce the current show or activity at the theater, and is framed by a perimeter metal band that steps up near the center of the marquee. Like the marquee canopy, this appears to date from 1929, and was modified in 1935 to its current appearance. The canopy fascia and surround around the marquee are currently orange in color. The vertical, large projecting sign is metal, painted maroon with neon lighting in the 'HEIGHTS' letters and sign surround. This sign has a Deco appearance and dates from 1935. The three horizontal metal supports are not as long as those shown in the c.1935 (pre-renovation) historic photograph but are in the same location as that projecting sign and are thought to date from 1929, although modified in length.

Other elements at this facade include four windows at the second floor: one round (porthole) window at each of the side bays, and two semi-circular windows on each side of the center stucco pilaster; these windows date from the 1989 renovation.

This facade is clad with a smooth stucco finish, which extends across the entire wall plane above the metal canopy and below the metal canopy. The upper wall plane and its stucco finish (above the marquee canopy) date from 1929 and were modified in 1935.

*Side (East) Facade*

This facade is open to a vacant lot, and the building's original (1929) structural concrete frame with clay tile infill remains intact. This exterior wall has been stuccoed and remains largely intact and painted white. The metal fascia, gutters and downspouts at the roofline are visible, and are also painted white.

*Rear (North) Facade*

The building's structural concrete frame with clay tile infill remains intact at this facade; these materials remain unpainted and reflect their original gray color. The white end gable (metal panels) and gutters of the 1989 metal roof structure remain intact. There are two pairs of exterior doors at this facade, located near each end of the facade. These openings are original (c. 1929) and still serve as exits from the theater. The flush metal doors date from 1989 and are painted. There are a few areas of this facade with graffiti that has been over painted with white paint. The building's electrical service enters the building below the roofline, and electrical conduit leads to the large electrical panel in the center of this facade.

*Side (West) Facade*

Due to the adjacent one-story building with its tall parapet at W. 19th Street to the west of the theater, the west facade is not visible from the public right-of-way. However, the northern portion of this facade is visible from the alley; this facade's concrete frame, clay tile infill, metal fascia, and gutter are painted white. An existing roof mounted mechanical unit is partially visible from the alley.

*Roof*

The building's roof structure dates to 1989 and is a steel frame low-pitch gable roof with standing seam metal roofing. The front gable is not visible from the front facade and can only be seen from the alley. Four mechanical units are located on top of the roof; these are not visible above the W. 19th Street facade but can be partially seen from the adjacent vacant lot and alley. Gutters at the north, east, and west facades drain the roof to downspouts.

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## Interior

The interior of the building consists of several distinct spaces-the lobby, the kitchen and restrooms in the center of the building which separate the lobby from the venue space-the large "listening room" (auditorium) in the center of the building and the back-of-the-house areas at the rear of the building. As the historic interior walls and the original second floor structure, the theater balcony and roof had been destroyed in the 1969 fire, the interior walls, the mezzanine level and most of the finishes in the recent rehabilitation are new. This rehabilitation has provided accessibility for those with disabilities to the listening room and support spaces.

### *The Lobby, Bar and Kitchen, Restrooms and Vestibules to the Listening Room*

The one-story lobby space occupies the full width of the building adjacent to West 19th Street; a curved bar is located at the north wall. The lobby is an open space; an area of structural framing directly over the entrance doors is open to the mezzanine lobby above. An open stairwell adjacent to the east wall provides public access to this mezzanine level. The south wall of the lobby features the entrance doors and glass block windows previously described.

This center bay of the Lobby was originally an outdoor, sloped entry to the 1929 theater's recessed entrance and was enclosed in 1935, leaving the floor sloping up immediately in front of the entry doors. The flooring in this exterior entry area was 'broken' red and brown ceramic tile flooring. While this ceramic tile flooring is unique and its preservation was desired in the recent rehabilitation project, this sloping floor at the front entry doors did not allow an accessible entry into the building from West 19th Street.<sup>1</sup> The Owner and Architect worked with Texas Historical Commission and the National Park Service to explore alternatives to this issue, resulting in the historic ceramic tile flooring being removed (in pieces) and re-laid in a new, level concrete slab that was at the same elevation as the public sidewalk. This original ceramic tile now extends from the entry doors to the rounded bar, in its original, although lower, floor location. The adjacent floor areas of the lobby are sealed concrete.

The north wall of the bar contains an inset space for shelves and a countertop. The curved bar top is supported by curved sheetrock walls, and a dropped sheetrock ceiling extends throughout the bar space, following the curve of the bar top. The bar, the kitchen and adjacent restrooms create demising spaces between the 'listening room' (auditorium). The men's and women's restrooms are located to each side of the kitchen and accessed from the vestibules that leads to the listening room. These two side vestibules flanking the bar and restrooms lead to the listening room; these spaces provide acoustic separation between the lobby and the listening room.

Newly constructed interior drywall partitions and ceiling are painted white. Some areas of the interior face of the exterior walls have been painted while others remain as exposed structure, clay tile and limited areas of the historic plaster finish that survived the 1969 fire.

### *The "Listening Room" (auditorium)*

The listening room is a large, two-story space; the floor is level with simulated wood flooring material over the concrete floor. The south wall of the listening room is the rear wall of the kitchen, and is painted drywall. Two private seating areas and an open control booth are located next to the south wall. The interior east and west walls are painted, with areas of clay tile block construction visible beneath. These upper portions of these walls at the balcony are unpainted exposed clay tile block within the concrete frame. The north wall of the listening room dates from the original 1929 construction and is the only original interior wall to remain after the 1969 fire. The wall is

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<sup>1</sup> As the Owner does not own the adjacent vacant lot (parking lot) to the east of the theater building, the City of Houston would not allow an accessible entry with ramp or other code-required exits to exit to this adjacent vacant lot. As the theater building front facade at West 19th Street is close to the property line, it was not possible to locate a ramp to serve the raised floor level at the Lobby.

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painted clay tile block, and extends to the underside of the roof. A movable low stage and stage curtain have been installed adjacent to this wall. Door openings in this wall (at both sides of the stage) provide access to the 'back of the house' spaces. The ceiling of the listening room consists of 2x4 lay-in ceiling tiles in a metal grid, painted black. Stage lights, sound equipment, and projection equipment are suspended from metal frames supported by the roof structure.

*Mezzanine Spaces*

The mezzanine is accessed by the lobby stairwell which leads to the mezzanine lobby bar. A bar like that on the first floor is located at the north wall; the mezzanine lobby bar front is like the first-floor bar in design, and has a similar curved design finished out in drywall. The east and west walls of the mezzanine lobby are painted clay tile block and structure. The south wall is left as unfinished clay block. The flooring of the lobby bar is carpet tiles and the ceiling is painted sheetrock. The opening in the balcony to the Lobby below creates a visual connection to the first floor, with a metal railing with horizontal cables surround the opening. The round windows of the front facade of the building create a prominent and character defining features of this interior space, flooding the room with light.

Within the listening room, the U-shaped steel balcony structure is supported by round steel columns, creating seating areas at the sides and rear that overlook the listening room. A metal railing with horizontal cables extends the entire perimeter of the balcony. The east and west sides of the balcony accommodate 2 rows of seating, with repurposed wood and metal bench-style theater seating, and new high-backed chairs. The sides of the balcony angle slightly inward toward the stage at the north. The south side of the balcony is two aisles deep and contains the same seating. The floor of the balcony is covered with carpet.

*Back-of-the-House Spaces*

The north end of the building is a two-story "back of the house" space that include a two green rooms and restrooms for the performers at each floor. The first floor also includes a multi-purpose room while the mezzanine level includes mechanical and storage spaces. A corridor adjacent to the listening room at both levels serves these spaces, and provides acoustic privacy from the listening room and access to it. The interior walls are painted sheetrock, and the interior face of the exterior walls are typically exposed gray block walls; the floor is carpeted and the ceiling is lay-in ceiling in a metal grid.

**Integrity**

The historic Heights Theater has retained a high degree of its integrity from its 1935 Moderne appearance. The building remains in its original location, in the same urban setting within the Heights' commercial district, and is surrounded by many of the same buildings as when it was built. The feeling of the property has not changed. The building's exterior remains nearly intact with its materials and design features largely unaltered, with the its stucco walls, canopy marquee, projecting sign, stepped parapet with rounded round forms and vertical metal signs with neon remain intact. The original exterior doors are thought to be replicas of the original doors that were destroyed in the 1969 fire. The building has also retained its original association, as the function of the building is again a performance venue.

In summary, the Houston Heights Theater retains all seven aspects of its original integrity: setting, location, association, design, workmanship, materials and feeling.

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### Statement of Significance

The Heights Theater has been a prominent presence in the Houston Heights commercial district since it opened in 1929, serving the community for almost 90 years as a movie theater, art gallery, and as now as a music venue. The theaters' use has changed with the times from its' beginning as a movie theater that served the neighborhood with family films in the 1930s-1950s, introduced more controversial adult films in the 1960s. Following a 1969 fire, the building served non-theatrical functions, although the owner occasionally used the roofless portion of the building as an "outdoor" music venue in the 1980s. The building hosted an art gallery in the 1990s and early 2000s. With its recent rehabilitation, the Heights Theater is now used as a music venue. The Height's almost 90-year history mirrors that of the Houston Heights (and other areas of inner city neighborhoods across the country) with its evolution from providing entertainment for the neighborhood families in its early years, to adapting to the changes in inner-city neighborhoods in the 1960s with more *Avant Garde* movies, to its use as an art gallery as the surrounding neighborhood in the 1980s and 1990s became recognized as a historic and arts-oriented neighborhood.

With its Moderne facade that towers over the adjacent one- and two-story commercial buildings, it is one of the more prominent buildings in the Heights commercial district. It stands as a typical example of an early twentieth century neighborhood theater that provided entertainment and recreation opportunities for the surrounding neighborhoods and played an active role in communities across the country. The Heights Theater is nominated to the National Register under Criterion A at the local level in the area of Entertainment/Recreation, and Criterion C in the area of Architecture, both at the local level of significance. Its period of significance is 1935-1967, reflecting the date of its current Moderne appearance, and extends through the current 50-year point.

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### Houston Heights

Houston Heights, commonly referred to as "The Heights," was developed as a 1,750-acre suburban town northwest of the City of Houston by Omaha and South Texas Land Company in the early 1890s; it was a separate municipality from 1896-1918, when it was annexed by the City of Houston. The largely residential suburb centered around Heights Blvd, a north-south boulevard with a wide landscaped median flanked by many of the neighborhood's oldest and largest residences. Homes in the Heights largely date from 1893 until post World War II and include a wide variety of sizes and styles. The residential streets typically parallel Heights Blvd while West 19th Street and West 20th Streets were developed by the developers as commercial, and are orientated east-west; these streets continue to serve the neighborhood today with restaurants, antique and furniture shops, jewelry and other specialty retail stores.

The earliest Sanborn map of Houston Heights in 1889 shows the West 19th Avenue (now Street) block with few structures-an artesian well with 100' tower (located at the subject site), a small beer hall, Houston Heights Hotel and a 'Summer Theater' with a stage and lights-which is assumed to have been an outdoor theater (refer to Figure 2). This small commercial district soon filled in with other small commercial buildings and the well and water tower were soon moved. By the time the Heights was annexed by Houston in 1918, the 300 blocks of West 19<sup>th</sup> and West 20<sup>th</sup> streets had become a cohesive commercial district, serving the growing Heights neighborhood and nearby areas of Houston. The street railway on nearby Nicholson Street provided easy access for customers; with later popularity of the automobile, head-in parking was provided in front of the businesses. In the 1930s and 1940s blocks to the east and west changed from residential to commercial use and houses were replaced with masonry commercial buildings. In the 1960s and 1970s suburban retails centers-with larger stores- provided competition but the Heights commercial area continued to feature local and specialty retail businesses, and successfully weathered the down times; committed local businesses and individuals (like The Kopriva's) contributed greatly to the districts revitalizations in the later decades of the twentieth century. In addition to the retail businesses, medical facilities have been in this area since 1899 when the Houston Heights Hospital and Texas Christian Hospital opened.

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Although these medical facilities no longer exist, St. Joseph Hospital remains on Ashland Ave and is supported by nearby medical clinics and offices.

Currently the Heights neighborhood extends beyond the originally platted area and includes over 8,000 structures—mostly historic residences, government buildings including some that pre-date the areas' annexation by the City of Houston (schools, a 1914 brick fire station), both historic and newer commercial development and newer infill development. The Heights commercial remains as a popular, neighborhood shopping district with unique, locally owned stores and restaurants that have a strong association with the Heights area as well as draws from a larger area of Houston for specialty shopping.

Following a historic survey of the Houston Heights neighborhood in late 1978, the Heights was designated as a Multiple Resources Area (MRA) by the National Park Service in 1983. Between 1983 and 2004, 121 National Register nominations were approved under this multiple property form, including those for 109 houses.

While the Heights is considered a historic neighborhood in Houston, the City of Houston has created three separate historic districts: Houston Heights East, Houston Heights West and Houston Heights South districts. The Heights theater is not included in any of these three local historic districts. However, the Heights Theater became a City of Houston Protected Landmark (PLM) in 2015.

### **Original Heights Theater, 1922-1929**

The original Heights Theater was located at the corner of Ashland and West 19th Street, in a small retail space in the Simon Lewis Building in 1922; furniture and equipment consisted of 350 folding chairs, a screen and projector. The theater operated in this space until 1929 when it moved to its new building. The Simon Lewis building would later house a drug store and other uses; this building remains in place and now accommodates the Carter and Cooley Deli.<sup>2,3</sup>

### **History of the Heights Theater**

#### *Heights Theater, 1929-1935*

Construction began on the current Heights Theater in 1928, and opened May 14, 1929. Owned by Charles Wygant, he leased the theater to his son Robert Wygant who would operate it for 22 years. The rectangular (50' x 132') building' structure was concrete frame with columns and horizontal concrete beams at the second-floor level and roof. These structural elements are flush with the plane of the exterior wall, and protrude into the building interior and were originally clad with stucco. The infill walls are red clay tile, with gray clay tile used at the rear facade. While the theater was presumably built for 'talking pictures,' the proscenium and rear bay indicate the building would also accommodate limited back-of-the-house spaces for live acts—which could have been for professional or local use.

The 2-story building was Mission Revival style with a stucco facade, ornate, curved 'mission' style parapet, marquee canopy suspended from the building facade, with vertical canopy sign, a large projecting HEIGHTS sign, and a pent roof that extended over a pair of windows at each side bay; these pent roofs were multi-colored roofing tiles. The center bay had five fenestrations—a window opening with fixed wood shutters in the center of the bay, flanked on each side by a tall arched opening that was filled, two smaller, rectangular openings at the side of the center bay, with fixed wood shutters and two large circular vents (with trim surround) near the roofline.

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<sup>2</sup> Welling, David. *Cinema Houston: From Nickelodeon to Megaplex*. University of Texas Press, Austin. c. 2007; pg. 93.

<sup>3</sup> City of Houston, *Heights Theater Protected Landmark Designation Report*, 2015.

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The auditorium was located at the rear (north end) of the building with a balcony that was approximately one-third the size of the auditorium below, located at the front (south end). This recessed entry sloped up from the sidewalk to the slightly raised elevation at the theater lobby; this sloped entry flooring was 'broken' red ceramic tile flooring. The theater's seating capacity was 750, including the first fifteen to eighteen rows of wooden seats that were designed specifically for children.<sup>4</sup> The interior has been described as having red curtains at the stage and wood seats with green and ruby leather'.<sup>5</sup> Only one interior photograph remains from this period and shows a proscenium at the front with curtains, exposed structural columns and horizontal concrete perimeter beams at the exterior walls and wood chairs (Refer to Figure 6). The auditorium sloped down to the stage, and had a wide center aisle. The interior wall finishes appear to be stucco with faux windows inset into the upper portion of the walls. The ceiling appears to have been flat with rounded (or angled) stucco cove at the wall to ceiling transition. Although the theater was designed primarily for movies, it also had a small stage that was one bay deep; a proscenium with curtains was provided (see Figure 6). This allowed staff or guests to speak or introduce movies, and accommodate performances by local organizations or the occasional traveling performances. This reflected the last era of live performances at local theaters; by 1935 neighborhood theaters would be designed only for film and without stages for live performances.

The first movie shown was "Silent Pass," a Zane Grey silent western, and like movie theaters across the county, western would dominate the industry for the next decade. The ticket price was twenty cents for adults. The theater served as a neighborhood theater, showing family movies-westerns and second run movies-which ran for a two-day stretch. Records reflect that the owners promoted the theatre's attractions with related themes. The Houston Protected Landmark Designation Report notes that a 'bullet ridden car might be parked in front of the theater for a gangster movie, while a caged animal would be on display for a Tarzan flick.' As was common for neighborhood theaters, film stars would participate in appearances in conjunction with the showing of their films-including Gene Autry who made such appearances at the Heights Theater.

*Heights Theater-1935-1957*

In 1935, the Wygant family upgraded the theater, presumably to modernize its appearance and increase the seating capacity to 900. The front facade, facing W. 19th Street, was changed to reflect the *au courant* Moderne style. The large recessed, exterior entry space was enclosed and served as an interior lobby; the free-standing ticket booth located in this exterior entry area was removed. It is thought the auditorium remained largely intact in this renovation with the stucco surface at the exterior walls remained although paint colors and decorative elements would have been changed. The balcony remained intact and was possibly enlarged. Air conditioning was added at this time-which was becoming common in local theaters. Unfortunately, no photographs are available of its exterior or interior appearance after the 1935 renovation.

Small retail spaces were located at each side of this recessed exterior entry and were leased to small retail stores; the western tenant, Ebert Armstead Heights Confectionary, sold candies and ice cream to theater patrons.<sup>6</sup> Local Heights residents have noted that there was a window in the wall between the confectioner's shop and the theater lobby where theater patrons could purchase candies from the theater lobby during their visits to the theater.

Robert Wygant died in 1951 and his son Richard took over the theater. However, due to the increased competition from television and larger suburban theaters, neighborhood theaters found their audiences shrinking. Like many other older, neighborhood theaters, the Heights was closed by Richard Wygant in January 1957.

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<sup>4</sup> Heights Theater, City of Houston Protected Landmark Designation Report, May 14, 2015; page 2.

<sup>5</sup> Welling, David. Cinema Houston: From Nickelodeon to Megaplex. University of Texas Press, Austin. c. 2007; pg. 94.

<sup>6</sup> Heights Theater, page 2.

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*Heights Theater-1957-1988*

The Houston Chronicle reported on April 9, 1958 that Charles Wygant had sold the theater to John W. Scott and W. E. Coats, Jr., who stated that the theater would emphasize good family entertainment. This article indicated the new owners were renovating and remodeling the building.<sup>7</sup> The theater re-opened in April 1959, showing *April Love*. Shortly after its re-opening, the owners decided that instead of one full-time and a part-time projectionist during the second shift, Scott would run the projector during this second shift. He asked the union for permission to operate this second shift-which the union declined. Scott then fired both projectionists which raised the ire of the local unions and the theater was picketed. In October 1959, the Heights Theater and the Don Gordon Theater, another non-union movie theater, were vandalized when someone deposited foul-smelling chemicals in the auditoriums and later the ticket booths and the theaters were closed and had to be cleaned.

Scott and Coats eventually ceased operation of the theater and leased it out to other groups, who by 1969 were booking R- and X-rated films, stirring controversy in conservative Houston. When the theater screened the notorious 1967 Swedish film "I Am Curious (Yellow)" in May 1969, members of the Shady Oaks Full Gospel Church claimed the movie was obscene and picketed in front of the building. The following day, the Ku Klux Klan handed out leaflets protesting the film, and a stink bomb was set off in the theater. The situation escalated, with a bomb scare on May 27, followed by the return of picketers. In the early morning of June 6, an arsonist broke into the theater and set fire to the building with a liquid accelerant, severely damaging the roof, interior walls, and finishes.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately, the exterior walls and the West 19th Street (front) facade with its iconic Moderne features were not damaged (Figures 7 and 8). Although the roof was missing over much of the auditorium, the front areas of the building were repaired, and Scott used this part of the building for a machine shop; the Auditorium space remained without a roof and open to the elements.

In 1981, Jim Holland Jr. purchased the theater with plans to restore it and add a screening room at the second floor, and a roof garden and patio at the third (roof) level. The Houston Protected Landmark Designation Report notes the cost for this was \$500,000. In 1984 Holland hired Robert Morris, Architect, to develop plans for the rehabilitation of the building including retaining the historic ceramic tile flooring at the entry and non-historic spaces that faced West 19th Street, new retail spaces to accommodate a delicatessen and dining room facing West 19th Street, new bathrooms, a circular stair that led to a new second floor at the front of the building, with a private lounge, offices and private balcony that overlooked the Auditorium. From the second floor, the circular staircase extended to the roof where a roof garden would be located above the partial second floor. A new screen and stage area at the front of the auditorium was planned. This plan also provided a new, stepped roof over the auditorium, with a new metal stud exterior wall, faced with stucco that extended from the top of the existing perimeter concrete beam to the underside of this new roof. The plans also noted the exterior walls at the site bays of the first floor would be new concrete block walls with new glass block in a 'stepped pattern', new entry doors at the center bays and new glazing at the second-floor windows. These renovation plans were issued for a building permit in 1984. These proposed plans to enclose and rehabilitate the theater building were not realized. Holland did utilize the theater open (and outdoor) space for occasional outdoor music venues in the mid-1980s. By the late 1980s, he was interested in selling the theater.

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<sup>7</sup> Old Heights Theater to Be Reopened Soon, Houston Chronicle, April 9, 1958

<sup>8</sup> Theater Fire is Blamed on Arsonists, Houston Chronicle, June 17, 1969.

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*Heights Theater, 1988-2015*

In 1988, Heights residents Gus and Sharon Kopriva, purchased the theater with plans to re-open it as an art gallery and performance space. The new owners utilized some of the design features that Robert Morris had proposed in his 1984 drawings, and new drawings dated August 1988 were developed and submitted to the City of Houston for a building permit; these drawings did not include the name of an architect or designer. While these 1988 drawings and the subsequent work included some work that was per Robert Morris's design-new pairs of entry doors with glass block surround, curved exterior wall that transitioned from the side bays to the center bay, new round (porthole) and semi-circular windows, repair of the exterior marquee canopy and vertical signs with neon lights and large HEIGHTS sign at the front facade, repair of the exterior stucco finish-other items included in Morris' 1984 drawings were not built including the new first floor retail spaces, new bathrooms, second floor, circular stair that led to second floor and its' private lounge and private balcony that overlooked the Auditorium, third floor Projector Room, exterior metal stairs from second floor and roof deck.

Other changes that occurred in 1988 included a new steel roof structure with low pitched gable roof, providing the building with a roof for the first time in twenty years, and the construction of a wood framed second floor structure in the north bay, behind the stage; this additional second floor space was used for storage. Jay Dougherty served as contractor for this restoration that was completed in late 1989 (Figure 9).

The Heights Theater re-opened November 1989 with a live theatrical performance; the theater was soon used by local theater groups, fashion shows, photography exhibits, lectures and events for the ACLU and in 1990, they hosted the annual meeting of the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance. In 1993, the Kopriva's., Robert Morris and Jay Dougherty received a Good Brick award from the Preservation Alliance for the theater's preservation. The Kopriva's utilized the building for a variety of uses-an antique center, event space and art gallery but prior to its purchase by the current owner the building had been vacant for several years.

*Heights Theater, 2015-2017*

In 2015, Height Theater, LLC, purchased the Height Theater from the Kopriva's, and began a rehabilitation that returned the building to its original use for the performing arts-after being vacant or utilized for other uses for the last 47 years. DSGN Associates, a Dallas architectural firm, was the architect.

The Heights Theater reopened in December 2016 as a local and regional music venue, and has applied for Federal and State Investment Tax Credits (ITCs); the Part 1 and Part 2 applications for this work have been approved by THC and the National Park Service. The theater has been well-received in Houston as a venue for local and Texas artists, receiving accolades for its rehabilitation. Since opening in December 2016, the theater has hosted include Robert Earl Keen, James McMurty, Del Castillo, Lee Ann Womack, Rickie Lee Jones and Los Lobos.

**Neighborhood Theaters in Houston**

Although Houston's grand theaters of the 1910s and 1920s accommodated primarily live Vaudeville shows, they were also showing 'moving pictures' by the mid-1920s-which became the dominant entertainment venue in the early 1930s due to the depression and the lower cost of showing movies. Houston's first neighborhood theater built expressly for movies was the Delman in 1935.<sup>9</sup> Later that year the North Main Theater opened as Houston's first new suburban movie theater.<sup>10</sup> *Cinema Houston* documents the many new Suburban theaters that opened in the 1930s-the Uptown (1935), University, Park, Eastwood Playhouse and Westheimer (1936), Joy, Pasadena (1937);

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<sup>9</sup> Houston Chronicle Rotogravure magazine, November 11, 1956, pg. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Houston Chronicle Rotogravure magazine, November 11, 1956, pg. 11.

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Union (1938), State (which competed with the Heights), Navaway, River Oaks (1939), Queen, Lyons (1940) and the Sunset (1941). Many of these were locally owned (independent theaters) while others were owned by the larger regional theater companies such as Interstate Theaters. Each of these new theaters garnered publicity in the local press. However, as the Heights Theater was a local, neighborhood theater and drew from the Heights and surrounding areas, its transformation in style and increased size in 1935 did not note city-wide publicity.

During World War II, the options for entertainment were limited and the neighborhood theaters remained popular, with several new theaters opening until the late 1940s. By the end of 1945 the number of movie theaters in the county had risen to 19,096, an increase of 1,116 from the previous year.<sup>11</sup> With the end of WWII, theater attendance increased, but this was short-lived due to the rise of the suburban and automobile culture; this was evidenced by families moving to the suburbs, their acquisition of televisions, improvement of television programming and by the 1950s, drive-in theaters allowed families with children to see movies in a new, informal setting-their car. At the same time, new and larger suburban theaters were being constructed which provided patrons with a grander experience than the neighborhood theaters offered.

Along with other neighborhood theaters in Houston, attendance at the Heights's declined and it closed its run as a neighborhood theater in 1957-after almost 30 years in operation.

### **Modern Movement, Moderne Architectural Style**

The Heights Theater was renovated in 1935 in the Moderne architectural style. This new style, also referred to as Art Moderne or Streamline Moderne, evolved in the early 1930s as both a reaction to the applied decoration of Art Deco and a reflection of austere economic times of the Great Depression. Industrial designers had embraced the new concept of 'streamlining'-the removal of applied ornamentation in Art Deco objects and buildings-and relying on the objects' (or buildings') form and lines to express its function and design. This concept coupled with Europe and America's fascination with aerodynamics of motion as seen in trains, ocean liners and cars was transferred to art works, everyday objects such as clocks, radios, furniture and other items, and to commercial buildings by the early 1930s.

Interestingly, the Moderne style was the first to incorporate electric neon light into architectural structures-and theaters and retail stores embraced this concept. Typical Moderne features include the simple curves that replaced sharp angles, smooth wall surfaces, flat roofs, horizontal lines, rounded corners, round windows, replacement of 'heavy' woods and stone with materials that were lighter, new ways of construction and materials such as exposed concrete, glass block, stainless steel and aluminum and limited ornamentation. Moderne was commonly used on small and medium sized commercial buildings, gas stations, and residential (both single and multi-family)-such as Miami Beach houses and hotels-and theaters. The Heights was not the only theater in Houston to utilize this modern style; other Moderne buildings in the Houston area during the 1930s included the Capitan theater in Pasadena, Granada Theatre, Brochsteins manufacturing plant, Carnation Company, and Albritten Eats in Houston.

Due to the Heights' existing building form and shape, vertical 'streamline' elements were used in lieu of horizontal elements-two vertical metal signs with neon lighting (in chevron patterns) separate the side bays from the wide center bay and a third vertical element, clad in stucco, has the same form as the vertical signs. These three elements extend above the parapet and return to the roof several feet in a semi-round form, forming a stucco 'side' to these signs-and emphasizing the verticality of this facade.

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<sup>11</sup> Valentine, Maggie. *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theater*. Yale University Press; New Haven, 1994. p 195.

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**Summary of Significance**

Houston's Heights Theater is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A, Entertainment and Recreation, at the local level of Significance as an example of a historic neighborhood theatre that has provided entertainment and recreation opportunities for its surrounding neighborhood for almost 90 years. It is one of a very few of Houston's historic theaters that continue to be open to the public for its' original use as a local entertainment venue.

It is also significant under Criterion C, in the area of Architecture, at the local level of significance as an excellent example of a Moderne building in Houston, Texas. The period of significance is 1935-1967, reflecting the date of its transformation to its Moderne appearance to fifty years ago. With its Moderne facade that towers over the adjacent one and two-story commercial buildings, it is the most iconic building in the Heights commercial district, and one of the most iconic in Houston.

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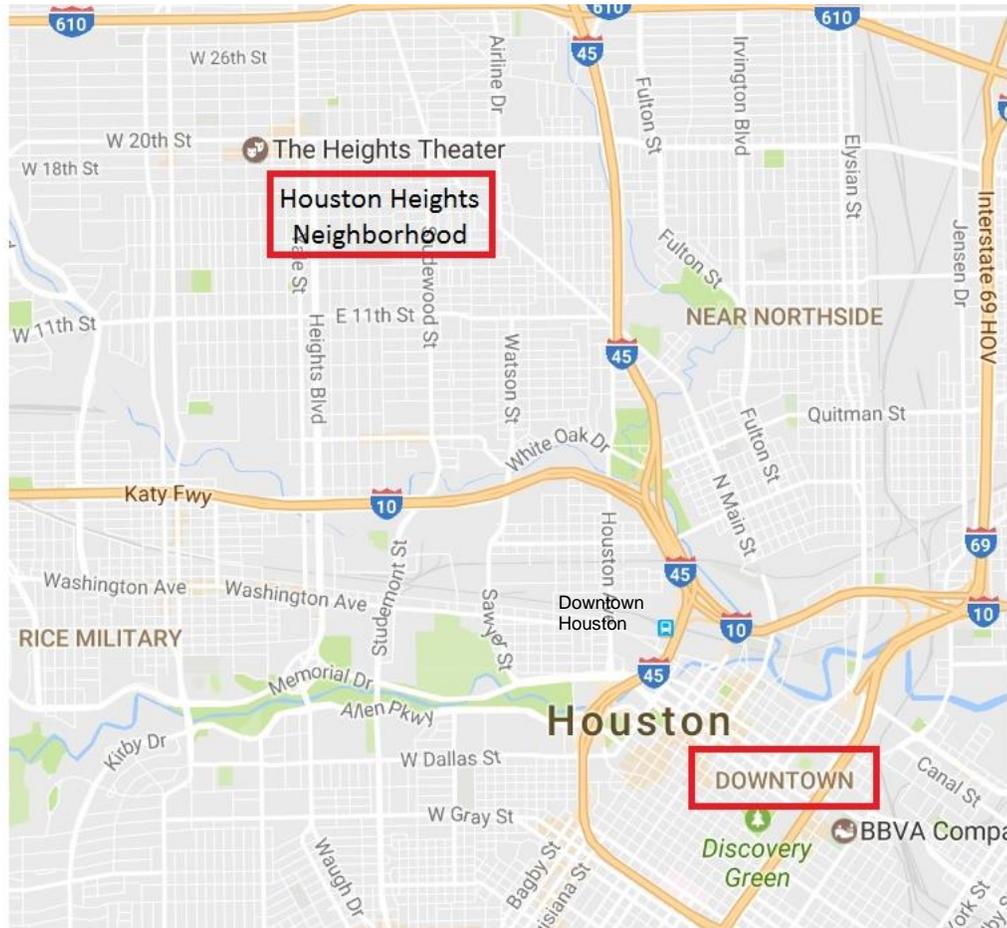
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**Maps**

Map 1: Harris County, Texas

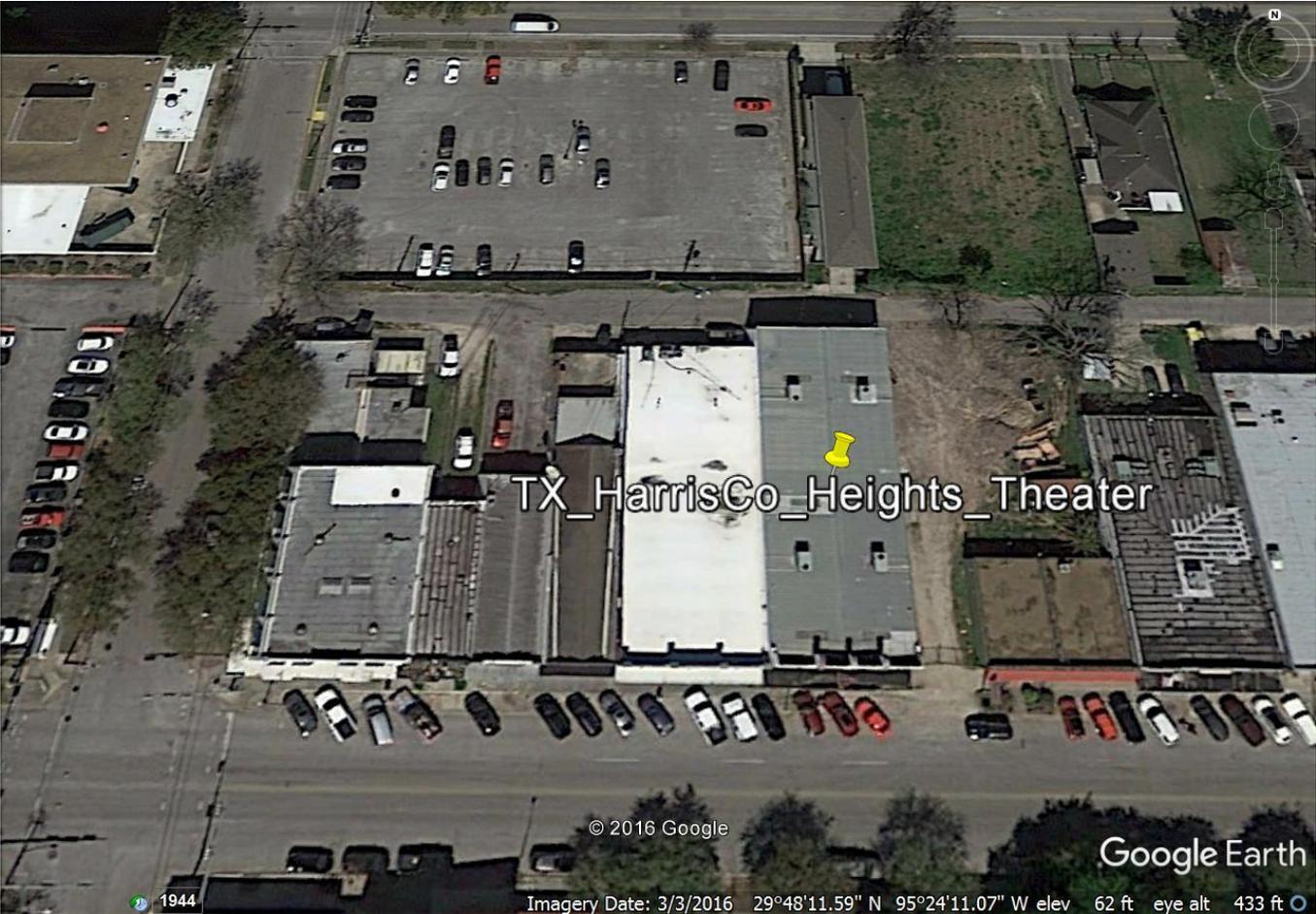


Map 2: Google Map, Location of Heights Theater, Houston Heights neighborhood, and downtown Houston.



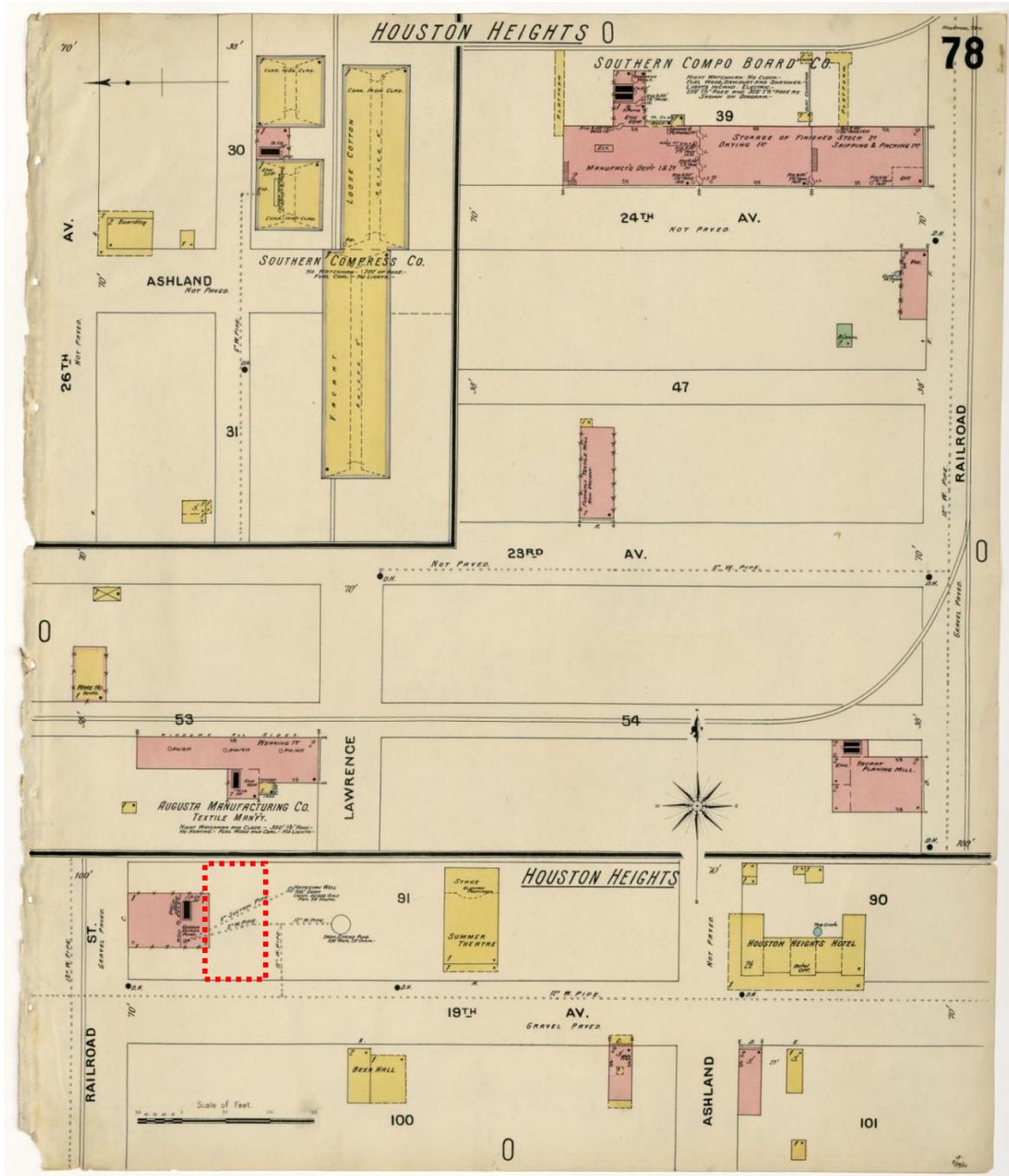
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Map 3: Google Earth Map, accessed March 7, 2017



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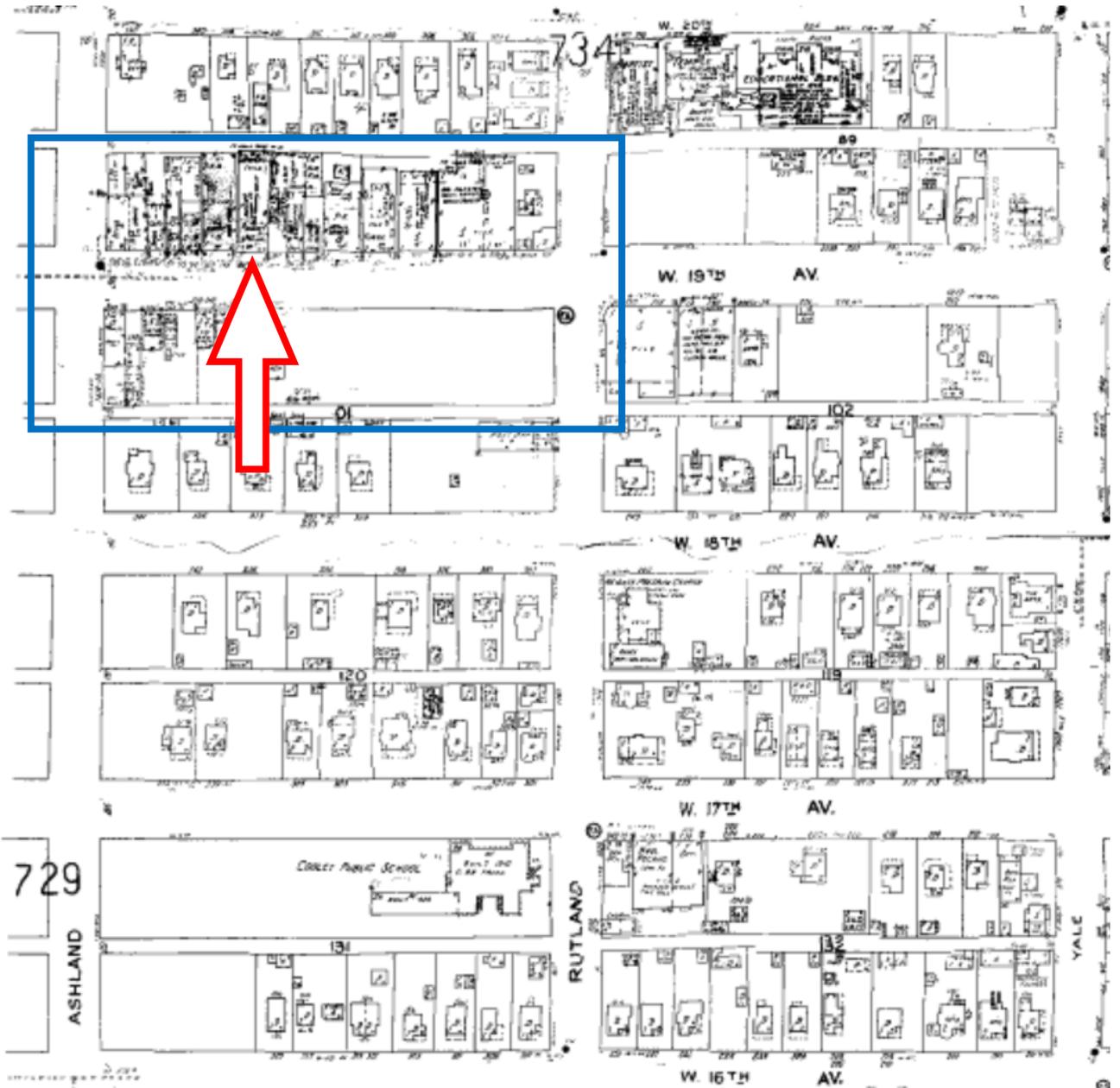
Map 4: 1899 Sanborn map, page 78—showing the future site of the Heights Theatre outlined in red, dashed rectangle. The western end of the block, including the future site of the theatre had an artesian well and 100' tower on it at that time. Please note that an outdoor 'summer theater' was located to the east of the future Heights Theater site, and a beer hall was located across the street.



Original located at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin

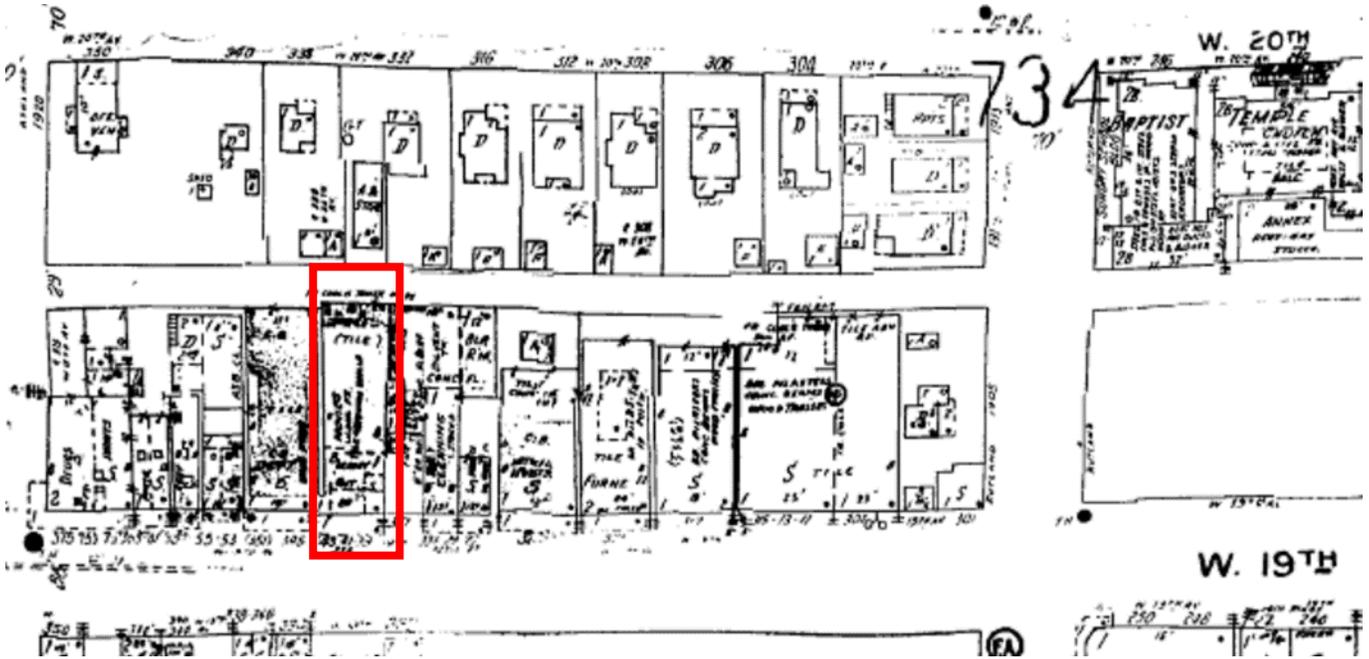
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Map 5: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map Company, Houston, Texas, Volume 7, 1924 + 1951, Vol. 7, pg. 730.  
The Heights Commercial district is outlined in blue and Heights Theater is identified by a red arrow. West 19th Street is the commercial district that services the Heights residential neighborhood extending to the southeast, south, southwest and north.



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Map 6: (Detailed view) Sanborn Fire Insurance Map Company, Houston, Texas, Volume 7, 1924 + 1951, Vol.7, pg. 730, with the Heights Theater's location identified by a red rectangle. The Theater's use is noted as 'Movies' and this map reflects its 1951 floor plan with enclosed lobby and adjacent retail spaces, second floor balcony at the front third of the building and the theater space at the rear. Note the rear portion of the building extends beyond the property line and into the Alley by several feet.



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**Figures**

Figure 1: Heights Theater, 1935. This photo shows the theater's original Mission-style facade before it was modified to its present Moderne-style later in 1935. *Courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.*



Figure 2: Heights Theater, interior c. 1929-1935. This photo shows the theater's interior prior to its modification in 1935, and is only photograph of theater interior located. *Courtesy of Edwin Cabaniss.*



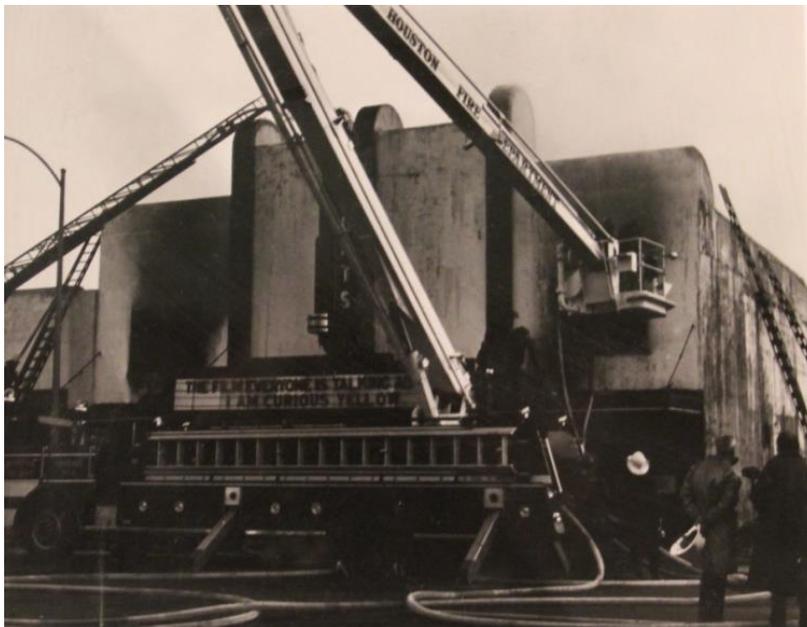
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Figure 3: Photograph showing Heights Theater on fire, June 6, 1969. There is no known image in existence of the theater between 1935 and this time. *Courtesy of the Houston Post.*



Figure 4: Photograph showing Heights Theater immediately after June 6, 1969 fire. Front facade, exterior walls, marquee canopy and projecting sign remain intact. *Courtesy of Edwin Cabaniss.*



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Figure 5: Photograph of *The Leader* newspaper showing Heights Theater on March 10, 1988. Feature article on Gus and Sharon Kopriva's plans to renovate and re-open the Heights Theater as an art gallery and performance space. The round and semi-circular windows in the front façade designed by Robert Morris (1984) had been accomplished by this time. *Courtesy of Edwin Cabaniss.*



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**Photographs**

Photo 1: West 19th Street Streetscape, looking northwest, May 5, 2017



Photo 2: South facade, looking northwest, May 5, 2017



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Photo 3: South Facade, looking north, May 5, 2017



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Photo 4: East Facade, looking northwest, May 5, 2017



Photo 5: North and partial west (right side) Facades, looking southeast, May 5, 2017



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Photo 6: First floor lobby and bar (at right); opening to Mezzanine above at left, and bar at right side of photo; looking west. January 30, 2017



Photo 7: First floor lobby and bar; bar front at center and 'broken' ceramic tile re-laid in new concrete floor, looking north. January 30, 2017



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Photo 8: First floor Lobby, bar at left, stair to Mezzanine behind wall with photos; front doors at right. Looking east. January 30, 2017



Photo 9: Detail of broken tile re-laid at First Floor Lobby, January 30, 2017



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Photo 10: First floor Listening Room, looking to stage with Mezzanine balconies at both sides, looking north. January 30, 2017

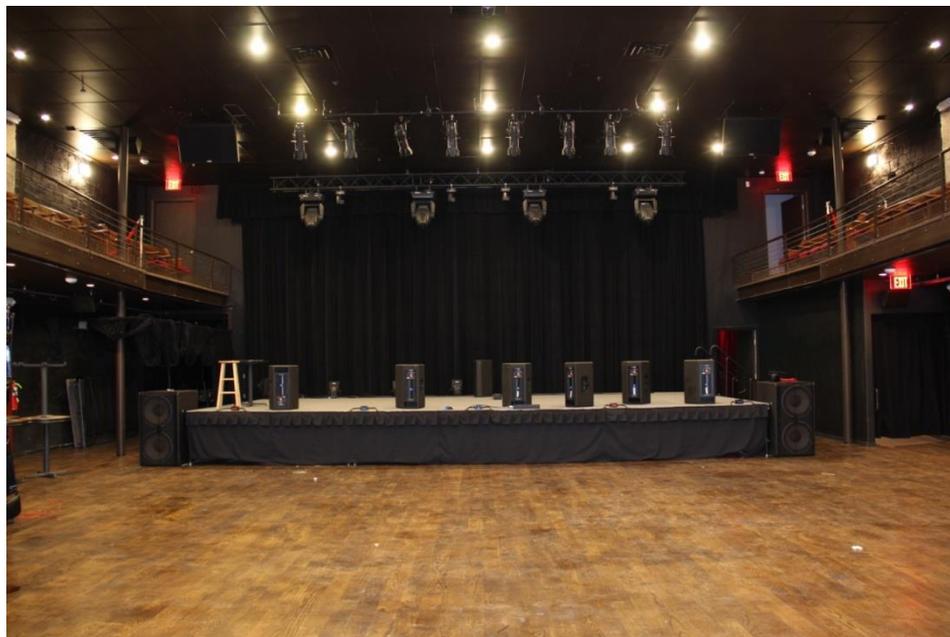


Photo 11: Mezzanine Balcony, overlooking Listening Room and stage, with Mezzanine balconies at both sides, looking northeast. January 30, 2017



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Photo 12: Mezzanine Balcony, overlooking Listening Room with east Mezzanine balcony across the room, looking northeast. January 30, 2017

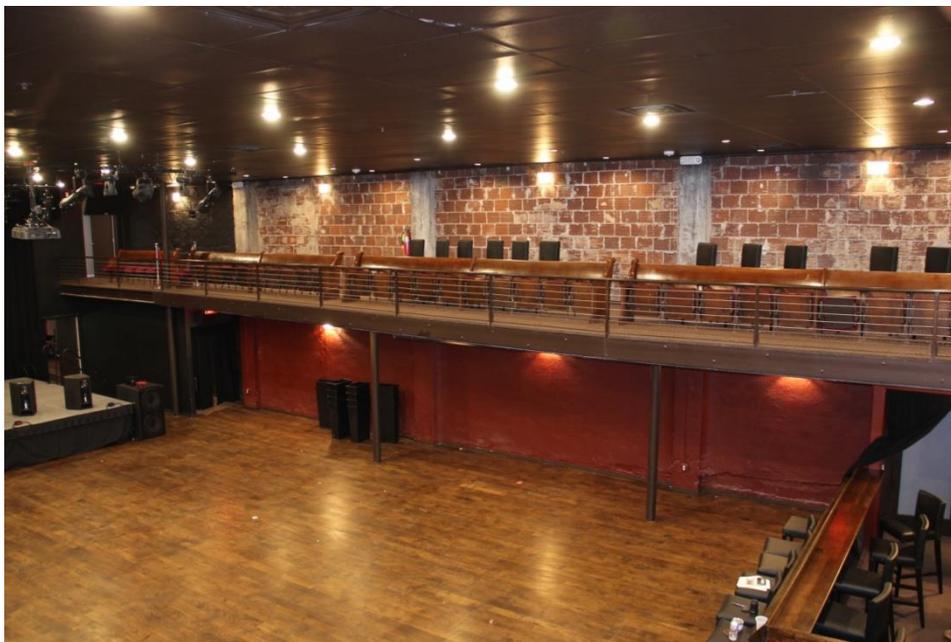


Photo 13: Mezzanine Lobby and Bar, looking east. January 30, 2017



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Photo 14: Mezzanine Lobby, looking southeast. January 30, 2017



Photo 15: Mezzanine Lobby, looking northwest. January 30, 2017



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Photo 16: First floor corridor and stair to Mezzanine, in back: of: the: house areas, looking west. January 30, 2017

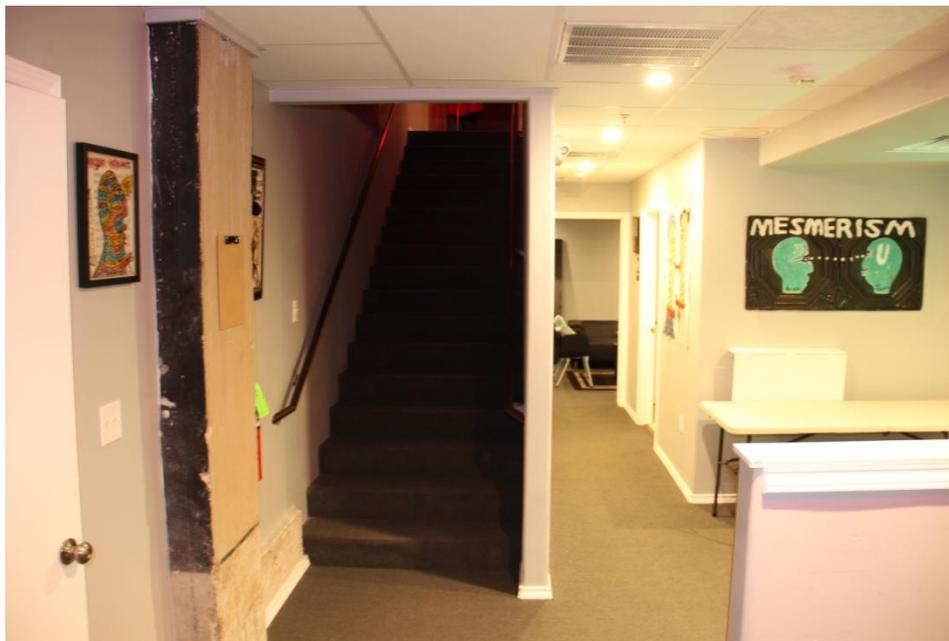


Photo 17: Mezzanine Green Room, looking west. January 30, 2017

