

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

1. Name of Property

Historic Name: Ritz Theatre  
Other name/site number: R. and R. Ritz Theatre  
Name of related multiple-property listing: NA

2. Location

Street & number: 715 North Chaparral Street  
City or town: Corpus Christi State: Texas County: Nueces  
Not for publication: NA Vicinity: NA

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 12/20/23  
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

Ritz Theatre, Corpus Christi, Nueces 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:** RECREATION AND CULTURE / Theater

**Current Functions:** WORK IN PROGRESS / Theater; COMMERCE/TRADE / Professional = office

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification:** LATE-NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY REVIVALS /  
 Other: Spanish Renaissance Revival

**Principal Exterior Materials:** Concrete; Structural clay tile; Brick

**Narrative Description** (see continuation sheets 6 through 11)

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## 8. Statement of Significance

**Applicable National Register Criterion:** A

**Criteria Considerations:** NA

**Areas of Significance:** Entertainment/Recreation

**Period of Significance:** 1929–1974

**Significant Dates:** 1929, 1946, 1972

**Significant Person:** NA

**Cultural Affiliation:** NA

**Architect/Builder:** Dunne, William Scott (architect)  
Wood Sherman Construction Company (general contractor)

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (see continuation sheets 12-20)

## 9. Major Bibliographic References

**Bibliography** (see continuation sheets 21-24)

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

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- 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: *Corpus Christi Positive Action Toward Cultural Heritage (CCPATCH)*

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

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## 10. Geographical Data

**Acreage of Property:** 0.4 acres

### Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: NA

Latitude: 27.798390° Longitude: -97.394402°

**Verbal Boundary Description:** The boundary encompasses two parcels. The boundary follows the north, east and south perimeter of Parcel 191663, recorded by the Nueces Central Appraisal District as: Beach Lot 4, south 10 feet of Lot 5, 10 feet x 20 feet of Lot 8, 50 feet x 60.58 feet of Lot 9, and northeast 5 feet x 30 feet of Lot 10 out of Block 9. The boundary extends along the south, west, and north perimeter of Parcel 191670, recorded by the Nueces Central Appraisal District as: Beach west 50 feet x 89.2 feet of Lot 9 out of Block 9.

**Boundary Justification:** The nominated property is the land historically associated with the Ritz Theatre. The building is on two separately owned parcels. The Ritz Theatre historically spanned the east-west width of the block, with the primary entrance facing North Chaparral Street and a secondary entrance facing Mesquite Street. Since the east and west sides were historically internally connected, for the purpose of this National Register nomination the resource is considered a single building that spans two parcels.

## 11. Form Prepared By

Name/Title: Alana Vidmar, Architectural Historian, and Amy E. Dase, Senior Historian, with contributions from Emily Reed, Cultural Resources Principal, and Jennifer Brosz, Architectural Historian

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Telephone: 737-307-8498

Date: June 2023

## Additional Documentation

**Maps** (see continuation sheets 25-27)

**Additional items** (see continuation sheets 28-42)

**Photographs** (see continuation sheets 43-54)

**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, D.C.

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**Photograph Log**

Ritz Theatre  
Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas  
Photographed by Marcus Huerta, October 14, 2022

Photo 1. Front façade, view facing west.

Photo 2. Oblique, view facing southwest.

Photo 3. West façade, view facing southeast.

Photo 4. West façade, view facing east.

Photo 5. South façade, central lower portion obstructed by adjacent building, and west façade of the theater stage, view facing northeast.

Photo 6. Interior, from rear of mezzanine toward stage, view facing west.

Photo 7. Interior, lobby, view facing west.

Photo 8. Interior, from rear of auditorium first level toward stage, view facing west.

Photo 9. Interior, stage, curtain, and portion of north tower, view facing northwest.

Photo 10. Interior, from stage toward mezzanine, view facing east.

Photo 11. Interior, from front of mezzanine toward stage, view facing west.

Photo 12. Interior, detail of stylized ornamentation, view facing north.

Photo 13. Interior, from front to rear of mezzanine, view facing east.

Photo 14. Interior, second floor office, view facing southeast.

Photo 15. Interior, upper dressing room with dark room at left rear, view facing northwest.

Photo 16. Interior, mezzanine lounge, view facing southwest.

Photo 17. Interior, projection room, view facing northwest.

Photo 18. Interior, backstage, view facing south.

Photo 19. Interior, enclosed arched wall and built-in shelves, view facing west.

Photo 20. Interior, drinking fountain with tile floor and backing on the mezzanine, view facing northwest.

Photo 21. Interior, Carrier-Brunswick compressors in mechanical room, view facing southwest.

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*This project was funded through an Emergency Supplemental Historic Preservation Fund grant from the National Park Service that addresses damage inflicted by Hurricane Harvey. In November 2020, National Park Service staff concurred that this property is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.*

## Description

The 1929 Ritz Theatre, in the heart of the Corpus Christi central business district along Corpus Christi Bay, spans the city block from North Chaparral Street to Mesquite Street. The highly decorated main (east) façade looms prominently over the city's historic main commercial street, featuring four-story square towers that flank the central section with a shaped parapet, molded coping, and multiple finials indicative of Spanish Renaissance Revival architecture. The façade is symmetrical, apart from differing roof types and towers. The original pattern of rectangular, square, oculus, and round-arch windows and blind arches remains intact, despite some window enclosures. Inside the theater, towers, balconies, stepped parapets, and niches evoke the atmosphere of viewing theatrical productions in an outdoor courtyard under the night sky. The theater operated continuously as an entertainment venue until its 1989 closure, showing feature films until 1972, operating as a music hall from 1974 until the late 1970s, and then as a playhouse. The main façade was altered several times. Loss of the front marquee and reconfigured first-floor fenestration patterns are conspicuous. Inside, alterations have removed some seats, and modified the lobby and its materials. Despite these changes, the building's many original materials and stylistic details robustly reflect Spanish-influenced architectural traditions and atmospheric theatre design, and the building retains sufficient integrity to convey its historical significance.

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The Ritz Theatre, at 715 North Chaparral Street, is at the north edge of Corpus Christi's central business district facing what was historically the most frequented commercial street (**Map 1**).<sup>1</sup> The building is two blocks southeast of the Interstate Highway 37/ U.S. Route 181 terminus and two blocks west of Corpus Christi Bay. When completed in 1929, the theater was one block west of the bay. This changed after 1941, with construction of a protective seawall. Fill dirt extended land into the bay an additional block east of the former Water Street, creating land for commercial improvements and public spaces.

Before the theater was built, the surrounding area already had many improvements. North Chaparral Street had one- and two-story commercial-block buildings, and a few four or more stories tall. These buildings typically had lower-level retail shops, services, or offices. Their upper levels were for diverse purposes including but not limited to boarding rooms, a business college, a coffee roaster, and fraternal meeting rooms. A one-story store, made of shell concrete, set back from North Chaparral Street abutted an eastern portion of the building's north side. A wide, deep, one-story brick commercial building facing Mesquite Street abutted the western half of the theater's north side. A Spanish-influenced corner gasoline station, with a red clay tile roof, was at the southeast corner of Taylor and Mesquite Streets (**Figure 1**). Two dwellings were extant in the block's southwest quadrant, otherwise one- and two-story single-family dwellings were to the north and northwest. Nearby businesses were corner banks, department stores, hotels, a five and dime store, and a vulcanizing plant.<sup>2</sup>

The surrounding area had evolved by mid-century. The 1937 *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* building, constructed northwest of the theater, underwent many decades of expansion. The four-story State Hotel and several automobile-related businesses were nearby by the late 1930s. A ca. 1940 one-story commercial-block building partitioned four businesses that faced Taylor Street. By 1950 a smaller, one-story restaurant with a flat roof had replaced the shell concrete building on the eastern portion of the theater's north side. Surface parking filled most of the block's northeast quadrant (**Figure 2**). On its Mesquite Street façade, the theater entrance had been removed; a wholesale candy and tobacco business occupied the southern two-thirds of the first floor, and an electrical repair shop occupied the northern one-third. The Spanish-

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<sup>1</sup> Through its period of significance, the Ritz Theatre used the spelling *theatre* in its advertising, but the spelling *theater* appears in articles through the present.

<sup>2</sup> Sanborn Map Company, *Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas* (Sanborn Map Company), 1931, Fire Insurance Map.

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influenced gasoline station at Mesquite and Taylor Streets had evolved with additions to accommodate expanded automobile services.<sup>3</sup>

By 2023, the setting had changed considerably, with the exception of the historic-age, two-story, commercial-block buildings to the south that face North Chaparral Street. More recently built parking garages and skyscrapers for professional offices and hotels are two blocks east and west of the Ritz Theatre, and near the bay. Several one- to four-story, early- to mid-twentieth-century commercial-block buildings remain in the vicinity, and others were either lost as the result of hurricane damage or otherwise demolished. South of the theater block, historic-age commercial buildings are interspersed with vacant lots, surface parking lots, concrete parking garages, and recent infill construction. Most nearby blocks are paved surface parking lots; these are immediately west and northeast of the theater, on the south half of the block to the north, and on part of the north half of the block to the east. The north half of the block to the north is Artesian Park, and the southwest quadrant of the block to the east has a mid-century bus station that was converted into a bar. The Spanish-influenced gasoline station at the corner of Mesquite and Taylor Streets was also converted into a bar. Although the setting surrounding the Ritz Theatre has been altered, the rhythm of commercial buildings to the south remains, and the historic-age gasoline station to the north survives.

The theater is in a hardscape environment. Ground covers, deciduous trees, and some palm trees dot the sidewalks and setbacks on secondary façades. A small, recently planted deciduous tree and round concrete planters are on the sidewalk north of the building's front entrance. Strips of grass along the sidewalk parallel Taylor Street and the east side of the former gasoline station. Globe lights and parking meters line the Mesquite Street sidewalk. A medium-size deciduous tree is at the southwest corner of the building abutting a later-constructed brick-and-iron gate.

### Building Description

The Ritz Theatre spans an east-west segment of the city block between Chaparral and Mesquite Streets (**Map 2**). The building footprint is a series of rectangular sections—lobby, auditorium, stage house, mechanical room, and shop-turned offices—of various heights and roof forms (**Figure 2**). It is approximately 285 feet and 10 inches long. This encompasses the western 92 feet and 6 inches, which once contained a secondary box office, theater access hall, and shop, but was walled off and converted to leased office space by 1950.<sup>4</sup>

The building's structural composition varies mildly from section to section (**Figure 3**). The entirety of the building is on a concrete foundation and is clad in brick, painted beige at an unknown date. The wall structure is reinforced concrete column-and-beam frame with clay-tile infill. Inside, the stage walls are load-bearing brick, and the auditorium balcony is of reinforced concrete with structural steel supports. Interior floor structures are concrete slabs, and walls have a smooth finish. The building's various sections have different roof structures and materials. The auditorium roof structure is of steel trusses topped with a concrete slab. Behind (west of) the primary front parapet, the roofline follows the grade inside the auditorium, gently sloping downward one story where it meets the stage house tower; small clerestory windows with some gold-colored glass top the four-story stage house. A single, square, four-story chimney rises through the northeast corner of the mechanical room, adjacent to the stagehouse. The auditorium roof also angles down to the north and south where it meets the stepped parapets on the north and south façades. At the building's west end, the roof structure is steel-bar joists and concrete slab. The other sections have flat roofs. The one-story westernmost section's flat roof has a prominent parapet. The four-story fly tower has a clerestory glass-block window block on its roof, and the two-story mechanical room roof has a small skylight. Exterior roof cladding is layered bituminous roof felt, asphalt, and, on lower areas, gravel. The building has an integral gutter system.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sanborn Map Company, *Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas, Volume 1* (Sanborn Map Company), 1950, Fire Insurance Map.

<sup>4</sup> Sanborn Map Company, *Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas, Volume 1*, 1950.

<sup>5</sup> Stantec, "Ritz Theatre [Draft]," (2022), Historic American Buildings Survey.

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*Exterior*

The front (east) façade faces North Chaparral Street (**Photos 1 and 2, Figure 4**). Originally, a freestanding, multiple-sided ticket booth was centered within a recessed open entrance. Three sets of double French doors led inside to the small first floor entrance lobby. The entrance's appearance changed frequently with movie signboards announcing feature films. A flattened arch spanned the entrance opening, terminating where poster frames were affixed above the water table. The original marquee suspended over the recessed entrance had display space announcing films on three sides. The sides swooped down at the ends to meet newel-like molded and paneled corner pieces. Globe lights were affixed to the top of these on each side of the marquee front. Various early advertisement board configurations atop the marquee obscured the second-floor façade to promote theater offerings. One early version featured a metal sunburst motif. By 1940, only 11 years after opening, the theater front was updated with a streamlined marquee spanning the entire façade.<sup>6</sup> Sometime between 2004 and 2005 the marquee was removed. Local news reported remodeling at the Ritz, including marble and tile added to the exterior in 1946, but the positioning is unclear.<sup>7</sup> Small commercial fronts originally occupied the outer bays on the first floor. Each storefront had a central multiple-light double door entrance. On each side of the storefront doors, plate glass windows were atop checkboard-patterned tile bulkheads. Each storefront had a tripartite multiple-light transom; the fixed center pane had 10 lights and the operable outer sections had 6 lights and clipped or bracketed corners that echoed the flattened arch motif over the theater entrance. Remnant brown, square sidewalk tiles demarcate the former open entrance.

Today, the first level of the front façade has a slightly recessed central bay with two double doors flanked by two plain bays. The southern entrance has an aluminum frame with narrow glass double doors next to a fixed paired window over a horizontal rectangular glass base panel. Fixed transoms are over the paired windows and doors. The northern portion of the central bay has paneled steel double doors; above, a former transom is covered with boards and, within the recessed entry and north of the door, The Ritz is painted to read vertically. The plain outer bays are similarly stripped of original details. The slightly recessed south bay is enclosed and decorated with a mural. The north bay, flush with the primary façade, is without details. The north bay and the posts separating the other bays show evidence of painted-over small square tiles added to the first-floor front façade at an unknown date. Contact points from the ca. 1940 marquee punctuate the exposed brick between the first and second levels.

The upper levels display the theater's Spanish Renaissance Revival ornamentation. Two, four-story, square towers flank the slightly projecting central bay, the edges of which are lined with twisted rope molding. On the mezzanine/second floor levels, a large blind round arch, lined with oversized bead-and-reel molding, is topped with a cartouche or shield-like keystone and scrollwork. Within the arch are three rectangular window openings that share a sill. The multiple-pane metal casement windows with fixed multiple-pane transoms that originally occupied the openings are boarded. Delicate engaged Solomonic columns accent window openings and their highly decorative bracketed window hoods are topped with a shield emblem and finial. Above the center window and at the peak of the blind arch, metal extensions are remnants of the ca. 1940 streamlined sign blade for the theater. Centered in the arch is a rectangular opening surrounded by elaborate scroll molding. Contact points from a former metal grille surround the molding. On either side of the blind arch are molded shield accents. Two bands of horizontal molding define the section between the large central blind arch and the parapet. Within this section are three small, blind, round-arched windows with slightly projecting sills. The centrally positioned projection-room window, higher than two lower flanking openings, originally had louvers and, within the historic period, a solid panel that swung open like a casement window. It is currently boarded, although some louvers, in poor condition, are apparent. The parapet has a central blind oculus with metal grille. Prominent molding caps the mission-shaped parapet, which has five equidistant finials.

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<sup>6</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "Ritz Theater Downtown Corpus Christi," August 3, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "Ritz Theatre To Reopen Tomorrow," August 29, 1946, 14 (Newspapers.com).



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The flanking north and south towers with internal stairs are similar, except at the uppermost level. Their second levels each have a blind round arch. Originally, these had a functional paneled wood door associated with an interior stairwell landing and a decorative metal balconette. By 1940, the openings had been infilled with brick.<sup>8</sup> Above the second level a long, plain segment of unornamented brick extends upwards to a rectangular window. On the south tower, this opening has a six-pane casement window that has been painted; on the north tower the window appears to be partially boarded. A stylized parapet with molded coping tops the south tower. The tower's south, east, and north sides each have two blind round engaged arches and, above, an oculus with metal grille; the tower is otherwise unadorned. The north tower's south, east, and north sides each have a blind oculus with a metal grille; the tower is also otherwise unadorned. Atop its corbelled peak is a red-clay-tile hipped roof.

The outermost bays of the front façade accentuate the building's decorative centerpiece. The second level of these bays is flush with the towers. Each bay has a boarded square opening, originally filled with paired six-light casements with fixed-pane transom, a blind oculus with metal grille, and, above, a thin band of molding. Red-clay-tile shed roofs top the second level of these bays; a stylized parapet with molding rises above these roofs' northmost and southmost edges. The northern parapet has a finial. Each roof terminates where it meets the four-story portion of the building. These east-facing sections of the building are plain, with the exception of a blind oculus with metal grill near the top and corbelled brick parapet.

The parapet is the focus of the block-long north façade that faces Taylor Street and flaunts the building's colossal, if plain, segmented silhouette (**Photo 2**). On the eastern portion of this façade, a graduated nine-step parapet with tile coping hides much of the roof before terminating at its junction with the four-story fly tower. The surfaces of the eastern portion and the fly tower are smooth stucco with recently painted murals. On the western portion, a graduated four-step parapet with tile coping hides the roof. Here, the concrete post-and-lintel structural grid protrudes slightly from the structural tile wall. A set of metal-frame cast-iron doors are at the stage and an auditorium side aisle.

The one-story, three-bay west façade that faces Mesquite Street offered a central secondary theater entrance and subtly echoes the main façade's Spanish Renaissance Revival detailing (**Photos 3 and 4, Figure 5**).<sup>9</sup> Framing the entryway are four, square, painted brick piers with metal-post fencing that create small courtyards corresponding to the north and south bays. The parapet, the highlight of the taller central bay, has a few "steps" that mimic the courtyards' brick piers. The parapet's towering central arch niche is defined with prominent molding. Two delicate Solomonic columns rise from a bas-relief scroll and flora panel to frame the niche's round medallion with a bas-relief shield. A finial is at the pinnacle. Flanking the niche, the parapet steps lower on either side, first to clay-tile cladding, then slightly up to display scrolled broken pediment and shield motifs on the parapet's north and south ends.

Metal-post fencing protects access to the central bay entrance, which has a rectangular matte reddish-brown tile floor. The suspended canopy that protected the entrance is no longer extant. The main entrance is beneath a depressed single corbel arch with flanking, partial-height, masonry pilasters with fixed wood-frame display windows. Wood-frame fenestration divides the recessed entrance into six sections, with a door in the southernmost section. The door has pronounced raised panels and a metal-bar pull handle. To its north are two tall vertical rectangular windows. A row of orange matte tiles is beneath the windows, and above are three large, fixed transoms.

Commercial enterprises flanked the west façade's central bay entrance originally. In 1950, an electrical repair business occupied the northern store and a wholesale candy and tobacco business occupied the southern store.<sup>10</sup> Both bays are shorter than the central bay, and very slightly recessed. The store fronts have Spanish-influenced wood double doors and

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<sup>8</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "Ritz Theater Downtown Corpus Christi."

<sup>9</sup> *Corpus Christi Times*, "New R. and R. Theater Under Construction in City," September 22, 1929, 85 (Newspapers.com). This 1-story section at the rear of the theater is under separate ownership from the main multi-story portion of the theater.

<sup>10</sup> Sanborn Map Company, *Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas*, 1931; Sanborn Map Company, *Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas, Volume 1*, 1950.

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two plate glass windows, all with transoms. Their parapets' few "steps" mimic their courtyards' brick piers, and have modest corbelling and clay-tile cladding.

From Mesquite Street, the building's west-facing, upper-level, painted brick façades are apparent (**Photo 5**). The mechanical/dressing room west-facing façade has several windows with metal louvers and a single door. The four-story fly loft has no fenestration, but a brick flue projects from this façade, extending several feet above the stage tower.

The south façade that faces Starr Street is partially concealed by an adjacent one-story building (**Photo 5**). The eastern portion abuts a two-story, early-twentieth-century, two-part commercial-block building that also faces North Chaparral Street. A former opening on this façade, at the one-story hall, onlead to the auditorium, stage, and the mechanical room. Cast-iron double doors set in a metal frame lead an auditorium side aisle into a courtyard. The courtyard is surrounded by the theater on the north and the backs of two commercial buildings, the one facing North Chaparral Street and another facing Starr Street. The one-story western portion of the south façade is clad in unpainted brick with tile coping lining the parapet; one, small square window with a metal grille is the only fenestration.

*Interior*<sup>11</sup>

The interior of the Ritz retains noteworthy attributes, especially the auditorium, entered from the lobby (**Photos 6 and 7**). Stylized arched openings lead into the auditorium (**Photo 8**). Three sections of linked folding seats face the stage, surrounded by smooth walls that rise on either side to a stepped parapet that creates the feeling of a Spanish-influenced courtyard. This parapet, differing from the stark versions on the exterior, is highly embellished with coping, stylized niches, and an assortment of emblems, finials, sconces, brackets, vases, and other thematic details. An atmospheric ceiling, painted to resemble the sky, had twinkling lights and Brenograph machines projected wafts of wispy clouds overhead. The seats are not original, and the orchestra seating area was removed from the auditorium.

The auditorium has a central stage, but the focal point is its flanking towers and corresponding balconies (**Photos 9 and 10**). Brick columns support the colossal stage curtain (**Photo 11**). The flanking twin towers that rise almost to the ceiling, each have a tall round false arch, a single infilled window opening with decorative window hoods and highly ornamented stucco walls, scored with an intricate crosshatch design and small rosette detailing. Each tower peaks in a Baroque cupola "crown." Extending away from the stage, a decorative wall with stepped parapet connects with the hacienda-like balconies (**Photo 12**). Each three-bay balcony has a turned-wood balustrade with stylized bracketed turned-wood posts that support a red-clay-tile shed roof.

The mezzanine level forms a balcony surrounded by the stepped-parapet walls with seating (**Photo 13**). The several front rows are linked folding seats like those on the auditorium floor with an aisle separating them from the many rows behind, where the seating has been removed.

In addition to the auditorium, other interior spaces offered amenities and services to theater-goers. The lobby, concession stand, box office, and some restrooms are on the first level. The lobby arrangement dates from the 1946 theater remodel. A large, open lounge with entry points to balcony seating, restrooms, two offices, upper dressing room with dark room, and stairwells are on the mezzanine (**Photos 14 and 15**). The lounge, created by closing off the former open well between the entrance and the mezzanine level, has four fixed banquettes clad in Art Deco–influenced tile dating from the 1946 theater remodel, and Spanish-inspired detailing is absent (**Photo 16**). The small third level has a few offices. The fourth level, which also provides entry point to the highest mezzanine seats, is accessed through the tower stairwells, and hosts the projection booth and a sound/lighting room (**Photo 17**).

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<sup>11</sup> Del Mar College Architectural/Drafting Technology Program and Nick Gignac, "Ritz Theatre Drawings," 2020, Corpus Christi PATCH.

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The three-story stage house's north wall extends the building's full width, but the southern wall does not. A catwalk is backstage. A large sheet metal trunk duct rises full-height on the south wall before splitting into ducts to the auditorium (**Photo 18**). A large, central metal door leads to the mechanical room. Directly above another opening connects with a second level above the mechanical room. A doorway on the backstage wall's southern end has a stairway that leads to second-level dressing rooms.

Vestiges of interior highlights include interior walls with arched openings, stylized molding, and built-in shelves, now-enclosed arched openings (**Photo 19**). Tile flooring is in a few areas and built-in tile furniture—seating and a table—and a drinking fountain are present (**Photo 20**).

Not embellished, but important to the building, are functional interior rooms. From the mechanical room, two Carrier-Brunswick compressors pumped conditioned air into the building (**Photo 21**).

### *Alterations*

The Ritz has been subject to much change, summarized here. Early changes include enclosing a Mesquite Street entrance and relocating the box office and concession stand. Flooring in the auditorium was raised, and flooring was added to the second level lobby above the foyer, severing these formerly associated spaces. Restrooms and drinking fountains were added. Between 1950 and the 1970s, the integral recessed entrance was enclosed. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, seating, the marquee, and other original details were removed. The exterior of the building is in disrepair with cracking exterior brick and boarded openings. The interior has sustained damage from water infiltration and deferred maintenance and is missing many original details.

### *Integrity*

The Ritz retains enough physical and historical integrity to be a good example of its type and a noted local landmark. The building is in its original location. The surrounding setting has evolved, as central business districts do, but has continuously supported commercial activity in downtown Corpus Christi, despite the loss of many buildings to urban renewal, neglect, and hurricanes. Some of the building's integrity of materials and workmanship have been compromised. The loss of a character-defining canopy, marquee, and sign and first level alterations are infractions, but otherwise, major architectural attributes are intact. The imposing front façade decorated with stylized moldings and heraldic shields exuberantly portrays the Spanish Renaissance Revival design. The much-altered interior retains many original features, particularly in the auditorium, which still evokes the feeling of a Spanish-influenced courtyard. The building's associative qualities are inextricably tied to the history of Corpus Christi's theaters.

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### Statement of Significance

The theater industry was of central importance in the context of American entertainment and recreation during the twentieth century. As Corpus Christi's population, economy, and consumer culture grew, bolstered by flourishing regional cotton production, booming oil extraction, and construction of both a large naval training base and a beneficial deep-water port, the R. and R. Ritz Theatre, known commonly as the Ritz Theatre or just the Ritz, was the city's premier theater entertainment venue featuring stage performances and talking picture movies. Prominent Dallas theater architect William Scott Dunne designed the theater as an atmospheric picture palace with an opulent Spanish Renaissance Revival exterior and an interior that incorporated a Spanish courtyard theme. Completed in 1929, the Ritz Theatre opened in the heart of the city's central business district along Corpus Christi Bay, just before the Great Depression. When the theater was modernized in 1946, elements of the Art Deco style were incorporated. The building is an important representation of theater entertainment in Corpus Christi, evolving to accommodate social changes throughout the city's twentieth-century development. No other examples of this type of entertainment venue are extant in Corpus Christi. The Ritz Theatre, built during the era of atmospheric theaters and movie palaces, was a noteworthy location for personal and community leisure activities. After 1972, films were no longer shown at the theater and in 1974 it became the Ritz Music Hall. The music hall hosted numerous national performers, including Bruce Springsteen and Jimmy Buffett, during the first year of operation. The Ritz Theatre is nominated under Criterion A, at the local level of significance, in the area of Entertainment/Recreation.<sup>12</sup> The period of significance extends from 1929, the year construction was completed, to 1974, the current 50-year point.

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### *Incorporation and Development of Corpus Christi*

Corpus Christi became the county seat of Nueces County in 1846 and was formally incorporated in 1852.<sup>13</sup> By 1853 the town had saloons, trading posts, churches, a courthouse, and a jail.<sup>14</sup> The establishment of Corpus Christi as a port was key to sustainability. Although the shallow bay prevented ships from entering, the volume of trade increased and included regular stops by steamship lines.<sup>15</sup> The onset of the Civil War led to a blockade of the Corpus Christi port in 1862 but the town continued trade, particularly with Mexico, via the Cotton Road established ten miles from the town.<sup>16</sup> Corpus Christi became a center of commerce in the 1860s. By 1870, most of the commercial businesses were along North Chaparral Street, between Schatzell and Lawrence Streets. The lack of a deep-water port in Corpus Christi continued to prevent the town from turning into a booming city. Galveston, approximately 185 miles northeast of Corpus Christi along the Gulf Coast, was the preeminent port in the region.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1870s the town experienced a number of changes which forever altered its future as a commercial center. In 1874 the channel at the mouth of Corpus Christi Bay was dredged allowing entrance by larger ships.<sup>18</sup> As commerce grew, so too did the population and tourism, which led to the construction of amenities.<sup>19</sup> Corpus Christi continued a pattern of improvements and setbacks through the early twenty-first century. In 1905 the first Chamber of Commerce was established. Corpus Christi had several saloons, clothing stores, furniture shops, drug stores, and barbers with storefronts

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<sup>12</sup> The Ritz is also likely to be eligible under Criterion C, in the area of Architecture. However, the strategy for this grant-funded nomination was to pursue a single area of significance. In the future, to nominate the property under Criterion C, another layer of assessment would compare the Ritz with other versions of the style in Corpus Christi and with other Spanish Renaissance Revival theaters in Texas.

<sup>13</sup> Long, "Corpus Christi, Texas."

<sup>14</sup> Heines, *Historic Corpus Christi: A Sesquicentennial History*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Heines, *Historic Corpus Christi: A Sesquicentennial History*, 14; Long, "Corpus Christi, Texas."

<sup>16</sup> Heines, *Historic Corpus Christi: A Sesquicentennial History*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> Heines, *Historic Corpus Christi: A Sesquicentennial History*, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Long, "Corpus Christi, Texas."

<sup>19</sup> Heines, *Historic Corpus Christi: A Sesquicentennial History*, 22.

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along Chaparral, Schatzell, Peoples, Mesquite, and Lawrence Streets.<sup>20</sup> Ambitious efforts to continue to improve the city, beginning in 1913, were thwarted by a hurricane in 1919 that damaged most of the commercial core. The city rebuilt by finally authorizing the construction of a deep-water port, the income from which would help fund reconstruction efforts. The port was completed in 1926 and the economic benefits were immediate.<sup>21</sup> During the Great Depression, Corpus Christi struggled to sustain growth. The number of commercial businesses in the city was reduced from 920 in 1931 to 710 in 1933. The nearby discovery of oil in 1930 led to growth again in the region.<sup>22</sup> To protect the city's commercial progress, a seawall was constructed between 1934 and 1941 that surrounded the downtown core. The seawall became a defining feature of the city and extended buildable land into the bay an additional block east of the former Water Street, creating space for commercial improvements and public spaces.<sup>23</sup>

The success of the port continued to drive up the commercial success and population of the city. The naval air station completed in Corpus Christi in 1941 was the largest base of its type in the world at the time. In 1948 the Corpus Christi port was the second largest in Texas. By 1952 Corpus Christi had 2,845 businesses. The 1960s saw an increase in entertainment facilities, including museums and a playhouse.<sup>24</sup> In 1970 Hurricane Celia caused enough destruction that insurance companies considered the area "high risk" for property damages.<sup>25</sup> Ten years later, Hurricane Allen left significant damage in Corpus Christi after making landfall and developing into a series of tornados.<sup>26</sup> Until Hurricane Allen, Corpus Christi had few amenities designed specifically for large-scale entertainment or tourism. In the wake of Hurricane Allen, the city invested in tourist attractions, particularly near the bay, and upgraded public infrastructure to transform Corpus Christi into a destination as the "Texas Riviera."<sup>27</sup>

Destruction caused by hurricanes, and other new construction, over time, has resulted in a high percentage of historic-age building loss in Corpus Christi's downtown core. Most recently, on August 25, 2017, Hurricane Harvey made landfall 30 miles northeast of Corpus Christi. High winds and rain in Corpus Christi and the metro area resulted in over \$100 billion in economic damages.<sup>28</sup> Although this most recent hurricane left relatively little destruction in the city compared to other parts of the metro area, some one- to four-story, early- to mid-twentieth-century commercial-block buildings in the downtown commercial area were damaged.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Movie Theaters in the Early Twentieth Century***

The extravagant and eclectic theaters of the early 1900s were a testament to the success of the film industry. Prior to ca. 1910, there were few purpose-built theaters, and films were shown in multiple-use halls, vacant lots, churches, opera houses, or playhouses.<sup>30</sup> As films became longer in length, producers hired well known architects to design opulent theater exteriors and interiors to attract and engage audiences. "These 'dream palaces,' so called because of their often-lavish embellishments of marble, brass, gilding, and cut glass" replaced simple nickelodeon theaters and alternate venues.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Sanborn Map Company, *Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas* (Sanborn Map Company), 1906, Fire Insurance Map.

<sup>21</sup> Long, "Corpus Christi, Texas."

<sup>22</sup> Long, "Corpus Christi, Texas."

<sup>23</sup> Heines, *Historic Corpus Christi: A Sesquicentennial History*, 30.

<sup>24</sup> Heines, *Historic Corpus Christi: A Sesquicentennial History*, 45, 63.

<sup>25</sup> Joshua William Featherstone, "Environmental Narratives of the Texas Coastal Bend: Hurricanes in Corpus Christi," 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Roy Sylvan Dunn, "Hurricanes," in *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, 1995.

<sup>27</sup> Heines, *Historic Corpus Christi: A Sesquicentennial History*, 63–64.

<sup>28</sup> Jim Lee, "Harvey's Impact on Corpus Christi," *Economic Pulse*, Volume, No. 3 (2018).

<sup>29</sup> Gregory Smith, Hurricane Harvey Emergency Supplemental Historic Preservation Fund Grant Program Application for the Ritz Theater, Texas Historical Commission, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Allen, "Moviegoing in Early 20th-Century North Carolina," in *Documenting the American South*, University of North Carolina, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> University of Minnesota Libraries, "The History of Movies."

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After World War I the atmospheric theater, a new type of entertainment venue, began to replace the design approach of the early 1900s. The first atmospheric theaters were constructed in the early 1920s.<sup>32</sup> Designed to emulate the feeling of viewing film in an open-air venue, these theaters employed lighting techniques and artistic wall and ceiling renderings to give the illusion of being outdoors.<sup>33</sup> This design avoided the costly plasterwork and chandeliers of earlier-built theaters. Atmospheric theaters paid homage to the ancient Greek and Roman amphitheaters which hosted plays, and heavily sampled European opera houses and Mediterranean or Spanish architectural styles.<sup>34</sup> Most atmospheric theaters in the United States were constructed between 1925–1930, and many of these theaters have since been destroyed or fallen into disrepair.<sup>35</sup>

Although Black-only theaters continued to exist, the new wave of purpose-built theaters were often designed or altered to include segregated attendance by Black patrons. Theaters were sometimes constructed with secondary box offices and entrances, and Black viewers were segregated to balconies or remote areas of the theater.<sup>36</sup> Theaters without these features would dictate the hours available for Black patrons to be in the theaters.<sup>37</sup> Despite segregation and imposed limits on Black viewership of films, Black attendance at films had notably increased since the nickelodeon days.<sup>38</sup>

The 1930s and 1940s were the “Golden Age” of cinema. The first half of the twentieth century saw the rise and fall of silent films, and the introduction of talking pictures in 1927. Next color pictures were introduced just before the onset of the Great Depression, which delayed mass production of color films until the 1940s. In 1939 film was the 11th-largest industry in America.<sup>39</sup> Less than a decade later, factors such as post-war inflation and the commercialization of television in 1947 contributed to slowing the rate of growth of the motion picture industry.<sup>40</sup> Film producers again pursued new technologies to renew interest in theatergoing. Films in color became more realistic, cheaper to make, and accessible to multiple companies which it had not been before because of Technicolor’s hold on the technology. The improved large format provided by theaters was able to hold the attention of viewers, but interest in theaters continued to decline.<sup>41</sup>

Desegregation in theaters did not occur en masse until the late 1960s. Movie theaters were by that time highly intertwined with public ideas about normalized sexuality and privileged leisure, both activities whites wanted to restrict Blacks from participating in. After the 1954 Supreme Court ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education* and passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, theaters were still slow to desegregate in the American south compared to other public places such as schools and restaurants.<sup>42</sup>

Many urban theaters fell into disuse in the latter half of the twentieth century. Once a symbol of modernity in American cities, lingering effects of the accessibility of television and the widespread use of home movie technologies such as videocassette recorders and the Internet slowed the theater entertainment industry.<sup>43</sup> The rise of suburban malls and

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<sup>32</sup> Mike Hume, “Atmospheric Theatres,” 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Laura Kiniry, “Eight Historic Movie Theaters with Interesting Second Acts,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Hume, “Atmospheric Theatres.”

<sup>35</sup> Hume, “Atmospheric Theatres”; Kiniry, “Eight Historic Movie Theaters with Interesting Second Acts.”

<sup>36</sup> Charlene Regester, “From the Buzzard’s Roost: Black Movie-Going in Durham and Other North Carolina Cities During the Early Period of American Cinema,” *Film History*, Volume 17, No. 1 (2005): 113–114.

<sup>37</sup> Allen, “Moviegoing in Early 20th-Century North Carolina.”

<sup>38</sup> Regester, “From the Buzzard’s Roost: Black Movie-Going in Durham and Other North Carolina Cities During the Early Period of American Cinema,” 114.

<sup>39</sup> University of Minnesota Libraries, “The History of Movies.”

<sup>40</sup> Mitchell Stephens, “History of Television,” in *Grolier Encyclopedia*, New York University, 2023; University of Minnesota Libraries, “The History of Movies.”

<sup>41</sup> Kiniry, “Eight Historic Movie Theaters with Interesting Second Acts”; University of Minnesota Libraries, “The History of Movies.”

<sup>42</sup> Susannah Broun, “Panic at the Picture Show: Southern Movie Theatre Culture and the Struggle to Desegregate,” *Swarthmore Undergraduate History Journal*, Volume 3, No. 2 (2022): 20.

<sup>43</sup> Kiniry, “Eight Historic Movie Theaters with Interesting Second Acts”; University of Minnesota Libraries, “The History of Movies.”

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complexes replaced typically smaller downtown theaters.<sup>44</sup> Many of these theaters were able to find new life in adaptive reuse as churches, stores, or even parking garages after a period of disuse. Some have been revived as operating movie theaters. Others have been demolished to make room for new commercial or residential developments, or due to fire, natural disaster, or an advanced state of disrepair.<sup>45</sup>

### *Movie Theaters in Corpus Christi*

At the turn of the twentieth century, Corpus Christi was actively being promoted as a seaside resort, full of opportunities for entertainment and leisure.<sup>46</sup> The Grand (later the Ideal) opened in 1906, and an open-air theater, the name of which has not been recorded, opened in 1908. Other theaters included the Pavilion, Crystal, Palm Garden, Lyric (now the Dallas Hotel), Seaside Electric, Dixie, Rex, and Amusu (dismantled in 1928), which had all opened by 1912. These early theaters were not restricted to showing films. Vaudevilles sometimes bookended showings, and small instrumental performances were known to accompany films.<sup>47</sup>

The Lyric was the first theater in Corpus Christi opened by H. H. Elliott in 1908. Elliott gained experience in theater operation before moving to Corpus Christi, and later opened the Rex and the Amusu theaters.<sup>48</sup> In 1925, the R. and R. Gulf Amusement company, a theater development group, was incorporated through the consolidation of Elliott's theater holdings with the Robb and Rowley enterprise, established by Harold Robb and Robert Rowley of Dallas.<sup>49</sup> By partnering as R. and R. Gulf Amusement (later known as the R. and R. Circuit), Elliott and Robb and Rowley reduced the cost of shows at their theaters and showed films ahead of larger cities in Texas.<sup>50</sup>

Larger theaters were constructed in the wake of the Corpus Christi port opening in 1926.<sup>51</sup> The Palace opened on North Chaparral Street in 1926.<sup>52</sup> The Palace showed films and performances such as musical comedies and vaudevilles.<sup>53</sup> The Palace even showed film which depicted the lives of Black Americans, such as the 1929 showing of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's "Hallelujah," during the time of segregation.<sup>54</sup> During this time, the Amusu theater closed for remodel in January 1928, but later that year, plans appear to have been scrapped and the theater was dismantled instead.<sup>55</sup>

Generally, the entertainment industry in Corpus Christi developed two to three years behind its industrial advancements. The winter of 1929–1930, after completion of the port, was a particularly important period in the development of entertainment in Corpus Christi.<sup>56</sup> By September 1929, R. and R. Gulf Amusement, with Elliott at the helm, operated the

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<sup>44</sup> Patrick Sisson, "Giving Closed Movie Theaters a Second Act," November 23, 2020, CityLab (Bloomberg).

<sup>45</sup> Murphy Givens, "Old Picture Palaces: City's First Theatres Were Storefront Affairs with Bedsheets for Screens," *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, January 9, 2002; Kiniry, "Eight Historic Movie Theaters with Interesting Second Acts."

<sup>46</sup> Dan E. Kilgore, "Corpus Christi: A Quarter Century of Development, 1900–1925," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Volume 75, No. 4 (1972): 437.

<sup>47</sup> Givens, "Old Picture Palaces: City's First Theatres Were Storefront Affairs with Bedsheets for Screens"; *Sunday Morning Times*, "Elliott Heads Operations of R. and R. Firm," September 22, 1929, 85 (Newspapers.com).

<sup>48</sup> *Sunday Morning Times*, "Elliott Heads Operations of R. and R. Firm."

<sup>49</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller*, "Theaters Fill Needs of City," September 8, 1926, 12 (Newspapers.com).

<sup>50</sup> *Sunday Morning Times*, "Elliott Heads Operations of R. and R. Firm."

<sup>51</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "Recreational Side of Corpus Christi Life Shows Big Development During Years Since Opening of Local Port," May 18, 1930, 6 (Newspapers.com).

<sup>52</sup> Givens, "Old Picture Palaces: City's First Theatres Were Storefront Affairs with Bedsheets for Screens."

<sup>53</sup> *Corpus Christi Times*, "The Palace Theatre Has Closed for Motion Pictures," April 16, 1925, 8 (Newspapers.com).

<sup>54</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "'Glorifying the American Girl' at Palace," December 15, 1929 (Newspapers.com).

<sup>55</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "Amusu Theater To Be Rebuilt Before Summer," January 24, 1928, 1 (Newspapers.com); "Amusu Theater is Being Dismantled," November 14, 1928, 10 (Newspapers.com).

<sup>56</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "Recreational Side of Corpus Christi Life Shows Big Development During Years Since Opening of Local Port."

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Grande, the Palace, the Aldine, and the Melba (opened as the Leopard Street theater across the street from the Grande in 1927), all in downtown Corpus Christi. Operating four of the six theaters in Corpus Christi, R. and R. Gulf Amusement was the premier theater company in the city and was a major employer. The other two theaters, the Fennix and Agnes Street theaters, were operated independently. The success of their four theaters encouraged R. and R. to invest in the construction of a new, state of the art, \$450,000 theater that would become the R. and R. Ritz Theatre.<sup>57</sup> Combined, the seven theaters in Corpus Christi would be able to seat 7,000 movie attendees.<sup>58</sup>

The new theater was to be designed by William Scott Dunne, a prominent Dallas architect. Dunne first came to Texas from St. Louis, Missouri in 1917 as a professor at Texas A&M University. He taught architecture before becoming a partner at the A.C. Finn architecture firm in Houston. In 1924, Dunne founded his own architecture firm and quickly developed a relationship with R. and R. Gulf Amusement designing theaters throughout Texas. Dunne's work on the Ritz Theatre began a multiple-year partnership between himself and R. and R. Gulf Amusement.<sup>59</sup> After a little more than a decade of private practice, Dunne died in 1937.<sup>60</sup>

When it opened in December 1929, the Ritz Theatre was the most opulent theater yet in Corpus Christi. It opened despite the onset of the Great Depression in September of that year.<sup>61</sup> The Depression slowed the construction of new theaters but appears to not have dampened the city's resolve to remain a key entertainment center.<sup>62</sup> Shortly after the opening of the Ritz, the Aldine theater was closed as a result of R. and R. Gulf Amusement consolidation.<sup>63</sup> The R. and R. Company continued to seat patrons by offering free matinee showings at the Palace and the Ritz to those who bought merchandise from a list of partner businesses, including the Barry-Hendrix Drug Store, Olympia Confectionery, and Meehans' Department Store.<sup>64</sup> Following the pattern of entertainment following industry in Corpus Christi, the construction of the Rio Theatre in 1933 followed three years behind the discovery of oil in the area, which considerably softened the effects of the Depression in the region.<sup>65</sup>

The end of the twentieth century marked the closing of many of Corpus Christi's urban movie theaters. Many of the theaters had been acquired by Corpus Christi Theaters Inc., a new theater management company.<sup>66</sup> The Palace Theater, which had since become a theater for Black moviegoers, closed after a destructive fire in 1953 and was not rebuilt.<sup>67</sup> Another fire destroyed the Avalon Theater in 1955, and the Beach Theater was also closed.<sup>68</sup> The Grande closed in 1960,

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<sup>57</sup> *Corpus Christi Times*, "Amusu Theater is Being Dismantled"; "Announcing South Texas Finest Theatre the R. and R. RITZ," December 15, 1929, 16 (Newspapers.com).

<sup>58</sup> *Sunday Morning Times*, "Show Business Has Developed Recent Years," September 22, 1929, 85 (Newspapers.com).

<sup>59</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "Construction of Theatre Begins," July 14, 1936, 5 (Newspapers.com).

<sup>60</sup> Nancy McCoy, "Texas Theatre, Dallas, Dallas County" Texas Historical Commission, 2003), National Register of Historic Places Designation.

<sup>61</sup> Givens, "Old Picture Palaces: City's First Theatres Were Storefront Affairs with Bedsheets for Screens."

<sup>62</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "Recreational Side of Corpus Christi Life Shows Big Development During Years Since Opening of Local Port."

<sup>63</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "Theaters in Corpus Christi Have Grown Greatly in Past 10 Years," May 18, 1930, 2 (Newspapers.com).

<sup>64</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "Free! Free! Merchants Matinee Tickets," March 30, 1930, 5 (Newspapers.com).

<sup>65</sup> Givens, "Old Picture Palaces: City's First Theatres Were Storefront Affairs with Bedsheets for Screens."

<sup>66</sup> *Corpus Christi Times*, "Corpus Christi Theaters, Inc.," August 26, 1954, 18 (Newspapers.com).

<sup>67</sup> Givens, "Old Picture Palaces: City's First Theatres Were Storefront Affairs with Bedsheets for Screens"; Movie-Theatre.org, "Corpus Christi Movie Theatre and Drive-In History, 1940-1979."

<sup>68</sup> Fanny S. Chirinos, "Popular Northside Market Closes," *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* (Newspapers.com), September 19, 2007; Movie-Theatre.org, "Corpus Christi Movie Theatre and Drive-In History, 1940-1979."



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the Amusu closed in 1962, and the Melba closed in 1966.<sup>69</sup> In 1966 the R. and R. Gulf Amusement was taken over by the United Artists Theater Circuit.<sup>70</sup>

In the early 1970s the United Artists Theater Circuit began a pattern of opening and closing drive-in theaters and adult cinema venues. In an effort to revitalize downtown movie theaters, the United Artists Theater Circuit proposed the construction of four small theaters in 1972, including two within the Centre Theater. The small theaters would allow the showing of independent or niche films which did not hold the widespread appeal of blockbuster movies.<sup>71</sup> The Ritz Theatre closed as a movie theater that year as a result of competition from larger suburban theaters, like the Tower at Six Points.<sup>72</sup> Several pre-World War II theaters were utilized as adult movie theaters during this time including the Amusu, which reclosed in 1973, and the Melba as the Studio III which closed in 1974.<sup>73</sup> The Centre theater closed in 1988 due to underperformance.<sup>74</sup> Suburban theaters, cinema complexes like the Tinseltown mega theater, and a slew of drive-in theaters replaced use of the remaining pre-World War II-era theaters by the turn of the century.<sup>75</sup>

### *The Ritz Theatre*

Anticipation of the Ritz's construction generated much local excitement, and the theater was promoted as the finest theater in town and region. The local paper first announced the Ritz Theatre's pending construction in April 1929. H. H. Elliott, manager and joint owner of R. and R. Gulf Amusement, expected construction to begin on a new \$300,000 theater on July 1.<sup>76</sup> Elliot anticipated Dallas architect "Scott Dunn" would complete the theater building plans in a month, and it would open by January 1, 1930.<sup>77</sup>

Although not the first "amusement house" of R. and R. Gulf Amusement in Corpus, the Ritz would have a seating capacity of 1,300 and extend from North Chaparral Street to Mesquite Street. Property for the Mesquite Street side was secured first.<sup>78</sup> On April 23, 1929, H. H. Elliott filed a warranty deed from Addie Kell Bewley to R. and R. Amusement Company, for Lot 9, Block 9 of the beach section locally described as "property south of the Satterwhite Furniture Company on Mesquite Street." At the time, papers for the title to the North Chaparral Street front were still under examination.<sup>79</sup> It is said the original landowner kept a shop on Mesquite Street and therefore required a Mesquite Street entrance, but the back entrance was never very popular.<sup>80</sup> Another version of the story is that W. W. Jones, local Corpus Christi businessman who owned the Nueces Hotel on Mesquite Street, appealed for the secondary box office and entry because it would enhance business along Mesquite.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "Arrests Clear Up Thefts From Restaurant and Lawn," July 8, 1968, 4A (Newspapers.com); Movie-Theatre.org, "Corpus Christi Movie Theatre and Drive-In History, 1940-1979."

<sup>70</sup> Movie-Theatre.org, "Corpus Christi Movie Theatre and Drive-In History, 1940-1979."

<sup>71</sup> *Corpus Christi Times*, "4 New Small Movie Houses Are Planned," April 20, 1972, 1 (Newspapers.com).

<sup>72</sup> Givens, "Old Picture Palaces: City's First Theatres Were Storefront Affairs with Bedsheets for Screens."

<sup>73</sup> Movie-Theatre.org, "Corpus Christi Movie Theatre and Drive-In History, 1940-1979."

<sup>74</sup> Allison Ehrlich, "Downtown's Centre Theatre Debuted in 1942," *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* (Newspapers.com), October 10, 2019.

<sup>75</sup> Movie-Theatre.org, "Corpus Christi Movie Theatre and Drive-In History, 1940-1979."

<sup>76</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "New \$300,000 Theater Will Be Built Here," April 24, 1929, 1 (Newspapers.com).

<sup>77</sup> Smith, Hurricane Harvey Emergency Supplemental Historic Preservation Fund Grant Program Application for the Ritz Theater, 2020.

<sup>78</sup> Friends of the Ritz, "History," 2023.

<sup>79</sup> History Programs Division Texas Historical Commission, Hurricane Harvey Emergency Supplemental Historic Preservation Fund Grant Program: Rockport School, Texas Historical Commission, 2020.

<sup>80</sup> Hilary Hylton, "The Ritz—Stories of Christmas Past," *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* (Newspapers.com), December 26, 1976.

<sup>81</sup> Friends of the Ritz, "History."

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Prominent Dallas architect William Scott Dunne designed the Ritz with an opulent Spanish Renaissance Revival style exterior and a Spanish courtyard interior in keeping with the popular atmospheric theater style. Constructed by the Wood Sherman Construction Company, and decorated by the Peckenpaugh Construction Company, the interior of the theater was painted with a Mediterranean village scene and a blue-sky ceiling with lighting effects mimicking stars. Two constructed turrets near the stage supported machines which pumped condensed moisture into the air of the theater to create synthetic clouds.<sup>82</sup> It was, at the time, a welcome sign of investment and confidence in the city's potential for future growth.

The Ritz Theatre opened ahead of schedule, on Christmas day in 1929, with a showing of "It's a Great Life." Tickets were 30 cents for adults and 10 cents for children, higher than the other theaters in town at the time.<sup>83</sup> Despite information circulating that the Ritz began as a performance theater and later converted to show movies, the April 1929 Ritz announcement clarifies that the Ritz was always planned as a theater capable of featuring both movie and stage entertainment.<sup>84</sup> The Ritz Theatre was one of the first talking picture houses in south Texas.<sup>85</sup>

Through the 1930s and into the 1940s the Ritz Theatre strengthened its position as a cultural hub in downtown Corpus Christi. In addition to showing high profile films, the theater housed a beauty shop, a Duckworth's dress shop, a café, and the Ritz Confectionery on the North Chaparral Street frontage.<sup>86</sup> The theater hosted exhibits, such as displaying "relics" located by local Boy Scout troops for public viewing, and regular contests with available prizes.<sup>87</sup> During World War II, the Ritz broadcasted speeches and patriotic films, and hosted rallies.<sup>88</sup>

In 1946 the theater was closed for remodeling. Just before the onset of World War II, a large naval training base was constructed in Corpus Christi, at the time the largest of its kind in the world.<sup>89</sup> The influx of population into the city related to naval development, and the celebratory close of the war, likely inspired R. and R. Gulf Entertainment to modernize the Ritz. Alterations were made under the direction of architect Robert L. Volger. Volger is said to have applied an Art Deco style to the interior and exterior of the building.<sup>90</sup> The *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* interviewed Bruce Collins, manager of Corpus Christi theaters, and reported the following at the time of the remodel:

When the Ritz reopened, Collins said, it would be a "different" theater. Both exterior and interior fixtures were undergoing a face-lifting and architectural changes as well as new decorations would alter the appearance of the building. The mezzanine well was being covered to provide a solid second floor. The auditorium floor would be raised and rest rooms and fountains would be installed downstairs. An interior decorator from Dallas would come to Corpus Christi to design the inside arrangement. The building would have a marble front with the box office

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<sup>82</sup> *Corpus Christi Times*, "Building the Amusement Center of Southwest Texas," September 22, 1929, 32 (Newspapers.com); Mike Hume, "Ritz Theatre," 2023.

<sup>83</sup> Friends of the Ritz, "History"; Givens, "Old Picture Palaces: City's First Theatres Were Storefront Affairs with Bedsheets for Screens."

<sup>84</sup> Smith, Hurricane Harvey Emergency Supplemental Historic Preservation Fund Grant Program Application for the Ritz Theater, 2020.

<sup>85</sup> Friends of the Ritz, "History."

<sup>86</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "Announcing New Location of Lady Luck Beauty Shop," January 15, 1930, 6 (Newspapers.com); "Easter Frocks Present Refreshing Aspects of Advance Fashions," March 30, 1930, 2 (Newspapers.com); "White Kitchen Cafe," March 4, 1934, 11 (Newspapers.com); Givens, "Old Picture Palaces: City's First Theatres Were Storefront Affairs with Bedsheets for Screens."

<sup>87</sup> *Corpus Christi Times*, "Old Weapons Placed on Display at Ritz; Prizes Are Offered," January 20, 1937, 2 (Newspapers.com).

<sup>88</sup> Corpus Christi PATCH, Ritz Theatre National Register of Historic Places Eligibility Determination, Texas Historical Commission, 2019.

<sup>89</sup> Heines, *Historic Corpus Christi: A Sesquicentennial History*, 45.

<sup>90</sup> Hume, "Ritz Theatre."

Ritz Theatre, Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas

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located on the south side. A concession stand would occupy the north side of the entrance. New lighting effects would brighten the marquee and carpets would cover the floor of the main lobby.<sup>91</sup>

The 1946 remodel began a period of continued change at the Ritz Theatre in an effort to remain relevant. The increasing popularity of suburban and drive-in theaters constructed by R. and R. Gulf Amusement inadvertently took business from their urban theaters.

There are few records regarding the status of integration of the Ritz Theatre. The theater was constructed during the Jim Crow era and was open only to white patrons in its earliest days.<sup>92</sup> The Ritz is known to have had a secondary entrance and box office, reported to have been constructed at the urging of local business owners, and a balcony. Within the balcony, cushioned chairs reserved for white patrons at the front are separated by an aisle and railing from concrete benches at the rear for Black and Hispanic attendees. This seating arrangement is still extant today.<sup>93</sup> These features are typical of segregated theaters and were likely constructed for white-only patrons and later converted to use by integrated audiences, based on the context of the time period. The secondary entrance and box office on Mesquite Street were enclosed and converted to shops by 1950.<sup>94</sup> If the secondary entrance and box office were indeed reserved for Black and Hispanic attendees during a period in the theater's history, an integration date of 1950 is early compared to general integration trends in Corpus Christi. The majority of shops, restaurants, and theaters in Corpus Christi were integrated by 1963.<sup>95</sup>

By the end of the 1960s the blocks surrounding the Ritz Theatre were associated with urban economic fragility in the city.<sup>96</sup> After surviving Hurricane Celia in 1970, the theater continued to operate in the midst of the establishment of large, multiple-screen suburban theaters. However, in 1972 the Ritz Theatre closed as a movie theater due to economic decline of the downtown area and suburban competition.<sup>97</sup>

After the official closing of the Ritz Theatre as a movie theater it was reopened as The Ritz Music Hall in 1974. Only open for a year under the original management scheme, the theater housed performances by big name artists such as Willie Nelson, Bruce Springsteen, and The Pointer Sisters, to name a few. The theater closed in 1975 and reopened under new management in 1976, during which time several seats were removed to provide standing room for concerts.<sup>98</sup> Into the 1980s the Ritz was used primarily as a playhouse, but degrading facilities caused the theater to close for good in 1989. The nonprofit organization Corpus Christi Positive Action Toward Cultural Heritage, locally known as CCPATCH, acquired the theater in 2010 and has held several bespoke events in the space in efforts to revitalize the Ritz.<sup>99</sup>

### **Criterion A**

The Ritz Theatre is significant under Criterion A at the local level for its association with the development of movie theaters as an important entertainment and recreation venue in Corpus Christi in the middle of the twentieth century. The theater was constructed during a period of local economic prosperity that instigated increased leisure interests for a

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<sup>91</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "Ritz to be Closed for Few Weeks," June 16, 1946, 3B (Newspapers.com).

<sup>92</sup> Givens, "Old Picture Palaces: City's First Theatres Were Storefront Affairs with Bedsheets for Screens."

<sup>93</sup> *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, "Historic Ritz Theatre in Downtown Corpus Christi," February 2, 2023.

<sup>94</sup> Sanborn Map Company, *Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas, Volume 1*, 1950.

<sup>95</sup> Ronnie Thompson, "Desegregation is Taking Place Quietly, Voluntarily in Texas," *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* (Newspapers.com), June 30, 1963.

<sup>96</sup> Corpus Christi PATCH, Ritz Theatre National Register of Historic Places Eligibility Determination, 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Corpus Christi PATCH, Ritz Theatre National Register of Historic Places Eligibility Determination, 2019; Givens, "Old Picture Palaces: City's First Theatres Were Storefront Affairs with Bedsheets for Screens."

<sup>98</sup> Other performers who played at the Ritz through the 1970s include Status Quo, Blue Oyster Cult, Rush, Journey, Patti Smith Group, and AC/DC.

<sup>99</sup> Corpus Christi PATCH, Ritz Theatre National Register of Historic Places Eligibility Determination, 2019.

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growing population. It retains enough physical and historical integrity to be a good example of its type and a noted local landmark. The period of significance begins with the theater's 1929 completion and ends in 1974, when the Ritz reopened as a live music facility after it ceased operations as film venue in 1972.

The Ritz opened as a large, modern venue at the height of opulent motion picture palaces. It was constructed as the city's premier theater in the downtown core, just before the onset of the Great Depression. The theater remained a relevant center of urban entertainment through periods of growth, depression, war, and renewal by operating as a playhouse, showing high-profile films, and hosting special events. The Ritz continued showing films when many similar downtown venues closed and new suburban theaters built. Many contemporaneously built local theaters have been lost to fire, neglect, renewal efforts, or hurricane damage. The Ritz has survived an extended period of change since its closure and has retained major architectural attributes including its Spanish-courtyard interior and its Spanish Renaissance Revival exterior detailing. The Ritz is representative of the prolific R. and R. Gulf Amusement Company's theater developments and their partnership with architect William Scott Dunne. It is one of very few theaters extant in Corpus Christi from the period of significance and is the only theater in the city to have offered the immersive atmospheric theater experience to moviegoers.

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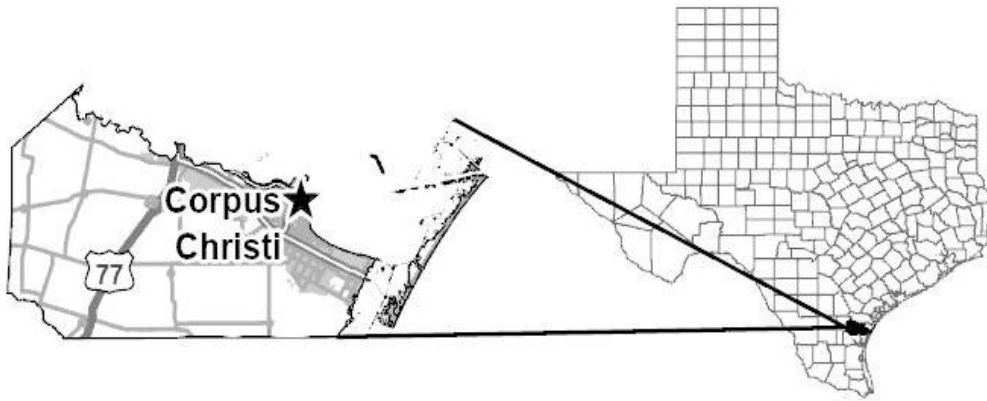
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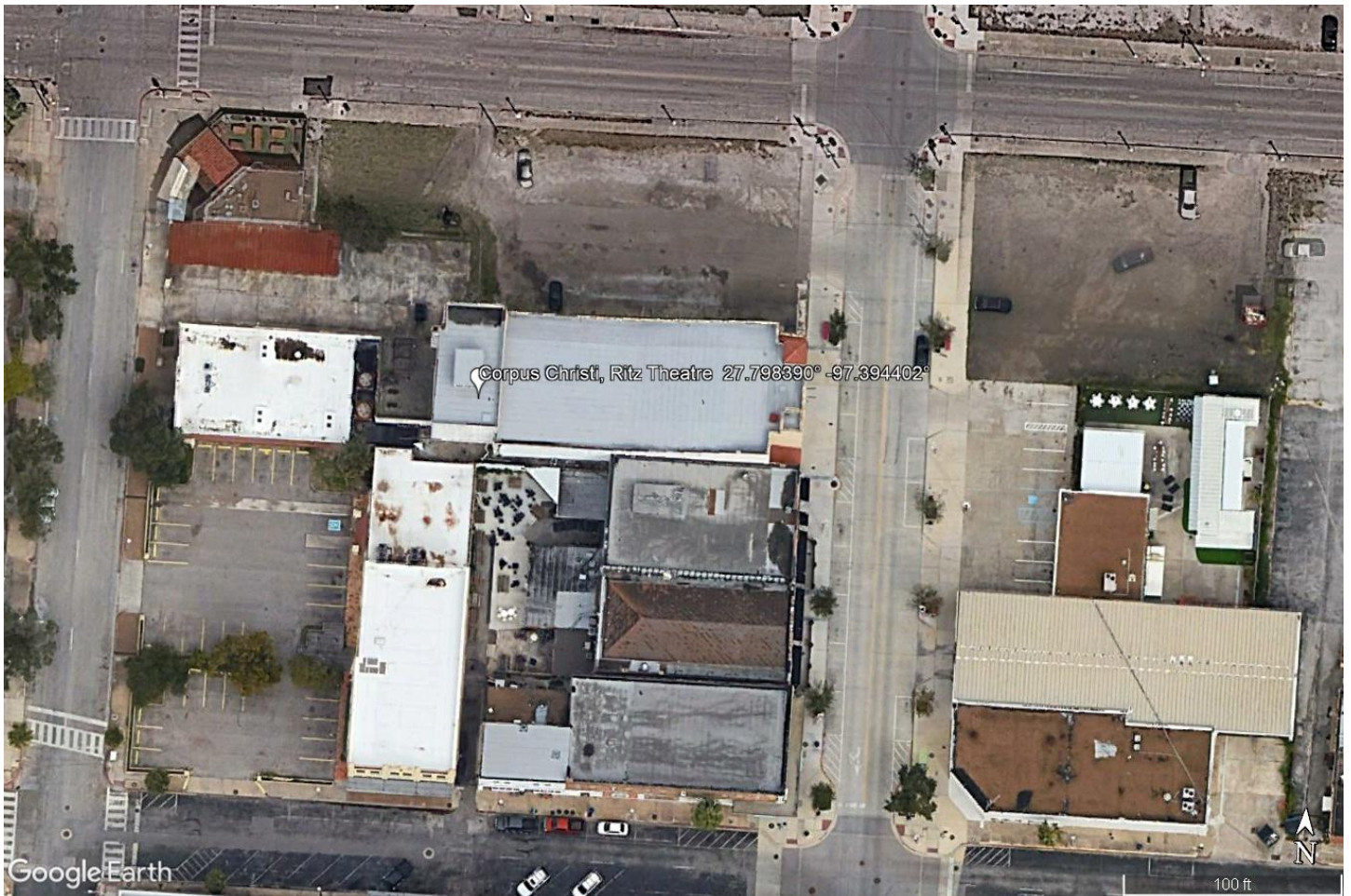


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**Google Earth Map** (accessed August 8, 2023).  
Latitude: 27.798390° Longitude: -97.394402°



Ritz Theatre, Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas

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Nueces Central Appraisal District (NuecesCAD) map indicating nominated parcel boundaries

Owner Name: CORPUS CHRISTI PATCH INC

Property Identification Number: 191663

Legal Description: BEACH LT 4, S10' OF LT 5, 10' X 20' OF LT 8, 50' X 60.58' OF LT 9 & NE 5' X 30' OF LT 10 BK 9

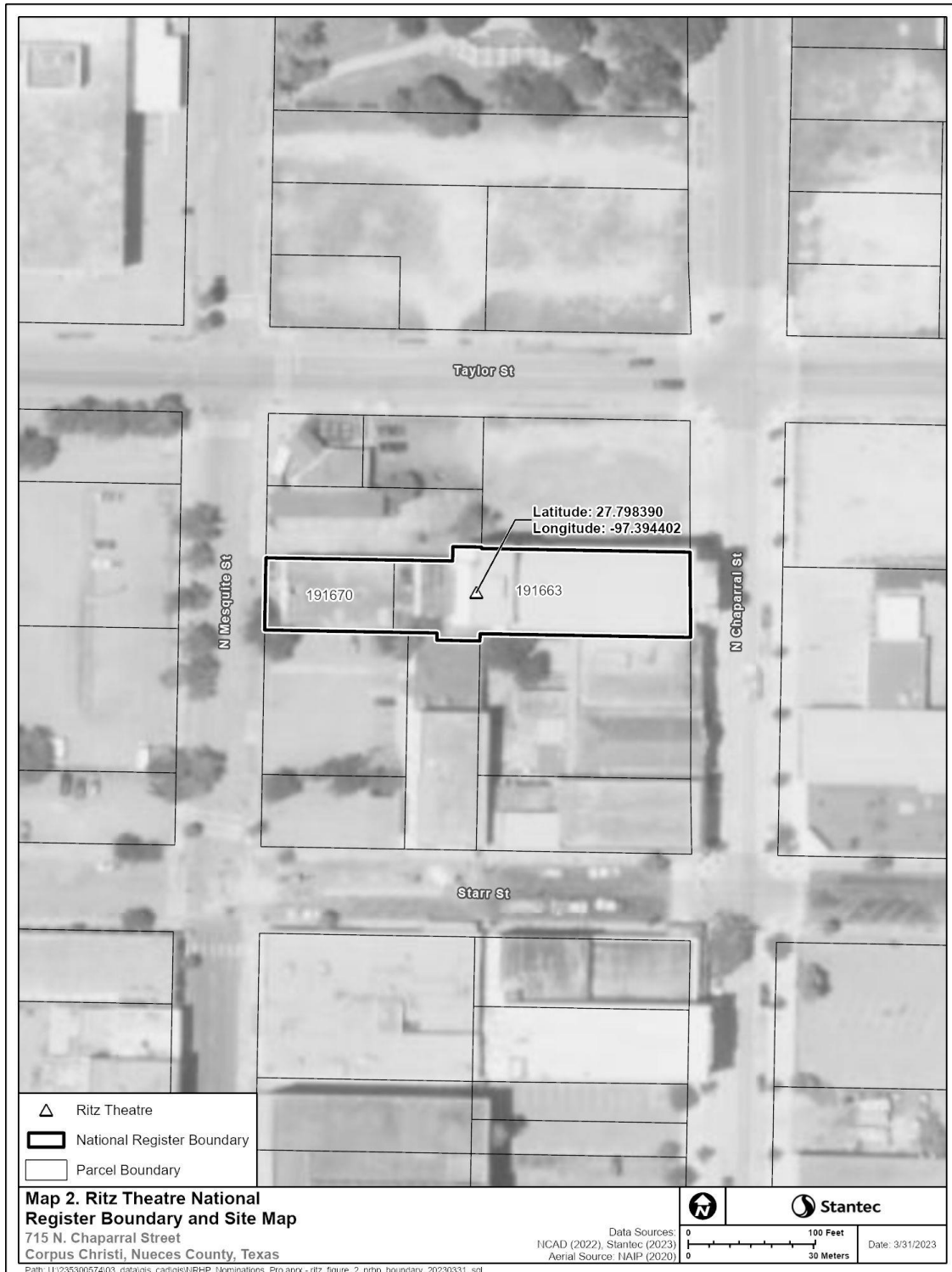
Owner Name: WARNER-MCCOWN PROPERTY GROUP

Property Identification Number: 191670

Legal Description: BEACH W50' X 89.52' OF LT 9 BK 9



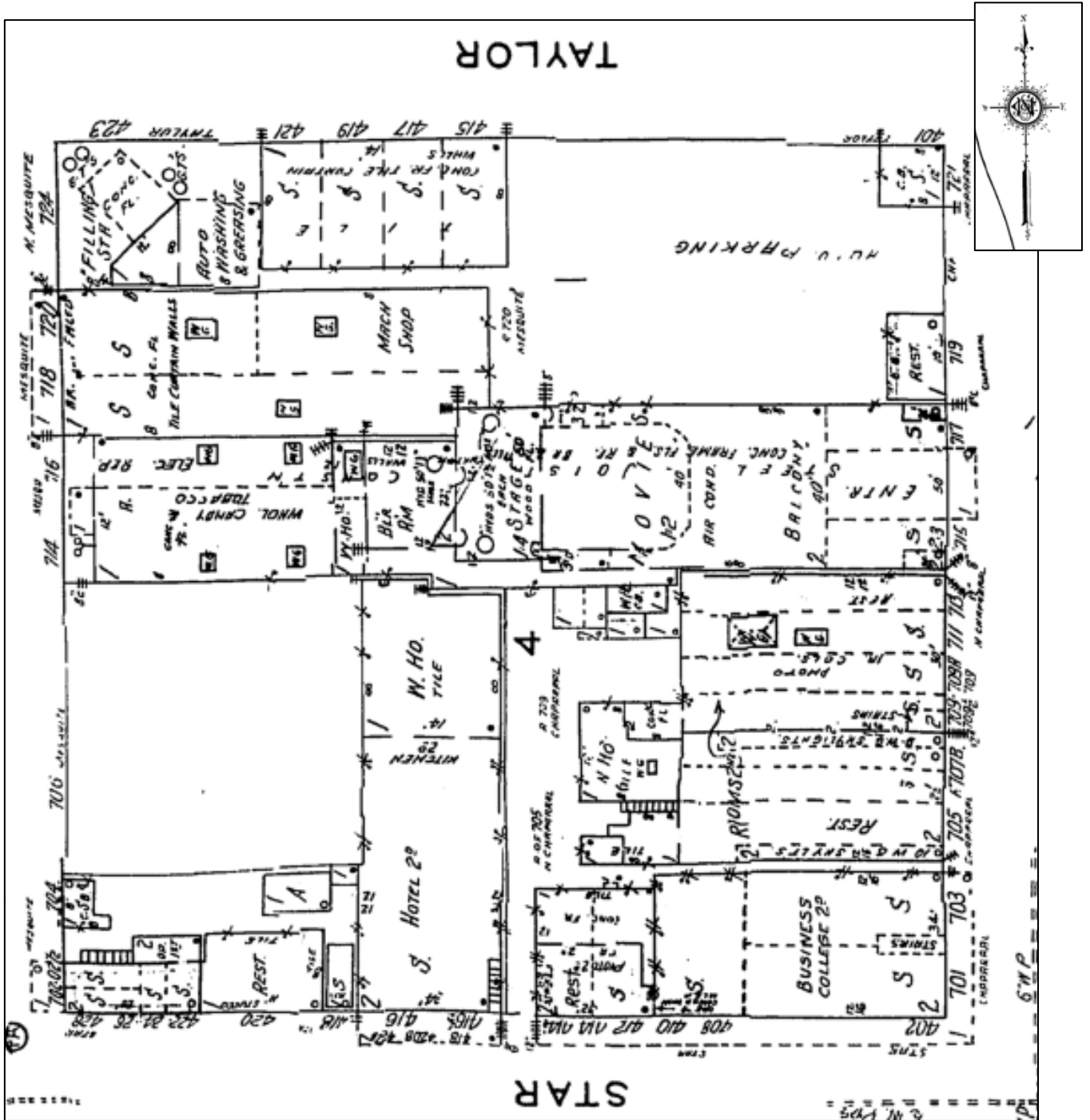
Ritz Theatre, Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas





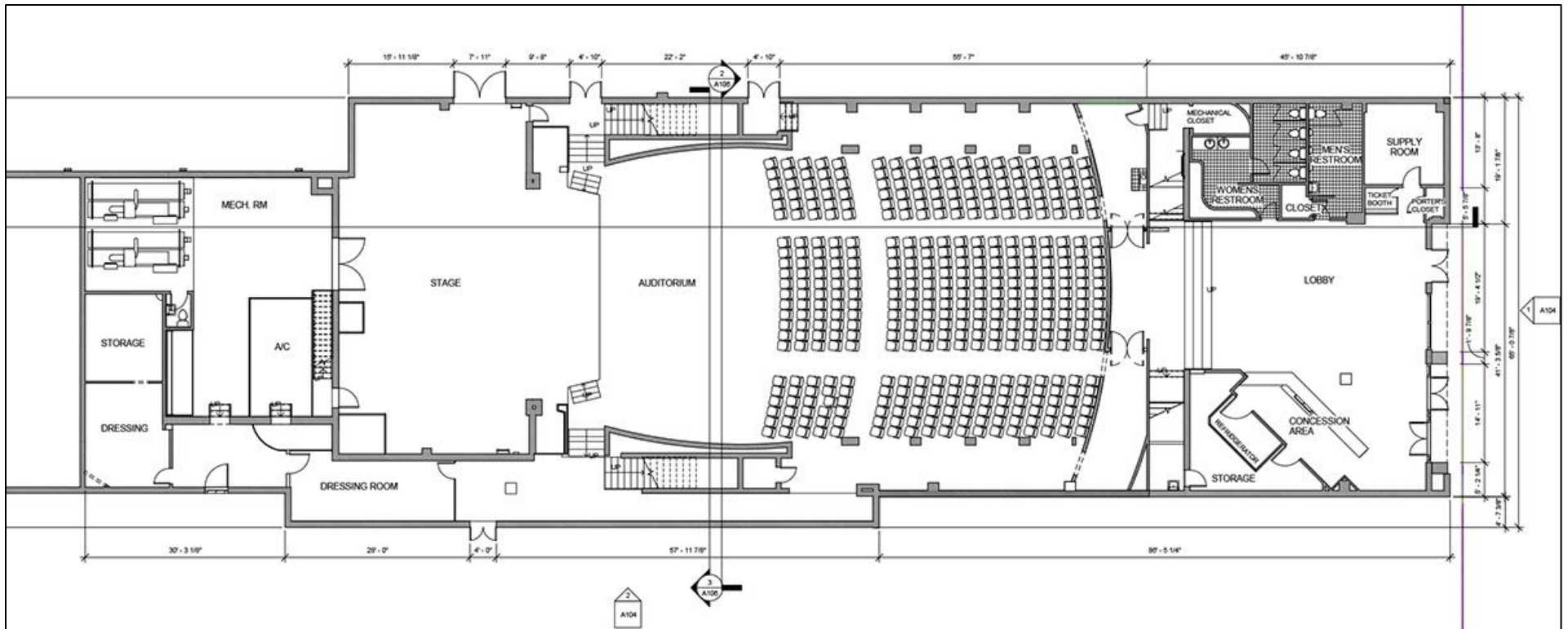
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Figure 2. The 1950 city block encompassing the Ritz Theatre, with Mesquite Street entrance and box office removed (Sanborn Map Company 1950).



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**Figure 3.** Floor plan of the ground level of the Ritz Theatre (Del Mar College Architectural/Drafting Technology Program and Nick Gignac, Gignac and Associates 2020).

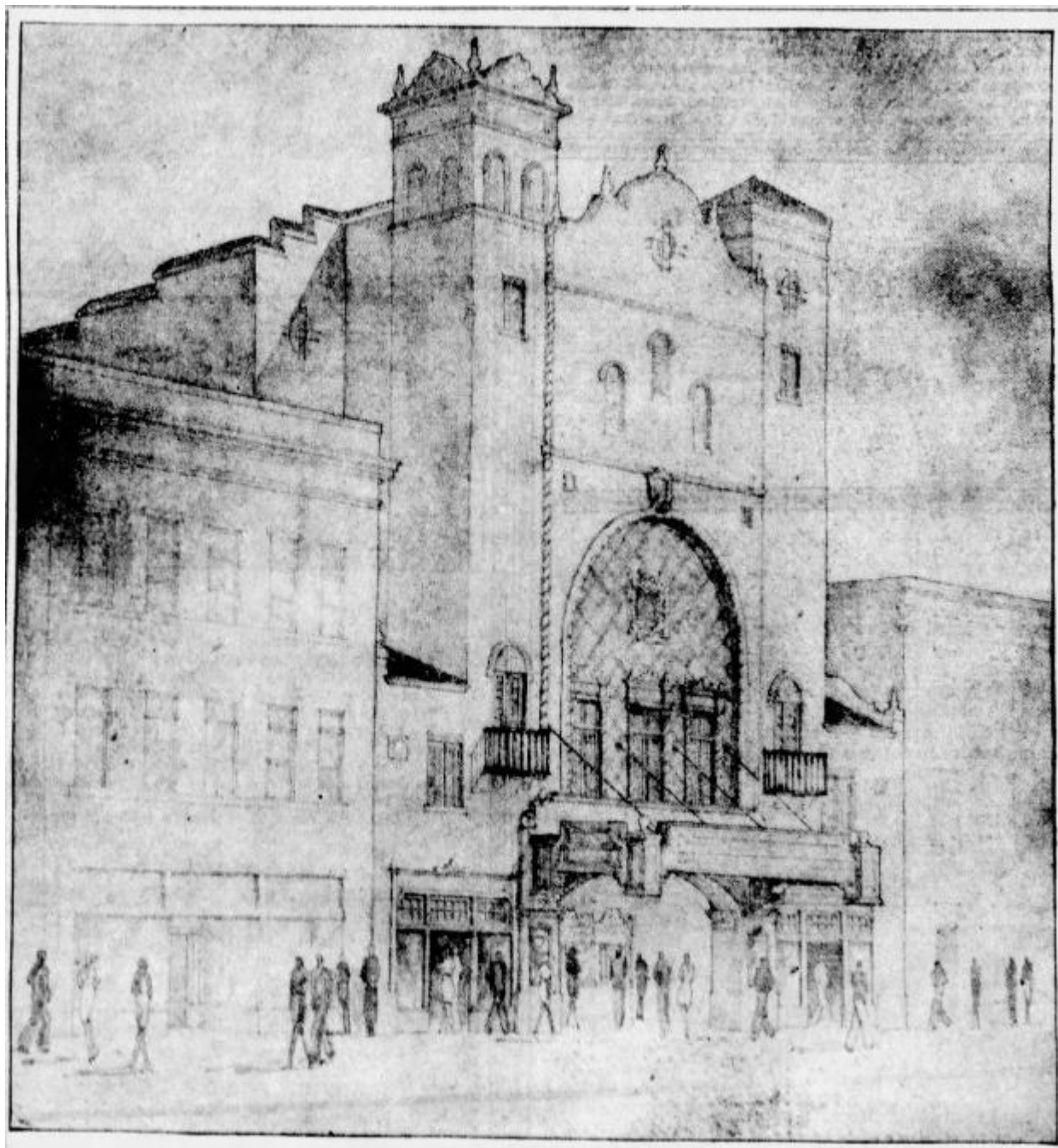


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**Figure 4.** Sketch of the Ritz Theatre from North Chaparral Street under construction in Corpus Christi featured in the September 22, 1929, issue of the *Corpus Christi Times*. The Ritz would open two months later on Christmas Day.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/757631412/>



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**Figure 5.** The Ritz Theatre's secondary entrance is at right in this 1930s photo of the 700 block of N. Mesquite Street, facing northeast (Murphy Givens, "Union Soldiers Raided Matt Nolan's Home on Mesquite," *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, May 17, 2017, 12A).

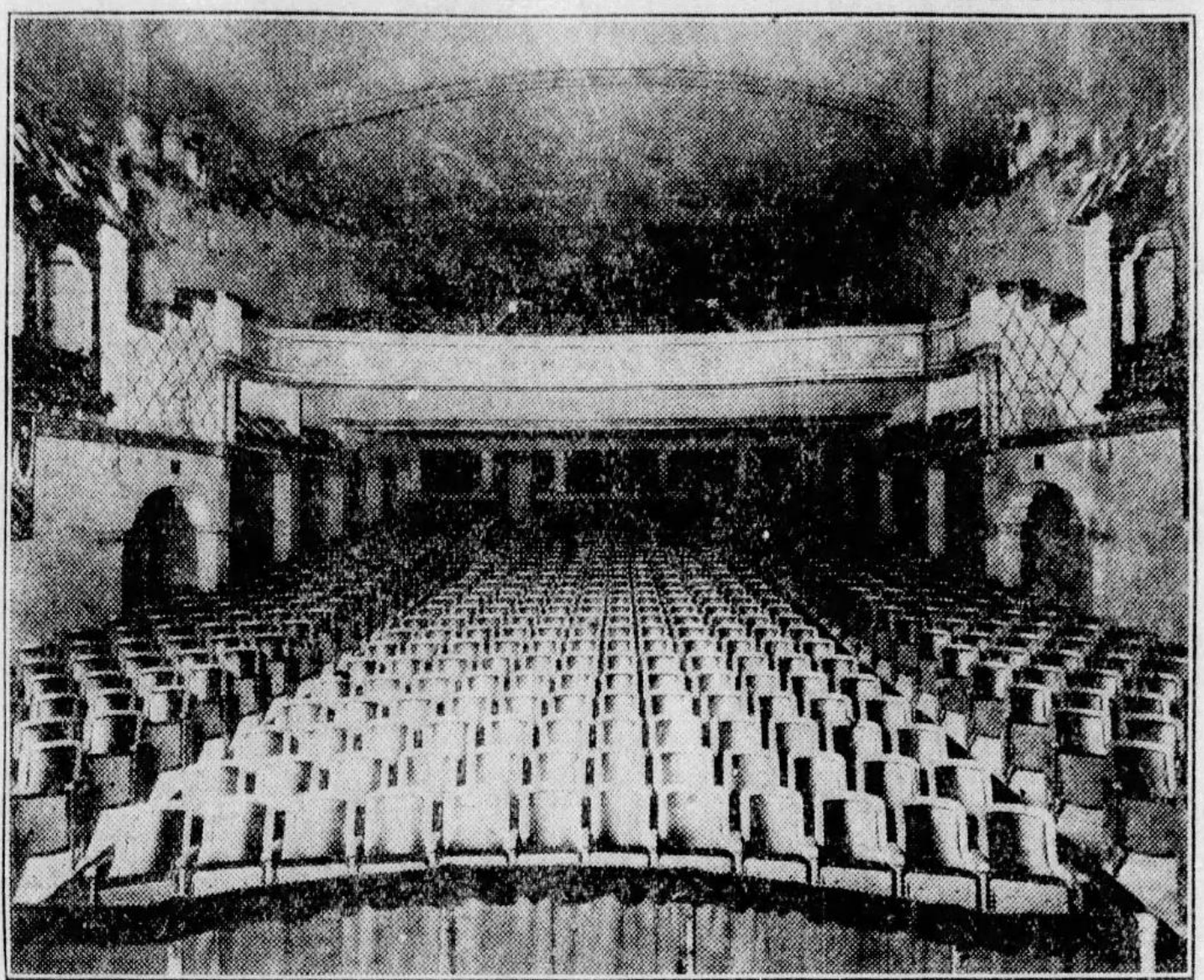




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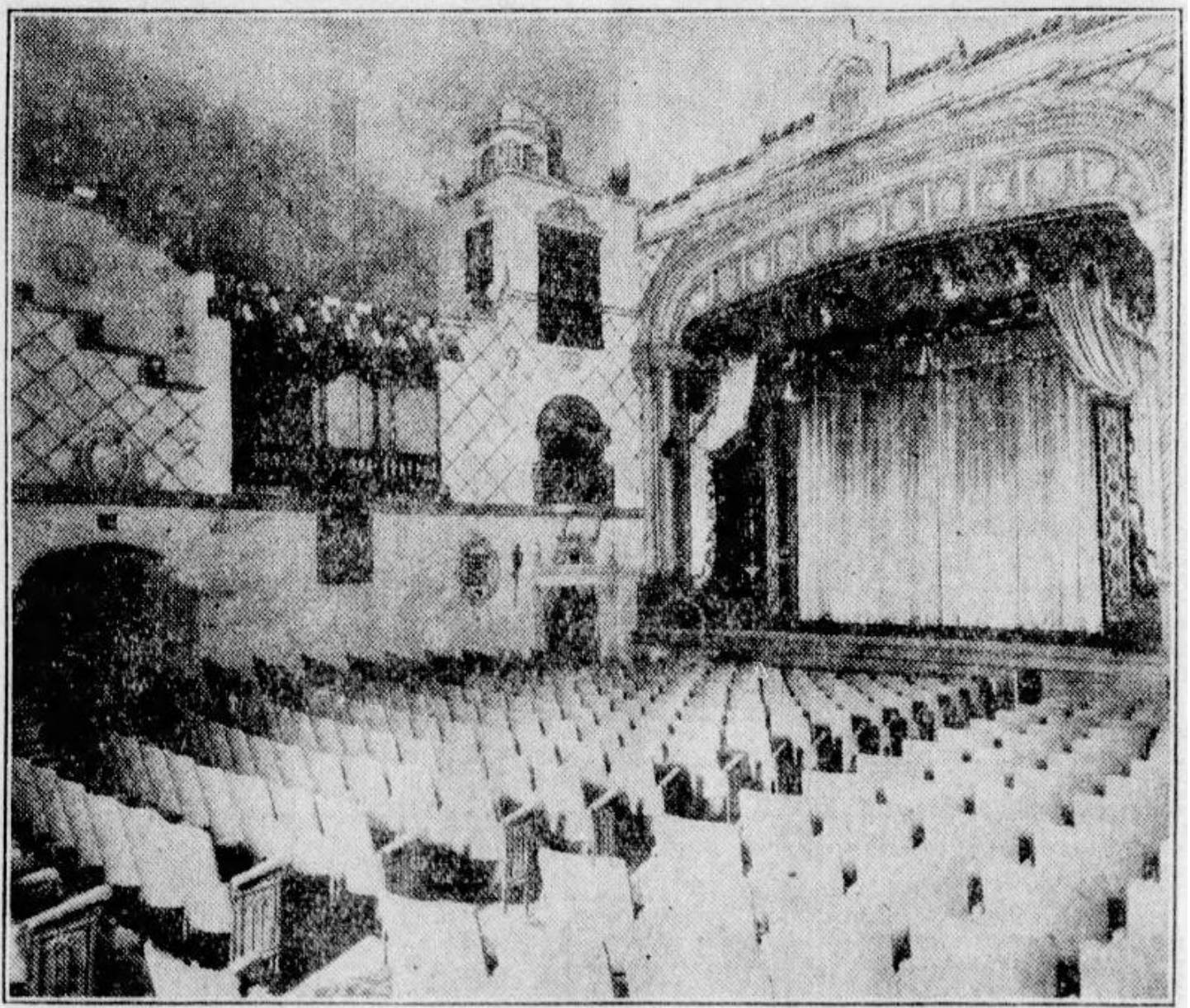
**Figure 6.** Interior View of the Ritz Theater, *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, January 12, 1930  
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/754802409/>



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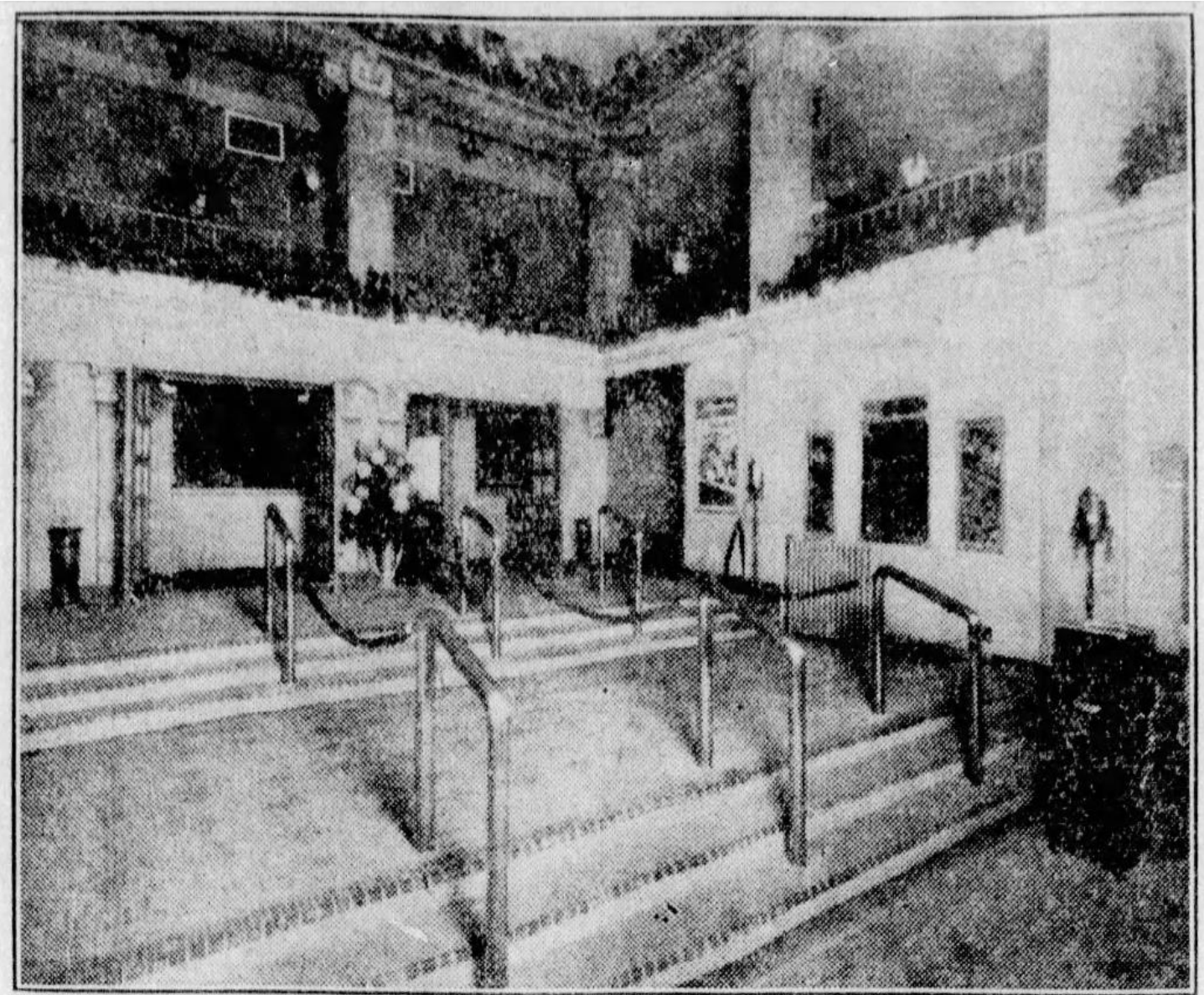
**Figure 7.** Interior View of the Ritz Theater, *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, January 12, 1930  
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/754802409/>



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**Figure 8.** Interior View of the Ritz Theater, *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, January 12, 1930.  
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/754802409/>



Ritz Theatre, Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas

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**Figure 9.** Ritz Theater, November 22, 1934 (Doc McGregor Collection, Corpus Christi Museum of Science and History).



Ritz Theatre, Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas

**Figure 10.** Chaparral Street and the Ritz Theater, late 1920s, Collection F1, Box 1, Folder 15, Item 1, Corpus Christi Public Library Local History Archives.



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**Figure 11.** Ritz Theater's front façade, February 6, 1935, McGregor Photos, Collection 4, Box 12, Folder 28, Item 9, Corpus Christi Public Library Local History Archives.



**Figure 12.** The Ritz Theater and Chaparral Street, October 3, 1940, McGregor Photos, Collection 4, Box 12, Folder 28, Item 5, Corpus Christi Public Library Local History Archives.



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**Figure 12.** The Ritz Theater and Chaparral Street after Hurricane Celia, August 3, 1970, Collection 1, Box 29, Folder 9, Item 16, Corpus Christi Public Library Local History Archives.



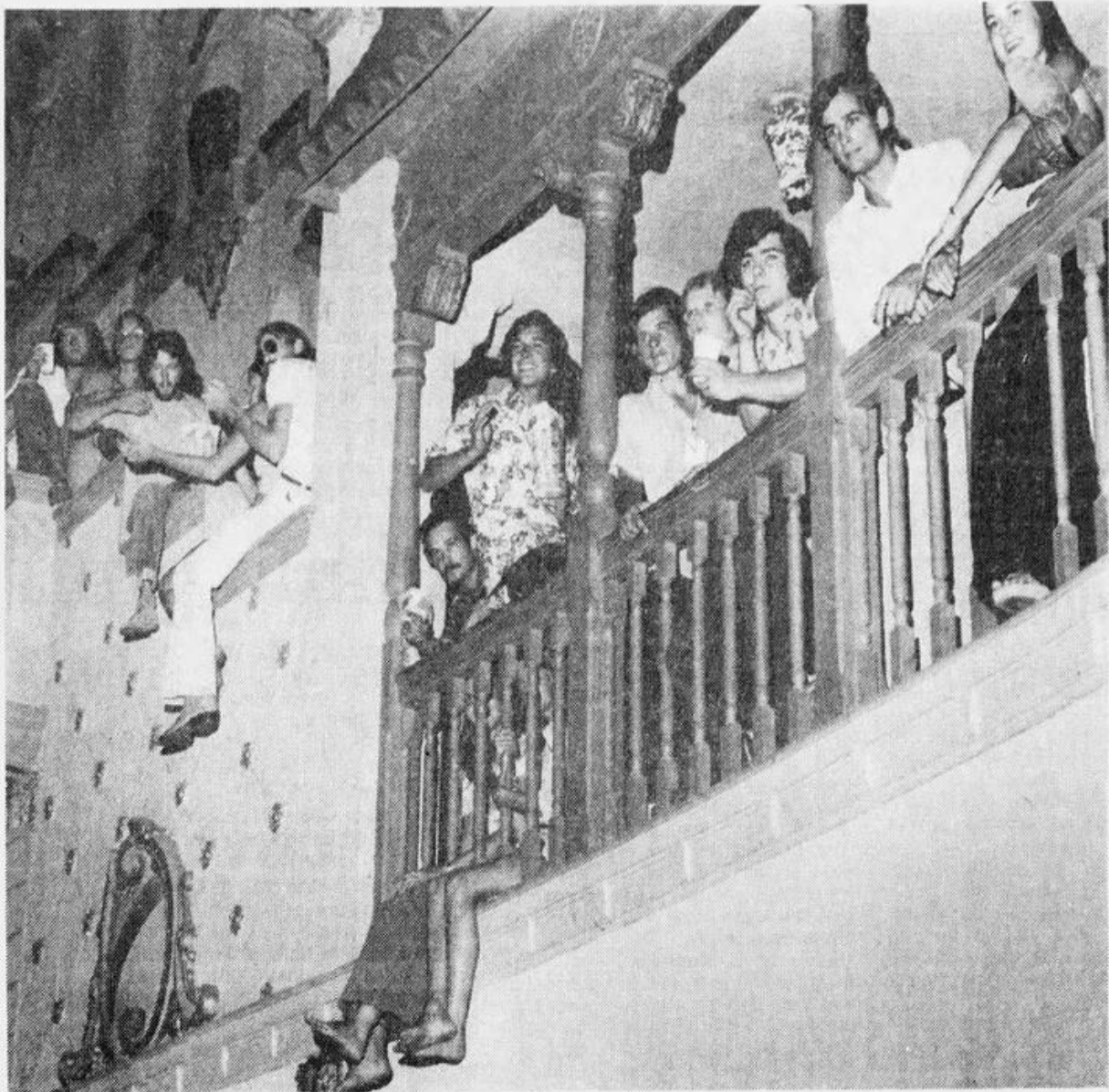
**Figure 13.** Line outside of a Jerry Jeff Walker Concert at opening of the “Ritz Music Hall” July 24, 1974. Ritz Theater, Corpus Christi *Caller-Times* photograph archive.



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**Figure 14.** Jerry Jeff Walker Concert at opening of the “Ritz Music Hall” July 24, 1974. *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*.



THE CROWD AT THE RITZ CHEERS JERRY JEFF WALKER



Ritz Theatre, Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas

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**Figure 15.** Ritz Theater, May 26, 1988, Folder: Ritz Theater, *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* Photo archive.



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**Figure 16.** Interior, south wall from floor, January 2014.  
Photo by Gregory Smith



**Figure 17.** Interior, south wall from balcony, January 2014.  
Photo by Gregory Smith



Ritz Theatre, Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas

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**Current Photos** (October 14, 2022)

**Photo 1.** Front façade, view facing west.



**Photo 2.** Oblique, view facing southwest.



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**Photo 3.** West façade, view facing southeast.



**Photo 4.** West façade, view facing east.



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**Photo 5.** South façade, central lower portion obstructed by adjacent building, and west façade of the theater stage, view facing northeast.



**Photo 6.** Interior, from rear of mezzanine toward stage, view facing west.



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**Photo 7.** Interior, lobby, view facing west.



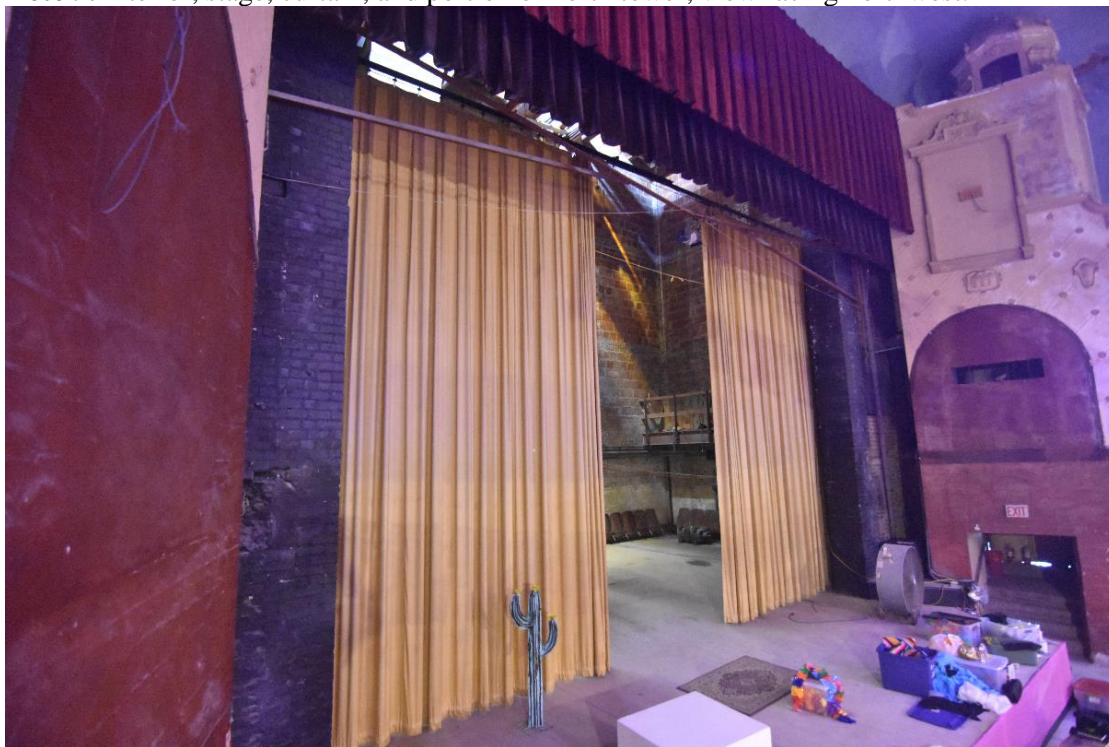
**Photo 8.** Interior, from rear of auditorium first level toward stage, view facing west.



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**Photo 9.** Interior, stage, curtain, and portion of north tower, view facing northwest.



**Photo 10.** Interior, from stage toward mezzanine, view facing east.



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**Photo 11.** Interior, from front of mezzanine toward stage, view facing west.



**Photo 12.** Interior, detail of stylized ornamentation, view facing north.





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**Photo 13.** Interior, from front to rear of mezzanine, view facing east.



**Photo 14.** Interior, second floor office, view facing southeast.



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**Photo 15.** Interior, upper dressing room with dark room at left rear, view facing northwest.



**Photo 16.** Interior, mezzanine lounge, view facing southwest.



Ritz Theatre, Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas

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**Photo 17.** Interior, projection room, view facing northwest.



Ritz Theatre, Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas

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**Photo 18.** Interior, backstage, view facing south.



Ritz Theatre, Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas

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**Photo 19.** Interior, enclosed arched wall and built-in shelves, view facing west.



**Photo 20.** Interior, drinking fountain with tile floor and backing on the mezzanine, view facing northwest.



Ritz Theatre, Corpus Christi, Nueces County, Texas

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**Photo 21.** Interior, Carrier-Brunswick compressors in mechanical room, view facing southwest.



- end -