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# Dream Palaces: The Motion Picture Playhouse in the Sunshine State

By Michael D. Kinerk and Dennis W. Wilhelm

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*It was a brief era, as golden eras go. It had swept in on a floodtide of splendor, of million-dollar real estate deals, of fantastic architecture, of music, laughter, and dreams, less than a decade before. And it was to end.... The whole dizzy, prodigal, enchanted business came to gaudy full bloom, filled the night with its scent, wilted, and drooped in the short span of years that lay between the coming of Prohibition and the onset of the Depression.<sup>1</sup>*

With their epic scale, tropical courtyards, dimly lit corridors, and opulent public salons, the motion picture dream palaces built early in our century paid tribute to architectural wonders of the past. The pyramids of Egypt, the Alhambra, and Versailles offered inspiration for movie theatres erected throughout the United States (figs. 1 and 2). However, there was a modern aspect that superseded the links to the past — all of the picture palaces had thoroughly new technology to project flickering images of romance or tragedy. After 1930 all of them were wired for sound. They had climate control to chill hot sultry nights and to warm the coldest winter freeze, in rooms so vast that the sultans who built the original palaces would have torn their turbans in envy.

From 1908 to 1917 Thomas A. Edison's (1847–1931) film patents were controlled by the Motion Picture Patents company, binding the earliest studios in a cartel finally broken by court order.<sup>2</sup> After this, the motion picture studio system grew rapidly. Each major production studio bought, merged with, or created a distribution arm, a publicity machine, and most importantly, bought or built increasingly spectacular chains of exhibition outlets. Fierce competition and the vast potential for profits dictated that by 1920 these theatres — flagships of the studio in each city — be the best. Each studio was forced, literally, to build dream palaces (figs. 3 and 4).

Though the balance shifted several times through the years, there was always a hierarchy in terms of the major studios. In 1931 it was, in order, Paramount, Warner, Fox, Loew's, and RKO. These firms were responsible for building the nation's most lavish showplaces. By 1931 Paramount Publix, the operating exhibition subsidiary of Paramount Studios, had 971 theatres; Warner had 529; Fox had 521; Loew's had 189; and RKO had 161.<sup>3</sup>

In 1927, the zenith of the silent-picture era, Florida had three exceptional dream palaces with more than two thousand seats, and twenty-one with more than

1. Ben M. Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats* (New York: Bramhall House, 1961), 12.

2. Richard Dyer MacCann, *The First Tycoons* (Iowa City: Image and Idea Inc., with Scarecrow Press of Metuchen, N.J. and London, 1987), 247.

3. *Ibid.*, 181.



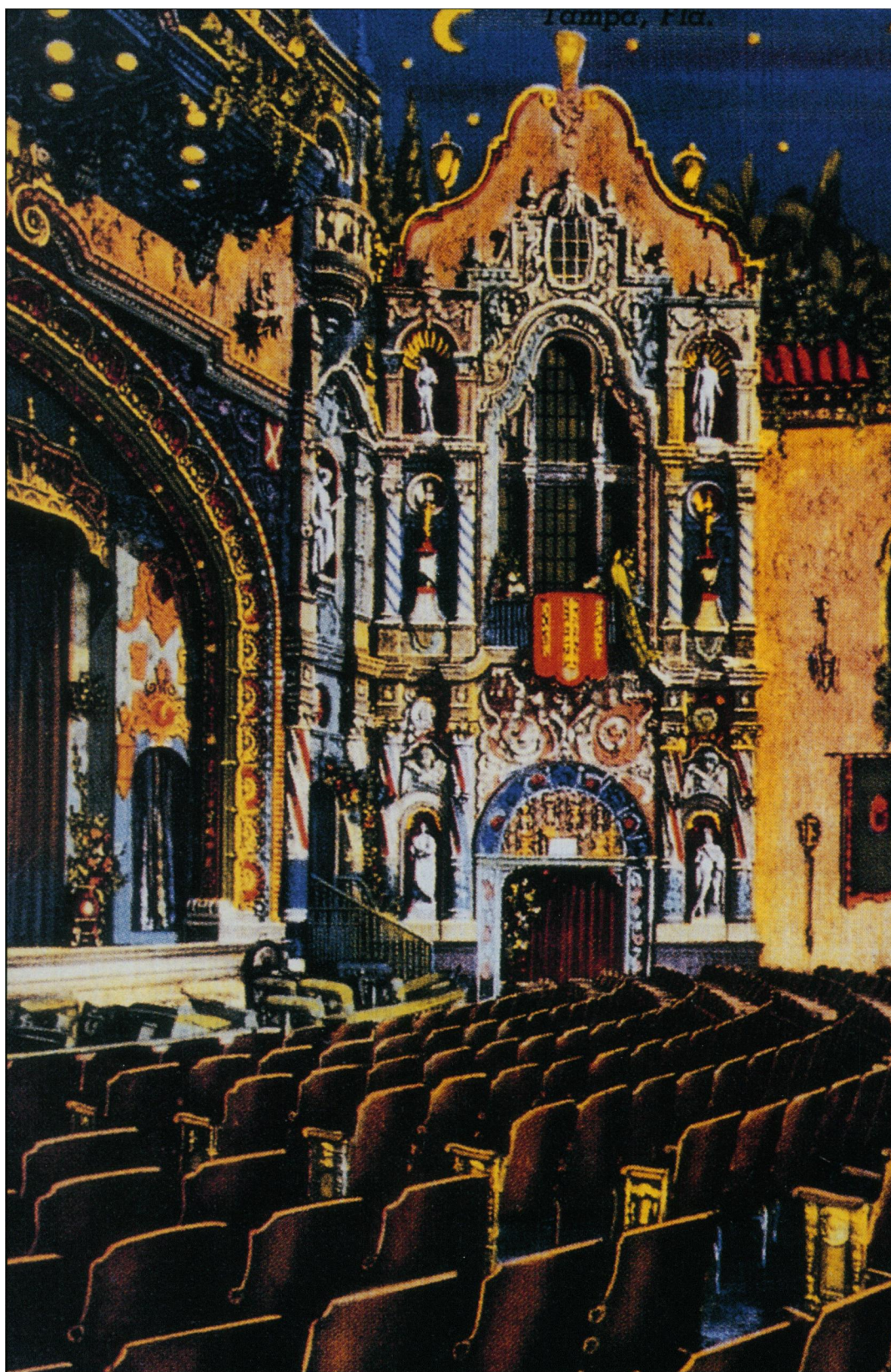
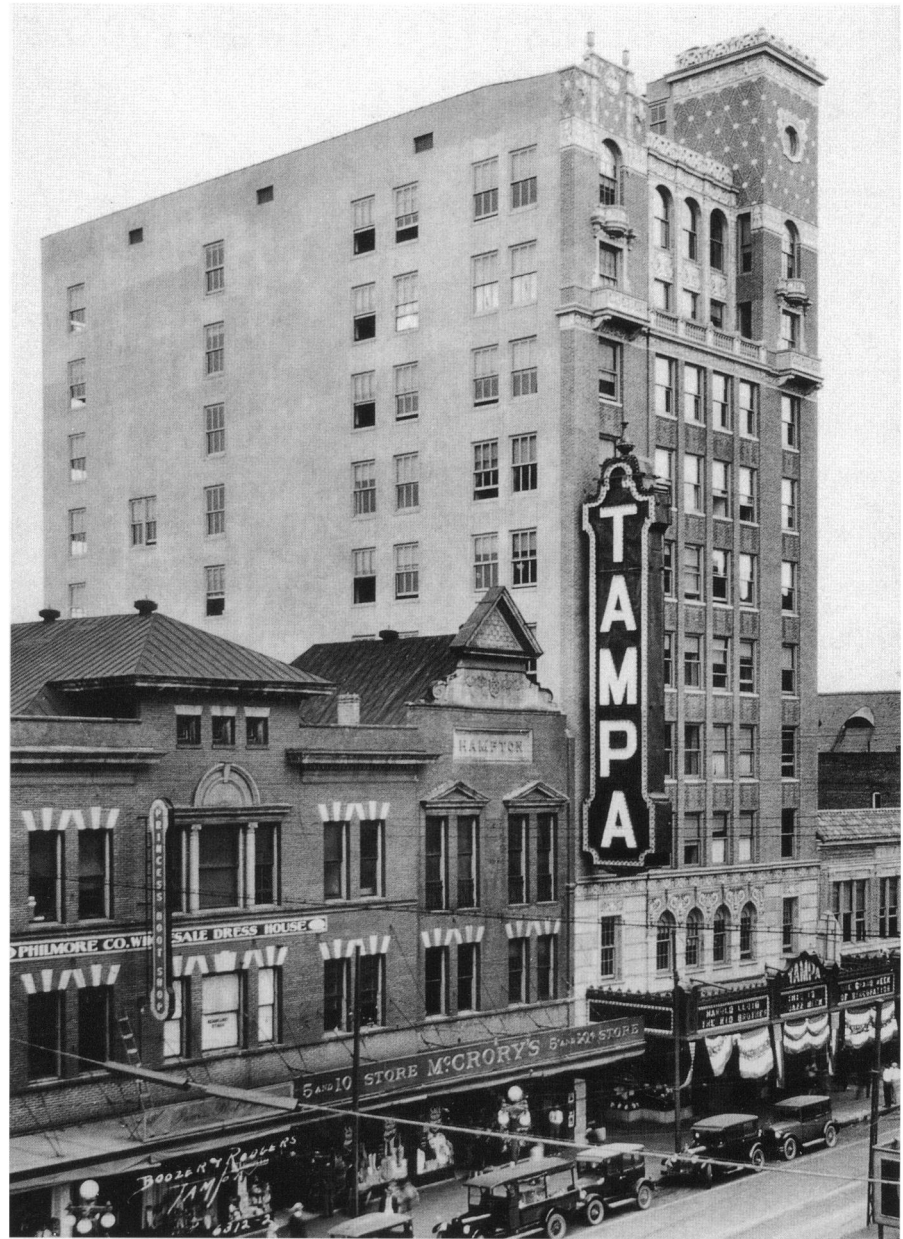


Fig. 1. John Eberson, Tampa Theatre, stage and right sidewall, 1926. From a postcard. Bernard Zyscovich collection.





*left,*

**Fig. 2. John Eberson, rendering of exterior facade of Tampa Theatre, 1926. From a printed color cover of a prospectus for building bonds, 11 x 14". Eberson Archive, Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian, Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida.**

*above,*

**Fig. 3. John Eberson, Tampa Theatre, exterior facade with upright sign, 1926. Eberson Archive, Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian, Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida.**



**Fig. 4. John Eberson, Tampa Theatre, box office and entry, 1926. Eberson Archive, Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian, Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida.**



one thousand seats. In addition to the largest theatres, Florida had nearly one hundred smaller, more conventional cinemas, each less than one thousand seats, sprinkled across the state by the dozens in bigger counties, with at least one or two in practically every county. Between 1900 and 1950 more than five hundred movie houses were built in Florida. Population was the prime determinant in the construction of the theatres. Dade County (with both Miami and Miami Beach) had the most theatres operating in this period, followed by Hillsborough (Tampa), Pinellas (St. Petersburg), Duval (Jacksonville), Polk (Lakeland), and Broward (Fort Lauderdale) counties.<sup>4</sup>

The studios employed a select group of architects, primarily using the services of John Eberson (1875–1954), Thomas W. Lamb (1871–1942), and the brothers

4. Florida theatre operating data compiled from Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) research department, *Theatre Directory, Atlanta Exchange Territory* (New York: February, 1948); and *Film Daily Yearbook* (Florida chapters) 1930, 1945, 1955.



**Fig. 5. John Ebersson, Tampa Theatre, outer entrance foyer with stair in main lobby, tile floor, antique furniture, coffered ceiling, 1926. Ebersson Archive, Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian, Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida.**

Cornelius W. (1861–1927) and George Rapp (1878–1942), whose firm was known as Rapp and Rapp. Just as there was a second tier of theatre chains (Universal, Columbia, United Artists), there was a second tier of architectural firms working nationwide, including S. Charles Lee (1899–1990) and C. Howard Crane. These architects were also first-rate movie theatre architects; they merely designed fewer theatres than Ebersson, Lamb, and Rapp and Rapp.

Florida's dream palaces were smaller than those in Northern states, where Paramount Publix's flagships were three-thousand-plus-seat titans, with as many square feet in the lobbies and corridors as in the auditoriums. Loew's "Wonder Theatres" were just as large. Fox built five spectacular five-thousand-seat houses in Atlanta, Brooklyn, Detroit, Saint Louis, and San Francisco. The strategy was to maximize revenues by holding enough people waiting in the massive lobbies to fill the auditorium quickly for the next show. People were lured in both by the extravagantly decorated lobbies and the entertainment provided within. The lobbies were, if anything, more sumptuous than the auditoriums, with huge chandeliers, towering marble columns, fine oil paintings, antiques, luxurious furniture (often imported from Europe), and other accoutrements appropriate for a true palace (figs. 5 and 6).

The lobbies often featured musicians, usually pianists, performing in the hours before the next show. Some of the largest theatres had a separate pipe organ in the lobby, and all true movie palaces had a mighty Wurlitzer, Kimball, or Robert Morton pipe organ within the auditorium. Nothing that could amuse the patrons was considered excessive, as Harold W. Rambusch, a renowned theatre decorator, explained in a 1927 article:

The vast majority of those attending our theatres are of very limited means. Their homes are not luxurious and the theatre affords them an opportunity to imagine themselves as wealthy people in luxurious surroundings. They may come here as often as they please by paying a small fee within their means and feel themselves to be the lords of all they survey. In our





**Fig. 6. John Eberson, Tampa Theatre, main lobby, pent eaves, staircase, floor lamps, urns, stanchions, 1926. Eberson Archive, Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian, Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida.**

big modern movie palaces there are collected the most gorgeous rugs, furniture and fixtures that money can produce. No kings or emperors have wandered through more luxurious surroundings.<sup>5</sup>

In Florida no city was large enough to warrant such massive theatres.<sup>6</sup> However, in 1926–1927, Paramount Publix, as it was then known, opened four of the most spectacular of the hundreds of theatres built or yet-to-be built in Florida: the Tampa, Jacksonville’s Florida, Miami’s Olympia, and St. Petersburg’s Florida.

Of Florida’s dream palaces, none was finer than the opulent but compact Tampa Theatre, built in 1926, and designed by architect John Eberson (1875–1954). Roy A. Benjamin (1888–1963) and Robert E. Hall (1888–1963) also were affiliated with the project (figs. 1–10). The Tampa Theatre closely approached the standard set by its big-city counterparts, although it had neither a hospital, children’s playroom, nor third- and fourth-floor foyers.<sup>7</sup> In keeping with Florida’s three hundred years of Spanish history, the most stunning picture palaces were of Moorish-Iberian derivation. The Tampa Theatre was no exception and has been described by one historian as one of Eberson’s finest “Andalusian bonbons.”<sup>8</sup>

5. Harold W. Rambusch, “The Decorations of the Theatre,” ed. R. W. Sexton, *American Theatres of Today* (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Company, 1930), 2:24.
6. U.S. 1920 Census figures: Jacksonville, 91,558; Tampa, 51,608; Pensacola, 31,035; Miami, 29,571; Key West, 18,749; St. Petersburg, 14,327; Orlando, 9,282; West Palm Beach, 8,659; Lakeland, 7,062; Gainesville, 6,860.
7. Restored in 1977 and placed on the National Register the following year, the Tampa Theatre is now a city-owned performing arts center offering film screenings. It is the only Florida movie palace used for its originally intended purpose. It had a Wurlitzer theatre pipe organ recently reinstalled to provide authentic accompaniment for silent film classics; Eberson job #571, Eberson Archive, Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian, Florida International University. Data also from KBJ Architects’ Roy A. Benjamin project list.
8. Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats*, 97.

**Fig. 7. John Eberson, Tampa Theatre, upper mezzanine with antique fourteenth-century Spanish decorative cabinet, pitchers, vases, wrought-iron torchieres, large medieval tapestry, 1926. Eberson Archive, Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian, Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida.**



**Fig. 8. John Eberson, Tampa Theatre, detail from auditorium sidewall, 1926. Eberson Archive, Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian, Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida.**



**Fig. 9. John Eberson, Tampa Theatre, stage and sidewalls, 1926. Eberson Archive, Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian, Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida.**



The Tampa Theatre sat behind a ten-story brick office tower. Its design, in the words of a 1926 article from Tampa's *Daily Times*, was "of the true Hispano-Italian style — that which came into vogue during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, lovers of art, who invited Italian architects, sculptors and painters to participate in some of the architectural wonders built during this period."<sup>9</sup>

By 1926, the year the Tampa Theatre opened, there were more than eighty cinemas in Florida. Many were designed with tropical elements, in keeping with the state's climate. It is not surprising that Eberson, architect of the "atmospheric" style, cited Florida as his inspiration:

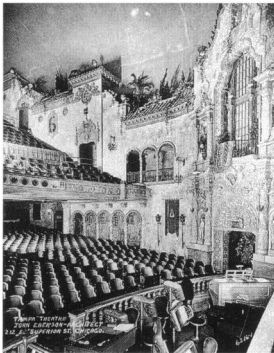
I have been wintering in Florida for the past several years, and it is from this state that I got the atmospheric idea. I was impressed with the colorful scenes which greeted me at Miami, Palm Beach, and Tampa, where I saw happy, gaily-dressed people living constantly under azure skies, and amongst tropical splendor. Visions of Italian gardens, Spanish patios, Persian shrines and French formal garden lawns flashed through my mind, and at once I directed my energies to carrying out these ideas.<sup>10</sup>

The atmospheric style that Eberson popularized consisted not of domes, marble columns, or crystal chandeliers; rather, the effect was of romantic "out-door" courtyards, surrounded by villas and tropical foliage, and topped by twilight blue skies with twinkling stars and slowly drifting clouds. Although this effect was created with plaster, electric lights, and projection machines, it was nonetheless galvanizing, and its popularity catapulted the architect to the forefront of his profession. Eberson designed hundreds of theatres during his career, but very few examples survive.<sup>11</sup>

Eberson described the atmospheric style in a 1927 article in *Motion Picture News*:

Ambition and competition among owners and architects in these enterprises had resulted in the elaboration of ornamentation and architectural effort, until I felt the saturation point — if I may use the term in this connection — had been reached, and that an appreciative amusement-loving public could expect no more development in this direction. Under such conditions it was not unnatural that the elaboration of ornament should go to extremes and in some outbursts of the competitive spirit result in many cases where the ornament became oppressive and overshadowed the stage and screen presentations....

Our first "atmospheric" design, the Majestic Theatre in Houston, Texas, has been the forerunner of over a hundred playhouses of this type in a comparatively short period of time. This rather quickly-won popularity may be attributed to the fact that these auditoriums are successfully different and are merely dignified imitations of nature glorifying classic architecture. Few innovations in the theatrical business have taken root as quickly as the Atmospheric Theatre...<sup>12</sup>



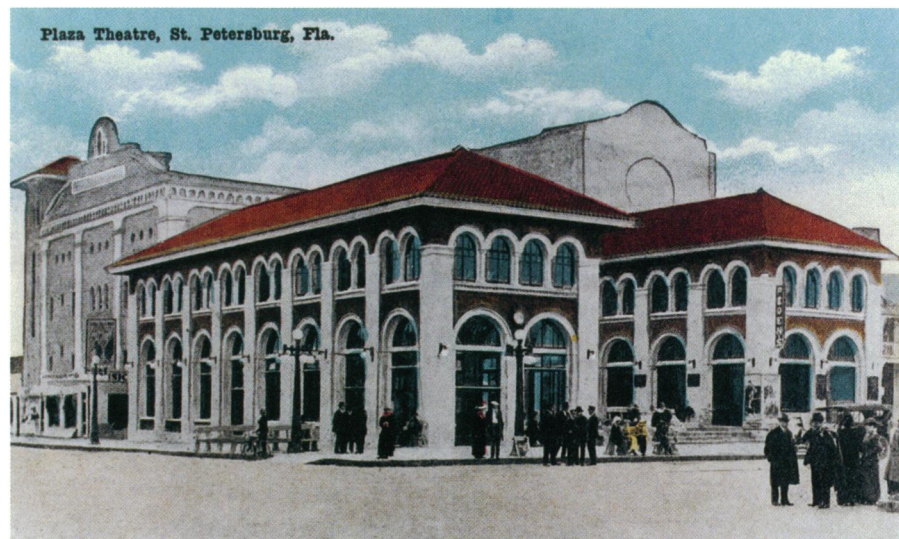
**Fig. 10. John Eberson, Tampa Theatre, sidewall of auditorium, orchestra pit, Wurlitzer organ, 1926. Eberson Archive, Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian, Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida.**

9. John Eberson interview, *Daily Times* (Tampa), 15 October 1926, sec. C, p. 10.

10. Ibid.

11. Eberson's greatest creation was the now-demolished 3,612-seat Paradise Theatre (1927), in Chicago. The 3,842-seat Loew's Paradise (1928), in the Bronx, New York, survives but its future is questionable. The Avalon (1927), a 2,387-seat Persian fantasy, survives in good condition on the south side of Chicago. Jane Preddy, "Palaces of Dreams, The Movie Theatres of John Eberson, Architect," catalogue for exhibition (San Antonio: McNay Art Museum, 1989).

12. John Eberson, "New Theatres for Old, Originator of the Atmospheric Style Discussed the Formula in Which Art and Showmanship Meet," *Motion Picture News* 1 (30 December 1927).



**Fig. 11. Boniwell and Son, La Plaza Theatre, St. Petersburg, plaza entryway, auditorium in rear, 1912. From a postcard. Florida State Archives.**

While Eberson is associated with the development of the atmospheric style, the Cort Theatre (1909) in Chicago, designed by J. E. O. Pridmore, often is cited as the first such theatre in the United States. In analyzing Eberson's design of the Olympia Theatre in Miami, architect Stuart Grant concluded:

In a sense, it is unfair to Eberson to look for precedents. One can almost always find some similarities between different buildings of the same type. Eberson is to be credited with developing, perfecting, and marketing the Atmospheric concept. His theatres were more than just a painted sky. The illusion reached into every nook and cranny of his theatres—and it was convincing.<sup>13</sup>

After 1930, when the atmospheric style fell out of fashion and Art Deco came into vogue, Eberson and his son Drew designed many Art Deco theatres across the country. The style shift was due to a combination of factors — acoustical considerations for sound pictures along with the Great Depression rendered the large, opulently decorated atmospheric palaces obsolete. The Art Deco theatres were smaller, though still luxurious, and this streamlined style still is much identified with South Florida.

Despite the differences in style, both the extravagant 1920s' versions and the sleek 1930s' varieties of Florida's theatres trace their origins to 1897, when Jacksonville's Park Opera House was converted to allow the first commercial exhibition of a motion picture in Florida.<sup>14</sup> Within a decade there were about a dozen nickelodeons in the more populous regions of the state.

In 1904 Jacksonville's Duval Theatre became the first theatre converted exclusively to the showing of photoplays. The Empire opened on East Jefferson Street in the Panhandle town of Quincy shortly thereafter. In 1905 the Royal Palm Theatre opened on Central Avenue in St. Petersburg, becoming the first cinema in that city. Miami got its first motion picture venue when Kelly's Theatre opened on Flagler Street in 1906. Many early movie theatres were buildings converted from other purposes. One of the most notable of these

13. Stuart Matthew Grant, "Miami's Olympia Theatre" (master's thesis, University of Florida, 1987): 9.

14. Richard Alan Nelson, *Lights! Camera! Florida! Ninety Years of Moviemaking and Television in the Sunshine State* (Tampa: Florida Endowment for the Humanities, 1987), 108.



**Fig. 12. Architect unknown,  
Community Theatre, Miami  
Beach, exterior marquee and  
courtyard entrance at night,  
1921. Arva Parks collection.**



was St. Petersburg's La Plaza (1912), which was renovated several times, and eventually got a dramatic entrance that went through a courtyard, then into the auditorium via bridge over the alley (fig. 11).<sup>15</sup>

By 1920 most of Florida's larger cities had a motion picture venue, with a statewide total of some forty theatres. By then a standard had emerged for movie theatres in small- or medium-size towns. They had to be decorative, inviting, and typically they had to have between six hundred and twelve hundred seats. Movies were shown under the stars in Miami Beach at a place called the Strand, but the first real motion picture theatre there was the seven-hundred-seat Community (1921) on Lincoln Road (fig. 12). Another typical theatre of this period was Fort Lauderdale's Sunset Theatre (1923), which opened with 757 seats; in 1934 it was remodeled by Roy A. Benjamin, and probably enlarged to 989 seats (fig. 13).<sup>16</sup>

15. Ibid.; Florida site file #GD00282, Tallahassee: Division of Historic Preservation, Secretary of State's Office, State of Florida; Ted White, "The Theatres of St. Petersburg, Florida," *Marquee, Journal of the Theatre Historical Society of America* 14 (fourth quarter 1982): 7, 14; Grant, "Miami's Olympia Theatre," 18.

16. MPAA, 1948; *Film Daily Yearbook*, 1930, 1945, 1955; the Sunset Theatre was demolished around 1970.

**Fig. 13. Architect unknown, 1923, Sunset Theatre, Fort Lauderdale; Roy A. Benjamin remodeling, 1934, Art Deco sunset-motif marquee from remodeling. Romer Collection, Miami-Dade Public Library.**



Florida's history with motion pictures extends beyond exhibition to film production. From 1908 to 1917 Florida emerged as the major winter film production center. Hollywood, California was known, but not preeminent until after 1915. In 1908 New York City reigned as the United States' film capital, while Jacksonville vied with Chicago and Hollywood for the number-two spot.

In fact, Jacksonville, with approximately thirty motion picture studios, was touted as the "winter film capital of the world" until an election in 1917 drove out of town the rowdy, vulgar, and often unscrupulous film producers. Jacksonville's Mayor "Jet" Bowden was a film booster, but after the conservative citizenry voted him out, the city's movie industry began its immediate decline. Sunshine and palm trees were not a Florida monopoly, and California soon became the center of the film universe.<sup>17</sup>

Until the Jacksonville election, studios such as Biograph, Edison, Gaumont, Kalem, Keystone, Klutho, Luben, and Selig regularly made feature photoplays

17. Nelson, *Lights! Camera! Florida!*, 26, 108.



in the state, using or leasing studios in Jacksonville. Among notable Florida productions were Edison Studios' 1898 newsreel scenes of American troops departing from Port Tampa for action in the Spanish-American War. That production came only four years after Thomas Edison founded the first motion picture studio in the United States. Later, many of director Mack Sennett's *Keystone Cops* comedies were filmed in Florida. Both Lionel Barrymore and Oliver Hardy began their film careers in Jacksonville. The legendary D. W. Griffith, who began in New York City as an actor for Biograph, directed several features in Florida, which included scenes on the beaches of Fort Lauderdale and Miami Beach.<sup>18</sup>

Jacksonville, in addition to being a production center, was also Florida's largest city during the boom-time era of the silent picture (1905–1927). As such, it was home to the state's largest dream palace: the 2,211-seat Florida Theatre (1927) designed by Robert E. Hall and Roy A. Benjamin (figs. 14, 15, and 16).<sup>19</sup> This theatre was in the heart of the city on East Forsyth Street, and featured a popular open-air roof garden above the auditorium. Although it had a rugged Spanish or Mediterranean fortress-like exterior, the Florida Theatre interior had romantic atmospheric lobbies with Spanish-tiled pent eaves overhung with flowering vines, framing an open blue sky on the domed plaster above them. Theatre historian David Naylor points out a striking resemblance between the Florida and the Tampa theatres' atmospheric lobbies, noting that Michael Angelo Studios of Chicago was used to furnish the Florida Theatre and was "often used by Eberson," architect of the Tampa Theatre.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, the Michael Angelo Studios was a wholly owned subsidiary of John Eberson's architecture practice. According to Eberson's son Drew, the staff of Michael Angelo Studios were his father, himself, and his mother, along with others. The historian Jane Preddy interviewed Drew Eberson in 1989:

Michael Angelo Studios was the name of our design team....About 30 people...They moved from theatre to theatre installing the plaster ornamentation, the statuary, trees and birds, painting the walls. They hung the banners my mother and sisters made. My job was ordering and placing the statuary, mapping out the stars, and generally seeing to it that things went well....The ornamentation for the walls and ceiling was cast plaster produced from clay molds. The fellow responsible was Rudy Schmidt, owner of the Schmidt firm in Chicago. The free-standing sculpture we ordered from Caproni Studios.... As for the lighting fixtures, we designed them ourselves...then had them made in Chicago by Pearlman. Father used a lot of pink lightbulbs and since they were impossible to buy, he dipped them in pink paint....The tapestries?...Many of them were from a theatre supply company in New York....the furniture also...there, and from antique shops in New Orleans.<sup>21</sup>

The design team would work for weeks, painting every surface in appropriate polychrome. They would reenter the theatre shortly before the opening and "blitz" it with decorations. These always consisted of large wooden throne-like

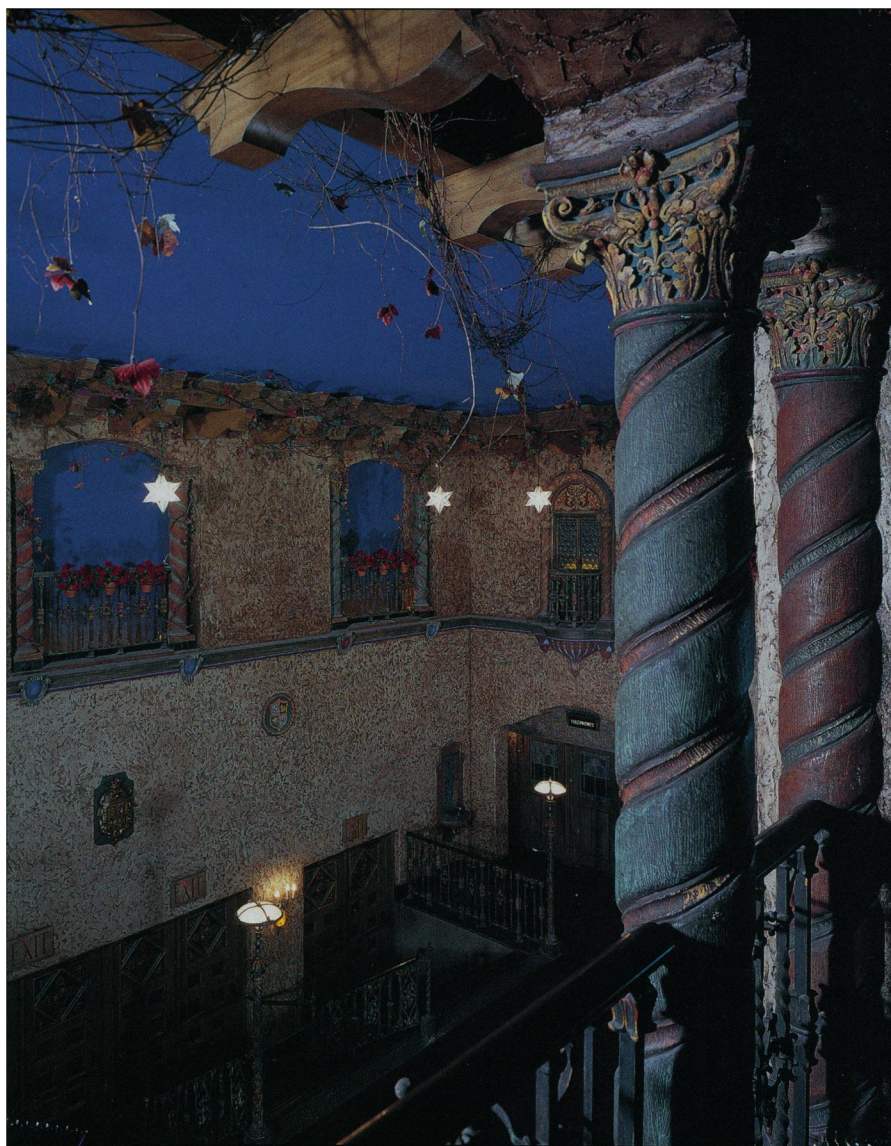
18. Ibid., 14–15, 20–21, 28, 31, 108, 18, 43.

19. The Florida Theatre of Jacksonville was placed on the National Register in 1982.

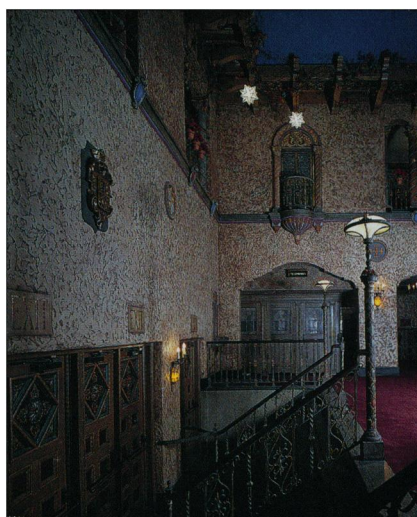
20. Architect Robert E. Hall was supervisor of construction for Paramount Publix in Florida; see also Grant, "Miami's Olympia Theatre," 23; data from "Florida Theatre floor plans," R.W. Sexton and B. F. Betts, ed., *American Theatres of Today* (New York: Architectural Book Publishing, 1927), 1:78–79; David Naylor, *Great American Movie Theatres* (Washington, D.C.: Preservation Press, 1987), 97.

21. Preddy, "Movie Theatres of Eberson," 5, 15–16, 18.

**Fig. 14. Robert E. Hall with Roy A. Benjamin, Florida Theatre, Jacksonville, view from mezzanine lounge looking down to atmospheric promenade, 1926. Photograph © Steven Brooke.**



**Fig. 15. Robert E. Hall with Roy A. Benjamin, Florida Theatre, Jacksonville; atmospheric promenade, 1926. Photograph © Steven Brooke.**







**Fig. 16. Robert E. Hall with Roy A. Benjamin, Florida Theatre, Jacksonville, auditorium and stage from rear balcony, 1926. Photograph © Steven Brooke.**

Spanish chairs, halberds and halyards hung with heraldic banners, sideboards, torchieres, wrought-iron gates, and parchment-shaded Spanish and Italian floor and table lamps. Near every horizon along the sky would be dozens of stuffed birds, more hanging velvet banners, and tropical flowers in pots and on hanging vines. On projects for which John Eberson himself was chief architect, there would be a stuffed peacock, tail feathers folded down, perched on one of the many overhanging false balconies along the facades of the fantasy villa.<sup>22</sup>

Eberson also designed, with Hall, Miami's 2,147-seat Olympia (1926), Florida's second-largest theatre until 1950 (figs. 17–21).<sup>23</sup> Located on Flagler Street in downtown Miami, the theatre was situated behind the ten-story office tower in which Eberson maintained a branch office for several years.<sup>24</sup> On opening night, 18 February 1926, Paul Whiteman and his twenty-eight-piece jazz orchestra performed the grand finale, courtesy of George Merrick (1846–1942),

22. Surviving relics from the Michael Angelo Studios are exceedingly rare. Co-author Kinerk's personal study and site survey of six Eberson theatres, conducted from 1967–1994.

23. Eberson job #558, Eberson Archive, The Wolfsonian, Florida International University. The relatively short-lived twenty-two-hundred-seat Wometco Carib Theatre in Miami Beach superseded the Olympia as second largest in Florida when it opened in 1950. Data: City of Miami Beach building department.

24. Eberson letter, 17 April 1928, reproduced in "New Theatres for Old," *Motion Picture News* 1 (30 December 1927): advertising reprint.



**Fig. 17. John Eberson, Olympia Theatre, Miami, northeast corner of office tower with upright sign and east theatre facade, 1926. Romer Collection, Miami-Dade Public Library.**



**Fig. 18. John Eberson, Olympia Theatre, Miami, stage and left sidewall with organ grille, 1926. Photograph © Dan Forer.**





**Fig. 19. John Eberson, Olympia Theatre, Miami, stage as seen from balcony, 1926. George Gerhart collection.**



**Fig. 20. John Eberson, Olympia Theatre, Miami, view across auditorium to sidewall and boxes, 1926. George Gerhart collection.**





**Fig. 21. John Eberson, Olympia Theatre, Miami, view from right box across auditorium to organ grille, 1926. George Gerhart collection.**



**Fig. 22. Roy A. Benjamin, Florida Theatre, St. Petersburg, marquee on Famous Players Theatre Building, 1926. From a postcard. Theatre Historical Society Archives, Elmhurst, Illinois.**

the developer of Coral Gables. The theatre had an original 15-rank, 3-manual Style 260-special Wurlitzer pipe organ.<sup>25</sup>

When it opened, the *Miami Herald* described the Olympia as one of the “architectural and decorative masterpieces of the playhouse kingdom.” Its highly embellished interior was designed to be an Andalusian garden, but the architectural references were both Spanish and Italian. Its walls were filled with applied ornaments such as shells, urns, and flowers, which were painted aqua, turquoise, coral, pink, and tan. Wall niches held Classical statuary. In front of the theatre a marquee sign spelled out “Olympia” in fifteen hundred electric lights.<sup>26</sup>

The third largest of Florida’s dream palaces was St. Petersburg’s twenty-one-hundred-seat Florida Theatre (1926), designed by Benjamin (fig. 22). It was on the northwest corner of South Fifth Street and First Avenue, behind the eight-story Famous Players Theatre Building, and it had a roof garden. Its opening program boasted:

Paramount Publix’s new theatre has Exotic Occidental Architecture, Decorations and Furnishings, Symphonic Orchestra. Giant Concert Wurlitzer Organ. Carrier Scientific Cooling and Ventilating. Model of Modern Safety Construction. Built to Present Every Character of Theatricals.

25. There are several pipe organs in Florida theatres, but all original installations except the Olympia’s were at some point removed. The pipe organs now in the Tampa, Saenger, and Polk theatres are replacements of similar types to those used in the silent era. In the time of silent films, every major theatre had a pipe organ for accompaniment of the film presentations. Only the largest theatres employed full orchestras. The smallest theatres used pianos. The authors have documented twenty-three original pipe organ installations in Florida theatres. There were undoubtedly more.

26. In ensuing years, the Olympia became a vaudeville house, then a first-run movie theatre again. It was saved from proposed demolition by philanthropist Maurice Gusman, who renamed it after himself and renovated it as a philharmonic hall. In the course of that renovation, much of the Eberson signature ornament was removed or covered over. A recent renovation has brought the theatre closer to its origins. The Olympia/Gusman was listed on the National Register in 1984. Beth Dunlop, “Happy Birthday Gusman,” *Miami Herald*, 16 February 1986, sec. K, p. 1.



Capacity: Two Thousand Five Hundred Persons. Cost: One Million Dollars.  
House Personnel: Sixty.<sup>27</sup>

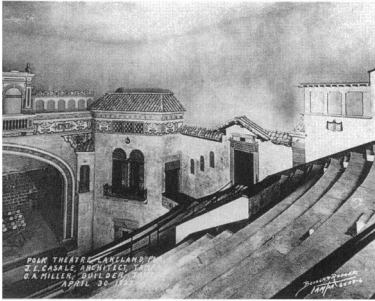
It is the only one of the major Publix palaces that was not saved as a performing arts center by its community.<sup>28</sup>

Paramount was the industry giant — a ruthless and voracious enterprise. In the 1920s the company not only recruited actors and created stars, but it bought into hundreds of land deals, hired or brought in as consultants its own architects, and ensured the creation of the dream palaces necessary to offer its products to the public.

Paramount typically used its financial clout to build its own theatres in the larger cities, but in smaller cities, it often induced local financiers and property owners to build the theatres, then leased them back to operate under the Publix banner. This happened many times in Florida, which eventually had approximately one hundred Publix theatres. Its successor, Florida State Theatres, would operate about 130 theatres.<sup>29</sup>

What happened with the eighteen-hundred-seat Polk Theatre in Lakeland is a telling example of Paramount's business practices (fig. 23). In 1925 John E. Melton, a Lakeland real estate developer, assembled land and financing to build a multipurpose office building, "anchored by a grand movie palace." He hired Italian-born architect James E. Casale (1890–1958) from Tampa, who specified and designed an atmospheric auditorium. In press reports, Casale credited his inspiration to Andrea Palladio's famed atmospheric Teatro Olimpico (1580) in Vicenza, Italy. It is more probable that Casale, who had set up his architecture office in Eberson's Tampa Theatre building, received his inspiration to build an atmospheric movie palace complete with a plaster ceiling and electric stars, not from Palladio, but from Eberson.<sup>30</sup> Casale designed the theatre in the Italian Renaissance style, though it was less exotic and opulent than Eberson's work. Perhaps the austerity was due to the fact that Melton ran short of money. The theatre sat unfinished for a time, while the builder entered into a Faustian agreement with Paramount Publix to obtain funding. Publix took a lease on the uncompleted theatre, apparently with no intention of opening it; Publix had other operations in Lakeland and was in no hurry to increase its operating costs by staffing the Polk.

When the theatre was completed in the spring of 1927, Publix refused to open the Polk and would not advance further funds. The Polk finally opened 22 December 1928—*after* Melton sold his interest in the theatre to Publix. Publix then came up with \$65,000 to upgrade the house to sound for talkies.<sup>31</sup>



**Fig. 23. James E. Casale, Polk Theatre, Lakeland, right side-wall of auditorium from unfinished balcony, 1928. Original construction photograph. Polk Theatre, Inc. collection.**

27. Research indicates twenty-one hundred seats. Data: MPAA, 1948; *Film Daily Yearbook*, 1930, 1945, 1955. Many press accounts overstate seating capacity. Opening Program, 10 September 1926, Theatre Historical Society Archives, Florida Theatre (St. Petersburg) file, Elmhurst, Ill.
28. The Florida Theatre was demolished in 1967. The other major Paramount Publix palaces that have been preserved are described herein. They are: Jacksonville's Florida, Miami's Olympia, Lakeland's Polk, Pensacola's Saenger, and the Tampa.
29. Douglas Gomery, "The Paramount Theatre, Palm Beach, Florida," *Marquee* 14 (fourth quarter 1982): 6; MPAA, 1948; *Film Daily Yearbook*, 1930, 1945, 1955.
30. Stephen E. Branch, "Mass Culture Meets Main Street — the Early Years of Lakeland's Polk Theatre" (master's thesis, University of South Florida, 1994): 39, 35, 44.
31. *Ibid.*, 39; a community-based non-profit corporation was formed in 1982 to save and restore the theatre. The Polk was listed on the National Register in 1993. Today it is a performing arts center, undergoing restoration in phases as funds are raised by the group, Polk Theatre Incorporated; it is said that Lakeland tycoon George Jenkins named his grocery store chain Publix in response to fond memories of Publix Theatre Corporation's Lakeland flagship, the Polk.

Paramount's driving force was its creator, Adolph Zukor, a Hungarian immigrant. Before becoming involved in movie theatres, he had a fur business in Chicago. On business trips to New York City, he noticed people flocking to novelty arcades showing short photoplays using handcranked viewing devices. These attracted a varied crowd of patrons who for a few minutes or an hour fed the machines with coins (thus the names penny arcade and nickelodeon).

Zukor entered the penny-arcade business in New York City in about 1902, with Marcus Loew as his partner. Ultimately Zukor presided over Paramount, and Loew over MGM. By 1910 the two had a chain of penny arcades all over the east.<sup>32</sup> Zealous in his desire to improve the product, Zukor split with Loew and started his own company. In 1912, with additional partners, he created Famous Players Film Company.<sup>33</sup> Stars such as Sarah Bernhardt, Mary Pickford, and Ethel Barrymore came on board. In order to book these early serious films into theatres, an independent distribution company called Paramount Pictures Corporation was formed.<sup>34</sup>

On 29 June 1916 Zukor's Famous Players Studio merged with the Jesse Lasky Feature Play Company to form Famous Players-Lasky Corporation. The studio lists this event as the beginning of Paramount Pictures. In September of that year the principals assembled for a photograph to mark the event (fig. 24). Zukor and Lasky were there, with partners, two of them legends of greater luminance than Zukor himself: Samuel Goldfish (who later changed his name to Samuel Goldwyn) and Cecil B. DeMille. Famous Players-Lasky soon absorbed other studios, and on 1 January 1917, acquired Paramount Pictures distribution company, but continued to operate as Famous Players-Lasky. In 1919 to combat the then-dominant First National Pictures, Famous Players-Lasky entered the theatre-owning business. Zukor took the company public, floating \$10,000,000 in securities. In 1925 Zukor merged with the Midwest exhibition giant, Balaban and Katz (B and K), at which time Paramount Publix Theatre Corporation was created to operate all the company-owned theatres.<sup>35</sup> B and K partner Sam Katz was brought to New York to lead Publix Theatres. Eventually Zukor changed the name of the entire enterprise to Paramount Pictures. For years thereafter the B and K influence endured, as Sam Katz's partner Barney Balaban eventually succeeded Zukor to run Paramount.<sup>36</sup> However, when Zukor died in 1976 at the age of 103, he still reigned as chairman emeritus of Paramount Pictures.<sup>37</sup>

Florida's first major motion picture palaces went on the drawing board shortly after the creation of Famous Players-Lasky. Edward Sparks was general manager for Publix in Florida. From his office in the Palmer Building in Jacksonville, he oversaw the steadily growing chain, and under his leadership Publix gained total domination of the Florida market. Sparks retired in 1941, after Publix was declared a monopoly and broken up by court order in 1940.<sup>38</sup>

Publix tended to create local partnerships in each city or region, buying into existing operations or forcing competitors to sell out, as in the case of Lakeland's

32. MacCann, *The First Tycoons*, 245.

33. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, 15 October 1926, sec. C, p. 7.

34. MacCann, *The First Tycoons*, 243–246.

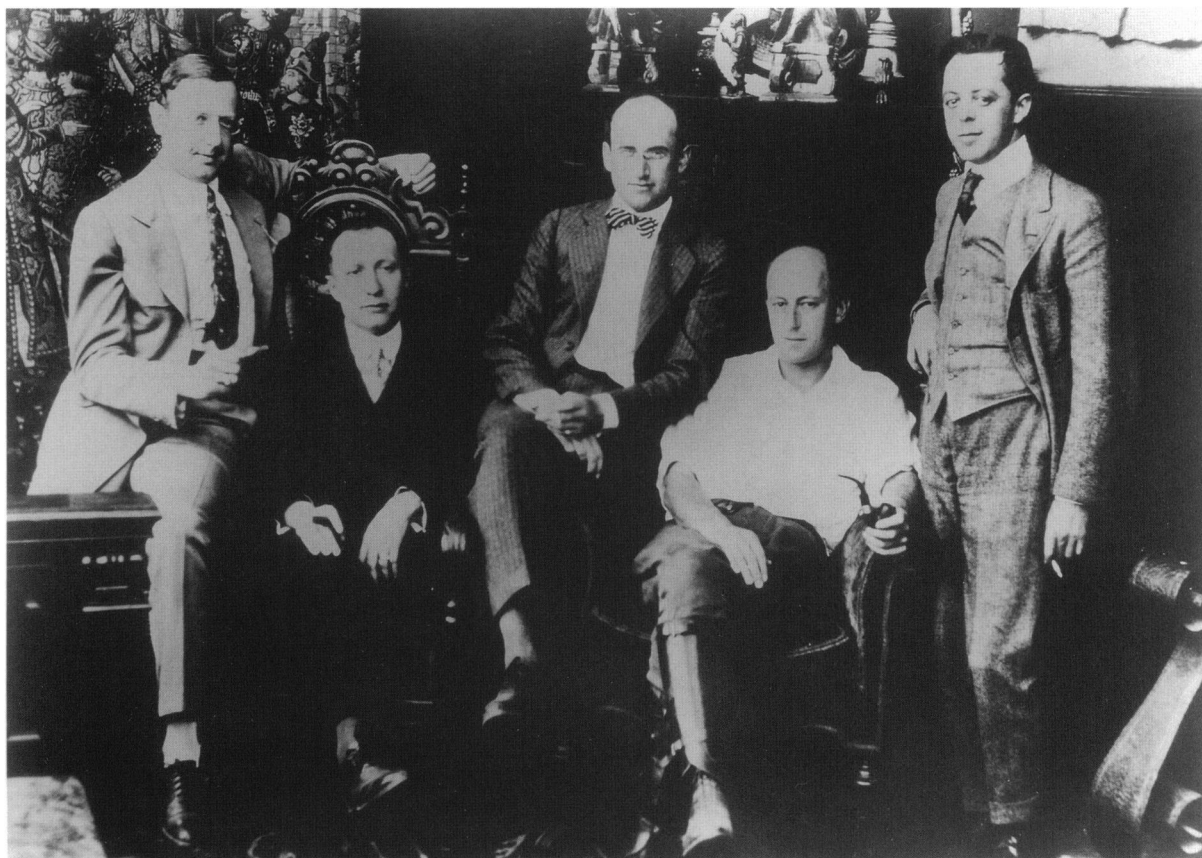
35. Ibid.

36. Carrie Balaban, *Continuous Performance, Biography of A. J. Balaban* (New York: A. J. Balaban Foundation, 1964), 107.

37. MacCann, *The First Tycoons*, 251.

38. Gomery, "Paramount Palm Beach," 6.





**Fig. 24. Paramount founding partners, executives of Famous Players Film Company, and Jesse Lasky Feature Play Company, on occasion of their merger, September 1916. Left to right, Jesse Lasky, Adolph Zukor, Samuel Goldfish (Goldwyn), Cecil B. DeMille, Albert Kaufman. Photograph © Paramount Pictures, used by permission.**

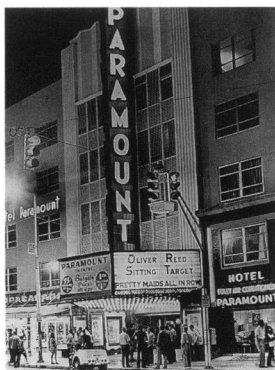
Polk Theatre. The story of the Leach family interests in Miami is another example of Publix operations from 1917 through 1933.

In 1922 the Leach family joined forces with Famous Players-Lasky to form Paramount Enterprises of Miami, with the Leachs initially enjoying controlling interest. Prior to this partnership, the family controlled many of Miami's early theatres.<sup>39</sup> They had an interest in the Airdome Theatre (1914) and a half-interest in the Fotosho Theatre (1915) on Flagler Street. There were two successive Airdomes and two Hippodromes in the period 1914–1925. Each was torn down, a new one built nearby, and the name perpetuated.<sup>40</sup> By 1925 the new Airdome already had closed to make way for Publix's Miami flagship, the Olympia.

The same thing happened with the venerable Paramount name. The Leach family apparently began booking Paramount films the same year the company was formed. The profits pouring into Paramount Enterprises (the Leach family concern) fueled the construction of ever-larger and more elaborate dream palaces. Their first Paramount theatre opened in 1916 on Flagler Street at Southeast First Avenue. The second Paramount was created in 1927, when they converted and renamed the 1922 Fairfax Theatre, also on Flagler Street. At that time they closed the original Paramount. The second Paramount was

39. George W. Gerhart, "A Moon Over Miami," *Theatre Organ-Bombarde: Journal of the American Theatre Organ Society* (April 1967): 11.

40. Grant, "Miami's Olympia Theatre," 19.



**Fig. 25. Architect unknown, Paramount Theatre, Miami, 1927; Robert Law Weed, remodeling, 1938, exterior, marquee (c. 1955), and upright. Photograph © Miami Herald, 1972, used by permission.**



**Fig. 26. E. T. Wells, architect, with Adolph Vollmer, decorator, Capitol Theatre, Miami, exterior, marquee and upright, 1926. Photograph © Miami Herald, used by permission.**

updated to an Art Deco appearance in 1938 by Miami architect Robert Law Weed (1897–1961) and lighting engineer C. Burton of Rambusch, of New York (fig. 25).<sup>41</sup>

Though Miami was still a small city, it enjoyed a booming economy through 1926. But a hurricane in September wiped out the Miami boom, and the city took years to recover. After this the Leach family suffered financial reversals and was forced to turn over control to Publix. This approach of stepping in when owners or investors were financially weak and seizing control worked many times for Publix, throughout the state — until 1933.

By 1933 Publix was overextended, fighting the bottomed-out economy of the Depression, and near insolvency. At that point it entered voluntary reorganization. Thereafter Publix began spinning off its assets, selling theatres, and attempting to regain profitability during the worst years of the Depression. A 1940 Federal Court order finally wiped out Publix, and its assets were divided among regional companies.<sup>42</sup> Florida State Theatres came into being by inheriting former Florida Publix properties, but Florida State, though a giant, could not crush competition with the effortless aplomb of Zukor's former juggernaut. This opened the door to stronger regional operators. Miami's Wometco was one of these.

As Publix faded, Wometco became the dominant theatre chain in South Florida. Wometco was founded in 1924 by Colonel Mitchell Wolfson and Sidney Meyer — the name was an acronym for Wolfson-Meyer Theatre Company. Wometco had affiliated at first with Fox Studio, while also exhibiting Universal, United Artists, and Columbia releases. Eventually Wometco grew to operate eighty-nine theatres, with forty in Florida (concentrated in Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties), another twenty-five in Puerto Rico, eleven in the Caribbean, and thirteen in Alaska. Always ahead of its time, Wometco advertised its international aspirations for Miami in the 1940s by stressing that it had "Spanish-speaking attendants."<sup>43</sup> Under Wolfson's leadership, the company established the first television station in Florida, WTVJ, in 1949, converting the 1,234-seat Capitol Theatre (1926), in downtown Miami, into television studios (fig. 26).<sup>44</sup> Both the Capitol and the fourteen-hundred-plus-seat Biscayne Plaza (1926), the second theatre in Miami Beach, were designed by local architect E. T. Wells.<sup>45</sup> The Biscayne Plaza (fig. 27) was erected on the southern tip of the island, at Biscayne Street between Collins and Washington avenues, near Miami Beach's most famous restaurant, Joe's Stone Crab.

Thomas W. Lamb of New York City was among the nationally prominent architects who designed movie palaces in Florida. Lamb, considered the dean of American theatre architects, worked on two Miami Beach theatres late in his career: the Lincoln (1936) and the Cinema Casino (1938) (figs. 28 and 29). Like John and Drew Ebersson, Lamb also successfully made the switch to the Art Deco style. Original work in both these theatres has been substantially destroyed in subsequent renovations. Lamb's celebrated Cinema Casino was named to tie into a well-advertised but short-lived prior name, the French

41. City of Miami building plans, microfilm roll 20: M.87.

42. MacCann, *The First Tycoons*, 181.

43. "The New Miami, Showplace of the Americas," inaugural performance souvenir program, 18 April 1947.

44. Dick Lehman, "From One Boom-Time Theatre to a Miami Entertainment Empire: A Reminiscence with Mitchell Wolfson," *Update: Historical Association of Southern Florida* 3 (April 1976): 6–7.

45. "Theatre Designer Leader in Field," *Miami Herald*, 26 June 1926, 14.





**Fig. 27. E. T. Wells, Biscayne Plaza Theatre, Miami Beach, exterior facade with busts in niches, dome, arched entry, 1926. Photograph © Miami Herald, used by permission.**



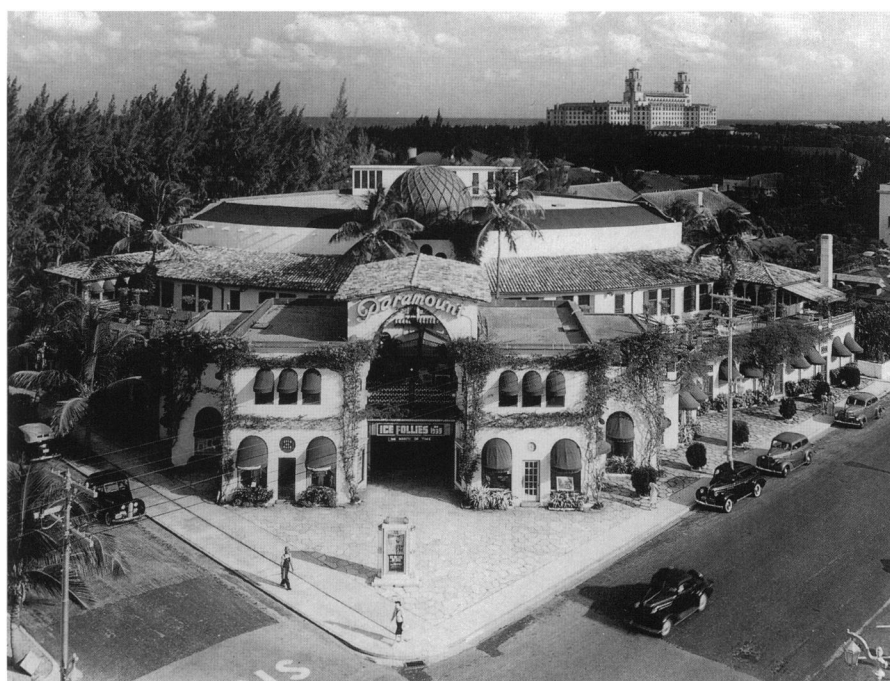
**Fig. 29. Thomas W. Lamb with T. Hunter Henderson, Cinema Casino, Miami Beach, view of etched-glass decorative panels that flanked entrance, 1938.**

Photograph © Miami Herald, used by permission.



**Fig. 28. Thomas W. Lamb with T. Hunter Henderson, Cinema Casino, Miami Beach, view of auditorium and sidewall murals from center of balcony, 1938. Photograph © Miami Herald, used by permission.**

**Fig. 30. Joseph Urban,  
Paramount Theatre, Palm  
Beach, aerial view of layout  
of theatre, twin spires of  
Breakers Hotel in background,  
1927. Historical Society of  
Palm Beach County.**



Casino — a theatre and supper club opened in 1934 and advertised jointly with its famed counterpart of the same name in Manhattan. In both cases, the supper-club format failed quickly in the Depression. Miami Beach's Cinema began as a club, was converted to show films, and was renovated by Lamb in 1938 to become the twelve-hundred-seat Cinema Casino (later just the Cinema).<sup>46</sup> In the rear of the lobby was a panoramic mural and a forty-foot-long undulating, curved counter surfaced in mother-of-pearl, used as a refreshment stand (it originally served as an elegant bar in the supper club). Lamb's hand is quite obvious, and the design — with its etched glass, murals, the bar, and the fluid, sweeping lines of the lobbies and auditorium — is among the best interiors in Miami Beach.<sup>47</sup> T. Hunter Henderson, of Miami Beach, worked with Lamb on this project.

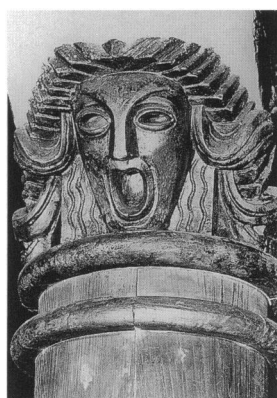
The Viennese-born, New York City architect Joseph Urban (1872–1933) designed the 1,235-seat Palm Beach Paramount (1927), one of the most unique and beautiful theatres ever constructed in the United States (figs. 30 and 31). Urban began his career by designing sets for the Ziegfeld Follies. He then became art director for Cosmopolitan Pictures (1920–1926), which was owned by William Randolph Hearst. With Lamb, Urban designed the New York Ziegfeld Theatre (1927), which opened one month after the Palm Beach Paramount. Urban is best known for New York City's New School Auditorium and for his designs

46. Today the Lincoln is home to the New World Symphony and the Cinema is a nightclub. In the face of a then-declining economy and poor attendance, its owners closed the Cinema in March 1977. When jackhammers began ripping out the floor of the lobby, a preservation battle erupted, with Barbara Baer Capitman leading the Miami Design Preservation League to "Save the Cinema." While the battle to save the original lobby was lost, Capitman was successful in getting the Art Deco district listed on the National Register in 1979. Soon thereafter, the lobby was reconstructed in a rough approximation of the original. The auditorium took on a new life as a successful nightclub; it is currently protected by strong historic preservation ordinances.

47. Based upon personal observation by the authors in site visits, 1977–1986.



**Fig. 31. Joseph Urban,  
Paramount Theatre, Palm  
Beach, auditorium sidewall  
murals, 1927. Historical  
Society of Palm Beach County.**



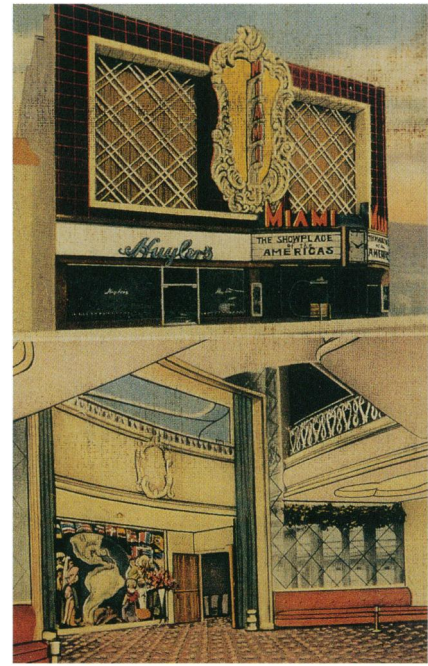
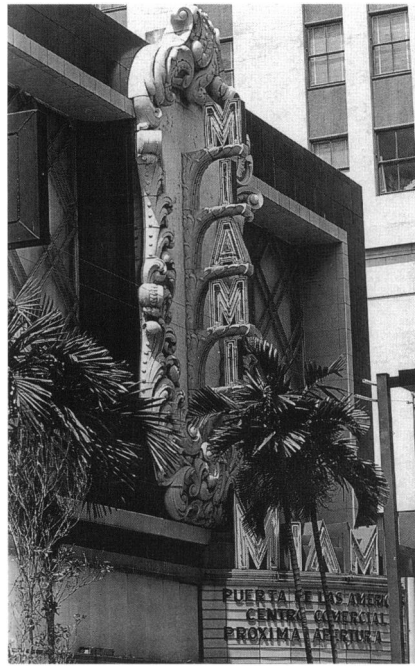
**Fig. 32. Joseph Urban,  
Paramount Theatre, Palm  
Beach, detail of carved-wood  
expressionist bust, serving as  
column capital, 1927.  
Photograph © Miami Herald,  
used by permission.**

(never executed) for a Metropolitan Opera House intended for Rockefeller Center—where instead the famed Radio City Music Hall was built. Some scholars believe Urban's designs for a proposed Rockefeller Center subtly guided the eventual design of the Music Hall.<sup>48</sup>

In Palm Beach, Urban capitalized on the temperate subtropical weather, including an open courtyard with several shops and an imposing gatehouse (not unlike the Paramount Studios gates in Hollywood). He specified a two-story auditorium of unusual proportion, shallow and fan-shaped. The resulting wide amphitheatre-type space left room for twenty-five private boxes — far more than a normal complement. These were finished with fine wood dividers and thick upholstery and were very popular with the Palm Beach society patrons, who paid high prices for their private redoubts. These boxes had excellent sight-lines, since they were not isolated along the sidewalls as was common, but spanned the entire rear of the auditorium, placing many of the 156 private seats dead center. The shallowness of the house kept them comfortably close to the screen. Other features of Urban's designs included exposed wood-beam ceilings, Art Deco Viennese chandeliers, wooden columns capped by German Expressionist busts (fig. 32), silk wall coverings, and auditorium murals of fantastic underwater scenes.<sup>49</sup> With its exclusive boxes and an expensive Wurlitzer pipe organ, the Paramount opened 8 January 1927. This was a theatre for the wealthy, selling one- and two-dollar tickets at a time when other theatres charged thirty-five cents. The boxes sold for \$1,000 for the two-month season.

48. Gomery, "Paramount Palm Beach," 6.

49. The extensive murals, one of the most striking features of the auditorium, may have been the work of Joseph Urban's daughter, Gretl, who did mural work for him at Marjorie Meriwether Post's Palm Beach mansion, Mar-A-Lago, also considered among Urban's greatest accomplishments.



*left,*

**Fig. 33. S. Charles Lee with Robert E. Collins, Miami Theatre, facade and upright marquee, 1947. Photograph © Miami Herald, used by permission.**

*right,*

**Fig. 34. S. Charles Lee with Robert E. Collins, Miami Theatre, dual view of facade with upright marquee and main lobby, 1947. From a postcard. Theatre Historical Society Archives, Elmhurst, Illinois.**

In the late 1940s the theatre, already in commercial decline, began marketing to the middle class. It closed and reopened several times, closing for good in 1980, later to be stripped and converted into offices.<sup>50</sup>

Another major theatre architect, S. Charles Lee, designed one of Florida's most beautiful and significant dream palaces. The Miami Theatre (1947) on Flagler Street (figs. 33 and 34) was designed for Wometco. Lee, who was based in Los Angeles, designed few theatres in the East, but designed more than one hundred in the West. His work included the Mayfair (1942) in New York City; El Capitán (1941), the Lido (1942), and others in Mexico City; and numerous theatres in Arizona, Ohio, Montana, Nevada, and Managua, Nicaragua. Much of Lee's work was done for the Fox West Coast chain in the 1930s and 1940s.

The Miami Theatre had many unique and beautiful features. Lee included a series of grand lobby spaces decorated in a tropical motif to match the Florida locale. In fact, as Lee explained, the lobby spaces and auditorium were translated into an over-scaled aquarium through which moviegoers "swam." There was a restaurant in the building with entry provided both from the street and from the theatre lobby.<sup>51</sup>

Lee designed the Miami Theatre in association with noted Miami Beach Art Deco architect Robert E. Collins, who had worked on several theatres. Collins was associate architect on Lamb's Lincoln Theatre, and designed four theatres himself, including the Cameo Theatre (1936) on Washington Avenue, Miami Beach. Other works included the St. John Theatre (1941) in Jacksonville, the Dixie Theatre (1948) in Miami, and Cinemorada (1956) on Islamorada, Florida Keys.

50. For national average of ticket prices, see Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk, An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Gomery, "Paramount Palm Beach," 4–6.

51. For a comprehensive discussion of S. Charles Lee's work, see Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*; *Ibid.*, 174.



Another nationally known architecture firm, Kiehnel and Elliott, designed the Coconut Grove Theatre (now the Coconut Grove Playhouse) in 1926.<sup>52</sup> It has been a legitimate theatre for decades, but spent its early years as a movie palace operated by Paramount Publix, and later by Wometco. Kiehnel and Elliott also brought South Florida the Mediterranean Revival style in 1917 with El Jardin, a Coconut Grove mansion that is now the historic Carrollton School.

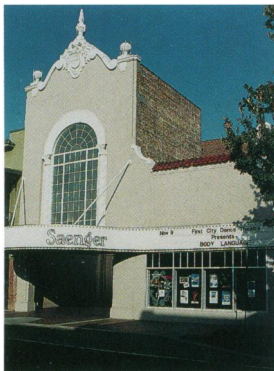
Regional architects did hundreds of theatres outside Florida, but seldom worked beyond their geographic area. This group included: Herbert J. Krapp, Armand D. Carroll, and William Harold Lee in the Northeast; Boller Bothers in the Southwest; B. Marcus Priteca, Timothy Pflueger, and G. Albert Lansburgh in the West; Liebenberg and Kaplan of Minnesota in the Midwest; Emile Weil and Roy A. Benjamin in the South. Of these, Lee, Weil, and Benjamin worked in Florida.

New Orleans architect Emile Weil (1878–1945) designed Pensacola's seven-hundred-seat Saenger Theatre (1925) for the New Orleans-based Saenger Amusement Company, founded in Shreveport, Louisiana in 1914 by Abe and Julian Saenger (fig. 35).<sup>53</sup> The family-owned Saenger chain grew rapidly. Saenger Amusement Company controlled three hundred theatres throughout the South before falling on hard times and being swallowed up by Publix in 1928.<sup>54</sup> Weil is also well-known for the atmospheric Saenger Theatre in New Orleans.

Pennsylvania's William H. Lee was commissioned to design the sixteen-hundred-seat Miracle Theatre (1948) in Coral Gables. He also designed the Art Deco-styled Norris Theatre (1929) in Norristown, Pennsylvania, which has been torn down, but whose massive terra-cotta entrance grille stands at the end of the main lobby atrium of The Wolfsonian, Florida International University, in Miami Beach.

Roy A. Benjamin, designer of St. Petersburg's Florida Theatre, was another regional architect, albeit one who dominated theatre design in Florida. An Ocala native, Benjamin moved to Jacksonville in 1902 and opened his own practice. His firm, still in business today as KBJ Architects, lists more than eighty theatre projects in Florida, many for Paramount Publix.<sup>55</sup>

Benjamin was known and respected nationwide, as indicated in the lavish display given his work in the 1927 edition of *American Theatres of Today*, which published eight sets of his plans.<sup>56</sup> He designed many theatres elsewhere in Southern states and was responsible for some of Florida's earliest theatres, many in Jacksonville.<sup>57</sup> Most notable are the Jacksonville Arcade (opened 1915), Crescent City's VIA (1916), Jacksonville's Imperial (1917), St. Petersburg's Pheil (1917), Winter Haven's Grand (1919), and Lakeland's Palace (1924). His largest early theatre was the Palace (1919) in Jacksonville, a classic Palladian-style house with 1,876 seats (fig. 36). Located on East Forsyth, The Palace was



**Fig. 35. Emile Weil, Saenger Theatre, Pensacola, exterior facade with marquee and parapet, 1925. Saenger Theatre, Inc. collection.**

52. Kiehnel and Elliott are best known in South Florida for their Carlyle Hotel on Ocean Drive in Miami Beach's Art Deco district.

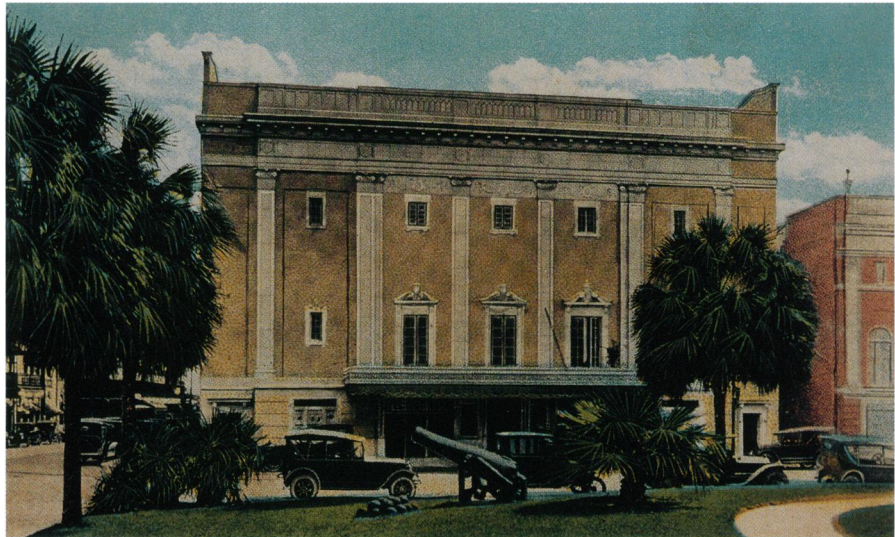
53. The Saenger Theatre was listed on the National Register in 1979, the venerable movie palace was donated to the city of Pensacola in 1975, and underwent a \$1,600,000 rehabilitation to reopen in 1981 as a performing arts center, operated by a non-profit corporation. Lucius and Linda Ellsworth, *Pensacola, the Deep Water City* (Tulsa: Continental Heritage Press, 1982), 125, 158, 161.

54. "The Strand, Shreveport, Louisiana," *Marquee* 18 (third quarter 1986): 13–15.

55. Wayne W. Wood, *Jacksonville's Architectural Heritage, Landmarks for the Future* (Jacksonville: University of North Florida Press, 1989), 8; KBJ Benjamin project list.

56. Sexton, *American Theatres of Today*, 1:2, 76–79, 83, 104–106, 108–109, 135, 139, 144–145, 174–175.

57. KBJ Benjamin project list.



**Fig. 36. Roy A. Benjamin, Palace Theatre, Jacksonville, Palladian-style facade, 1919. From a postcard. Theatre Historical Society Archives, Elmhurst, Illinois.**

the largest theatre in the state when it was built, and it remained so until 1926 when Publix opened the Florida in St. Petersburg and the Olympia in Miami.<sup>58</sup> In 1920 Benjamin was responsible for designing (or co-designing) six of the state's ten largest movie palaces. Eventually Benjamin designed theatres in twenty-two Florida counties, working steadily until retiring and selling his practice in 1946.<sup>59</sup>

Like all prolific theatre architects who wanted to stay in business, Benjamin stopped using classical, Moorish, Spanish, and Italianate designs by the early 1930s and adopted the simpler, sleeker Art Deco style. He left many prime examples of his design skills in Art Deco's streamline period, including the 850-seat Lake Theatre (1939) in Lake Worth and the 1,374-seat Florida Theatre (1940) in Tallahassee (fig. 37).<sup>60</sup>

Benjamin also remodeled many theatres, including his own. Most remodeling came in the 1930s, when the Colonial- and Adam-style buildings from earlier in the century typically received an Art Deco facelift. The historic 1915 Jacksonville Arcade was renovated by Benjamin in 1934 and renamed the Center; it was one of the longest-surviving theatres in Florida, remaining open and showing films until the 1990s. In 1941 Benjamin redesigned the Imperial (1917) and the Palace (1924), both in Jacksonville.<sup>61</sup>

Miami Beach's premiere 1930s architect, Henry Hohauser (1895–1963), designed a small theatre on Washington Avenue in the Art Deco district—still standing, but no longer a cinema. It opened as the Variety (1945) and closed as the Paris.<sup>62</sup>

Robert Law Weed (1897–1961) with William L. Pereira (1909–1985), then of Chicago, designed the Beach Theatre (1941), a project so spectacular it won an

58. The Palace was the fourth largest movie theatre in the state until 1950 when it was bumped to fifth. It is now demolished.

59. KBJ Benjamin project list.

60. The Lake was the Lannan Museum and is now the Palm Beach Community College Museum of Art.

61. KBJ Benjamin project list.

62. Hohauser is listed as architect on building card, City of Miami Beach building department. Keith Root, *Miami Beach Art Deco Guide* (Miami Beach: Miami Design Preservation League, 1987), 179.





**Fig. 37. Roy A. Benjamin, Florida Theatre, Tallahassee, facade with upright, curved Art Deco marquee and glass-block corners, 1940. Florida State Archives.**

award as the nation's best theatre of the year at its opening (figs. 38 and 39).<sup>63</sup> Seating 1,604, it featured a lobby with glass atriums, anticipating by several years Morris Lapidus' (born 1902) similar spectacle in the Miami Beach Americana Hotel. The theatre even had a stairway at its entrance, like the Fountainebleau — only this one was not a stairway to "nowhere at all," as Lapidus called his at the hotel, but rather led to the balcony.<sup>64</sup>

Other noteworthy Florida theatres were: the Aladdin (1924), in Cocoa, designed by the firm of Thornton P. Mayre, which is best known for its subsequent design of the Atlanta Fox; the 350-seat Vero (1924), architect unknown, in Vero Beach; and in Sarasota, the 1,445-seat Edwards (1926), designed by Benjamin, with interior design by W. M. Holland. Built by local developer A. B. Edwards, it was leased by Carl Laemmle's Universal Studios organization.<sup>65</sup> The contractor, G. A. Miller, also built the Tampa Theatre (and many Florida Kress stores). The Edwards had a \$25,000 Robert Morton pipe organ and was in a four-story steel-frame building with apartments and shops. The auditorium had a plaster and beamed ceiling, with ornamental plaster cartouches.<sup>66</sup>

It is important to note that the practice of racial segregation persisted in Florida throughout the golden age of the movie palace. Very few Florida theatres provided access for nonwhites. If a theatre allowed all races, the policy — even

*top,*

**Fig. 38. Robert Law Weed with William L. Pereira, Beach Theatre, Miami Beach, main lobby with grand staircase and atrium terrarium, 1946. Arva Parks collection.**

63. William L. Pereira is famous for Chicago's landmark Esquire Theatre (1938) and later, after moving to Los Angeles, the flying-saucer-shaped central restaurant building at Los Angeles International Airport. Barbara Capitan, Michael Kinerk, Dennis Wilhelm, *Rediscovering Art Deco U.S.A.* (New York: Viking, 1994), 57–58; David Gebhard and Robert Winter, *Architecture in Los Angeles, A Complete Guide* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1985), 70; the Beach Theatre's design won first place, "bronze medallion," in the largest seat class. *The Theatre Catalog* (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, 1942), 3:61–63.

64. Morris Lapidus, *An Architecture of Joy* (Miami: E. A. Seeman Publishing Inc., 1979), 164.

65. Florida site file #SO00410, Tallahassee: Division of Historic Preservation, Secretary of State's Office, State of Florida; "Extensive Program to Feature Opening of Edwards Theatre Here on Saturday Evening," *This Week in Sarasota*, 8 April 1926, sec. A, p. 7.

66. The Edwards was listed on the National Register in 1984 and renovated in 1985 to become home to the Sarasota Opera Association, Inc.

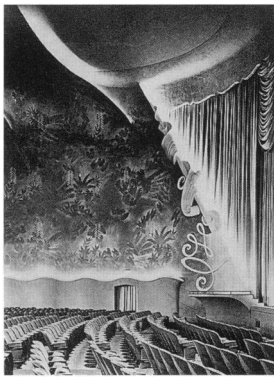


Fig. 39. Robert Law Weed with William L. Pereira, Beach Theatre, Miami Beach, auditorium with scrolling plaster work, 1941. Arva Parks collection.

opposite,

Fig. 40. Michael J. de Angelis with Roy F. France, Carib Theatre, Miami Beach, a map of the Caribbean above the entry, 1950. Photograph © Miami Herald, used by permission.

in Northern states —was to provide a separate side or rear entrance for African-Americans. In the largest palaces, this entrance would lead up many flights of stairs to a third- or fourth-floor vestibule tucked under the rear of the balcony. However, racial segregation policies did not stop the chains from seeking profits directly in the African-American communities. Several of the theatres surveyed were exclusively for “colored” patrons. Like all neighborhood houses, these were convenient to the patrons and usually profitable, though seldom showing first-run pictures.

At least nine such African-American theatres were built in Florida. The most historic of these is the 490-seat Lyric (1913) in Miami. It was built by one of the city’s most successful African-American businessmen, Geder Walker.<sup>67</sup>

Designed by Benjamin, the nine-hundred-seat Strand (1919) in Jacksonville was also built for African-American patrons. The 970-seat Ritz (1929) in Jacksonville, designed by Jefferson Powell, is most intriguing: its style has been described as Egyptian-Mediterranean Revival with Art Deco touches.<sup>68</sup> It is actually closer to Vienna Secession, one of Art Deco’s antecedent styles.

New York City architect Michael J. de Angelis, along with noted Miami Beach Art Deco district architect Roy F. France (1888–1972), working for Wometco, designed the last of Florida’s dream palaces, thus bringing down the final curtain in the saga. Wometco commissioned De Angelis and France to design Miami Beach’s twenty-two-hundred-seat Carib (1950) (fig. 40).<sup>69</sup> It was the second-largest theatre in the state until it was gutted for a shopping center in 1978. Even its outstanding facade depicting the Caribbean basin was destroyed during the renovation. France also designed the fifteen-hundred-seat Gateway Theatre in Fort Lauderdale (1952).

The early 1950s marked the end of the dream palace era in Florida. Few other theatres were built with single screens, as times changed and the movie theatre business faced deadly competition from television and cable television. Yet the legacy of Florida’s dream palace era lives on in the four performing arts centers that have been founded in the former theatres, preserving for the public a glimpse of a fabulous and dazzling era, the likes of which we shall never see again. □

67. Gary Goodwin and Suzanne Walker, *Florida Black Heritage Trail* (Tallahassee: Bureau of Historic Preservation, 1991), 15; the Lyric was listed on the National Register in 1989, and has been in a process of renovation for many years.

68. Wood, *Jacksonville’s Architectural Heritage*, 98.

69. New York architect Michael J. de Angelis’ name appears on all drawings of the project. Roy F. France was his local affiliate. City of Miami Beach building department data and Mitchell Wolfson Jr. personal archives.



