The Garden Theatre
10-12-14 West North Avenue
Pittsburgh
Allegheny County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1278

HABS
PA,
2-PITBU,
28-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
Reduced Copy of Measured Drawing

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

HABS
PA,2-PITBU,28-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. PA-1278

THE GARDEN THEATRE

Location: 10-12-14 W. North Avenue, North Side Pittsburgh, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania.

USGS Pittsburgh West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 17.583150.4478560

Present Owner: Penn-Ally Enterprises

Present Use: "Adult" Movie Theatre

Statement of Significance: As "movies" lost their novelty and became a major entertainment form, picture theatres became more substantial and dignified than the earlier Nickelodeons. The Garden Theatre is a typical little-changed neighborhood movie house of this century's second decade.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1915. Building Permit #403 was issued on April 27, 1915. The theatre was first listed in the Pittsburgh Directory in 1916.

2. Original and subsequent owners: Legal transactions of Lot 83, Block 23-L, Ward 22, Pittsburgh, Allegheny Co., Pennsylvania.

Date	Grantor	Grant	Consideration
4/11/1906 Book 1449 Page 352	Mary Jane Smith	David E. Park	$10,350.00
4/11/1906 Book 1449 Page 352	Wilson S. Smith	David E. Park	$ 2,500.00
4/11/1906 Book 1449 Page 354	Harry S. Pressly, *et ux*, *et al*	David E. Park	$15,500.00
5/30/1917 Book 144 Page 115	David E. Park	Lewis A. Park	Bequest

6/16/1924 Book 2237 Page 130	Lewis A. Park	Bennett Amdur	$	1.00
8/1/1924 Book 2258 Page 712	Bennett Amdur	North Side Amusement Co.	$	1.00

In 1973 the theatre was sold to Penn-Ally Enterprises.

3. Architect: Thomas H. Scott. A Pittsburgh architect, Scott's major work is the Machesney (now Benedum-Trees) Building, in downtown Pittsburgh, erected in 1905.

4. Builder: Construction was by the William D. Beatty Company.

5. Original plans, construction, etc.: Working drawings preserved by the management of the theatre show the building to have been erected in substantially the same form as it now exists.

6. Alterations and additions: A major alteration occurred c. 1927. Basically restoration, it was done under the direction of the Libman-Spanjer Company, of New York City. In this work some modifications were made to the entrance lobby and the rear of the auditorium. Since then, the marquee has been twice altered, and several signs have been added to the facade. Other changes were made to install a wide projection screen. As recently as 1974, the old ticket booth was removed. It is now installed as an exhibit at the Old Post Office Museum, One Landmark Square, Pittsburgh.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Opening without publicity, probably in 1915, the Garden Theatre was one of a growing group of North Side Pittsburgh neighborhood movie houses. Its builder, and the first owner, was David E. Park, Vice President of the Peoples National Bank. Living only four blocks to the east of the theatre site, he acquired the lot in April 1906.

Because of the similarity between "Park" and "Garden," the latter was chosen as a name for the theatre, both as a pun on the name of the owner, and to avoid confusing it with the name of another of his properties, the Park Building, in downtown Pittsburgh. Soon after the Garden opened, in 1917 or 1919, a young manager, Bennett Amdursky (later shortened to Amdur), came to it from a briefly held post as manager of the Alhambra Theatre. The Garden became the pride of his

life. He worked at the theatre daily until his death in the spring of 1970, over a half-century later.

In 1917, soon after the opening of the theatre, David Park died, and the property was inherited by his son, Lewis A. Park. In 1924 Lewis Park gave title to the theatre to Bennett Amdur. About three years after becoming the Garden's owner, Amdur sought to bring its decoration up to date. He commissioned the Libman-Spanjer Company of New York City, after he had seen their work in the Bellevue Theatre in Pittsburgh. The box office and the lobby decorations were re-done like those of the Bellevue. The transformation was restricted to decoration, and care was taken not to alter the theatre's basic character. No other such alterations of consequence were made, because Amdur stoutly refused to change the appearance of the building that meant so much to him.

Amdur insisted, however, that the Garden reflect the latest advances in exhibition technology. Most recent replacement of the projectors was in 1954. The same men who as projectionists can remember working at the Garden with the hand-cranked machines, and playing phonograph records for a musical accompaniment to the silent pictures, never failed to praise the Garden's projection booth and equipment, declaring them the most modern and comfortable to handle in the entire city of Pittsburgh. At one time a pipe organ was installed, but when the sound picture came into universal use, the organ was removed, and given to a church. Sound equipment, remote-control motorized light dimmers, wide-screen projectors, and modern heating and air conditioning were installed in the Garden as soon as they came on the market.

In the early years the Garden had its own power-generating equipment, and on one occasion during a severe flood it was the only theatre in the city able to operate without interruption. The building, now supplied by the central electric distribution system, still maintains emergency generators which can supply full power if there is ever another city-wide blackout.

In over fifty years there has never been a picture missing from the screen of the Garden Theatre. In more recent times, the only interruption of movie presentation took place when one of the projectionists fell dead of a heart attack, and his partner, overcome by the shock, collapsed along with him and died a few days later. In the best of show traditions, a replacement projectionist was at work in half-an-hour after the emergency.

Bennett Amdur died on June 2, 1970, and following his death the lobby of the Garden was darkened, except for a spotlight on his black-draped portrait, for thirty days, when the lights came on again as the Garden's tradition of service continued. At a time when the state of the moving picture business would have suggested cut-back and restraint, the facade was still flood-lit nightly, and the varnished polychrome and the mirrors were kept gleaming. Neighborhood residents stopped by the theatre to see Amdur's portrait as the Garden carried on its role of a North Side Pittsburgh institution. After 1973 the Garden Theatre was faced with closing or going to "adult" movies. Chosing the latter rather than to break with Amdur's tradition, it is now advertised as "The New Garden Theatre," but the theatre signs remain unchanged from Amdur's day.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Important old views: None.

2. Original and unpublished sources:

a. Records of the Buildings Department, City of Pittsburgh.

b. Records of the Recorder of Deeds, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania.

c. Plans preserved by the management of the Garden Theatre.

d. Drawings, with a different ticket booth design, were made by students at Carnegie Institute of Technology for HABS in 1970.

e. Interview with Miss Leatrice Vaupel, Manager, and the staff of the Garden Theatre by Craig Morrison in 1970, by Lucy Wheeler in 1976, and with Ellis Schmidlapp, former HABS member, now with the Old Post Office Museum, by Mrs. Wheeler in 1976.

3. Secondary and published sources:

The Pittsburgh-Post Gazette, January 25, 1958, and September 3, 1970.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural interest and merit: The Garden Theatre, a typical example of a neighborhood theatre of the second

decade of this century, has remained virtually unchanged throughout the succeeding years.

2. Condition of fabric: Excellent maintenance since 1915.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Number of stories: The front part of the building is two stories high and has a full basement not visible on the exterior. The auditorium to the rear is one story high and has no basement.

2. Over-all dimensions: The street facade is 59 feet wide and the building is 180 feet deep.

3. Layout, shape: Rectangular.

4. Number of bays: The facade is three bays wide; the building is 11 structural bays deep.

5. Foundations: Concrete below grade.

6. Wall construction, finish and color: The street facade is faced with cream-colored glazed terra cotta with spandrel panels of light green terra cotta. The side and rear walls are of dark red brick laid in common bond and unornamented.

The three bays of the facade are defined by four two-story, paneled pilasters, supporting an entablature which extends the full width of the building. The pilaster capitals are a modified Renaissance Doric, with an egg-and-dart molding broken by a central block forming the echinus. The entablature has a simple architrave, a paneled frieze and a cornice with block modillions. Over each pilaster the entablature is broken forward slightly, and in the frieze at each of these points is a wreathed circular mount for a light fixture.

The central bay is pedimented, and within the pediment, foliate ornamentation flanks a central cartouche. The outer bays each have a parapet wall of moderate height, which is broken forward over each pilaster as a paneled pedestal. Within each bay the parapet wall contains three horizontal panels filled with glyphs. The parapet continues undecorated over the pediment, and conceals the pitch of the roof behind.

At the first-story level the central bay is an open vestibule. Each outer bay contains a storefront. The

left one has a three-sided projecting display window, topped by an ornamental metal cresting and flanked by a single entrance door. The right storefront has a pair of five-sided shop windows, decorated like the other, but with one central door. Both of the storefronts have a continuous glazed transom, and at the first-story level all three bays have an entablature consisting of narrow architrave, wide frieze, and simple molded cornice.

At the second-story level each bay contains three windows separated by paneled terra-cotta mullions. The wooden sash are double-hung, eight-over-one lights. Below each window group a continuous molded sill has a band of vertical fluting below it. Light green terra-cotta tiles fill the spandrel panels beneath.

7. Lighting: The heavy cast metal exterior lighting brackets are semicircular in profile and originally had large glass globes. First located along the main frieze, they were later lowered on the pilasters to a point where they would illuminate display cases at the first-story level on the bases of the pilasters. The two outer fixtures still remain in place. The inner ones were removed with the marquee alteration of 1958. The entire facade is now floodlit by modern billboard fixtures projecting out over the top of the parapet wall.

8. Marquee and signs: The original marquee was a flat canopy of glass with an ornate fascia of pressed metal with glass panels, the whole suspended on chains from ornamental anchor plates on the central pilasters. At some time a higher fascia with the name of the theatre was placed on the marquee, and the soffit was covered with sheet metal and studded with radial rows of lights. A two-panel, wedge-shaped attraction board with interchangeable letters of white glass on an opaque ground and an ornamental, illuminated frame was suspended from the facade at the second-story level. Atop the central pediment a tall vertical sign bearing the name of the theatre in lights was erected. On January 25, 1958, the marquee fell, and was replaced with one of a slightly simpler design. The original lettering of the attraction panels has been changed to cast-aluminum letters on illuminated white glass ground, and much of the decorative lighting has been converted from incandescent bulbs to neon tubing.

9. Vestibule: The central bay of the facade opens into a 16' 8" square vestibule. The ceiling, originally coffered as in the inner lobby, was covered in 1958 with white enameled metal set with lights. The metal ceiling also covers the terra-cotta lintel on the facade which originally was set with 15 lights.

The floor of this area, raised one step above the sidewalk, is paved with small ceramic tiles with green and black patterns on a white ground. The rear wall of the vestibule is composed entirely of doors, above which are operable transom panels. Each side wall has a black imitation marble dado, above which are five tall rectangular panels topped by a thin entablature bearing scroll ornaments and Adamesque paterae. The panels are separated by spirally turned elongated colonnettes with turned bases. The end panels are narrow and painted pink, the central one is a glazed display board, and the intermediate panels are large mirrors scored into small rectangular panes. Small ornamental iron and leaded glass lanterns project from each mirror. The glazed and textured gold wall surfaces are touched up by pink-red and green polychromy.

10. Ticket booth: The present ticket booth is set inconspicuously inside the theatre. The original ticket booth is now displayed in the Old Post Office Museum at One Landmark Square in Pittsburgh, where it is shown with all its lights on, as it originally appeared. The booth is basically rectangular in plan with wide chamfered corners, giving it a quasi-octagonal effect. Above a low imitation black marble base, extremely elongated spirally turned colonnettes with tall baluster bases and Composite capitals "support" the entablature at each angle of the booth. Three of the principal faces and the four corner "bays" each have a round-headed window above a single-paneled dado. A small curved marble shelf is set at the base of the front window, and stylized foliate mantling decorates the spandrels of all the window arches. The rear face contains a gold-painted door with two pink panels. The entablature of the booth has a denticulated cornice and a frieze that breaks forward over each colonnette and is ornamented at each break by a vertical Adamesque patera executed in compo. The frieze is studded with electric light sockets on the front, sides,and two front corners in a 5-2-4-2-5 arrangement. Ornamental cresting caps each of the four principal faces. The booth is finished in gold and deep pink textured polychromy.

11. Doors and other openings: There are three sets of paired entrance doors extending the width of the vestibule. Each door contains a large plate glass panel. There are three sets of paired exit doors, one set at each side of the rear wall, and one set about midway along the east wall. Originally there was an exit from the men's lounge to the east alley, but it has long been sealed up. The exits are set beneath segmental arches

composed of three courses of headers. The doors are metal-sheathed. Circular openings above each of the rear exits were designed to contain ventilating fans.

12. Structural system and framing: The building is of masonry bearing wall construction with the roof supported by light steel trusses.

13. Roof: The steel truss roof is a longitudinal gable covered in composition roofing laid over concrete planks.

C. Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans:

a. Basement: The basement, under the front portion of the building, was originally divided into two rooms reached by stairways from the shops adjoining the theatre. The dividing partition has been removed to create one large space. The floor is concrete, the walls brick.

b. First floor: The front part of the building contains the open vestibule and enclosed lobby in its central bay. These originally were a single open space, the separating doors having been installed in 1927. To either side is a rental store. Originally these were connected with the vestibule and each had a small toilet room to the rear. The west store has been divided to create an office for the theatre; the vestibule entrance from the other store has been closed. At the west end of the building is a stairway giving direct access to the second story from the street. Behind the stores and lobbies the auditorium of the theatre occupies the full width of the building. It is narrowed at the rear by the public toilet rooms set into the rear corners. At the very rear it is further narrowed by the insertion of two small spaces which originally gave headroom to the basement stairways. One of these spaces now contains a refreshment counter, and one a water cooler. Double doors in the angled front walls of the auditorium give access to corner exit hallways.

c. Second floor: The front part of the building contains a single large room, built as an ice-cream parlor and used for many years as a dance studio. The walls and ceiling are of plaster, the floor of wood set in a pattern of diminishing concentric rectangles around a longitudinally laid rectangular central panel.

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to each of these panels is a tall enframement of similar design but without the arched top. These frames extend to the floor and contain (on the right side of the lobby) a scored mirror and (on the left) a door to the manager's office. The door has a scored mirror in its single large panel. The half of each side wall nearest the auditorium is ornamented with a motif of Palladian form. The sides (too broad for true Palladian proportions) are display panels, and the elliptical-arched center contains a scored mirror bearing an electric sconce with three candle branches above an illuminated elliptical boss-formed network of glass beads. The ornaments of the bottom rail, colonnettes, entablatures, and central arch are identical with those of the panels nearest the front. The side panels of the Palladian motif carry advertising displays.

b. Auditorium: The walls of the auditorium are of heavily textured plaster painted light blue-green above a dark green dado. The side walls are divided into six bays by pilaster strips lacking capitals and bases. Each wall segment contains a large nearly square panel of green-on-gold cloth over a sound-absorbent padded backing. The panels are bordered by moldings ornamented with a slender fillet of rope pattern. The narrow "pilaster" panels are framed by identical moldings but topped with an elaborate cartouche, while their fields are painted a bright red.

Each of the angled walls of the exit-ramp enclosures at the front of the auditorium contains a single pair of doors to the outside, and, above, an ornamental wooden grille. Both sets of doors and grilles are draped with gold cloth swags. Space between the hall exits is occupied by stage and orchestra pit which, evidence shows, were added after the original construction of the theatre. The stage now contains a wide curved CinemaScope projection screen which is curtained with the same fabric as is used in the wall panels. The orchestra pit is surrounded by a balustrade of closely spaced square balusters. Behind the screen can be seen the original decorative treatment of the front of the theatre.

The original screen was rectangular, and mounted directly on the wall of the auditorium. It was framed by a heavy molding of bound leaves, painted maroon on either side of the screen and green across

the top. Within the frame was a shallow recess with a wide beveled edge which held the screen proper. The entire wall was painted black. The side walls were painted a dark metallic maroon over a dark paneled wooden dado. The original ventilating grilles have classical frames consisting of a sill in the form of an entablature, a pair of paneled pilasters, and an upper entablature broken forward over each.

The ceiling entablature had an enriched ogee molding as architrave, a plain frieze, and a shallow cornice containing a heavy egg-and-dart molding. The ceiling now joins the walls in an unornamented cove, the original entablature having been removed in the 1927 redecoration. However, behind the projection screen a fragment of the original ceiling treatment still shows a ground of cream color with stylized stencilled ornament in a band around the edge of the old decorations.

The current auditorium ceiling is completely flat and without ornament. The ceiling is painted light blue with a mottling of cream, the mottling being sparse in the center and more dense toward the sides, in imitation of a cloud-filled sky. In the third bay from the rear of the auditorium, the ceiling drops approximately four feet. This lowered section extends the full width of the auditorium, but only through one bay of its length. Suspended from the roof structure, it accommodates the projection room, so located in order to provide a short throw to the screen. The front wall of the dropped section contains eight projection and view ports.

In front of the projection booth, in the ceiling area, are five large, screened, grilled openings to the attic--part of an early ventilation system.

Behind the last row of auditorium seats is a screen composed of standee's rail of wooden panels topped with a series of glass panels. This screen is seven panels wide, the frame finished in dark brown textured paint with the fields of the panels painted cream beneath a light brown glaze. The center of each panel holds a composition ornament. The glass panels above, which are arch-topped, are scored to form a border. For their full height they are separated by tall paneled, square-section colonnettes, each topped by a Corinthian capital and

urn finial. The upper portion of the colonnettes is decorated with an applied rope molding. The end colonnettes are connected to the outer corners of the lounges by ornamental wrought iron arches, with glazed hanging lanterns.

c. Public lounge and toilet areas: The circulation area behind the standee's rail is reduced in width by the enclosure of an L-shaped volume at each end. These enclosures contain the public lounges and toilets and, at the extreme rear of the auditorium, the headroom spaces over the basement stairways, now used as a refreshment counter and a water cooler alcove. The wall sections comprising these enclosures, except for the rear wall which contains a small wrought iron balcony carrying indirect lighting, have panels identical to the main auditorium panels in their upper portions, and lower portions with decoration similar in style to the standee's rail and to the lobby. All of this decoration was installed in 1927.

The lounges face each other across the rear space. They are entered through doors, glazed, and flanked by narrow sidelights. The glazing is of textured frosted glass, ornamented with a band of leaded stained glass at the top. In the sidelights this is of a random pattern continuing on across the door as background for the designation of the room which is, likewise, worked in stained glass. The LADIES panel remains, while the one for the men's lounge is missing, and has been replaced with standard frosted glass. To the side of each of these entrances and toward the rear of the auditorium, is a narrow paneled door which leads, on the west side, to the manager's office, and on the east side to the attic and projection booth ladder.

The rear portions of the L-shaped areas that are occupied by the refreshment stand and the water cooler are left unenclosed at the lower level. A thin square column supports the corner formed by the walls of each area. The openings are flanked by narrow Corinthian pilasters containing Adamesque composition ornament. The pilasters support a narrow entablature ornamented with paterae where it breaks forward over the pilasters. This woodwork is finished with heavily varnished dark brown textured paint. The present woodwork was apparently added in 1927, but it differs little from that shown in the original plans. The major change here was the enclosure of

the upper parts of the corner areas. Originally these were open, and the area over the men's lounge was surrounded by a parapet and served as the manager's office. It was reached by a conventional stairway where the water cooler now stands. This upper area is now reached only by a metal ladder in a former closet space to the rear of the men's lounge entrance.

5. Doorways and doors: The most noteworthy doors are those that connect the lobby with the auditorium. (The others have already been described.) There are three sets of paired doors at the auditorium entrance, each glazed with a single large pane painted on the inside to render it opaque, except that the center pair has small round peepholes. The outer side of each door is decorated with a cursive design in the Art Nouveau manner consisting of a light brown panel separated from a wide deep red outer border by a flowing strip of dull but polished gold leaf. The word ENTRANCE is lettered in Art Nouveau style in the central panels of the two middle doors.

6. Lighting: All lighting in the theatre is electric. The exterior lighting and that of the lobby have been described above. The auditorium is lighted by ceiling and wall fixtures. Large octagonal iron and yellow glass fixtures with truncated pyramidal bottoms are set tangent to the ceiling, four out of an original six in front of the projection booth bay and four toward the rear. (The left front "chandelier" became disengaged when it was lowered by its pulley system for relamping and is now displayed with the ticket booth at the Old Post Office Museum.) An elongated octagonal fixture en suite with the others lights the rear portion of the ceiling. The wall fixtures are in the form of wrought iron "torches" and are fixed to each of the pilaster strips along the side walls. These torchères were apparently once glazed with yellow pebble glass but are now fitted with opaque baffles, giving an indirect light.

7. Notable hardware: None.

8. Heating and ventilating: The auditorium originally was fitted with a number of wall and ceiling fans to effect air circulation. Radiators remain from the original steam heating system, as do the remnants of several early ventilating arrangements. Modern forced air heating and cooling systems are now in use.

D. Site and Surroundings:

According to legal description of the property, The Garden Theatre occupies Lot 83 of Block 23-L, Ward 22, on Pittsburgh's North Side, just above the confluence of the Ohio, the Allegheny, and the Monongahela Rivers. At 10-12-14 West North Avenue, a major commercial and residential street in that area, in a block at the intersection of North Avenue with Federal Street, the theatre faces directly upon North Park, a public park just across the street, and extends from West North Avenue back into the block to Eloise Street, which is a small residential and service street to the rear. The Garden abuts a building on its west side. A narrow exit alley extends its full depth to the east.

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September 1970
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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Garden Theatre was documented as part of a Historic American Buildings Survey project to record representative examples of theatre design in the United States during the first third of the 20th century. The project was begun under James C. Massey, former HABS Chief, and completed under the general supervision of Dr. John Poppeliers, succeeding Chief of the Historic American Buildings Survey since 1972. Archival photographs were prepared by Jack E. Boucher, HABS Photographer, in 1970. For study, blueprints and photographs were obtained through Miss Lea Vaupel, a former employee of the theatre under Owner-Manager Bennett Amdur, and later herself acting manager of the theatre. Additional information obtained in research conducted from the HABS office following 1970 was incorporated into the manuscript during its final preparation for the "Selections" series. The written data were edited by Denys Peter Myers, HABS Architectural Historian, in 1978.