

Pantages Theatre & Jones Building
901-909 Broadway St.
Tacoma
Pierce County
Washington

HABS No. WA-151

HABS
WASH,
27-TACO,
5-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

NATIONAL ARCHITECTURAL AND ENGINEERING RECORD

The Pantages Theater/Jones Building

HABS
WASH
27-TACO,
5-

Location: 901 and 909 Broadway
Tacoma, Washington

UTM: 10.542430.5233470
Quad: Tacoma North

Date of Construction: 1916-1918

Present Owner: City of Tacoma
County-City Building - 3rd Floor
930 Tacoma Avenue South
Tacoma, Washington 98402

Present Use: Motion picture theater; office
rental; retail shop.

Significance: The site on which the building was
constructed has particular importance
in the history of Tacoma commerce.
William Jones, who commissioned the
project, was a key figure in the
development of the shipping industry
and wheat trade in the northwest. The
building represents the earliest extant
example of the architect E. Marcus
Fiteca's numerous theater-office
building designs for the vaudeville
magnate Alexander Pantages.

Historian: Patricia A. Elias and Florence K.
Lentz, November, 1976.

THE PANTAGES THEATER/JONES BUILDING (901 BROADWAY, TACOMA, WASHINGTON)

DESCRIPTION:

The Pantages Theatre - Jones Building, designed by the architect B. Marcus Priteca, represents an interesting combination of variant styles and functions. The unusual structure, which opened its doors in January of 1918, was created to serve both as an office building and as a vaudeville theatre. These two disparate functions are clearly expressed on the exterior of the building, where the Second Renaissance Revival style is successfully juxtaposed with the Commercial style. This stylistic blending is achieved by Priteca's consistent use of stylized Roman motifs and modified classical proportion. With the exception of the ground-floor level, the exterior is largely unaltered, and the building still houses entertainment and commercial activities.

The Pantages Theatre - Jones Building stands at the end of the city block formed by Commerce Street on the east, Ninth Street on the north, and Broadway Plaza to the west (the south wall abuts that of the adjacent commercial building on Broadway Plaza). The setting is characterized by downtown commercial activities and relatively intact late 19th and early 20th century streetscapes. The theatre-office building is nearly square in plan, measuring 100 feet on Ninth Street and 115 feet on Broadway. A steel framed structure with walls of reinforced concrete, it is faced on both Ninth and Broadway with white, glazed terra cotta in a matt finish. The Commerce Street wall is faced with yellowish-toned brick.

The Ninth Street facade of the Theatre is divided horizontally into three major sections, and vertically into five bays. The lower level of the facade, which conforms to the steep Ninth Street grade, has received a minimum of elaboration typical of a Renaissance palazzo base. The central level of this elevation, equivalent to three stories in height, features a triple-arched blind arcade set within the three central bays. Each individual archway is punctuated by a pedimented structural opening with a large ornamental cartouche above. These central bays are each framed by imposing, pseudo-Corinthian pilasters and half pilasters, a full three stories in height. The blind arcade is solidly flanked by sparsely-decorated outermost bays. Structural openings on the same level as those of the central bays are capped with segmental-arched pediments. Five bracketed balconettes underline these openings, creating a strong horizontal course which firmly ties the variant bays together. A heavily proportioned entablature repeats the horizontal movement across the full five bays on this facade. The entablature consists of a simple architrave, festooned frieze, and cornice with a boldly projecting dentil course. An undecorated area of the frieze was to carry terra cotta letters reading PANTAGES THEATRE, according to Priteca's original plans; these were apparently never applied. A substantial parapet above the cornice is simply ornamented with raised terra cotta rosettes, and rectangles. Priteca's original plans had specified a ridge with shell-shaped finials to be placed on axis with each arch of the blind arcade below.

The full-blown Renaissance Revival style of this elevation contrasts sharply with the more straightforward Commercial style of the Jones Building proper. However, the marriage of the two styles and building functions is successfully carried off in several ways. On the Ninth Street facade, the Theatre is "inset" into the Jones Building (which stands a full two stories higher) by an overlapping, or sharing, of a single transitional bay. A two-story single bay portion of the office complex tops the connecting bay of the theatre, thus achieving the linkage. Another factor which contributes to this transition is the continuation of the theatre's cornice with its distinctive dentil course, around the corner and across the Broadway elevation of the Jones Building, at a level two stories higher. Similarly, the fenestration and terra cotta ornament of the Jones Building bay on Ninth Street is repeated in the Broadway elevation's outermost bays. A third element which visually connects the two structures is the horizontal movement created by the theatre's Ninth Street balconettes and the Broadway marquee.

The Broadway Plaza facade of the Jones Building consists of seven full bays. The five central bays feature two windows with double-hung, one-over-one light sash per story, while the outermost bays are characterized by three windows per story. The bays are enframed by stylized rope mouldings, and vertical garlands of terra cotta. The spandrels are ornamented in some locations with wreaths, rosettes, and geometric designs. Above the dentilled cornice, fenestration corresponding to that of the bays below provides light to a seventh story level on both Ninth Street and Broadway elevations.

The Commerce Street elevation is a particularly unusual one. The brick facing was laid in an intricate geometric pattern of inscribed rectangular panels, blind arches, and detail motifs such as diamonds and stylized rosettes. Although the surface of this elevation is essentially a flat one, the patterns created in the brickwork (termed "tapestry" brick in the specifications) are obviously an abstracted version of the classical configurations in terra cotta on the Ninth Street facade. A small number of window openings on Commerce Street have been filled in, and a fire escape has been removed.

Although the marquee has been modernized above the entrance to the theatre, at the corner of Ninth and Broadway, a substantial portion of the original pressed copper overhang remains on the Broadway elevation. The Pantages sign, which projected from the corner of Ninth and Broadway, has been replaced by a neon sign and reader board of the present-day movie theatre. The theatre entrance itself has been recently altered, as has the foyer. The original 1297 seats were of cast iron, those on the aisles displaying a cast "P" for Pantages. These seats, now replaced, were covered with imitation Morocco leather, allowing 2 feet 8 inches of leg room, and cost 34.85 each. The theatre's sight lines and acoustics are still excellent. Alterations to the interior of the auditorium have been relatively minor, and are essentially reversible. The original color scheme, which might easily be restored, was of ivory and dove grey with gold accents.

The auditorium of the Tacoma Pantages is elliptical in shape and is oriented north to south, the proscenium arch and stage located on the south wall. The small orchestra pit can be entered through the greenroom below the stage. Dressing rooms flank the greenroom at that level. Because of the very steep

grade on Ninth Street, large spaces below the auditorium level were available for rehearsals and storage. At the lowest level on Commerce Street, the heating and electrical systems were installed.

Decorative features of the auditorium rely upon the lavish use of classical motifs executed in plaster by European craftsmen. The proscenium arch is encrusted with a variety of these motifs, which culminate at a center point in an elaborate floral cartouche. Projecting from this cartouche is a torch which once carried a "P" for Pantages. The proscenium is flanked by fluted, engaged columns of massive proportions. The auditorium's entablature features a dentilled cornice with shell finials. Above the entablature rises a coved ceiling with gutter lighting. At the center of the ceiling is an art glass sunburst, in lieu of the traditional crystal chandelier. Remaining boxes are located on either side in the ante-proscenium area. Each box is an arch-shaped niche ornamented on its interior by rosettes and a large shell motif. The box entrance is enframed by a complex arrangement of pilasters, entablature, and broken pediment. The recessed space of each box is enframed in turn by a rectangular surround which is decorated with garlands and a centrally-placed classical mask at its head.

One of the most interesting and innovative features in the theatre is the "acoustical accelerator" designed by Priteca and located at the rear of the main floor under the balcony. Priteca, like Louis Sullivan, felt that members of the audience with the cheapest seats should see and hear as well as those with the most expensive. Priteca conceived the idea of a concave surface located several feet in front of the mezzanine crossover which allows the sound to resonate under the balcony, permitting improved acoustics for those seated in the rear orchestra. Although the "acoustical accelerator" device was used much later by Frank Lloyd Wright in an auditorium which he designed in Tempe, Arizona, the original idea may be attributed to E. Marcus Priteca.

The interior of the Jones Building retains original marble decorative trim in the lobby. The office space has been extensively remodelled for modern-day commercial usage; however, some original decorative features may well remain beneath modern building fabric.

The Tacoma Pantages Theatre participated in the formulation of a Renaissance style in theatre design, soon to be superseded by the Atmospheric style associated with the early movie house. As a vaudeville house, the Tacoma Pantages along with the Seattle Pantages (now razed) established a design pattern for future Pantages theatres in the west. It is now the earliest extant theatre-office building combination in that important chain of entertainment facilities. It clearly reflects the work of an innovative architect familiar with recent advances in early 20th century building technology, and thoroughly versed in the manipulation of classical form.

SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of the nomination of the Pantages Theatre-Jones Building lies in three distinct areas. The site on which the building was constructed has particular importance in the history of Tacoma commerce. Second, William Jones, who commissioned the project, was a key figure in the development of the shipping

industry and the wheat trade in the northwest. Third, the building represents the earliest extant example of the architect B. Marcus Priteca's numerous theatre-office building designs for the vaudeville magnate Alexander Pantages.

In the 1880's, the intersection of Ninth Street and Broadway, formerly C Street, was the heart of the city's commercial district. The Northern Pacific Railroad, a key industrial factor in the growth of Tacoma, had built its offices on the southwest corner of that intersection. In 1887, upon the arrival of the first transcontinental railroad, the Northern Pacific Railroad relocated its offices, and the Tacoma Theatre Building, designed by J. W. Wood of Philadelphia, was constructed on the site. On the northwest corner of the intersection, the Bostwick Hotel was built in 1889, on the site of Dr. Bostwick's original house. Bostwick was the first president of the Pierce County Medical Association and President of the Bank of New Tacoma. Across Broadway (C Street) from the hotel stood the Chamber of Commerce Building, headquarters of the Tacoma Commercial Club as well as the Chamber of Commerce. On the site of the Jones Building stood Gross Brothers Department Store, a local business begun in Tacoma in 1887 on Pacific Avenue. Gross Brothers was once considered the finest department store in the northwest. In short, at the intersection of Broadway and Ninth Street, Tacoma businessmen established a basis for the city's national and international trade in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries.

In 1897, William Jones, capitalist and philanthropist from Walla Walla, bought Gross Brothers and opened an office of his own in Tacoma. Jones was an officer of numerous companies involved in shipping and wheat trade. He also helped to develop Mt. Rainier as a tourist attraction, and worked for the establishment of a permanent military installation in the area. No clear documentation has come to light concerning Jones' collaboration with Pantages and Priteca for the Pantages Theatre-Jones Building project.

Benjamin Marcus Priteca was born in Scotland, educated at the University of Edinburgh and the Royal Academy of Art. During the course of his studies, he was apprenticed to the architect Robert McFarlane Cameron. In 1909, Priteca and his family emigrated to the United States, arriving in Seattle in time for the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition.

Priteca's professional career began the following year in Seattle. Richard F. McCann, F.A.I.A. and former colleague of Priteca, has said that Priteca's first design commission was a small commercial building in Tacoma. However, at an early date Priteca became the personal architect of Alexander Pantages, well-known vaudeville impresario, and was subsequently involved in the designing or remodelling of many Pantages buildings throughout the western United States and Canada.

Priteca's extensive work for Pantages, as well as for other theatre-chain clients, firmly established his position as one of the country's leading specialists in theatre and movie-house design. At the time of his death in 1971, sixty major theatres as well as 150 others of lesser importance had been attributed to him.

Among his more famous entertainment palaces were the ornate Hollywood Pantages at Hollywood and Vine, as well as the Palomar, originally the Pantages (1913), and The Orpheum (1927) in Seattle. The latter two have been recently demolished.

At the height of Priteca's career, he maintained offices in Los Angeles and headquarters in Seattle. As a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, Priteca was involved in such diverse projects as Seattle's Longacres racetrack, the Seattle Opera House, and the Congregation Temple de Hirsch. In addition, he designed a body for the Locomobile, and a raked grill and windshield for the Paige, forerunner of the Graham-Paige automobile.

The Tacoma Pantages Theatre Jones Building, constructed 1916-1918, holds a key position in Priteca's prolific repertoire of theatre design. As the earliest extant combination theatre-office building created for Alexander Pantages (the now demolished Pantages-Palomar in Seattle being the earliest constructed), the structure successfully unites a duality of functions and architectural styles. Structurally and mechanically, the building incorporates in both theatre and office space a sophisticated level of technology. As in the case of all remaining Priteca theatre complexes, an excellence in overall design concept and detail is displayed on both interior and exterior; the blending of the Renaissance Revival and the Commercial styles is a particularly noteworthy achievement in terms of enhancement of the streetscapes of downtown Tacoma. The Pantages Theatre Jones Building, because of its eminence as an early and choice Priteca theatre structure, is historically and architecturally significant on a national level.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Richard F. McCann, A. I. A. - Adaptation of Tacoma Pantages Theatre - to serve the Existing Need for a City Center Performance Facility. M. W. Co. P. S. - Seattle and Hollywood, March, 1976, unpublished. (File copy - City Clerk's Office)

Bonney, W. P. A History of Pierce County. 3 vols. Chicago. Pioneer Historical Publishing Company. 1927

Harvey, Paul W. Tacoma Headlines. Tacoma, Washington: The News Tribune, 1962

Hent, Herbert Tacoma Its History and Its Builders, A Half Century of Activity. 3 Vols. Chicago, Illinois; The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1916

Scully, Jr., Vincent Modern Architecture, George Braziller, N. Y. 1961
Library of Congress No. 61-13689

McCann, Richard F., A.I.A.: a series of conversations, personal interview during January and February and March 1976

Priteca, B. Marcus, A.R.C.A., F.A.I.A.; Specifications for the Pantages/Jones Building, Tacoma, Washington dated September 1, 1916

Seattle Post-Intelligencer, October 3, 1975, page A 7