

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

1. Name of Property

Historic Name: River Oaks Theatre
Other name/site number: 2009 West Gray Street
Name of related multiple property listing: NA

2. Location

Street & number: 2050 West Gray Street
City or town: Houston State: Texas County: Harris
Not for publication: [ ] Vicinity: [ ]

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

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

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

Applicable National Register Criteria: [ ] A [ ] B [ ] C [ ] D

[Signature] Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer
Signature of certifying official / Title Date 9/23/24
Texas Historical Commission
State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

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

4. National Park Service Certification

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

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

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## 5. Classification

### Ownership of Property

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

### Category of Property

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

### Number of Resources within Property

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

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

## 6. Function or Use

**Historic Functions:** RECREATION AND CULTURE: Theater

**Current Functions:** RECREATION AND CULTURE: Theater

## 7. Description

**Architectural Classification:** MODERN MOVEMENT: Moderne

**Principal Exterior Materials:** STUCCO, METAL

**Narrative Description** (see continuation sheets 7-13)

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## 8. Statement of Significance

**Applicable National Register Criteria:** A, C

**Criteria Considerations:** NA

**Areas of Significance:** ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION, ARCHITECTURE (*Local*)

**Period of Significance:** 1939-1974

**Significant Dates:** 1939, 1949

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

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

**Architect/Builder:** Pettigrew & Worley

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (see continuation sheets 14-29)

## 9. Major Bibliographic References

**Bibliography** (see continuation sheets 30-33)

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

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested. Part 1 approved June 1, 2023.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

**Primary location of additional data:**

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

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

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## 10. Geographical Data

**Acreeage of Property:** Less than one acre (Approximately 0.23 acres)

### Coordinates

#### Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: N/A

1. Latitude: 29.752668°N Longitude: -95.409159°W

**Verbal Boundary Description:** The boundary includes less than one acre (approximately 0.23 acres) in the central portion of the legal parcel identified as TRS10 11 12 & 13A ABST 696 O SMITH (Account # 0442250000171), Houston, Harris County, Texas as recorded in the Harris Central Appraisal District, accessed November 3, 2023 (Map 4).

**Boundary Justification:** The boundary closely follows the building footprint and includes approximately 0.23 acres of the larger legal parcel identified as TRS10 11 12 & 13A ABST 696 O SMITH.

## 11. Form Prepared By

Name/title: Amanda Coleman (Senior Consultant) with assistance from Amanda Barry (Manager), Steph McDougal (Senior Consultant), and Marie Martinsen (Intern)  
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Date: June 2024

## Additional Documentation

**Maps** (see continuation sheets 34-38)  
**Additional items** (see continuation sheets 39-93)  
**Photographs** (see continuation sheets 5-6, 94-109)

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

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

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## Photograph Log

Name of Property: River Oaks Theatre  
City or Vicinity: Houston  
County: Harris County  
State: Texas  
Date: April 2024  
Photographer: Amanda Coleman

*All photographs accurately depict property conditions. No changes nor significant deterioration has occurred since the photos were taken in April 2024.*

### Photo 1

North façade, view south.

### Photo 2

West (side) elevation showing fire escape, view north.

### Photo 3

East (side) elevation showing fire escape, view north.

### Photo 4

Front entrance/lobby, view south.

### Photo 5

Front entrance/lobby, view west.

### Photo 6

Front entrance/lobby, terrazzo inlay.

### Photo 7

Foyer, interior front entrance, concessions at right, stair at left, carpet removed and drop ceiling tiles removed, view north.

### Photo 8

Entrance to standee area, doors stored off-site, will be ADA compliant when reinstalled, view north.

### Photo 9

Standee area, view west.

### Photo 10

Standee area lighting, view east.

### Photo 11

Main auditorium, seating removed, view southwest.

### Photo 12

Main auditorium, seating removed, view southeast.

### Photo 13

Main auditorium sculpture, "Land," fabric removed, view southwest.

### Photo 14

Main auditorium sculpture, "Sea," fabric removed, view southeast.

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**Photo 15**

Stage with exposed brick, view south.

**Photo 16**

Main auditorium lighting, view northwest.

**Photo 17**

Main auditorium, enclosed balcony and sound attenuation material replaced, view northeast.

**Photo 18**

Main auditorium, enclosed balcony and sound attenuation material replaced, view northeast.

**Photo 19**

Main auditorium, view northwest.

**Photo 20**

Main auditorium ceiling details, new can lights, view southeast.

**Photo 21**

Foyer stair, metal railing temporarily removed for construction, view southwest.

**Photo 22**

Mezzanine concession, new bar, railing temporarily removed from stairs for construction, view south.

**Photo 23**

Mezzanine concession, change in location of stairs, view northeast.

**Photo 24**

Balcony theater (left) with seating removed and sound attenuation material replaced, view northeast.

**Photo 25**

Balcony theater (left), sound attenuation material replaced, view west.

**Photo 26**

Balcony theater (right), sound attenuation material replaced, view west.

**Photo 27**

Balcony theater (right), seating removed, enclosed balcony and sound attenuation material replaced, view northwest.

**Photo 28**

Projection room, newly exposed original windows (north elevation, west side), view north.

**Photo 29**

Projection room (north elevation, center room), view northwest.

**Photo 30**

Projection room, newly exposed original windows (north elevation, east side), view north.

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## Narrative Description

River Oaks Theatre is a two-and-a-half-story movie theater located at 2050 West Gray Street in the River Oaks Community Shopping Center, in Houston, Harris County, Texas. The property is an excellent example of a Streamline Moderne, small-scale neighborhood cinema. Built in 1939, the building is rectangular in plan, measuring approximately 40 feet wide by 170 feet deep at its widest and deepest points. The shorter (front) building span faces north onto West Gray Street and the rear faces south onto Peden Street. East and west (side) elevations are flanked by commercial retail spaces of the shopping center that were built after the theater. The theater is steel-framed with a three-tiered built-up roof and stepped front parapet that descends towards the rear of the building. The north (front) façade features a recessed entry/ticketing lobby that is clad in smooth burgundy and cream porcelain enameled steel panels and features curvilinear lines with detailed terrazzo flooring. The original boomerang-shaped marquee features neon lettering and horizontal lines with bands of porcelain-enameled steel. The second-floor parapet is painted with black and white horizontal stripes on enameled steel panels. Rear (south) and side (east/west) elevations are faced with painted stucco and contain secondary egress. The interior features a partially intact floor plan and original character-defining bas-relief sculptures (flanking the stage), engaged fluted columns, some lighting, and the streamlined, aluminum detailing on the staircase. In the 1980s, the balcony was converted into two small additional auditoriums. Ongoing rehabilitation work approved by the Texas Historical Commission began in 2023 and is being carried out in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Though the original design has been changed over time, the alterations were sympathetically implemented, and the theater retains a high degree of integrity.

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## A Note about Terminology

The words *theater* and *theatre* are often used interchangeably. For the purposes of this nomination, *Theatre* is used as part of this particular venue's name, while *theater* is used to describe the overall building and its components, as well as other similar venues. The term *auditorium* is used to describe the screening rooms within a single-screen or multiplex theater, whether built in that configuration or divided into multiple screens at a later date. In the case of the River Oaks Theatre, the original auditorium's primary seating area is now referred to as the *main auditorium*, since the balcony has been subdivided into two smaller, separate auditoriums.

## Site

River Oaks Theatre at 2050 West Gray Street is located within the southwestern-most block of the River Oaks Shopping Center.<sup>1</sup> The block is bound by West Gray Street to the north, Shepherd Drive to the west, McDuffie Street to the east, and Peden Street to the south. The shopping center occupies about eight blocks, bisected north/south by West Gray Street, a major thoroughfare linking the River Oaks residential area to downtown Houston (Maps 1-5). The theater is located towards the very west end of the shopping center, nearest to the residential development, and just to the east of the only remaining original, crescent-shaped shopping center building (1936, Figure 14). The commercial buildings directly flanking the theater were constructed in the 1940s and have been altered (Figure 11). The theater and adjacent commercial spaces were never internally connected (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> The easternmost portion of the commercial storefronts on the corner of West Gray and McDuffie are a post-1950 development.

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<sup>1</sup>The River Oaks Theatre is situated at 2009 West Gray Street but the larger parcel the building sits on now has a legal address of 2050 W. Gray Street in the Harris Central Appraisal District. The official legal address will be used in the documentation. 2009 West Gray Street is listed in Section 1 under another name. Accessed September 16, 2024, <https://public.hcad.org/records/details.asp?crypt=%94%9A%B0%94%Bf%84%91%83%7Cji%8E1%87tY%7BYW%9E%99%A2%D3%89%95%C2e%7CU%8B%80%86%86%80%AB%A8%AD%86%5EY%9B%C4%90uf%7B%A9%92%BEq%5E>.

<sup>2</sup> Historic photographs from 1939-1940 show that the theater was a freestanding building. The flanking commercial buildings were constructed in the early 1940s. However, those are not the retail buildings/storefronts shown in the original Pettigrew & Worley drawings, as those plans were

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The theater and flanking commercial storefronts have paved pedestrian sidewalks and parking at the front and side elevations (north, west, and east). Parking adjacent to West Gray on either side of the theater entrance is head-in. Landscaping in proximity to the theater is not of the period. Concrete urns with potted plants flank the theater on the sidewalk in front of the terrazzo detailing. The remainder of the block is sodded with flowerbeds, hedges, planters, and mature palm trees in the right-of-way. In the side parking lots, the rights-of-way are also sodded and contain mature trees.

The location is both pedestrian-friendly from block to block and designed with vehicular traffic in mind. Storefronts line the streets, and ample parking allows the driving observer to be easily drawn in by multiple access points. Alterations throughout the shopping center, however, have changed traffic patterns over time for both pedestrians and vehicles. High-rise new construction to the east has increased traffic volume, and some original setbacks from West Gray Street were reduced for additions to the shopping center, interrupting linear pedestrian traffic.

## Exterior

### *North (West Gray Street) Façade*

River Oaks Theatre is a two-and-a-half-story Streamline Moderne theater.<sup>3</sup> The recessed entry and ticketing area, referred to on the original plans as the “lobby,” is located below the projecting boomerang marquee (Figures 31, 43, Photo 1). The lobby is clad in smooth porcelain-enameled steel panels from Texlite.<sup>4</sup> The northeast and northwest corners of the building are clad in burgundy panels that also appear at the lobby base (Figures 49 and 50, Photos 4 and 5). Cream panels are featured above the burgundy base and at the marquee soffit. Two altered historic-age framed metal poster boxes are extant in their original locations at the recessed entry to the right of the front entry doors (on the north and west interior “lobby” walls, Figure 50, Photos 1, 5). The northeast and northwest corners also feature poster boxes facing their respective cardinal directions, for a total of six. Neon lighting is present at the soffit of the marquee, as well as on the projecting portion facing the street. The entry is inlaid with terrazzo in alternating rays of red and brown, which radiate from the original location of the ticket booth (Figure 49, Photo 5). The terrazzo is surrounded by contemporary concrete slabs on either side, continuing the pedestrian walkway. A rectangular ticket-booth addition/infill at the eastern portion of the entry partially masks the symmetrical terrazzo artwork; the right/west-side inlay illustrates an oak tree representative of the River Oaks community (Figure 51, Photo 6). The ticket booth addition has a glazed aluminum-frame entry door, two plate-glass window kiosks with speakers and a curved ticketing opening, and a single plate-glass window facing the street. Vertical synthetic cladding is present at top and bottom. Three pairs of non-original aluminum-framed full-light entry doors provide access to the foyer within.

The original boomerang-shaped marquee above the lobby cantilevers over the pedestrian sidewalk (Figures 2, 43, and 47, Photo 1). The marquee consists of original neon lettering and horizontal lines, and bands of smooth porcelain-enameled steel. Two original “River Oaks” signs are above each side of the marquee. The signs are outlined in neon and crafted in porcelain-enameled steel, matching the lobby cladding, with cream on the face and burgundy on the returns. The signs are executed in capital letters in a slightly italicized font with glyphs (Figure 43, Photo 1).

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never realized. River Oaks Theatre is not internally connected to the commercial buildings, and photos indicate the theater is only partially attached, as the rear two-thirds of the building’s side walls are fully exposed to narrow alleys. Taken from the Part 1 Historic Preservation Certification Application for River Oaks Theatre, March 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Virginia McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses: The Definitive Guide to Identifying and Understanding America’s Domestic Architecture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014) 579-585.

<sup>4</sup> Texlite Sign Company of Dallas was an industry leader in the production of both neon and porcelain enamel. Texlite was the nation’s largest provider of porcelain enamel at the time and provided cladding, signs, and neon for Interstate Theatres, among others.



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The second-floor stepped parapet is also clad with original smooth porcelain-enameled steel panels that have been painted with alternating black and white horizontal stripes (Figure 43 and 47, Photo 1). Three six-by-six with four-light original steel casement transom windows remain at the partial third story, which is clad in painted stucco.

*East & West (Side) Elevations*

The east and west side elevations are partially obscured by the adjacent commercial buildings. The rear two-thirds of the side elevations remain expressed, creating “alleys” that allow the original footprint of the theater to remain discernable (Figures 32, and 44-46, Photos 2 and 3). Both side elevations are clad in painted stucco, with short parapets that are stepped gradually on each side, descending towards the rear (Figure 48). Two paired, painted metal exit doors on each side elevation at the first floor provide emergency egress from the main auditorium and standee area. Exits on either side of the second floor are detailed similarly to the first floor exits and provide emergency egress from the balcony auditoriums. Corresponding fire escapes have been replaced (Figures 44 and 46, Photos 2 and 3).

*South (Rear) Elevation*

The rear elevation is clad in painted stucco (Figure 45, Photos 2 and 3). The one-story mechanical room at the southeast corner projects towards the south. Vents are positioned above. One non-original metal service door on this elevation corresponds to the interior location of the transformer vault room. Mechanical and electrical equipment are mounted above and adjacent to the machine room.

**Interior: 1<sup>st</sup> floor**

*Ongoing rehabilitation work approved by the Texas Historical Commission began in 2023 and is being carried out in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation. The work is mostly limited to the interior.*

*Foyer*

The exterior “lobby,” recessed below the marquee, leads into a “foyer” with curved corners at the front of the theater (Figures 35-40 and 52, Photos 7, 8). The original stair to the second floor/mezzanine remains at the west (right) wall. A non-original curvilinear bureau was built-out from the staircase with a non-original sign above directing patrons to the second floor was removed during the rehabilitation (Figure 62, Photo 21). A contemporary concession stand was located along the east (left) wall and will be rebuilt in that location. A narrow entry opening to the ticketing booth is accessed behind the concession counter. Three non-original metal movie poster frames remain behind the counter of the ticketing booth. Back-of-house spaces within the foyer are accessed via one historic-age wood door. Directly south of the concession area is a utilitarian custodial/systems storage area with a historic-age wood door. Beneath the stair, an office and storage room is accessed by a single historic-age wood door, in the west wall of the foyer, marked with an “employees only” sign and peephole.

Finishes vary throughout the foyer. Molded ceiling details are exposed and infilled with fiberboard tile painted in cream and green. Burgundy and cream diamond-patterned wallpaper has been applied to the walls. Non-original flooring was removed in the ongoing rehabilitation. The ticketing room is clad in drywall and faux wood paneling. The ongoing work may reveal original porcelain-enameled steel or inlaid terrazzo flooring beneath more recent materials.

*Standee Area*

Three pairs of period-appropriate replacement porthole doors (Figure 54, Photo 8, temporarily removed during rehabilitation) between the foyer and auditorium open into a “standee area” behind the seats, where guests could stand during the film (for instance, with restless young children). The standee area was originally partially separated from

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the auditorium by a pony wall with wide rectangular floor-to-ceiling columns on either side of each aisle (Figure 3). The rectangular-shaped standee area retains its original character-defining decorative lighting features and plaster ceiling. Three domed plaster inserts are equally spaced across the standee area ceiling, with an upturned suspended aluminum dome fixture centered in each insert (Figure 55, Photo 10). The curved plaster within the inserts is painted with a star motif. A pair of non-original painted metal doors with descending stairs are located at the east and west ends of the standee area. Non-original carpeting that stretched from the foyer into this space has been removed during the rehabilitation. Openings from the standee area into the auditorium, flanking the projection room, are partially cased at the bottom and reveal curved-detail corners (Figure 54, Photo 9).

### *Auditorium*

The main auditorium is a voluminous space comprised of three seating sections divided by two main aisles. Non-historic seating was removed during the rehabilitation (Figure 3). When the balcony above was enclosed and expanded for additional screening capacity, the full volume of the ceiling was partially encapsulated. The floor slopes down towards the stage and screen located at the south end of the auditorium (Figure 38). Prominent character-defining features of the auditorium include the original bas-relief sculptures flanking the stage and engaged fluted plaster columns (Photos 11-14, 17-18). The bas-relief sculptures, by artist and designer James Buchanan "Buck" Winn, Jr., are titled "Land" and "Sea." In the southwest corner, the "Land" sculpture depicts elegant horses, foliage, and a female human form (Figure 59, Photo 13). In the southeast corner, the "Sea" sculpture illustrates a koi fish and a male human form (Figure 58, Photo 14). Below each bas-relief sculpture, curved, concrete stairs lead up to the backstage/storage area. That space is utilitarian, with exposed wood subfloor and masonry walls (Photo 15).

The non-original projection room, elevator, and restroom addition at the rear of the auditorium encroach into the central seating section (Figure 40). While built within the volume of the auditorium, these spaces are accessed via the standee area.

Finishes vary throughout the auditorium.<sup>5</sup> The non-original carpet in the auditorium and was removed during the rehabilitation. Flooring beneath the seats is concrete. The chair rails and painted plaster finish above the chair rails at the east and west side walls have been removed in some places, exposing concrete aggregate. The ceiling features original undulating, curved, and striped plaster details (Figure 61, Photo 20). Historic-age flush-mount dome light fixtures (altered in 1949) remain beneath the balcony (Figure 60, Photo 16). The balcony extension has a painted drywall soffit, with accordion-style fabric applied to the south face for sound absorption. The projection room addition is clad with acoustical panels and provides a view to the auditorium and screen via a rectangular plate-glass window looking south.

### **Interior: Mezzanine/2<sup>nd</sup> floor**

An original dog-leg stair provides circulation between the first floor and the mezzanine/second floor. The original streamlined aluminum handrails and balustrade were temporarily removed during the rehabilitation and will be reinstalled (Figures 41, 62, Photo 21). It is unknown if the original artwork at the west wall of the stair is extant beneath the wallpaper. A storage closet is located directly south of the stair landing at the mezzanine. A centrally located, non-original bar area anchors the space (Figure 63, Photo 22). An elevated lounge area or mezzanine concession exists to the north of the bar, with an adjacent storage room (Figure 64, Photo 23). Flanking the bar are restrooms and associated vestibules, which have been substantially altered over time. Remnants of the original plaster ceiling remain, but have been compromised by the application, and subsequent removal, of acoustical ceiling tiles. Original light fixtures have also been removed. No original doors remain on the mezzanine or second-floor balcony levels.

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<sup>5</sup> Scaffolding shown in photos is temporarily installed for asbestos abatement.

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### *Balcony Auditoriums*

The balcony has been converted into two small additional auditoriums. Two sets of paired, non-original doors with rectangular lites (temporarily removed) are located to the south of the mezzanine, leading to the stair that provides access to the balcony auditoriums (Figure 63, Photo 22). The original curved aluminum handrail was temporarily removed during the rehabilitation and will be reinstalled (Figure 65, Photo 22). The surrounding balcony area has been substantially altered to accommodate the ca. 1986 alteration that bisected, enclosed, and extended the balcony by 16 feet to accommodate the new screens (Photo 19). The balcony auditoriums are mirror images of one another and are finished in the same manner. The seating area is divided into upper and lower sections by an east/west aisle (Figure 66-69, Photos 24-27). Both upper and lower sections are also bisected by an aisle (Figure 42).

Stairs leading to the balcony auditoriums, as well as aisles within the balcony area, utilized the same carpeting as the first floor, with synthetic treads. That non-historic carpet was removed during the rehabilitation. The remainder of the flooring in these auditoriums is painted concrete, except for the stage areas, which were MDF and have been replaced (Figure 67, 69, Photo 25). Wood banisters and wood box framing around the auditorium seating areas are not original. The stage/screen areas are built up with wood and fiberboard. The engaged fluted columns present in the main auditorium carry through to the ceilings of both balcony auditoriums. The demising wall between the balcony auditoriums had the same, pink accordion-pleated fabric applied to the south face of the balcony extension within the main auditorium; that material has since been replaced with red fabric (Figures 66, 67, 69, Photos 24-27). The eastern- and westernmost walls are a continuation of the main auditorium below and similarly have had the plaster finish removed while the engaged plaster columns remain. Ceilings are painted drywall. Paired painted metal egress doors are located at the exterior walls adjacent to the fire escapes.

### **Projection Room/Partial 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor**

Accessed from either balcony auditorium, the projection room is rectangular in plan and retains the building's only original metal windows (Photo 28). The room is utilitarian and houses electrical circuit breakers, as well as other mechanical equipment. Stairs leading to the room, as well as floor within it, are poured concrete.

### **Alterations**

Exterior and interior alterations of note include:

#### *Exterior*

- Ca. 1977 or earlier
  - Original ticket booth at front entrance removed
  - New ticket booth constructed to the east of entry
  - Doors leading to foyer replaced<sup>6</sup>
- Ca. 1986 (based on known interior changes that year)
  - Enameled tile at upper level painted in alternating black and white horizontal stripes<sup>7</sup>
  - Front entry doors likely replaced at this time
- 2023-2024 Rehabilitation Work
  - River Oaks signage and marquee repaired.
  - Non-historic lighting under the marquee removed (Figures 2, 49, 50, Photos 1, 5).

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<sup>6</sup> Photos ca. 1980 as compared to 1940 photos, *Houston Architectural Survey*.

<sup>7</sup> Anna Mod, "Village Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas," National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, 1993; Anthony Monda, photographer, Photo 10.

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- Fire escapes removed and replaced at center of east and west elevations (Figures 44 and 46, Photos 2 and 3).

*Interior*

- 1949
  - Auditorium stage expanded for Houston Players performances<sup>8</sup>
  - Wide curtain apron constructed to achieve a stage depth of approximately 30–44 feet
  - Two fire exits converted to stage entrances with swinging saloon doors for production set<sup>9</sup>
  - System of pulleys installed in the ceiling to lift all draperies above movie screen
  - Overhead light troughs, as well as “baby” lighting attached to lower balcony
  - Entire interior repainted and refurbished
  - New decorative “luxury” house lights installed
- 1977
  - Formica removed to reveal original plaster
  - New carpet, paint, and murals in “period appropriate style”
  - Neon signs and metal handrails restored<sup>10</sup>
- 1986
  - Outdated projectors and sound systems removed<sup>11</sup>
  - Original seats removed.
  - New concession stand and bar added
  - Auditorium adapted for projection booth with Dolby stereo and new projection equipment, seating reduced to 546, space repainted.
  - Balcony subdivided into two mezzanine-level auditoriums (125 seats each), with Ultra Stereo sound system and new projection equipment; balcony extended 16 feet to accommodate equipment.
  - Mezzanine café added to accommodate 10 tables, with seating for 40.
  - ADA-compliant facilities added, including elevator, restrooms, and seating accommodations<sup>12</sup>
- 2023-2024 Rehabilitation Work in Progress
  - Foyer/standee area:
    - Drop-ceiling tiles removed in recessed portion of foyer ceiling (Figure 53, Photo 7).
    - Non-historic concessions stand removed and will be rebuilt in same location (Figure 53, Photo 7).
    - Non-original bureau and sign near stair removed.
    - Doors between entrance foyer and standee area have been temporarily removed and placed in storage. An ADA-compliant door-opening mechanism will be added when the existing doors are reinstalled (Figure 53, Photo 8).
  - Non-historic carpet removed throughout theater: in public entrance portion of foyer (Figure 53, Photos 7, 8); in standee area and main auditorium (Figure 54, Photo 9, and Figure 57, Photos 11, 12); in mezzanine (also includes non-historic tile) (Figures 63, 64, 65, Photos 22, 23); in balcony auditoriums (Figure 66, 68, 69, Photos 24, 26, 27); also in restrooms.

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<sup>8</sup> David Welling, *Cinema Houston* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 128. Sue Dauphin, *Houston by Stages* (Burnet, Texas: Eakin Press, 1981), 116-123.

<sup>9</sup> “Dowling Illness Fails to Slow Up Players,” *Houston Chronicle*, August 28, 1949: 86 (infoweb.newsbank.com).

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Millar, “Repertory Film Theater Plans New Approach,” *Houston Chronicle*, March 23, 1977.

<sup>11</sup> Welling, *Cinema Houston*, 127.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Spies, “Rooms with a View,” *Houston Chronicle*, May 16, 1986, 89 (infoweb.newsbank.com).

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- Main auditorium and stage:
  - Non-historic seating removed (Figures 56, 57, Photos 11, 12).
  - Fabric wall covering around bas-relief sculptures removed (Figures 58, 59, Photos 13, 14).
  - Brick wall of rear stage (south elevation) exposed, previously covered by fabric (Photo 15).
  - Side walls (in both main auditorium and balcony auditoriums) and front of balcony auditoriums visible in main auditorium: non-historic pink accordion-pleated sound-attenuation material removed, and walls re-covered with red material (Figure 56, 57 and Photos 17-19).
- Streamline metal details:
  - Original streamlined aluminum handrails and balustrade in foyer temporarily removed and will be reinstalled (Figures 4, 62, Photo 21).
  - Stair railing leading to second-floor balcony auditorium temporarily removed during renovation (Figure 65, Photo 22).
- Mezzanine:
  - Non-historic stairs and railing to elevated Mezzanine concession level have been removed and stairs relocated (Figure 64, Photo 23).
  - Mezzanine metal serving bar/counter removed; a replacement will be constructed and installed in its place (Figure 63, Photo 22).
- Balcony auditoriums seating has been removed (Figures 66, 69, Photos 24, 26, 27).
- Third-floor projection room: historic metal windows have been exposed (Figure 70, Photos 28-30)

### **Integrity**

The River Oaks Theatre retains a high level of historic integrity. The theater remains in its original location. The historic setting is mostly intact, although some contemporary intrusions were added as the shopping center was updated. Some storefronts within the shopping center have been altered, and filling stations on the east side of the block were replaced with new retail. These changes occurred within the last 30 years; the immediate area remains a one-part commercial block. The essential form of the theater is intact without any additions or internal connections to the shopping center, and it retains its character-defining features. Integrity of design, materials, and workmanship is noticeably visible in the intact painted stucco exterior, as well as the overall form, which includes the built-up roof, rectangular plan, recessed entry/ticketing lobby, and Streamline Moderne decorative elements: the boomerang marquee, neon signage, porcelain-enameled steel panels, curvilinear lines, and terrazzo flooring entry design. Additional intact characteristics on the interior include the original Streamline aluminum detailing on the staircases (to be reinstalled during the ongoing rehabilitation), and the engaged fluted columns and bas-relief sculptures in the main auditorium. The original first-floor plan of the main auditorium and standee is intact, and the main seating area retains vaulted ceilings with original undulating, curved, and striped plaster details and historic-age light fixtures. The original balcony was extended and enclosed into two auditoriums in the 1980s but the changes were compatible and allowed for continued use. Original metal casement windows remain in the projection room. The River Oaks Theatre retains association with its historic use, consistently operating as a cinema since its opening in 1939. The property's high degree of integrity conveys the feeling of a late 1930s Streamline Moderne suburban neighborhood theater.

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## Statement of Significance

River Oaks Theatre, located at 2050 West Gray Street in Houston, Texas, was built in 1939 by the River Oaks Corporation, as an early suburban theater in the River Oaks neighborhood of west downtown. The theater was designed by the Dallas architectural firm Pettigrew & Worley, with interior art designed by James Buchanan “Buck” Winn, Jr. As Houston grew in the 1920s and 1930s, many affluent white residents opted to move away from downtown, leading to the development of both the River Oaks residential neighborhood and the River Oaks Shopping Center, the city’s first auto-centric suburban shopping center. Although the theater was designed as a cinema, with modern technologies including air conditioning and sound, it also served as a location for live stage performances in the late 1940s, as well as lecture series. It is likely the theater only served white patrons until sometime after 1963. Shortly after opening, the River Oaks Corporation reassigned operations to the management company Interstate Theatre Circuit, who operated the theater until the 1970s. Landmark Management Company ran the River Oaks Theatre from 1977 until it closed in March 2021. Prior to its closure, it was Houston's oldest continually operating motion picture theater. Other Houston theaters from the 1920s through the 1940s survive but have been repurposed, with varying degrees of integrity. River Oaks Theatre is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A in the area of Entertainment/Recreation and Criterion C in the area of Architecture as an excellent intact example of a small Streamline Moderne neighborhood theater, one of few remaining in Houston today. It also serves as an excellent example of the work of Pettigrew & Worley. The period of significance is 1939-1974, the year the building was completed and ending at the 50-year mark.

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### *River Oaks Residential Development*

The River Oaks neighborhood is located west of downtown Houston near Buffalo Bayou and Memorial Park. Development of the neighborhood was influenced by the City Beautiful movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Conceptualized by Michael Hogg and Hugh Potter, the original neighborhood consisted of 1,100 acres. In 1922, Hogg created the Country Club Estates subdivision purchasing 200 acres around the River Oaks Country Club clubhouse in 1923. Hogg and Potter hired Hare and Hare, landscape architects from Kansas City, to design a master plan to protect the natural environment and create a garden suburb. Jesse Clyde Nichols was also hired as a design consultant, having built the United States’ original outdoor shopping mall, located in Kansas City, The Country Club Plaza.<sup>13</sup> Together, Hare and Hare and Nichols created a master plan of homesites with a 15-acre campus for the River Oaks Elementary School. Esplanades with flowers were planned throughout the two shopping centers also included in the suburban design. In keeping with the tenets of the City Beautiful movement, the master plan placed utility lines underground, eliminated alleys, and only allowed three intersecting streets. To ensure the suburb would be an oasis of nature in the city, rigid building codes were enforced, including banning of all commercial traffic in residential areas.

Deed restrictions and centralized community oversight also ensured the exclusivity of the neighborhood. A panel of architects and citizens, hired to approve designs for houses, unofficially enforced a “gentlemen's agreement” to segregate the area through deed restrictions that excluded African Americans, Jewish people, and other minorities. The first new home in River Oaks was built by Will and Sue Clayton at 3376 Inwood Drive (NRHP 1984). River Oaks is also the location of “First Lady of Texas” Ima Hogg’s family home, known as Bayou Bend and designed by architects John F. Staub and Birdsall P. Briscoe.

Initially, the River Oaks development was considered undesirable, due to its distance from downtown, and as a result, the operation faced mounting debt in the late 1920s. Efforts to establish a convenient connection to downtown

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<sup>13</sup> Diana J. Kleiner, “River Oaks, Houston,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/river-oaks-houston>; Diane Euston, “The Country Club Plaza: The Nation’s First Outdoor Shopping Mall,” *The Martin City & South KC Telegraph*, December 26, 2019, [martincitytelegraph.com](http://martincitytelegraph.com).

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resulted in a new, influential, auto-centric suburban design for Houston. The developers of River Oaks persuaded the City of Houston to build seven thoroughfares connecting downtown with the South End of Houston, which would make possible an accessible route to the eastern border of River Oaks. Succumbing to pressure, the City commissioned Hare and Hare to create a 100-foot landscaped parkway spanning from the Sam Houston Park through the south bank of Buffalo Bayou and leading to the River Oaks suburb. This street design continued across the bayou, terminating at the entryway to Memorial Park. Completed in 1926, Buffalo Drive (now called Allen Parkway), opened an easily accessible route for River Oaks residents that was oriented around nature in the bayou. Its impact is still felt today; River Oaks is not only relatively close to downtown, but also now is geographically centered within the city, since Houston grew around and completely enveloped the suburb.<sup>14</sup> Although originally intended as a suburban neighborhood for residents with a range of income levels, River Oaks became (and remains) one of the most affluent neighborhoods in Houston, similar to the Boulevard Oaks and Broad Acres subdivisions southwest of downtown.<sup>15</sup>

*River Oaks Community Shopping Center*

Located just east of the residential neighborhood, the River Oaks Community Shopping Center is one of Houston's most significant early twentieth-century suburban retail developments, offering a convenient shopping experience for its residents. It was Houston's first auto-centric suburban shopping center and is home to the River Oaks Theatre.

The shopping center was designed by architects Stayton Nunn-Milton G. McGinty with Oliver C. Winston consulting. This was the first project of its kind for Houstonian Oliver Winston, a project planner for the Public Works Administration's Housing Division in Washington, D.C. Architectural historian Richard Longstreth writes that the source of design inspiration for the River Oaks Shopping Center was most likely the avant-garde modernist work of Richard Neutra, who produced unrealized designs for Houston park-and-shop centers. The first two commercial buildings in the River Oaks Community Shopping Center (ca. 1936) were mirror-image one-story crescent-shaped stucco commercial blocks on the north and south side of West Gray at the corner of S. Shepherd Drive (Figure 14). At this intersection, two filling stations (Texaco on the northeast corner, and Gulf on the southeast corner) were constructed in the same Moderne style (altered but extant). On the other end of the block, two more filling stations were located at the northeast and southeast corners (no longer extant). As Houston's first auto-centric suburban shopping center, River Oaks was also one of the earliest in the nation. West Gray Street runs through the center of the shopping center and is one of the many primary streets that connect River Oaks to downtown Houston. It was also the first shopping complex in the city to regularize its design aesthetic with sign, display, and lighting restrictions within a retail center, and to use backlit cavetto canopies and indirect lighting.

The River Oaks Community Shopping Center expanded eastward during the subsequent decades, partially enveloping the River Oaks Theatre and eventually covering about eight blocks. Plans for the center included a comprehensive grouping of goods and services easily accessible by motor vehicles. Hugh Potter, of the River Oaks Corporation, was instrumental in influencing the design to function for automotive travel, with multiple local amenities serving a residential area. The shopping center is easily distinguishable from the residential neighborhood, through the formation of automotive access points. Character-defining elements included warm sand-colored painted stucco walls, a soffit of continuous canopy, pale blue steel windows, structural glass storefronts, black framed entrances, and extruded aluminum illuminated door trim. Signs for individual shops were originally mounted beneath the canopy.<sup>16</sup> The River Oaks Shopping Center maintained those historic features and ideals of regularity until the early 1970s, when Weingarten Realty assumed ownership from the River Oaks Corporation. Even more noticeable changes occurred in

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<sup>14</sup> Cheryl Ferguson, "1920s Suburban Planning and Development in Houston for Grand to Modest Residences," River Oaks Elementary Alumni website, 2013, [riveroaksalumni.org/portfolio/history-ro/](http://riveroaksalumni.org/portfolio/history-ro/).

<sup>15</sup> Ann Dunphy Becker and George Murray, *Images of America: Houston's River Oaks*, (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2013) 68.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Longstreth, "River Oaks Shopping Center," *Cite 36*, Rice University, 1996, [offcite.rice.edu](http://offcite.rice.edu).

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1980s, specifically to the interior of the River Oaks Theatre.<sup>17</sup> Over the years, shopping center storefronts and profiles have been altered, tile removed, and some portions of the center demolished. In coordination with the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance (now Preservation Houston), a *Houston Chronicle* article in 2006 raised a high alert for the potential demolition of the center. Tenants were told that part of the center would be razed, including the theater and surrounding shops, when the lease expired in 2008.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the original northwest crescent-shaped portion was demolished around that time. Even after its designation by the City of Houston as a local landmark in 2007 partially protected the center, significant architectural changes continued to be made.<sup>19</sup> The exterior of the River Oaks Theatre itself, however, has not been significantly altered since the pre-1980 ticket-booth alterations.

### *River Oaks Theatre*

Before closing its doors in March 2021, River Oaks Theatre was the oldest continuously operating theater in Houston. The theater is first mentioned in the *Houston Chronicle* on June 4, 1939, in an article which noted that the theater would be constructed on West Gray near Shepherd. That unofficial announcement noted that Dallas-based Henger Construction Company had been contracted by the River Oaks Corporation to build the theater.<sup>20</sup> The official announcement was delayed due to another highly publicized theater (the Alabama) opening nearby at West Alabama and Shepherd. When the River Oaks Theatre finally opened on Tuesday, November 28, 1939, it was advertised as the “newest, safest, finest neighborhood theatre.” River Oaks Theatre’s opening night featured *Bachelor Mother*, starring Ginger Rogers and David Niven.<sup>21</sup> The next day, a full recap of the event appeared in the *Houston Post*. Speakers at the opening included Hugh Potter (River Oaks Corporation), Houston Mayor Oscar Holcombe, H.F. Pettigrew (architect), Buck Wynn (muralist/interior art), H.A. Kipp (engineer), William Henger (construction company), Paul Scott (manager), and Thomas Palmer (assistant manager).

The same *Houston Post* article specifically mentioned the burgundy and cream color scheme, which included the exterior porcelain-enameled entry tiles.<sup>22</sup> Texlite Sign Company of Dallas was an industry leader both in the production of neon and porcelain enamel. At that time, Texlite was the nation’s largest provider of porcelain enamel and provided cladding, signs, and neon for the Interstate Theatre chain, among others (Figures 1-11).

In addition to films, the theatre also hosted events and performances. In December 1939, a lecture series on gardening was hosted by J. Gregory Conway, reflecting community interest in the greenery, gardens, and manicured landscapes associated with River Oaks.<sup>23</sup> Grace Noll Crowell, the Texas poet laureate from 1935 to 1937, was a featured speaker.<sup>24</sup> Later, the venue attempted live theatrical performances.

Paul Scott, the first lessee of River Oaks Theatre, was a native of Dallas, where he operated another second-run neighborhood theatre before moving to Houston. During his short tenure as manager at the River Oaks Theatre, Scott was thrust into legal conflicts with the motion picture labor unions, such as C.I.O. Motion Picture and Stage Hands Union and the A.F. of L. Union.<sup>25</sup> In March 1940, Interstate Theatre Circuit, a theatre management company, assumed the 15-year lease from Scott; River Oaks Corporation maintained ownership.<sup>26</sup> During the 1940s, Interstate also

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<sup>17</sup> Confirmation from current owner, Kimco Realty, of acquisition on October 22, 1971.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa Gray, "Endangered Landmarks: Historic theater could soon fade into history; Tenants told of unconfirmed plan to raze portions of the River Oaks Shopping Center," *Houston Chronicle*, July 22, 2006, 1, infoweb.newsbank.com.

<sup>19</sup> The Landmark nomination was initiated by the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission (HAHC). At the time, those designations included a “90-day waiver,” which allowed the owner to proceed with any alteration, regardless of effect, after a 90-day waiting period.

<sup>20</sup> *Houston Chronicle*, June 4, 1939.

<sup>21</sup> *Houston Chronicle*, November 28, 1939.

<sup>22</sup> *Houston Chronicle*, November 29, 1939.

<sup>23</sup> “Reservations Reported for Garden Talks,” *Houston Chronicle*, December 31, 1939.

<sup>24</sup> “Mrs. Crowell Presented,” *Houston Chronicle*, January 14, 1940.

<sup>25</sup> “Theatre Man Testifies in Labor Case,” *Houston Chronicle*, January 11, 1940.

<sup>26</sup> “Theatre Here is Taken Over by Interstate,” *Houston Chronicle*, March 11, 1940.



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operated the Majestic, Metropolitan, Kirby, Eastwood, Blue Bonnet, Tower, Delman, Yale, North Main, and Alabama theaters in Houston, and were in the process of building a new theater on Almeda. The Houston manager of Interstate at the time was Al Lever; business managers were Hester & Wise Inc. After Interstate assumed operations of River Oaks, John Boyd was hired as the new manager. Boyd was the former assistant manager of the Yale, Delman, and Alabama Interstate theaters.<sup>27</sup>

In August 1949, the Houston Players, a local theatre troupe, announced that the River Oaks Theatre would be home to a two-week run of *Time of Your Life* by William Saroyan with actor and writer Eddie Dowling as the producer (Figure 13). He partnered with R.J. O'Donnell, the executive vice-president of Interstate Theatres, to negotiate the deal.<sup>28</sup> Eddie Dowling's arrival for the performance was highly publicized and celebrated.<sup>29</sup> Interstate contracted with the Houston Players to put on that live performance stage production, as well as five others, each with two-week runs. Other shows included "*The Silver Whistle, The Glass Menagerie, (and) King of Friday's Men.*" Actors included Mack Sennet, May McEvoy, Maurice Costello, Ethel Barrymore, and Dowling himself. The alliance between the Houston Players and Interstate was the catalyst for an adaptable expansion of the stage in front of the screening area, as well as updates to other parts of the building, to facilitate live performances.

The announcement for the *Time of Your Life* performances included details regarding the proposed architectural alterations:

"The River Oaks Theatre will combine the best features of both the regular proscenium stage and the arena style theatre, thus offering a desirable flexibility for each of the six productions...The movie house will continue to be used for showing of films between plays so construction within the building are required to be movable. Construction of a wide, curved apron to extend the stage to a total depth of 25 feet is already underway with Pat McKeough, technical director in charge. At its greatest width, the stage will be 44 feet offering a playing area larger than stages used by many professional theatres, Mead said. For the opening production, Mr. Dowling has sketched a stage plan which calls for the converting of the theatre's two fire exits into stage entrances complete with swinging doors reminiscent of old-fashioned saloon...the stage apron will make the theatre easily adaptable for Shakespearean plays Dowling said, and future productions of an experimental nature, planned for the second season, may make use of the theatre's projection equipment and movie screen."<sup>30</sup>

By August 1949, 700 season tickets had been sold for the approximately 1,000-seat auditorium.<sup>31</sup> Advertisements for the production began in October 1949. A nine-year-old River Oaks boy, Jerry Wright, was cast as the shoeshine boy.<sup>32</sup> Movie star Jane Wyatt, who had appeared in *Lost Horizon* opposite Ronald Colman and *Task Force* with Gary Cooper, was confirmed to play opposite Dowling in the production. During the announcement of her contract, additional interior alterations were also mentioned:

"An ingenious arrangement of pipe scaffolding and drapery is now being installed which will extend from the stage floor to ceiling of the house and provide a formal proscenium framing for the stage...When completed the stage opening will be approximately 30 feet wide and have a playing depth of 25 feet. Mr. McKeough said that all stage installations had to be constructed so as to be easily movable in order that the theatre might switch back overnight to the showing of movies. To facilitate this, he has placed a system of pulleys in the ceiling of the house which will lift all the draperies above

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<sup>27</sup> "John Boyd will be New River Oaks Theatre Manager," *Houston Chronicle*, March 17, 1940.

<sup>28</sup> "Houston Players Set October 4 as Date for Debut" *Houston Chronicle*, August 19, 1949.

<sup>29</sup> "Eddie Dowling Will Be Feted Here Tonight," *Houston Chronicle*, August 23, 1949.

<sup>30</sup> "Dowling Illness Fails to Slow Up Players," *Houston Chronicle*, August 28, 1949.

<sup>31</sup> *Houston Chronicle*, August 30, 1949.

<sup>32</sup> "Houston Singer, 9, Following in Footsteps of Eddie Dowling," *Houston Chronicle*, October 21, 1949.

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the level of the movie screen. When again needed for stage plays, the proscenium framework and drapes and be lowered and anchored into place in a minimum amount of time. Special lighting equipment is also being installed on the stage. Overhead light troughs will illustrate the upper part of the stage while the forestage will be lighted by a battery of baby spots attached to the lower balcony...Meanwhile as work progresses on stage facilities, the rest of the house is also undergoing change. Art Myer, theatre manager, said that the entire interior is being repainted and refurbished in the preparation for the gala opening night. Special decorative house lights are being installed which will lend an added air of luxury to the theatre.”<sup>33</sup>

The original opening date, October 4, was pushed back to November 8, due to Dowling’s unexpected illness. The opening night of the performance was attended by many prominent Houstonians, including Mrs. Jean De Menil, and received more publicity than the opening of the theatre itself. A second stage show, *Verily I Do*, was planned to open on December 1, 1949.<sup>34</sup> However, the venture “folded,” seemingly owing to Dowling’s poor health, after which the Houston Players ceased their live dramatic performances at this location.<sup>35</sup>

In the 1950s, drive-in theaters reached their prime in Houston, diminishing the popularity of well-established neighborhood theaters like River Oaks. To continue to attract patrons, River Oaks in the 1960s primarily showed child-friendly Disney films such as *Swiss Family Robinson*, *101 Dalmatians*, *The Absent Minded-Professor*, and *The Parent Trap*.<sup>36</sup> However, this family-friendly atmosphere abruptly changed in the decades to come. In 1975, the theatre screened the Houston debut of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* during regular operating hours, a decision which heralded its reputation for screening “inappropriate” material. Trans-Continental Theaters, Inc. became the managing partner in 1975 and passed the lease to Movie, Inc.

In March 1977, aware of its alternative reputation, Movie, Inc. announced that River Oaks Theatre would join a repertory film circuit, including seven other theaters across the southern United States, screening second-run or classic films. Paul Richardson, the manager, promised “Our audiences are young, affluent and well-behaved. We don’t appeal to the midnight-movie, street-urchin crowd. People who come to our movies know what the title is.”<sup>37</sup> After the Landmark Management Company assumed control of the lease in 1977, however, that plan was abandoned. Screenings from that point on included double features of classic, foreign, cult, and art films programmed to align with different genres, themes, film stars, and directors. Late-night showings became a staple of the schedule. In response to that artistic choice, Houston Vice Officers targeted the River Oaks Theatre for screening “inappropriate” movies on September 9, 1982. During the third showing of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film *Salo* (based on the Marquis de Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom*), the manager was arrested for showing the film; he faced trial in April 1983. Though found not guilty, he left Houston after the incident and moved to New Orleans to operate the Landmark Theatre. Other scandals included a screening of *Fire on the Water* in 1983, which inspired a Ku Klux Klan protest, and Jean-Luc Godard’s *Hail Mary* in 1985.<sup>38</sup> In addition to garnering attention for its provocative screenings, River Oaks also hosted its fair share of film premieres, such as *Evening Star* (1996), with actress Shirley MacLaine and director Robert Harling, and *Hamlet* (1996), with actor Kenneth Branagh.<sup>39</sup> Other premieres hosted at River Oaks Theatre included:

- *Fire on the Water* (1983)

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<sup>33</sup> “Jane Wyatt Signed for ‘Time of Your Life’ Role,” *Houston Chronicle*, October 23, 1949.

<sup>34</sup> “Houston Players Plan Roaring Folk Comedy,” *Houston Chronicle*, November 20, 1949.

<sup>35</sup> Ann Holmes, “This Insubstantial Pageant...,” *Houston Chronicle*, March 20, 1966; Welling, *Cinema Houston*, 116-123

<sup>36</sup> Welling, *Cinema Houston*, 1.

<sup>37</sup> “Repertory Film Theater Plans New Approach,” *Houston Chronicle*, March 23, 1977.

<sup>38</sup> Welling, *Cinema Houston*, 130; Tupper Hull, “River Oaks Theatre Raided by Vice Police,” *Houston Post*, September 12, 1982; Vici Macias, “‘Salo’ Not Obscene,” *Houston Post*, April 12, 1983; “Shouting March Erupts at Rally,” *Houston Post*, January 12, 1983.

<sup>39</sup> Welling, *Cinema Houston*, 130; Friends of The River Oaks Theatre website.

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- *Salam Bombay* (1988)
- *Robo Cop II* (1990)
- *Kika* (1993)
- *Dazed and Confused* (1993)
- *Ruby in Paradise* (1993)
- *Blaze* (2018)
- *Raise Hell: The Life & Times of Molly Ivins* (2019)

Despite these high-profile events, the property remained a primarily repertory second-run cinema. Threatened by the construction of drive-ins in the early to mid-part of the 20th century and later with the arrival of megaplex cinemas and malls in the 1980s, the earning power of small, neighborhood theaters began to decline. Competition also appeared in the nearby area, with theaters like Tercar's Park III opening in the early 1970s at 1996 West Gray (one block from River Oaks Theatre) as a "multicinema" (closed 1979). In 1990, the River Oaks Plaza megaplex opened at West Gray and Waugh Drive with 12 screens and caused confusion for moviegoers, due to the similar name. Even given the more modern megaplex format, this venue, too, did not survive into the new millennium.

Around 1986, Landmark extended the historic balcony and bisected the space to accommodate two additional screens, providing a greater income opportunity. The already legendary "fresh buttered popcorn" and "gourmet treats" offered at concessions on the first floor were accompanied by the opening of a bar on the mezzanine. Even with many accolades and appearances on the "Best of Houston" list, like so many other Houston theaters of the period, River Oaks was perennially threatened by changing technologies and new formats for film consumption. Videotape (VHS) rental businesses and cable television, which became prominent in the 1990s, as well as the onslaught of internet streaming services in the 2000s, greatly affected the River Oaks Theatre's business. It struggled with slim profit margins in the later years of its operation.

The first major threat of demolition of the historic River Oaks Shopping Center (including the theater) was publicized on the front page of the *Houston Chronicle* in 2006. Public outcry and a local landmark designation partially saved the theater and shopping center, but due to the weak provisions of the City of Houston's historic preservation ordinance at that time, the designation was largely honorific and offered little physical protection. Insensitive alterations and partial demolition of the shopping center persisted; a portion of the historic 1936 crescent-shaped shopping center was demolished and replaced by a Barnes & Noble bookstore and other retail stores in 2007. During that period, public outcry and support for the preservation of Houston's oldest operating theater was once again in the news. Local advocacy groups and philanthropists staunchly advocated for its preservation. Celebrities, who had personal connections with the theater, also assisted these efforts. Perhaps the most vocal was the award-winning director Richard Linklater, who premiered his first film, *Dazed and Confused*, at River Oaks Theatre in 1993 and stated that the films shown there were formative in his development as a director. Other local celebrities who lent their support to the cause included Bernard Freeman, aka Bun B (rapper, then-professor at Rice University, and board member of the Houston Cinema Arts Society) and acclaimed director Wes Anderson. These advocacy campaigns and strong public support were successful in saving the theater from the immediate threat, and it continued to operate as an art-house repertory cinema with Landmark. Economic strain brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 strained negotiations for a new contract between Weingarten Realty and Landmark, and the property ceased operations in 2021. In February 2022, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner held a press conference to announce Kimco's assumption of the lease, thus preserving the River Oaks Theatre.<sup>40</sup> Kimco plans to rehabilitate the property for use as both a movie theater and a venue for live performances, returning to its historic functions.

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<sup>40</sup> Sofia Gonzalez, "River Oaks Theatre Is Opening Its Doors Once Again after Outpouring of Support from Community," *Impact*, February 2, 2022.

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The River Oaks Theatre has meant a great deal to the neighborhood since its completion, and interest has continued to present day with an expanded audience. It was originally a venue for not only film premieres, but also live performances, cultural gatherings, and lectures of interest to the community in the early years of River Oaks' high-society clientele. In subsequent decades, curated showings would focus on alternative, art-house, and cult classic films starting in the late 1970s. As one of the few cinemas in Houston screening these types of films, the River Oaks Theatre formulated its own cult following of artists and cinephiles that continues to this day.

### *River Oaks Theatre and Streamline Moderne*

Popular in the 1930s and 1940s, Moderne (also known as Streamline Moderne) architecture was typically applied to commercial and multi-family residential buildings.<sup>41</sup> The style is considered a “streamlining” or simplification of the Art Deco style by expressing a building’s true form, supporting function with minimal ornamentation. A response to the intricate Art Deco aesthetic, Streamline Moderne’s lack of ornament reflected the economic downturn of the Great Depression.<sup>42</sup> The style can be identified by distinct horizontality; smooth curvilinear lines, surfaces, and projections; flat roofs; metal handrails; circular (porthole) windows; and enameled tiles.<sup>43</sup> Neon lighting was a character-defining feature of commercial buildings, especially theaters, constructed in the style. Illuminated and projecting marquees, with signage advertising the venue and current showings/events, were used to attract drivers. Many theater designs in this style employed pronounced asymmetrical massing with tower signage, while others exhibited a radiating symmetry. Typical designs sought to extend simplified beauty and ambiance on the interior through artwork and lighting, rather than exaggerated architectural features. The most current air conditioning, film, and sound technology were installed to enhance the overall customer experience and the theater’s ability to compete in the marketplace.<sup>44</sup>

River Oaks Theatre is an excellent example of a Streamline Moderne, small-scale neighborhood theater in Houston.<sup>45</sup> Character-defining features of Streamline Moderne visible in the design of the River Oaks Theatre include the low-rise horizontal emphasis, second-floor parapet painted with black and white horizontal stripes on the enameled steel panels, symmetrical façade, projecting central boomerang-shaped marquee with horizontal neon signage, and curved ticket booth below (since replaced). The exterior is further accentuated by terrazzo flooring with sun-ray detailing and a recessed entry/ticketing lobby flanked by curved walls clad in smooth porcelain-enameled steel panels. The original interior is also in keeping with the Moderne style, displaying elegant, curved aluminum handrails for staircases and porthole doors (to be reinstalled during the ongoing rehabilitation) in the foyer leading to the standee area. Artwork by Buck Winn, Jr.—including the foyer stair mural and bas-relief sculptures flanking the stage—enhanced the restrained architectural details, such as the engaged fluted columns in the auditorium. Recessed lighting in the foyer’s tray ceilings, as well as covered, concave dome lighting, created a soft ambiance. The River Oaks Theatre was also outfitted with the most updated air conditioning and film technology for its era.<sup>46</sup> The engineering firm of Kribs and Landauer, with offices in Houston and Dallas, designed the air-conditioning system.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Marcel Quimby, “Heights Theater, Houston, Harris County, Texas,” National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service 2017, 16.

<sup>42</sup> William Curtis, Jr. *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Phaidon, 2021), 291.

<sup>43</sup> Marcus Whiffen, *American Architecture since 1780: A Guide to the Styles* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992), 241-246; Jay Firsching, “Forest Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas,” National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> “Theaters: Cinema, Community, Broadcasting,” *Architectural Record*, July 1938, 95-128, usmodernist.org. Many other theaters of the period in Houston, such as Garden Oaks, Broadway, and Santa Rosa, featured asymmetry and vertical neon signage.

<sup>45</sup> Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), 95.

<sup>46</sup> Welling, *Cinema Houston*, 127.

<sup>47</sup> “Firm of Kribs and Landauer Widely Known,” *Houston Chronicle*, December 30, 1939, 51. This article lists buildings in Houston for which the firm designed air-conditioning systems; the River Oaks Theatre is the only theater listed. However, movie palaces began to be built with air conditioning in the 1920s, so it is likely that other Houston theaters also offered that amenity in 1939.

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*Pettigrew & Worley*

River Oaks Theatre was designed by architects Henry Frank Pettigrew (1906-1975) and John Arron Worley (1913-1982). A Chisholm, Texas native, Pettigrew graduated from Bryan Adams High School in Dallas and worked as a draftsman with the Thompson and Swaine firm from 1928 to 1938. In 1938, Pettigrew went into business with John Arron Worley. Worley attended North Dallas High School prior to matriculating to the Texas A&M University School of Architecture, graduating in 1935. Worley and Pettigrew were mentored by J. R. Elder, an Interstate Theatres construction executive, who reportedly educated the pair on theater construction, design, and equipment, leading the duo to quickly succeed as a theater design firm, beginning with the San Antonio Broadway Theater. The outbreak of World War II resulted in the dissolution of Pettigrew & Worley, with each separately aiding the war efforts. Worley earned the rank as a major, along with a bronze star for his service in the European theater between 1941 and 1946. Pettigrew aided the war effort on the home front at the Texas Prefabricated House & Tent Company, which sent more than 100,000 "Victory Huts," designed by Worley, to U.S. troops. Despite Pettigrew heavily profiting from Worley's designs during the war years, the two continued to have a strong relationship, reuniting following Worley's military service. The firm expanded into the contracting realm of theater design as they continued to remodel and design theaters, working heavily on those located in Texas.

Pettigrew & Worley finished approximately two dozen movie-theater projects in Texas between 1946-1951, concluding with the Wynnewood Theater project in Dallas in 1951. According to Pettigrew, the firm was involved in the design of more than 75 theaters including 60 for the Interstate Theatre syndicate.<sup>48</sup>

Interstate Theatres designed by Pettigrew & Worley between 1946-1948 in Houston include:

- The Garden Oaks Theater/Capri Theater (1947, 3750 N. Shepherd Drive)
- The Broadway (1947, 1325 Broadway Street)
- The Santa Rosa/Santa Fe (1946, 5607 Telephone Road)
- The Fulton/Cine Colonial (1947, 3310 Fulton Street)

The Broadway, Santa Rosa/Santa Fe, and Fulton theaters have all been demolished. The Garden Oaks Theater is extant but has been heavily altered and repurposed for a church campus (Figure 18).<sup>49</sup> The Garden Oaks Theater (also established through Interstate) was designed in an L-shaped footprint with expressive circular terrazzo flooring, curved metal screens, and murals with natural plant themes in the lobby. The building also has a boomerang marquee like the River Oaks Theatre, but with predominantly vertical neon signage and curvilinear neon lights on the parapet.<sup>50</sup> The Broadway, like Garden Oaks, also had vertical neon signage but a less protruding boomerang marquee. The interior auditorium ceiling took cues from the River Oaks Theatre, with projecting central fluted plaster detail and additional scalloped or circular details designed on either side (Figure 19).<sup>51</sup> The Santa Rosa/Santa Fe Theater's exterior was designed in a more austere Moderne style, with offset vertical signage, rather than a centered marquee as found on the other examples designed by these architects in Houston (Figure 20 and 21). The ticketing booth, entry, and interior design had more noticeable curvilinear or circular designed elements (porthole doors, radiating terrazzo).<sup>52</sup> The Fulton/Cine Colonial Theater interior is most like the Garden Oaks Theater, with a long, exposed, curving staircase and metal railings; porthole doors; oval tray ceilings; interior murals; and radiating terrazzo floor art (Figure 22). In Pettigrew & Worley's Houston theaters, common themes included circular motifs, murals, and dramatic neon signage and detail lighting.

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<sup>48</sup> Firsching, "Forest Theater."

<sup>49</sup> Welling, *Cinema Houston*; "Houston Architectural Survey," Rice University, ca. 1980

<sup>50</sup> "Garden Oaks Theater in Houston, Texas," Cinema Treasures website, [cinematreasures.org/theaters/10815](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/10815).

<sup>51</sup> "Broadway Theater in Houston, Texas," Cinema Treasures website, [cinematreasures.org/theaters/22829/photos/175187](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/22829/photos/175187).

<sup>52</sup> "Photos of Santa Rosa Theatre in Houston, Texas," Cinema Treasures website, [cinematreasures.org/theaters/10915/photos](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/10915/photos).

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The architects designed other Moderne theaters in Texas, as well. Lakewood Theater in Dallas (1938), at 1825 Abrams Parkway, exhibits the most interior similarities to the River Oaks Theatre. It was also designed within a suburban shopping center, with Texlite lighting/signage and porcelain-enamel details, for Interstate Theatres. The interior mural and sculpture artwork is reminiscent of that of Buck Winn, Jr., but was executed by Perry Nichols, Harry Carnahan, Victor Lallier, and sculptor Jose Martin (flanking statues, Figures 23 and 24).<sup>53</sup>

In addition to new theater construction, the Pettigrew & Worley firm took on adaptations of existing buildings and molded them into Moderne Texas theaters. Some of these include:

- Queen Theatre, 110 S. Main Street, Bryan, Texas (renovation/remodel ca. 1939) is extant and remains intact (Figure 25).<sup>54</sup>
- Tyler Theater, 111 S. Broadway Avenue, Tyler, Texas (ca. 1940) is the most reminiscent of the River Oaks' Moderne style with a boomerang marquee, as well as interior metal railing details and artwork. Originally, the theater appeared to have some enameled metal tile and a curved ticketing booth. This venue was also operated by Interstate Theatres, Inc. It has been heavily modified and only the structure of the building remains (Figure 26).<sup>55</sup>
- Wichita Theater and Opera House, 919 Indiana Avenue, Wichita Falls, Texas (ca. 1939, NRHP-listed in Indiana Avenue Historic District, 2023) is extant and intact (Figure 27). The architects continued their use of circular motifs; however, this location has a minimally projecting boomerang marquee under a cantilevered awning. Prominent signage was vertical and centered.<sup>56</sup>

The Bowie Theatres were built ca. 1941 at 413 Center Avenue in Brownwood, Texas, and 3858 Camp Bowie Boulevard in Fort Worth, Texas.<sup>57</sup> The Brownwood location was a more modestly sized venue; however, the marquee bears a striking resemblance to that of the River Oaks Theatre, with neon letters above either side of the marquee (Figure 28). The Fort Worth Bowie location is larger and was designed with asymmetrical details and offset vertical signage.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, Pettigrew & Worley shifted their business focus to developing housing subdivisions in Dallas and its surrounding suburbs. Through their extensive network and résumé, the pair became leaders in housing development within the region. They continued to design theaters in Dallas during the post-war era, including:

- Circle Theater, 2711 Storey Lane, ca. 1947 (Figure 29).<sup>58</sup>
- Forest Theatre, 1920 Martin Luther King Boulevard, ca. 1949 (Figure 30).<sup>59</sup>
- Avenue Theatre, 4923 Columbia Avenue, ca. 1950.<sup>60</sup>
- Wynnewood Theater (Wynnewood Shopping Village), 666 Wynnewood Plaza ca. 1951.<sup>61</sup>

In 1958, in partnership with his son, Worley created the Worley Corporation to focus on constructing residential buildings under the TexAnn and TexMark brand names. Within a 20-year period, Worley and Reynolds constructed thousands of homes and dozens of apartment complexes, which would later eclipse their work in the theater

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<sup>53</sup> "Comments about Lakewood Theatre in Dallas, Texas," Cinema Treasures website, [cinematreasures.org/theaters/328/comments](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/328/comments).

<sup>54</sup> "Queen Theatre in Bryan, Texas," Cinema Treasures website, [cinematreasures.org/theaters/13964](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/13964)

<sup>55</sup> "Tyler Theatre in Tyler, Texas," Cinema Treasures website [cinematreasures.org/theaters/7952](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/7952).

<sup>56</sup> "Wichita Theatre and Opera House in Wichita Falls, Texas," Cinema Treasures website, <https://cinematreasures.org/theaters/4100>.

<sup>57</sup> "Bowie Theatre in Brownwood, Texas," Cinema Treasures website, [cinematreasures.org/theaters/9208](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/9208); "Bowie Theatre in Fort Worth, Texas," Cinema Treasures website, [cinematreasures.org/theaters/9734](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/9734).

<sup>58</sup> "Circle Theater in Dallas, Texas," Cinema Treasures website, [cinematreasures.org/theaters/8423](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/8423).

<sup>59</sup> Firsching, "Forest Theatre."

<sup>60</sup> "Avenue Theatre in Dallas, Texas," Cinema Treasures website, [cinematreasures.org/theaters/19253](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/19253).

<sup>61</sup> "Wynnewood Theater in Dallas, Texas," Cinema Treasures website, [cinematreasures.org/theaters/8223](http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/8223).

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construction industry. Sadly, all of the duo's original drawings and records of their theater commissions have been lost except River Oaks Theatre (Figures 31-39).<sup>62</sup>

*James Buchanan "Buck" Winn, Jr., Interior Artist/Designer*

James Buchanan "Buck" Winn, Jr., was born in Celina, Texas, on March 1, 1905. He studied at Washington University in St. Louis under Oscar E. Berninghaus and Fred Carpenter and traveled to the Académie Julian in Paris to continue his education in art and architecture. In 1929, Winn established a studio in Dallas, where he practiced as a muralist, sculptor, architect, and inventor. He married Kathryn ("Kitty") Butler, an English teacher at Hockaday School in Dallas, in 1931. During the 1930s, Winn painted many murals throughout Texas, including in the following buildings:

- Dallas Medical Arts Building (Dallas)
- Highland Park Village Theater (Dallas, demolished)
- Titche-Goettinger Building (Dallas)
- Burrus Flour Mills (Ft. Worth)
- Telenews Theater (Dallas, demolished)
- Hillcrest Mausoleum (Dallas)
- Sylvan Supper Club (Arlington)
- Driscoll Hotel (Corpus Christi)
- Blackstone Hotel (Fort Worth)

Winn's exhibits included the Dallas Public Art Gallery in 1932; the State Fair of Texas in 1930, 1931 and 1934; and the Dallas Allied Art Exhibitions in 1929, 1930, and 1933. Additional works are housed at the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum.<sup>63</sup> In 1936, for the Texas Centennial in Dallas, Winn teamed with Eugene Savage to paint murals for the Hall of State, the Great Seal featuring the Six Flags of Texas, exterior motifs for the Women's Pavilion, and main entrance bas-relief. Within Fair Park at the Parry Avenue entrance, another piece called *Buffalo Hunt* was constructed in collaboration with George Dahl for the 1936 Centennial Exposition Corporation. Winn designed the sculptural frieze of a buffalo hunt and wagon train that surrounds the pylon's base.<sup>64</sup> Other murals and sculptures include those within the State Historical Museum in Gonzales, Victoria National Bank in Victoria, the Power and Light Building and Oak Cliff Savings in Dallas, institutional buildings of Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Howard Payne University in Brownwood, Southwestern University in Georgetown, the University of Texas at Austin, and, of course, River Oaks Theatre in Houston. Winn also worked at the New York World's Fair. It has been suggested that the lighting exhibits from this 1939 Fair inspired that within the River Oaks Theatre.

Along with these commissions, Winn's portfolio also includes the *Magic of Flight* bas-relief, which he created for the Fort Worth Amon Carter Airport, and the Mercantile Bank Dallas' wooden murals. Throughout the Southwest, Winn created numerous sculptures, bas-reliefs, and historical, educational, and commercial sites. In 1946, Winn won the United States competition for the commemoration of Texas statehood. He was successful not only in the world of art, but also as an engineer. Through his ingenuity, Winn created patented processes and technology for the utilization of fiberglass and lightweight concrete, among other innovations; he was never satisfied and tirelessly sought out both durably and economically sustainable building materials. Winn emphasized the importance of practicing these habits when he designed housing. He developed "fan-folded" roof designs and taught them to his architecture students at the University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M University, Princeton University, the University of California at Berkeley, and Rice University, as well as other institutions where he lectured. Many of those materials and designs were tested in

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<sup>62</sup> Firsching, "Forest Theatre."

<sup>63</sup> Paula L. Grauer & Michael R. Grauer, eds. *Dictionary of Texas Artists 1800-1945*. (West Texas A&M University Series 3 (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 100.

<sup>64</sup> Carol Morris Little, *A Comprehensive Guide to Outdoor Sculpture in Texas*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 143.

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his studio, on his ranch, Four Winns Ranch (NRHP 2018), in Wimberly. When he was not testing or lecturing, Winn participated in organizations such as the Academy of Applied Sciences, the American Institute of Architecture, and the Philosophical Society of Texas. Winn was also an active member of the Wimberly community, where he assisted in the organization of public schools, an interdenominational church, and the Wimberly Chamber of Commerce.<sup>65</sup> After years of service to his community, as well as instrumental work in Texas architecture, Winn passed away on December 18, 1979, and is buried in the Wimberley Cemetery.<sup>66</sup>

The low bas-relief sculptures in the River Oaks Theatre are called “Land” and “Sea.” In the southwest corner, the “Land” sculpture depicts elegant horses, foliage, and the female human form (Figure 59, Photo 13). In the southeast corner, the “Sea” sculpture illustrates a koi fish and the male human form (Figure 58, Photo 14). The sculptures have a strong sense of movement and appear to be floating, reminiscent of the Great Seal medallion at the Texas Hall of State in Dallas (1936). Winn’s style can be categorized as “Lone Star Regionalism,” an aesthetic developed by a group of artists called the “Dallas Nine,” who focused on Texas landscapes and people during the 1930s and 40s.<sup>67</sup> While he was not officially part of the Dallas Nine, his work had similar geometric elements representing mythical and actual imagery related to Southwestern subjects.<sup>68</sup>

### *Historic Houston Theaters*

In the 1920s and 1930s, cultural shifts and Houston’s growing population gave rise to suburban residential development and infrastructure improvements. The popularity of neighborhood theaters and small commercial businesses within these areas also surged. In December 1939 alone, four neighborhood theaters (including the River Oaks Theatre) were opened for white patrons only. Before that time, theaters were centrally located in downtown Houston; the earliest of those were oriented toward live performance, vaudeville, and nickelodeons or short films. Before its closure in 2021, River Oaks Theatre was the oldest, continuously operating historic theater in Houston and the second-longest operating of all theaters in Houston (second only to a non-historic, ca. 1990s cinema in Sharpstown).<sup>69</sup> In addition to the River Oaks Theatre, a select number of theaters built for white patrons in the early twentieth century remain in the city, including:

- The Scenic (1900, 315 Travis Street)
- Isis Theater (1912, 1012 Prairie Street)
- Zoe Theatre, aka Capitol Theatre (1914, 719 Main Street)
- The Ritz, aka Majestic Metro Theatre (1926, 911 Preston Avenue)
- Tower Theatre (1926, 1201 Westheimer Road)
- Heights Theater (1935, 339 W. 19<sup>th</sup> Street, NRHP 2017)
- Alabama Theatre (1939, 2922 S. Shepherd Drive)

None of these venues, however, still operate as theaters. The Scenic was adapted to become a restaurant. Isis Theater stopped showing films in the late 1920s. The Zoe Theatre is an event space for the Houston Bar Center Building (NRHP 2017). The Ritz operates as a special event venue. Tower Theatre is now an Acme Oyster House. The Heights

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<sup>65</sup> Dorothy S. Schmidt, “Winn, James Buchanan, Jr.” *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State History Association, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/winn-james-buchanan-jr>.

<sup>66</sup> “Biography: Buck Winn: Lone Star Regionalist,” University Archives Online Exhibits, Texas State University, <https://exhibits.library.txstate.edu/univarchives/exhibits/show/buck-winn/biography>.

<sup>67</sup> Gene Fowler, “In the Creative Moment: Artist Buck Winn Helped Define 20th-Century Texas Art,” *Texas Highways*, August 1, 2014, <https://texashighways.com/culture/people/in-the-creative-moment-texas-artist-buck-winn/>; “Dallas Nine,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/dallas-nine>.

<sup>68</sup> “Buck Winn Mural,” see Wimberley Institute of Cultures website, May 16, 2015, <https://www.wimwic.org/buck-winn-murals/>.

<sup>69</sup> Live recording, Southwest Alternate Media Project (SWAMP) panel about River Oaks Theatre, recorded Facebook.com, March 31, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/swampfilm/videos/save-our-landmark/498858007948709>.



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Theater is an event venue and hosts live performances. The Alabama Theatre was converted into a bookstore in the 1980s and currently contains a Trader Joe's grocery store.

Demolished examples of early neighborhood theaters what exclusively served white patrons include:

- Delman Theater (1934, 4412 Main Street)
- Union Theatre (1938, 4001 Humble Road)
- Stude Theatre (1939, 730 East 11<sup>th</sup> Street)
- Navaway Theatre (1939, 6714 Navigation Boulevard)
- Village Theatre (1941, 2412 University Boulevard)

Several theaters were constructed and operated for African American patrons in the first half of the twentieth century in Houston. In a study done by the Interstate Theatre corporation in 1968, "Negro" theaters included:<sup>70</sup>

- Deluxe Theater (1941, 3303 Lyons Avenue)
- Dowling Theatre (1941, 2110 Dowling Street)
- Lincoln Theatre (1916, 711 Prairie Street)
- Park Theatre (1939, 2813 Dowling Street)
- Roxy Theatre (1940, 2737 Lyons Avenue)

Of the examples listed above, only the Deluxe Theatre is still extant. It has been repurposed as a special event venue. The Lyons Theatre (1940, 4026 Lyons Avenue) is also still extant, but stopped operating as a theatre in 1958 and thus was not included in Interstate's survey. It currently functions as a church and has been altered on the exterior.

Extant early Spanish-language theaters that historically served Mexican audiences include the North Main Theatre aka Cine Ritz (1935, 3730 N. Main Street) and Garden Oaks Theatre (1947, 3750 N. Shepherd Drive). Each of these theaters has been adapted for reuse as a church property and has been significantly altered.<sup>71</sup>

Of the surviving theaters mentioned above, none serve their original purpose, and few are as architecturally intact as the River Oaks Theatre. River Oaks Theatre retains both continuity of use and architectural integrity, making it extremely significant in the entertainment and cultural landscape of Houston cinema.

### *Segregation and Houston Cinema*

"Race riots" (including the 1917 incident involving African American troops stationed at Camp Logan in Houston), police beatings, and Ku Klux Klan activity, including lynchings and intimidation, characterized just some of the violence and abuse that Black Houstonians suffered well into the 1950s. Treated as second-class citizens during the Jim Crow era, African Americans were prohibited from enjoying equal access to public spaces such as schools, parks, theaters, and public transportation. The River Oaks neighborhood in Houston remained a completely segregated community for white residents, who nevertheless employed Black service workers. This relationship led the wealthy white residents of River Oaks to protest the lack of bus service for African Americans in 1925, presenting a petition to Houston's city council that argued for a designated bus line to allow "Black domestics" to arrive to work on time. After the petition was approved, Clifton Frederick Richardson, a prominent black journalist at *The Informer* newspaper and a political activist, argued that every bus company should follow suit and allow

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<sup>70</sup> "Interstate Theatres Collection," Dallas Public Library Archives.

<sup>71</sup> Mod, "Village Theatre," and Cinema Treasures website.

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Black passengers to use the service.<sup>72</sup> When that failed, Richardson responded by saying, “We presume that the only hope for our people to ride these buses will be for all of us to get a job working for some white family in that section of the city, and then we shall all be eligible to ride these ‘pretty little buses!’” Houston City Council approved an amendment to the city’s segregation ordinances related to public transportation in 1932, but most public transportation operators continued to refuse to drive Black passengers.<sup>73</sup>

Like other public spaces in the Southern United States, movie theaters during the 1920s served primarily white customers, although theater owners and managers recognized the value of African American business. Theaters limited attendance by their Black clientele in a variety of ways. Some theatres provided segregated areas for Black moviegoers or set aside specific days for African American audiences. For example, the Palace and Majestic theaters in Houston limited Black patrons to balcony seats. Additionally, between 1926 and 1928, the management of the Majestic banned Black patrons from attending weekend performances. During the 1930s, the Loew’s State Theatre and the Metropolitan Theatre arranged for exclusive showings of movies with Black casts for their Black clientele, although African American patrons were still required to utilize a segregated. Similarly public performances at the City Auditorium, Music Hall, and Sam Houston Coliseum often excluded Black people entirely or limited them to a designated segregated area within the venue or provided segregated performances or showings.<sup>74</sup>

The segregation of African Americans was codified by the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which established the “separate but equal” doctrine; as long as African Americans were afforded functionally similar facilities, they legally could be segregated from the white population.<sup>75</sup> Multiple legal challenges during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were unsuccessful before the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* officially desegregated public education in 1954.<sup>76</sup> Although *Brown* did not extend to all public accommodations, and Southern cities found ways to avoid implementing it in practice, Houston Mayor Roy Hofheinz (at least nominally) banned segregation in public spaces such as City Hall, libraries, and golf courses in 1955, with little fanfare.<sup>77</sup> Signs denoting race were simply removed, and Hofheinz convinced media outlets not to cover the changes. In reality, public spaces continued to discriminate against Black patrons. Privately owned businesses largely remained segregated. African Americans began to hold sit-ins in Houston in early 1960, in response to a lack of sincere action to integrate by local businesses. Texas Southern University (TSU) students led a series of demonstrations against Weingarten’s Grocery, specifically Store No. 26 on Alameda near Wheeler, which was near the university campus. Many of these protests ended in a temporary closure of the business, loss of income from Black patrons, and the arrest of Black demonstrators.<sup>78</sup> Peaceful protests throughout the city continued until more significant agreements were struck. According to the Reverend William “Bill” Lawson, white and Black community leaders—hoping to avoid the violence and unrest taking place in other Southern cities, and to avoid repeating previous violent incidents throughout Houston’s history—met peacefully at the Rice Hotel to negotiate integration efforts. Following the intentional tactics of Mayor Hofheinz in the 1950s, the owners of media outlets in Houston agreed to a self-imposed blackout.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Amber Seely and Leon Richardson, “Richardson, Clifton Frederick, Sr.” *Handbook of Texas Online*, Texas State Historical Association, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/richardson-clifton-frederick-sr>.

<sup>73</sup> Beeth and Wintz, *Black Dixie*, 185.

<sup>74</sup> Beeth and Wintz, *Black Dixie*, 187.

<sup>75</sup> Williamjames Hull Hoffer, *Plessy v. Ferguson: Race and Inequality in Jim Crow America* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2012), 121-122.

<sup>76</sup> Hoffer, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 172-178.

<sup>77</sup> James Gast, *The Astrodome: Building an American Spectacle*. Boston: Aspinwall Press, 2014. Also James Pinkerton, “Road to integration was quieter in Houston, but still wasn’t easy,” *Houston Chronicle*, July 30, 2016. The Houston Independent School System did not take steps to desegregate its schools until 1970.

<sup>78</sup> Beeth and Wentz, *Black Dixie*, 214.

<sup>79</sup> Gast, Pinkerton.

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More widespread desegregation was led by supermarkets, drug stores, and restaurants over a few months in 1960, but movie theaters, in particular, were slow to participate and among the last businesses in Houston to desegregate. Protesters sometimes marched outside the side-by-side Metropolitan and Loew's State theaters in downtown Houston.<sup>80</sup> River Oaks residents were predominantly white (as reinforced by deed restrictions), and the neighborhood was geographically removed from established Black neighborhoods that contained African American-welcoming venues. Prior to 1963, no evidence of separate screenings or segregated balcony seating has been located to indicate that the River Oaks Theatre admitted Black customers.

Houstonians of Mexican and Indigenous descent also faced discrimination in public accommodations. A large, vibrant Mexican community developed in Houston, primarily in the Second Ward/Segundo Barrio, Fifth Ward, and Houston Heights. Mexican American neighborhoods functioned as self-sufficient ethnic enclaves, with their own industries, shops, restaurants, and entertainment venues. Lively musical groups, traveling shows, clubs, and theaters like El Teatro Azteca, one of the earliest Mexican American theaters and the first Spanish language theater in the city, helped to develop Houston's Hispanic culture.<sup>81</sup> The Cine Ritz movie theater served Spanish-speaking audiences on Houston's Northside.

While the Ku Klux Klan also targeted Mexicans in Houston, racial strife between white Anglos (English-speaking people of European descent) and ethnic Mexicans and Indigenous people was present in Texas from the mid-1800s, when colonizers from the American South began to move into the Mexican state of Coahuila y Tejas. This continued after the Texas War for Independence from Mexico in 1836 and the Mexican American War of 1845-1848, which ended when Mexico ceded much of what is now the Southwestern United States to its northern neighbor. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed at the end of that war, officially established Mexicans as white, but de facto discrimination, particularly against darker-skinned working-class people of Mexican and Indigenous descent, continued unabated. By the early 1900s, tensions between Mexican and Anglo Texans—exacerbated by refugees from the Mexican Revolution fleeing across the border into Texas—erupted into mob violence. The 1910 lynching of Antonio Rodriguez in Rocksprings, Texas, like lynchings of Black people across the state, went unpunished, signaling that Anglos perpetrating violence against ethnic Mexicans would likely face no consequences. In Mexico, demonstrations and protests over the lack of arrests for Rodriguez's murder were rationalized by Anglo Texans as evidence of Mexicans' collective tendency toward violence and a further justification for the killing. Lynchings continued through 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>82</sup> In 1977, members of the Houston Police Department beat to death Jose Campos Torres, a veteran; following an unsuccessful cover-up of the murder, the officers involved received five years' probation with no jail time, leading to protests.<sup>83</sup>

Ethnic Mexican people also faced discrimination in education, housing, and public spaces. The 1883 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the *Civil Rights Cases* codified the rights of business owners to either deny service to non-white/Anglo people or require them to use segregated facilities. This affected Mexican and Indigenous people as well as African Americans.<sup>84</sup> The Texas Supreme Court also empowered business owners to discriminate against Mexican people by restricting their access to public and private spaces—a practice that was already well-established. For instance, the developer who built and leased dance platforms in San Pedro Springs Municipal Park began banning Mexicans from the platforms in 1883. The next year, the 1884 Texas Supreme Court ruling in *Manning v. Social Club*, declared that “a

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<sup>80</sup> Lisa Gray, “The Quiet Revolution to Open Segregation’s Doors,” *Houston Chronicle*, January 12, 2012.

<sup>81</sup> Jesus Jesse Esparza, “La Colonia Mexicana: A History of Mexican Americans in Houston,” *Houston History* 9, no. 1, 4.

<sup>82</sup> Nicholas Villanueva, Jr., *The Lynching of Mexicans in the Texas Borderlands* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017), 14-15, 25-28, 51-62, 171.

<sup>83</sup> Esparza, 6.

<sup>84</sup> Susan Cianci Salvatore, “Civil Rights in America: Racial Desegregation of Public Accommodations” (Washington, DC: National Park Service, 2009), 93.

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denial of admission ... was not a violation of federal or state law because governments should not interfere in the social intercourse of people in places of pleasure or amusement.”<sup>85</sup>

The Texas Legislature’s 1907 law, “Theaters, Etc.—Prohibiting Discrimination Between Persons Desiring to Lease Same,” in fact legalized discrimination by stating that “business owners, managers, and lessees who offered public amusement services in theaters, playhouses, opera houses, and similar types of buildings had the right to refuse service to ‘objectionable characters’ and to provide separate accommodations” in the form of assigning seats to patrons. That law allowed Texas theaters to segregate audiences or entirely prohibit attendance by non-white/Anglo customers.<sup>86</sup>

Well into the 1940s, businesses in border towns, rural areas, and major cities posted signs reading “No Mexicans or Dogs”.<sup>87</sup> As early as 1911, the *Houston Post* reported that the Mexican Consul in Galveston had traveled to Houston to file charges with that city’s police chief about a “cinematographic theater” that had posted a sign “to the effect that Mexicans would be charged 50 cents admission” (\$16.44 in 2024 dollars) at a time when nickelodeons usually charged five cents for admission (hence the term *nickel-odeon*). The theater’s employees were also accused of treating Mexican customers poorly.<sup>88</sup> In 1924, two Mexican students “were refused entry to (Houston’s Luna Park) dance hall on account of their nationality”; one of the students, J. Pietro Laurens, was arrested and beaten by a police officer, then himself charged with assault.<sup>89</sup> Mexicans were also prohibited from using public swimming pools and “white only” drinking fountains. In Houston, Mexican people were represented in their struggle for civil rights by Mexican consuls to the United States, as well as a succession of political organizations, including the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), founded in Houston in 1929 and now the oldest and largest Hispanic organization in the United States.<sup>90</sup>

The extent to which the River Oaks Theatre was segregated is not clear; however, the Interstate Theatres Circuit operated the theater between 1940 and 1975, and Interstate’s corporate policy was to maintain segregated theaters in the case of Black audiences.<sup>91</sup> Its corporate policies around Mexican audiences were not located during the research for this nomination, but correspondence in 1961 regarding another Interstate venue, the 1918 Pictorium (“Pic”) Theater in Vernon, Texas, states that “We have always shown to some Mexicans in this house, and since most, if not all, of the Mexicans who come here are from south Texas, I believe we will always be able to get them in this theatre.”<sup>92</sup> Interstate had taken over the Pic Theater as part of its 1933 acquisition of the Dent Theater Circuit,<sup>93</sup> indicating that Mexican customers were welcome in the Pic from that point forward. Interstate also “contract(ed) for Mexican-made Spanish-language films for theaters in the (Rio Grande) Valley which catered to the Mexican populace.”<sup>94</sup> Whether those policies extended to the River Oaks Theatre is unknown, but it is likely that River Oaks was maintained solely for white audiences through the de facto segregation of the neighborhood as a whole through at least 1963.

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<sup>85</sup> Martha Menchaca, *The Mexican American Experience in Texas: Citizenship, Segregation, and the Struggle for Equality* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022), 98-99. The quote is from Menchaca, not the Texas Supreme Court ruling.

<sup>86</sup> Menchaca, 99. Again, the quote is from the author, not the Legislative Act.

<sup>87</sup> Villanueva, 170, 172.

<sup>88</sup> “Discrimination Alleged,” *Houston Post*, August 1, 1911, 9.

<sup>89</sup> “Laurens Row Up to Mayor,” *Houston Post*, August 24, 1942, 12.

<sup>90</sup> “LULAC History: All for One and One for All,” LULAC website, <https://lulac.org/about/history/>.

<sup>91</sup> “Negro Man Falls from Balcony of Theater,” *Vernon Daily Record*, February 22, 1951; “Negroes, Whites Protest Segregation at Theaters,” *Vernon Daily Record*, February 13, 1961, 2.

<sup>92</sup> Inter-office memo between Fred Palmer and W. E. Mitchell, July 22, 1961.

<sup>93</sup> Katherine Faust and Paul Beck, *Overview and History, Interstate Theatre Collection*, Dallas Public Library, [dallaslibrary2.org/dallashistory/archives/07701.php](https://dallaslibrary2.org/dallashistory/archives/07701.php).

<sup>94</sup> Faust and Beck.

River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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### **Summary**

River Oaks Theatre is nominated to the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criterion A in the area of Entertainment/Recreation and Criterion C in the area of Architecture. The period of significance is 1939-1974.

River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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***Maps***

City Map Viewer (City of Houston)



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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Google Earth Pro

Google Maps

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River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Maps**

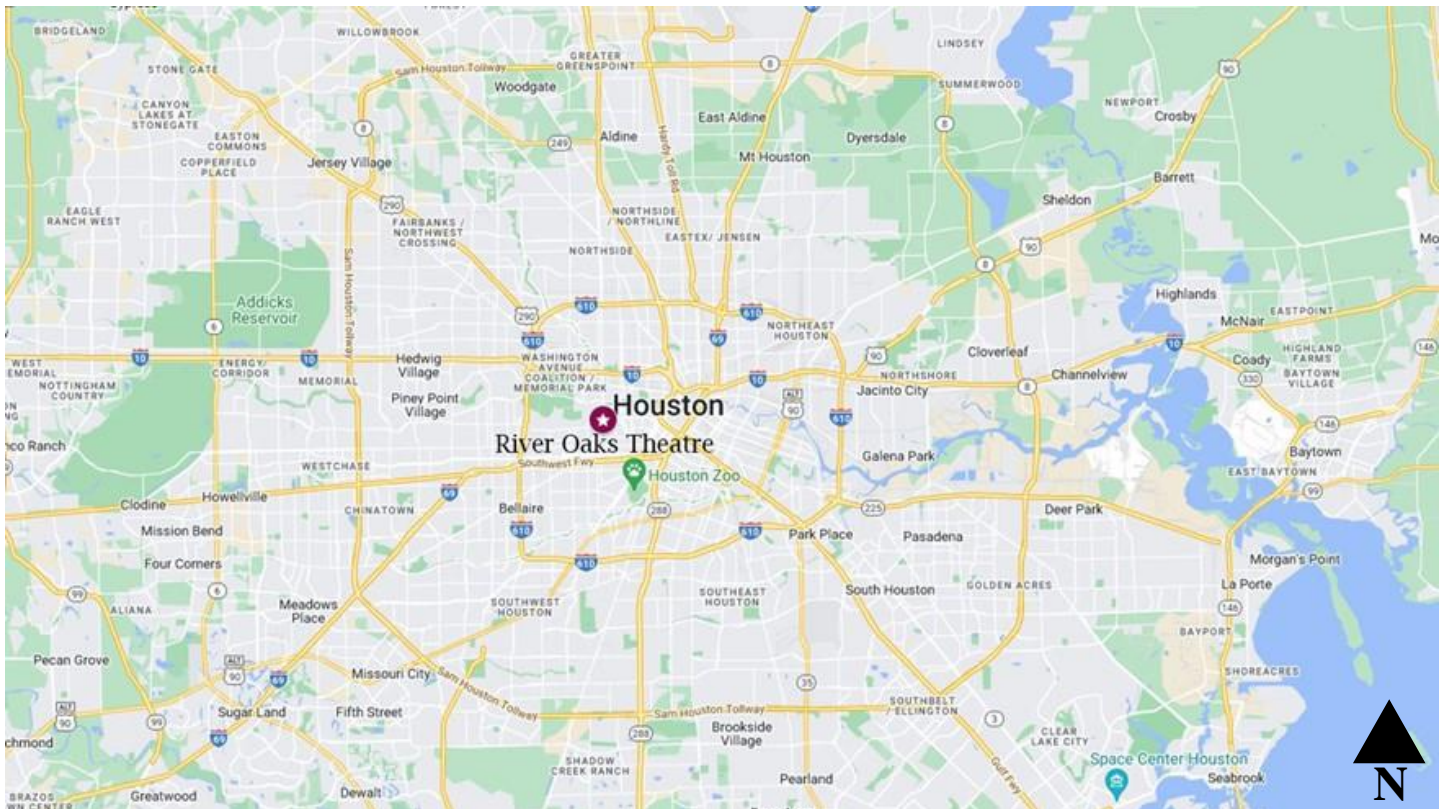
**Map 1**

Map of Texas counties, showing the location of Harris County in red.



**Map 2**

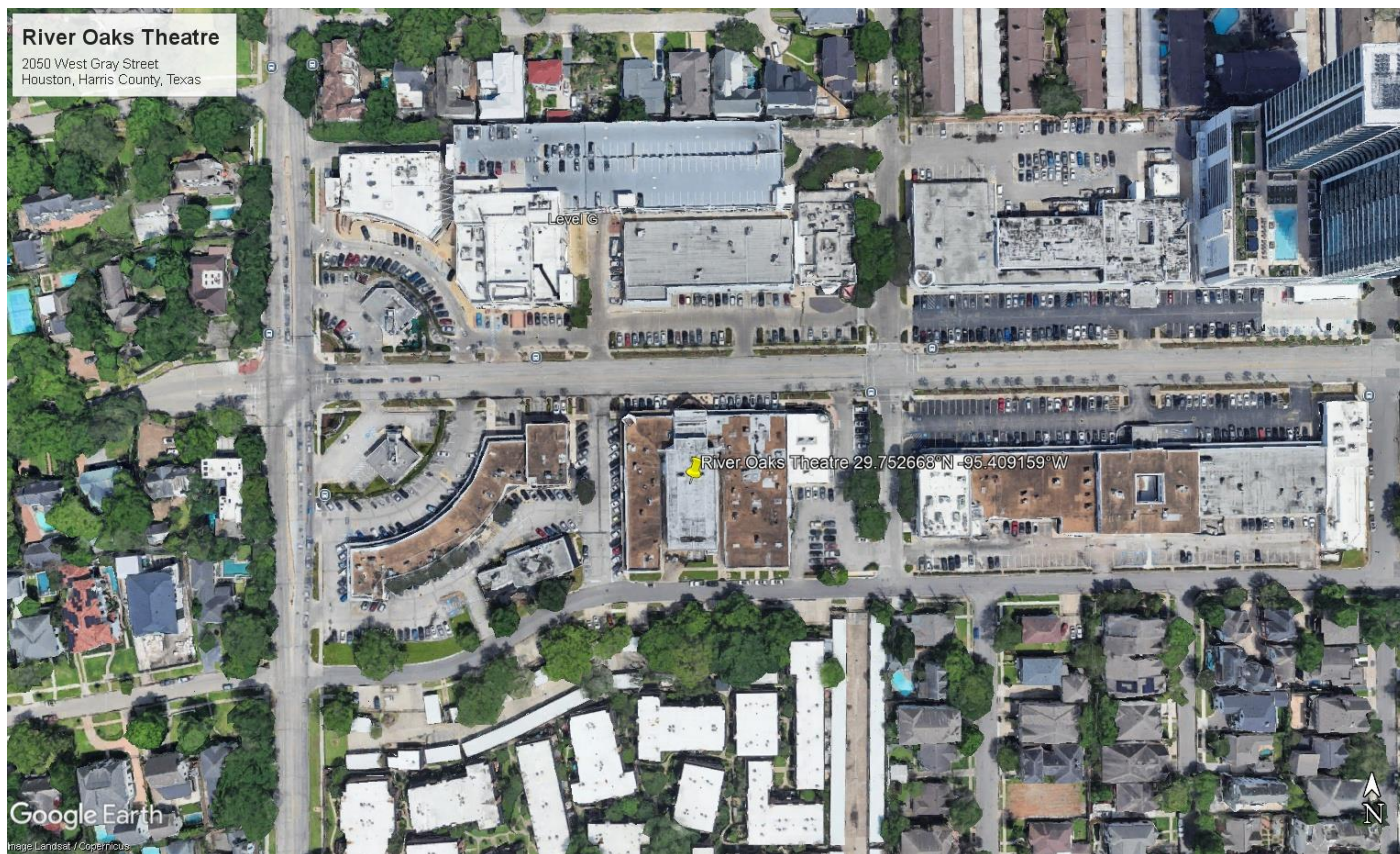
Map of the greater Houston area, as it appeared in 2023 (Google Maps).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

**Map 3**

Satellite view of River Oaks Shopping Center and River Oaks Theatre (Google Earth, accessed September 16, 2024).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

**Map 4**

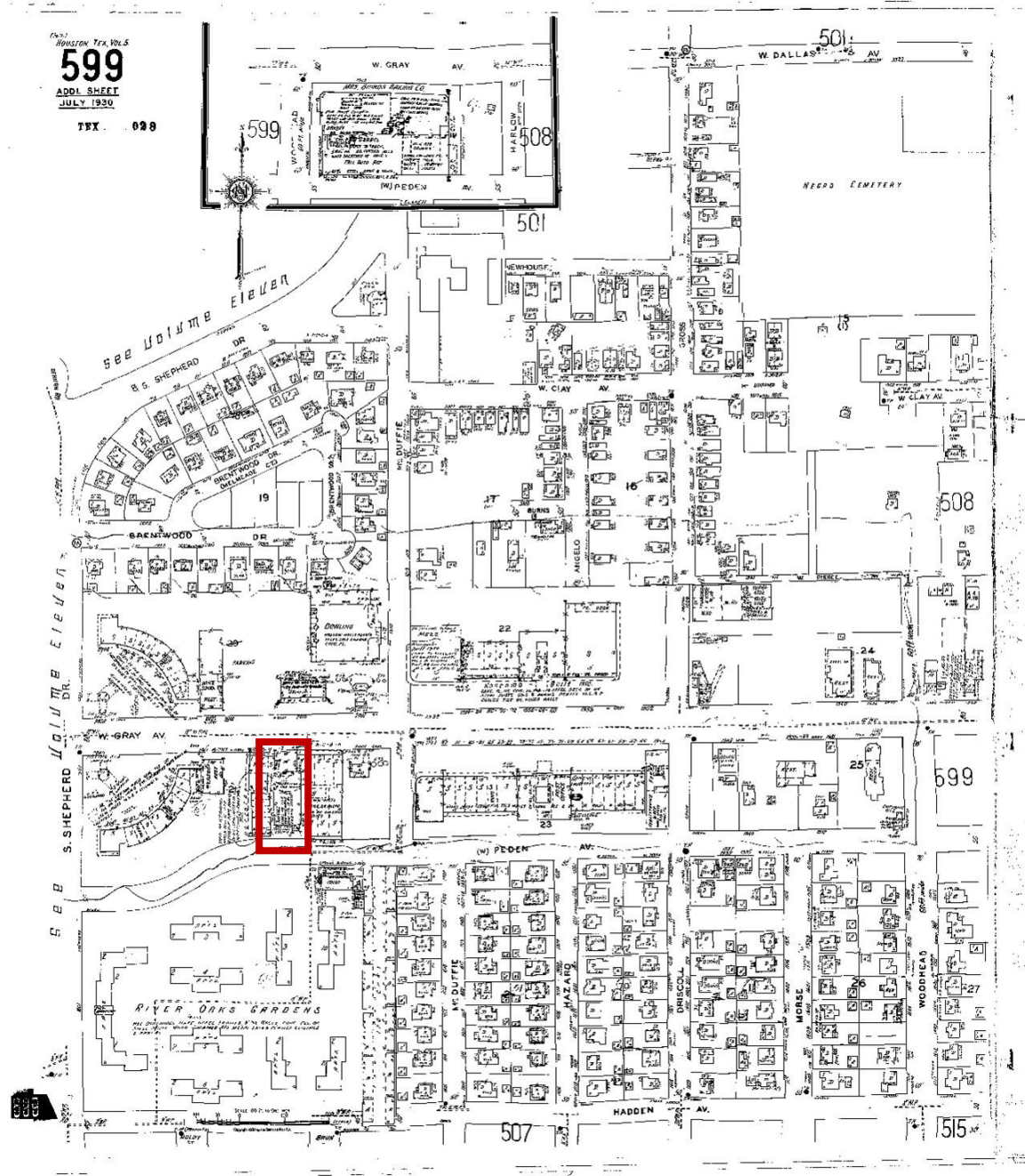
Boundary of the subject property, shown in red (Google Earth, accessed November 3, 2023).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

**Map 5**

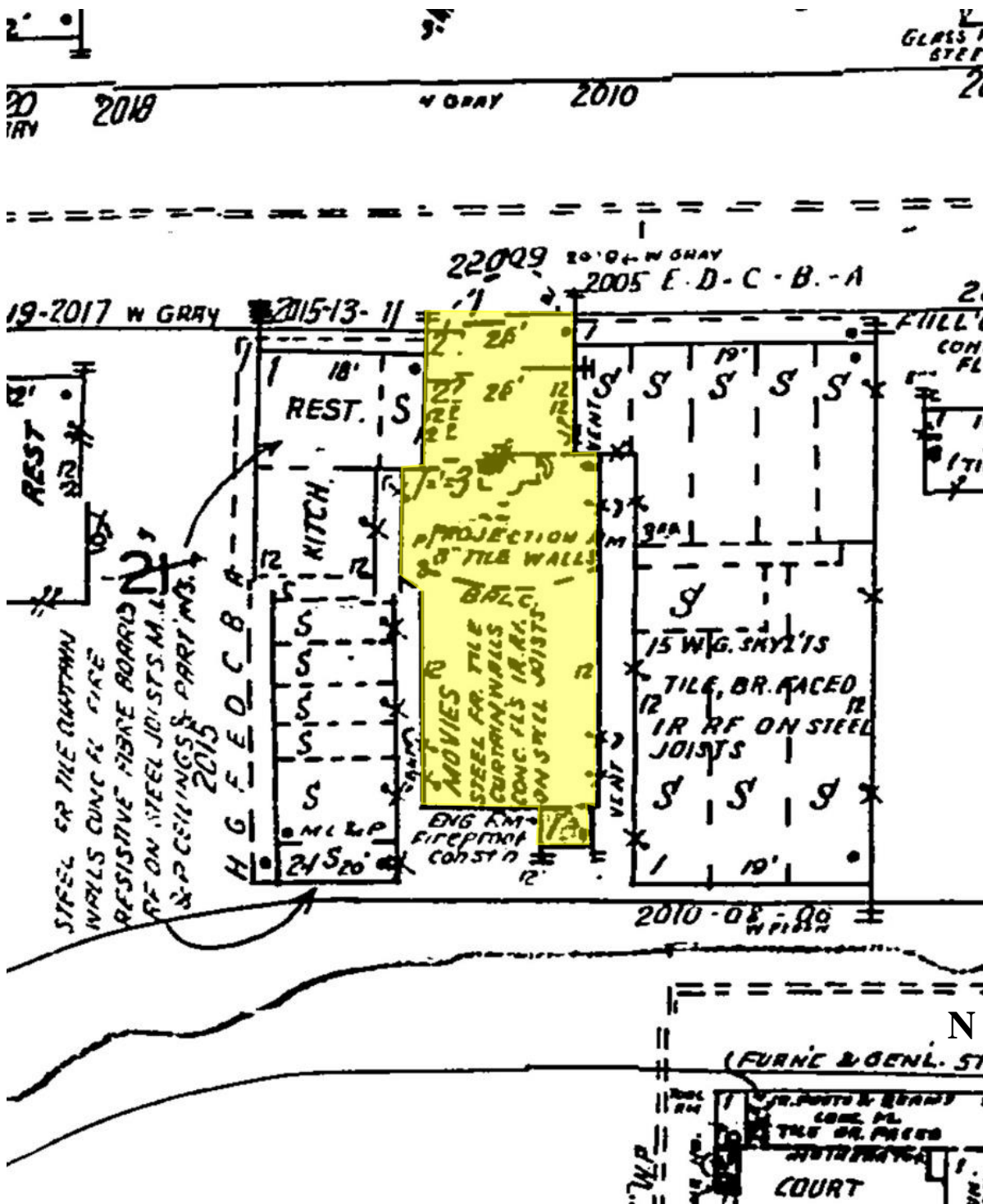
Sanborn Fire Insurance Company map, July 1930, updated 1950, Volume 5, Sheet 599 (accessed via Houston Public Library research databases).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Map 6

Detailed excerpt, Sanborn Fire Insurance Company map, July 1930, updated 1950, Volume 5, Sheet 599 (accessed via Houston Public Library research databases).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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## Figures

### Figure 1

River Oaks Theatre, as it appeared in 1940 (Houston History Research Center, Houston Public Library).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 2**

River Oaks Theatre marquee, as it appeared in 1939 (cinematreasures.org).





River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 3**

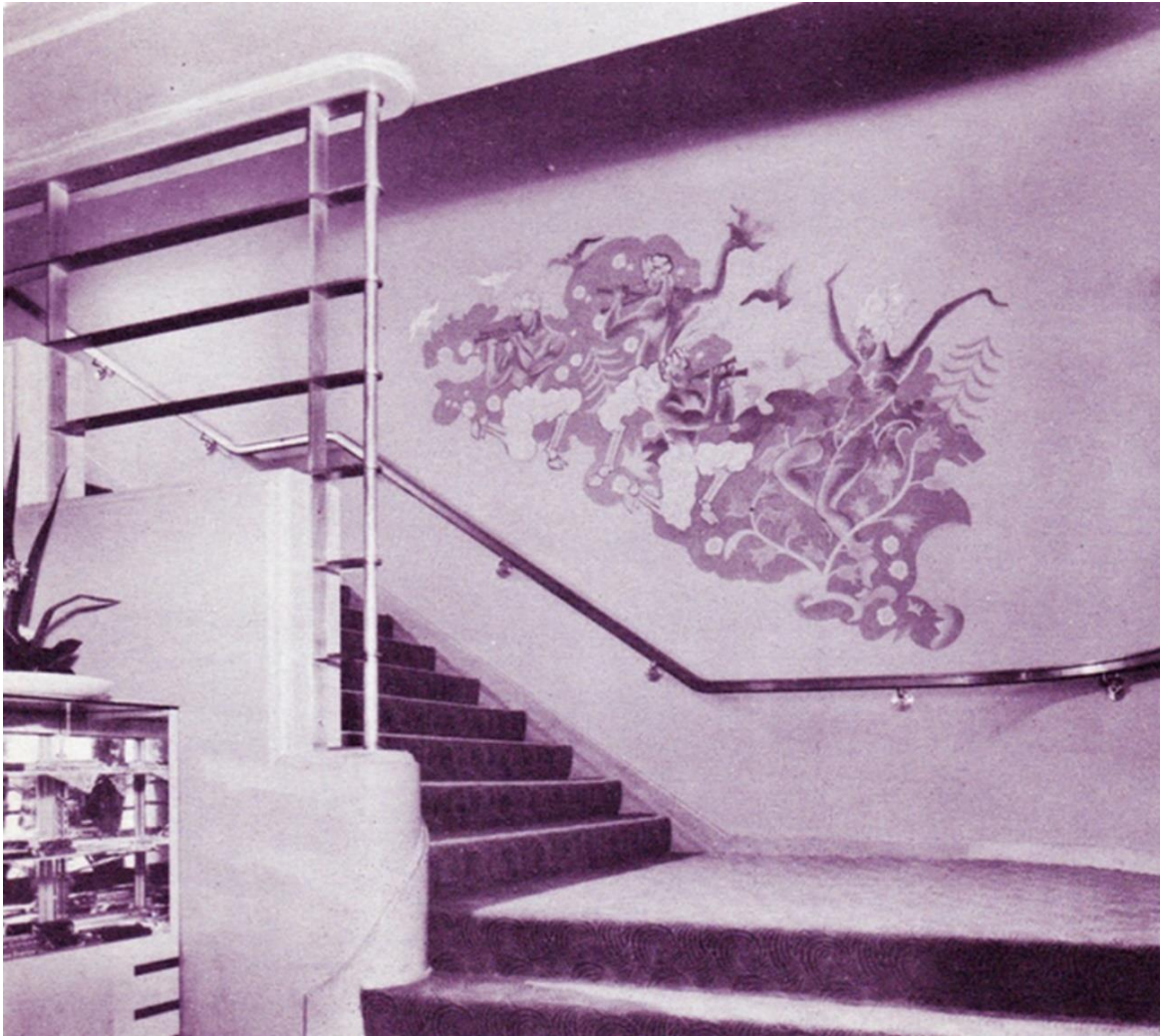
River Oaks Theatre, interior main auditorium, ca. 1940 (cinematreaasures.org).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 4**  
River Oaks Theatre, interior foyer, ca. 1940 (cinematreasures.org).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 5**

Opening Night Announcement, undated, ca. 1939 (Ann Dunphy Becker and George Murray, *Houston's River Oaks*, Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2013, 70).



**Figure 6**

Opening Night Announcement, 1939 (cinematreaasures.org).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 7**  
Main Auditorium, ca. 1940 (cinematreasures.org).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 8**

View of the stage from the balcony, facing south, ca. 1940 (Friends of the River Oaks Theatre).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 9**

View of the foyer and staircase to the balcony, facing west, ca. 1940 (Friends of the River Oaks Theatre).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 10**

Projection equipment, ca. 1940 (Friends of the River Oaks Theatre).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 11**

Exterior view of the River Oaks Theatre, ca. 1940 (Friends of the River Oaks Theatre).





River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

Figure 12  
 Grand opening article and advertisements, *Houston Post*, November 28, 1939 (Friends of the River Oaks Theatre).

TUNE IN ON KPRC
THE HOUSTON POST—TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 1939
Section 1—Page 11

## Grand Opening of New River Oaks Theater Will Be Held at 7:30 p. m. Today

### Hugh Potter to Participate in Brief Ceremony

The new River Oaks theater, including eight of eleven new business buildings for the center and safety of persons, will be opened to the public at 7:30 p. m. on Tuesday.

A brief ceremony will mark the opening of the playhouse, situated on the south side of West Gray adjacent to the River Oaks Shopping Center at West Gray and South Shepherd drives.

Mayor Oscar P. Houston, Hugh Potter, president of the River Oaks corporation, Paul P. Scott, president and manager of the theater, and several other operators will take part in the program.

Public Affairs' starting program will begin with the opening ceremonies.

Mr. Potter will be master of ceremonies for the occasion, which will be held on the steps of the new building. The new River Oaks Theater, designed by Paul P. Scott, Jr., and built by the William J. Sawyer construction company, is situated on the south side of West Gray adjacent to the River Oaks Shopping Center.

The theater has been designed to suit the best architectural neighborhood standards. The building is a masterpiece of modern design and construction, and will be a landmark in the city.

The new River Oaks Theater, designed by Paul P. Scott, Jr., and built by the William J. Sawyer construction company, is situated on the south side of West Gray adjacent to the River Oaks Shopping Center.

### Roosevelt Shaves Budget for Year Beginning July 1

WASHINGTON, Nov. 27.—(AP)—President Roosevelt and his budget office, headed by Harold D. Smith, today announced the budget for the year beginning next July 1.

Mr. Roosevelt said that the budget had been a success, the budget office, headed by Harold D. Smith, today announced the budget for the year beginning next July 1.

Mr. Roosevelt said that the budget had been a success, the budget office, headed by Harold D. Smith, today announced the budget for the year beginning next July 1.

### Best Wishes to RIVER OAKS THEATRE

**ALL NIGHT SERVICE**  
 Leave or Pick Up Your Laundry and Cleaning Any Time After the Show

## MONARCH

Laundries & Cleaners  
 "Decently Better"  
 Shepherd Drive at Kipling Phone J. 2510

Compliments of

### WILKIN-PARKER LUMBER CO.

801 Main St. Loh 6111

### Best Wishes TO THE RIVER OAKS THEATRE

Shop Our Stars For CHRISTMAS GIFTS  
 An annual tradition is made every night.

With Our New Show to the River Oaks Shopping Center.

CHINA-CLASSWARE KITCHENWARE  
**HARDCASTLE'S**  
 RIVER OAKS SHOPPING CENTER  
 J. 2-6166

### J. B. COFFEY Mgr., and ENTIRE PERSONNEL

of the River Oaks A-B-C Store

## EXTEND A HEARTY WELCOME

To Their New Neighbor The New

# RIVER OAKS THEATRE

**ABC** Dependable FOOD STORES

### Congratulations MR. PAUL SCOTT

On the Opening of Your Beautiful New

# RIVER OAKS THEATRE

Providing More Pleasure for Residents of South End and River Oaks

If it is the Constant Aim of **JERRY and MIKE'S** to Furnish More Pleasure With **FINE WINES and SPIRITS**

### CONGRATULATIONS TO THE NEW RIVER OAKS THEATRE

**Houston Movie Operators**  
 Local 279

**Houston Stage Employees**  
 Local 51

### RIVER OAKS welcomes the NEW RIVER OAKS THEATRE to the River Oaks Shopping Center

West Gray at Shepherd Drive

Houston's newest place-to-go opens tonight. For the opening, Manager Paul P. Scott has selected "Banker's Match," starring Ginger Rogers.

This notable film sets the standard for pictures you can expect to see at the River Oaks Theatre; it is the first of a series of pictures all of which have been specially selected for their good taste, their high entertainment value, their suitability for family audiences.

The building is as comfortable and as safe as modern design, modern construction methods, modern equipment and maintenance. Seats are unobtrusively comfortable and so arranged that every seat in the theatre gives a clear, unobstructed view of the screen; seats in this theatre are spaced farther apart than in any other theatre in the Southwest, so that no patron entering or leaving will not inconvenience those already seated. Specially heavy, steel roof members in the framing of the building add materially to its fireproof safety. And there's plenty of paid parking space.

But see for yourself—come out tonight and join the thousands of your neighbors who are going to enjoy the opening of Houston's newest, finest, select neighborhood theatre.

The new River Oaks Theatre... adds materially to the service rendered by the River Oaks Shopping Center to River Oaks residents, the families in River Oaks Gardens, and their neighbors. As you attend the opening tonight, note the variety of modern shops and service establishments in the Shopping Center, study the show windows—and make up your mind to do your shopping where reasonable rents enable good merchandise to offer excellent merchandising at reasonable prices.

We Salute The New **RIVER OAKS THEATRE** BARBER PLUMBING CO. 1419 Paige C. 3011

Congratulations... **RIVER OAKS THEATRE** This Society Modern Building AIR-CONDITIONED BY **Chas. G. Heyne & Co.** Plumbing, Heating, Air-Conditioning 2002 Bathwell St. P. 4181

Best Wishes to The **RIVER OAKS THEATRE** We Are Happy to Have Had a Part in Its Construction **PAUL WRIGHT ELECTRIC CO.** ELECTRICAL CONTRACTORS HOUSTON SAN ANTONIO

Best Wishes **RIVER OAKS THEATRE** We Are Happy to Have Served as CONSULTING ENGINEERS ON AIR-CONDITIONING **KRIBS and LANDAUER** Mechanical Engineers Bankers Mortgage Bldg.—Houston

SHILL Walks, Drives and Reads **HORTON & HORTON BUILDING MATERIALS** Quality Sales and Service 2541 Baker and Walnut Streets, Houston, Texas

Decorations Starts

Christmas decorations will be installed in the theatre by the staff of the theatre. The decorations will be installed in the theatre by the staff of the theatre.

River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

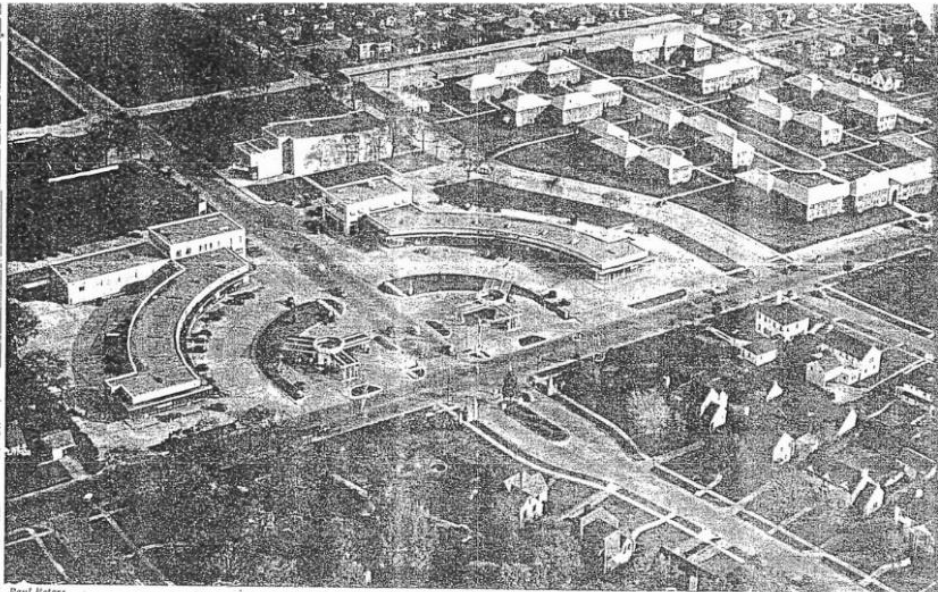
**Figure 13**

The Houston Players live theater performance advertisement (*Houston Chronicle*, October 9, 1949, page 86).

River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

**Figure 14**

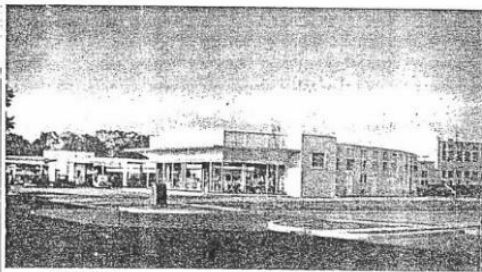
Aerial photograph of the River Oaks Shopping Center as it appeared in 1940 (*Architectural Record*, June 1940, page 114, courtesy of Preservation Houston).



Paul Peters

### A LONG-CONSIDERED SCHEME DEVELOPS

In the environs of Houston, Tex., the community of River Oaks has grown up where a few years ago there was open country. When the development started, the owners recognized a future need for a community shopping center. Land bordered by multifamily and low-priced detached house sites (see map, page 102) was set aside, and a scheme was developed which needed only minor later changes. STAYTON NUNN and MILTON McGINTY were the architects, with OLIVER C. WINSTON, consulting architect.



Stuart Fisher

BUILDING TYPES

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RIVER OAKS SHOPPING CENTER lies on one side of Shepherd Drive, a belt artery, and is bisected by West Gray Avenue, which leads to downtown Houston. Bus lines, used principally by domestic servants, traverse these two highways and another which parallels West Gray some blocks to the south. Almost every family in the surrounding developments has at least one automobile. It is planned to expand this center several blocks eastward, as conditions demand, along West Gray Ave.

There are at present two one-story store buildings, with offices in two-story blocks; two gasoline stations at the principal intersection and one further east; and a theater immediately east of the stores.

Before definite plans were undertaken, several conditions were set up: (1) the center should be neighborly in character with the adjoining community; (2) corner locations should be reserved for service stations, which were to be planned without sacrificing maximum visibility for the set-back stores; (3) front parking space, and direct delivery access in the rear, were to be provided, with large additional parking spaces so disposed that patrons would not hesitate to use them; (4) form and construction of each shop space were to be adaptable for use either with or without air conditioning; (5) costs were to be kept as low as was compatible with reasonably good construction. Appearance of all buildings was to be unified, with restrictions on signs, displays, and lighting.

ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

June 1940

River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 15**

River Oaks Theatre marquee and entrance, as it appeared in 1980 (Houston History Research Center, "Houston Architectural Survey: 1980, Volume Three," Southwest Center for Urban Research and the School of Architecture, Rice University).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 16**

River Oaks Theatre, as it appeared ca. 1993 (Anthony Monda, photographer, for the “Village Theater, Houston, Harris County, Texas”, nomination to the National Register of Historic Places).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 17**

River Oaks Theatre, as it appeared ca. 2011 (David Zornig, photographer, via cinematreasures.org).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 18**

Garden Oaks Theatre, 3750 N. Shepherd Drive, Houston, Texas, which opened on July 10, 1947; extant and operating (undated photo, cinematreasures.org; the movie “Tonta Tonta Pero No Tanto” premiered in 1972 and “Charrito,” starring the Mexican comic actor Chespirito, opened in 1984).

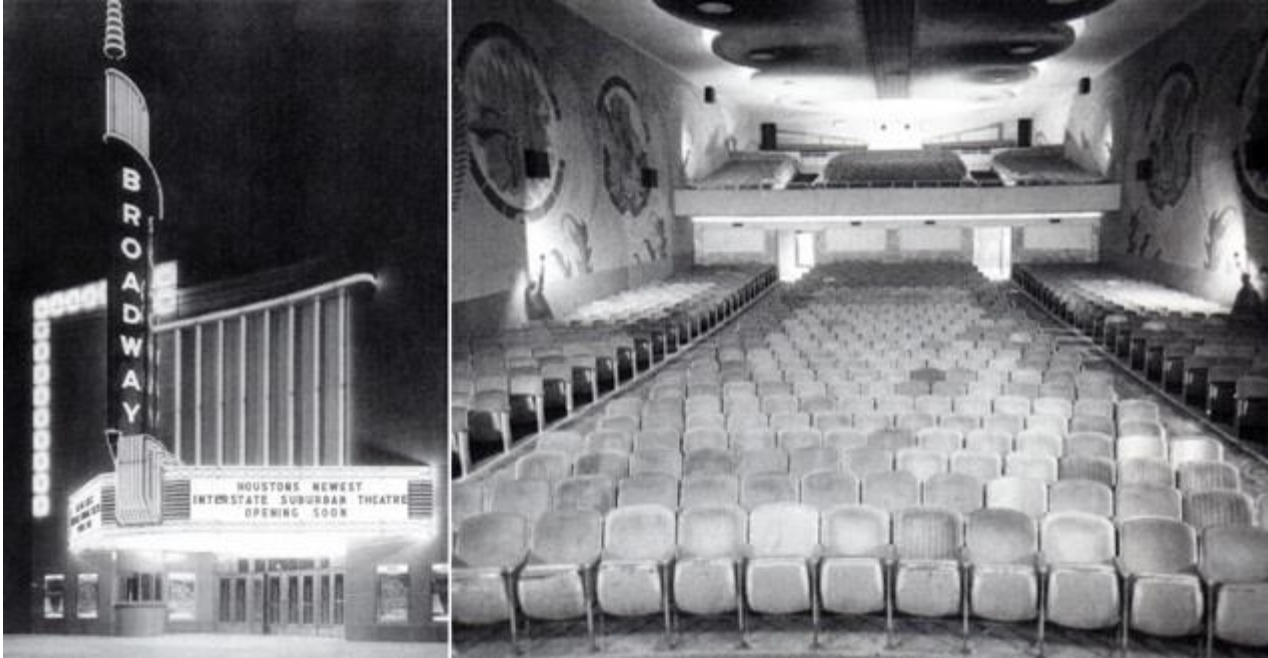


River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 19**

Broadway Theater, 1325 Broadway Street, Houston, Texas, as it appeared when it opened in 1947; demolished (cinematreaures.org).



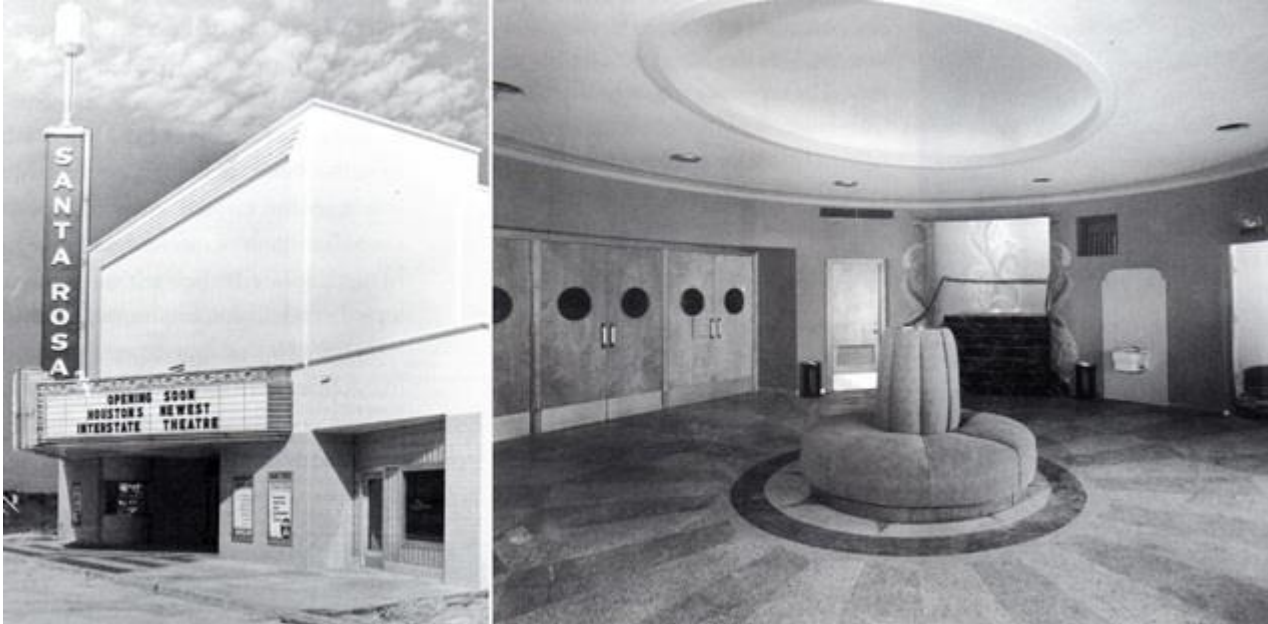


River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 20**

Santa Rosa Theatre, 5607 Telephone Road, Houston, Texas, as it appeared when it opened in 1946; demolished (cinematreaures.org).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 21**

Santa Rosa Theatre, 5607 Telephone Road, Houston, Texas, as it appeared when it opened in 1946; demolished (cinematreaasures.org).



**Figure 22**

Fulton Theater, 3310 Fulton Street, Houston, Texas, as it appeared when it opened in 1947; demolished (cinematreaasures.org).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 23**

Lakewood Theatre, 1825 Abrams Pkwy., Dallas, as it appeared when it opened in 1938; extant but closed (cinematreaasures.org).



**Figure 24**

Lakewood Theatre, Dallas, in 1938 (cinematreaasures.org).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 25**

Rendering of the Queen Theatre, 110 S. Main Street, Bryan, Texas, as it appeared ca. 1939 when it was remodeled by Pettigrew & Worley; closed 1976 and reopened 2018 following a multi-year community-supported restoration effort ([cinematreaasures.org](http://cinematreaasures.org)).

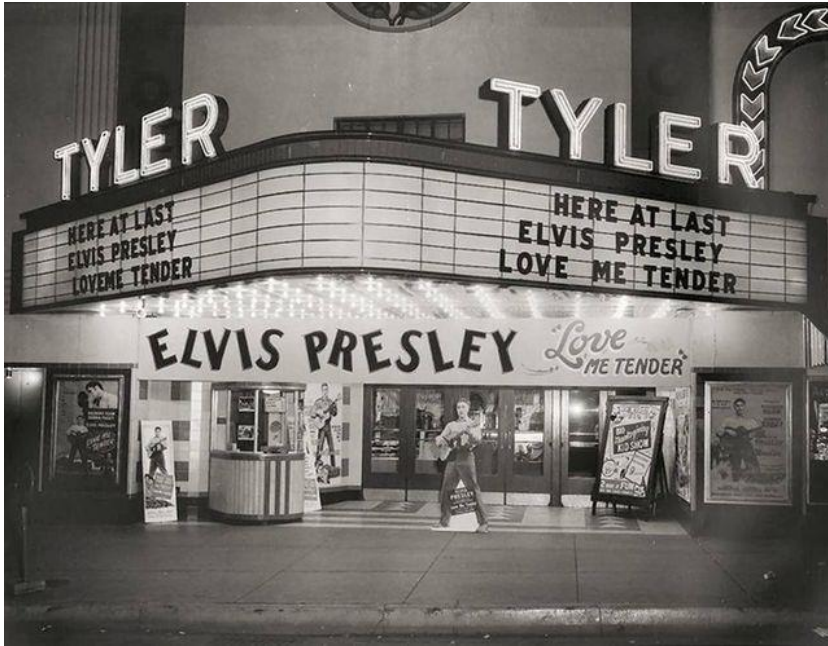


River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 26**

Tyler Theater, 111 S. Broadway Avenue, Tyler, Texas, as it appeared in 1956; opened in 1940, closed in 1982, and was converted to retail space.  
(cinematreaasures.org)



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 27**

Wichita Theater, 919 Indiana Avenue, Wichita Falls, Texas, Texas, as it appeared in 1966; opened in 1908 and remodeled by Pettigrew & Worley in 1939; extant and operating (cinematreaasures.org)



**Figure 28**

Bowie Theatre, 413 Center Street, Brownwood, Texas, as it appeared in 1945; opened in 1941; extant but now a retail space (Robert L. Bradley, photographer)



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

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**Figure 29**

Circle Theater, 2711 Storey Lane, Dallas, Texas, as it appeared when it opened in 1947; extant but closed (Robert L. Bradley, photographer, cinematreaasures.org)



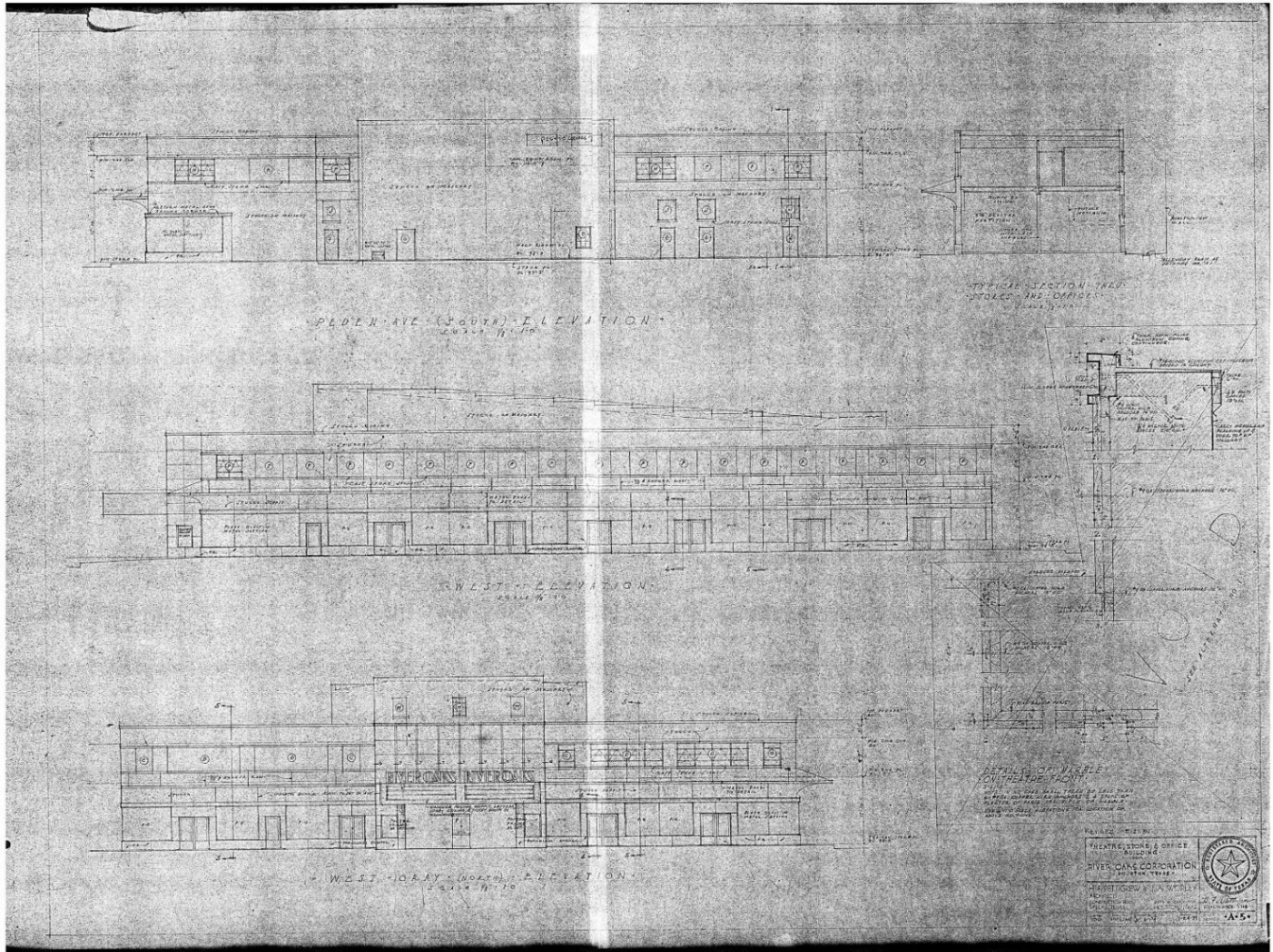
**Figure 30**

Forest Theatre, 1920 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., opened in 1949; extant and under renovation (Dallas Public Library via cinematreaasures.org)



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

**Figure 31**  
Original Drawings: Elevations, Pettigrew & Worley, Architects, 1939 (Friends of River Oaks Theatre).

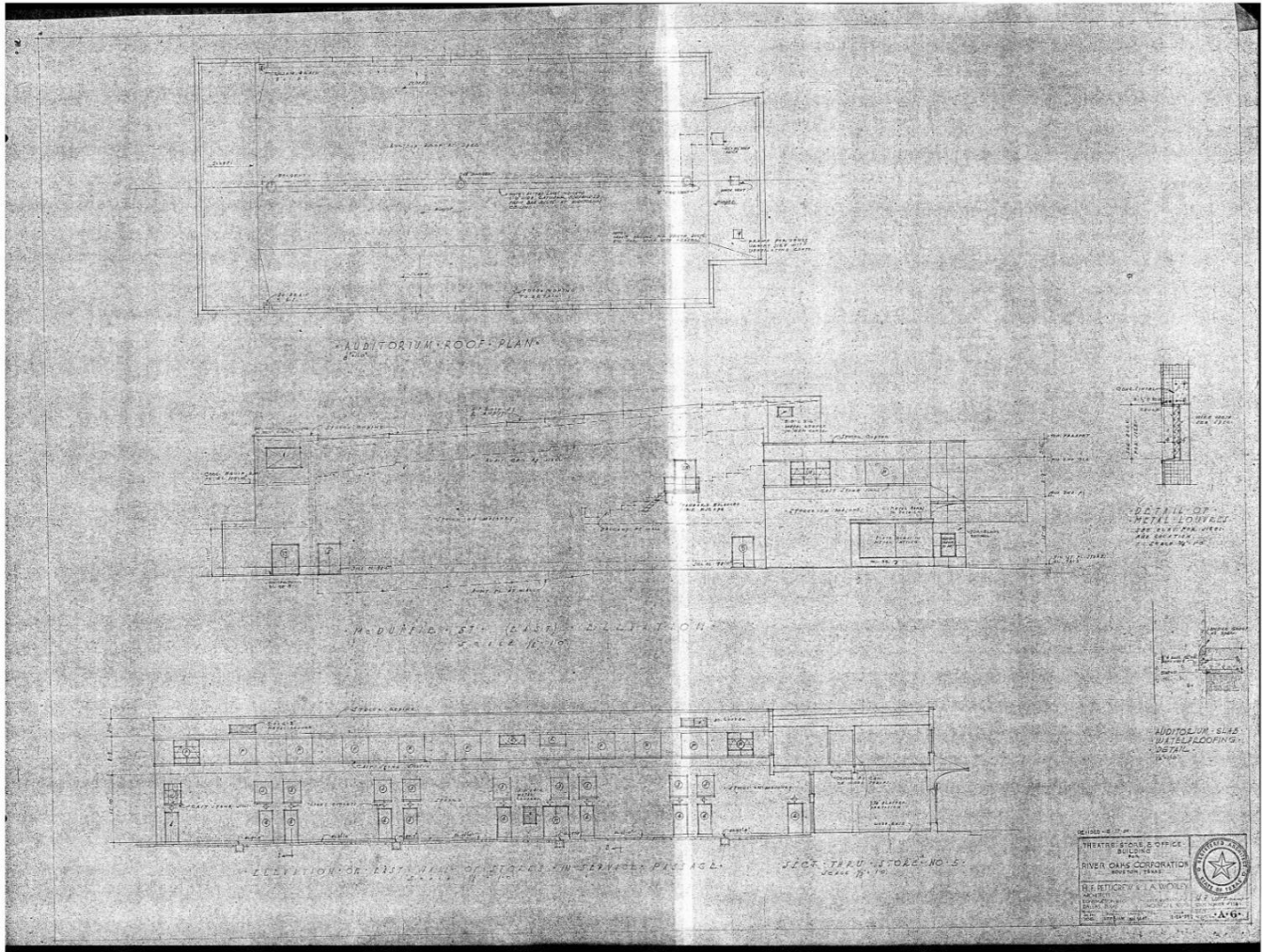




River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

**Figure 32**

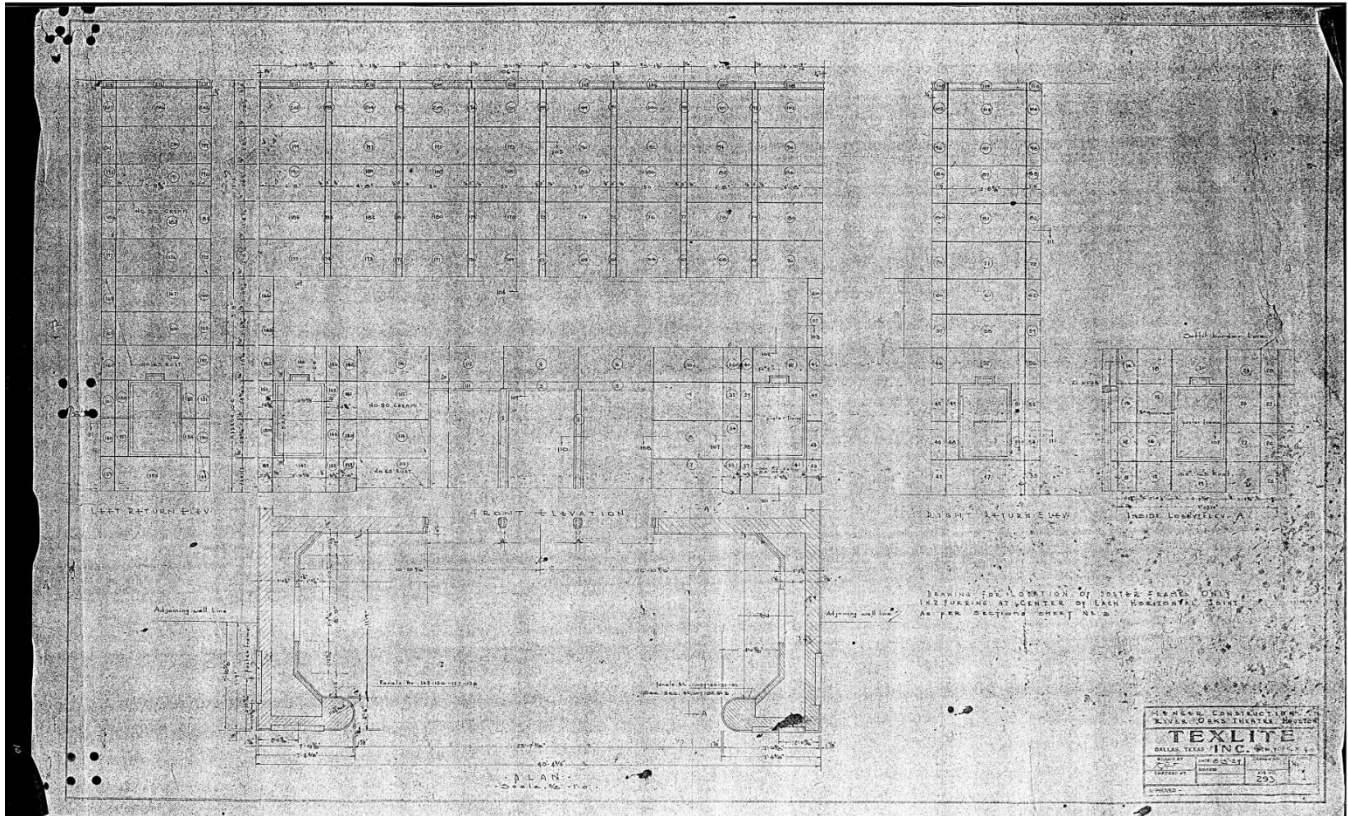
Original Drawings: Roof plan, side elevations, Pettigrew & Worley, Architects, 1939 (Friends of River Oaks Theatre).



River Oaks Theatre, Houston, Harris County, Texas

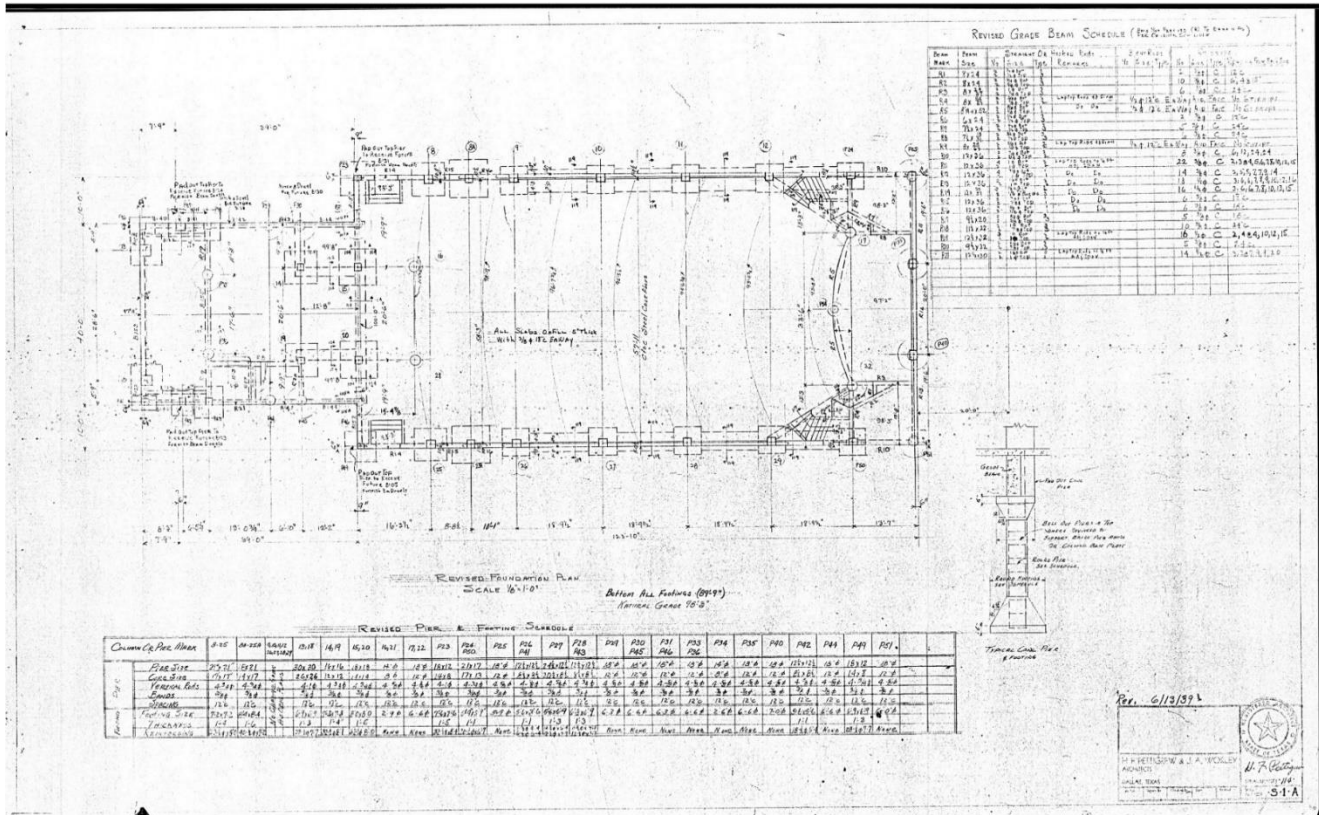
**Figure 33**

Original Drawings: Enameled steel layout for facade, Pettigrew & Worley, Architects, 1939 (Friends of River Oaks Theatre).



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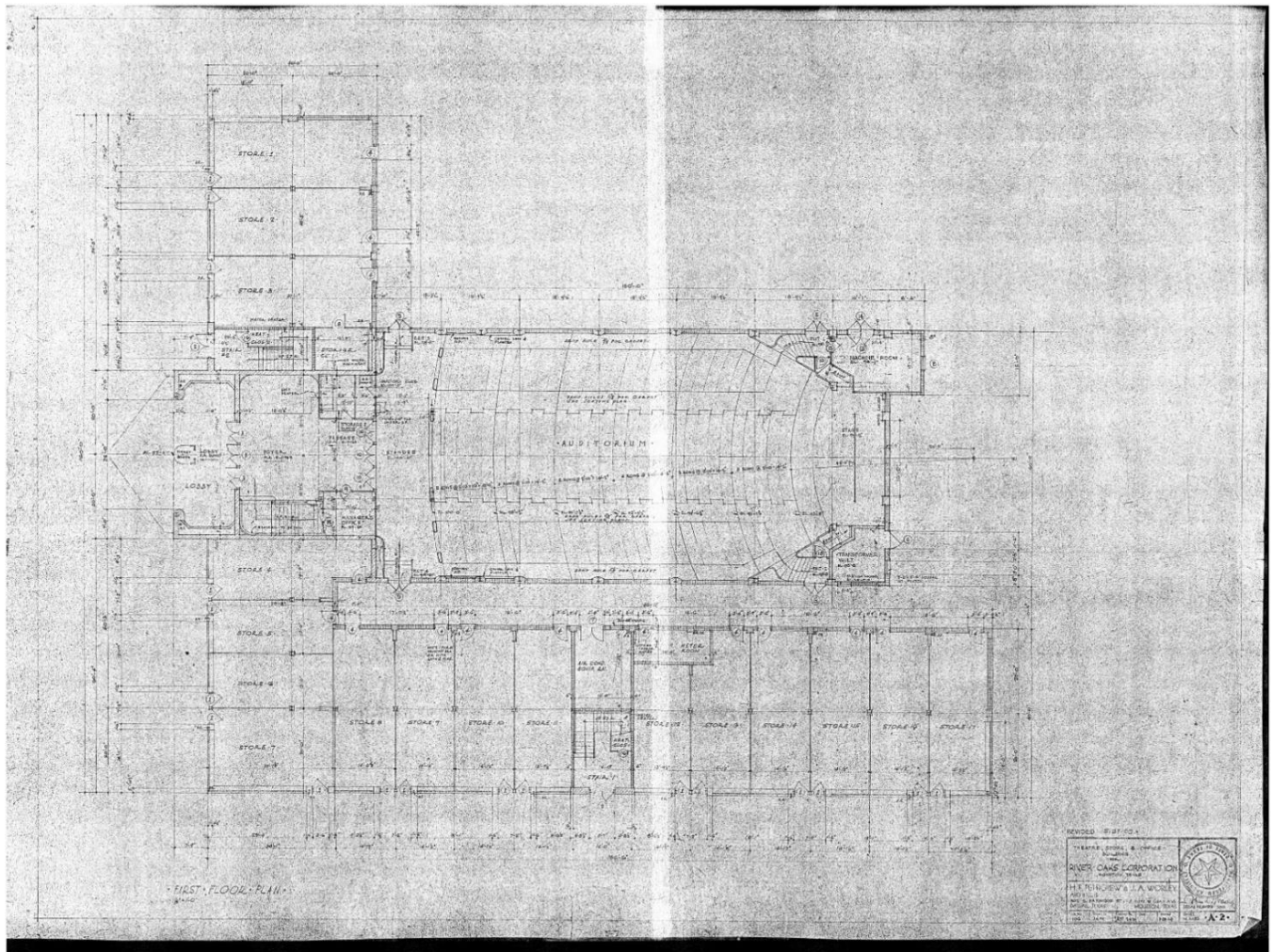
**Figure 34**  
 Original Drawings: Foundation plan, Pettigrew & Worley, Architects, 1939 (Friends of River Oaks Theatre).



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**Figure 35**

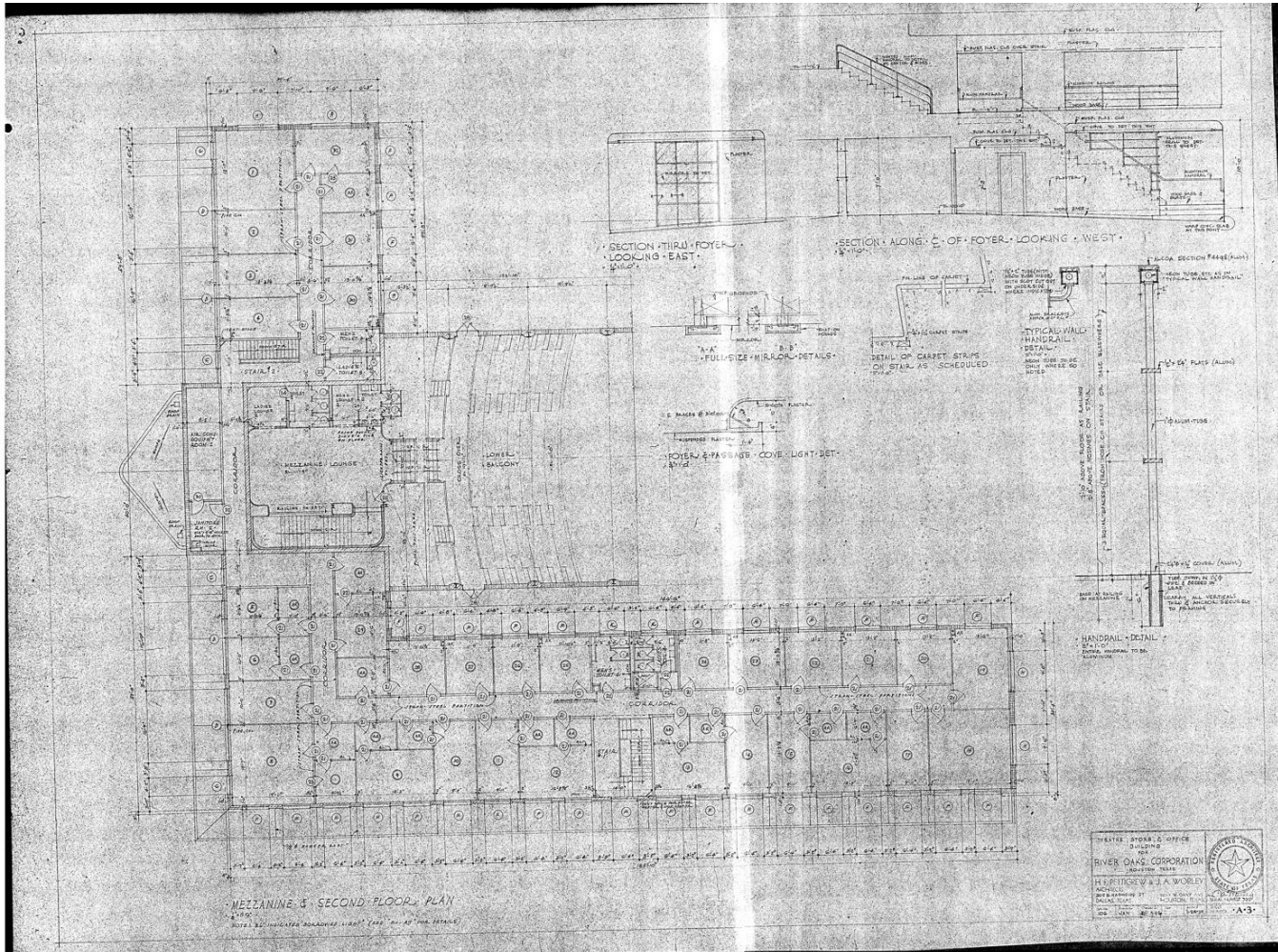
Original Drawings: Auditorium/retail first floor plan, Pettigrew & Worley, Architects, 1939 (Friends of River Oaks Theatre).



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**Figure 36**

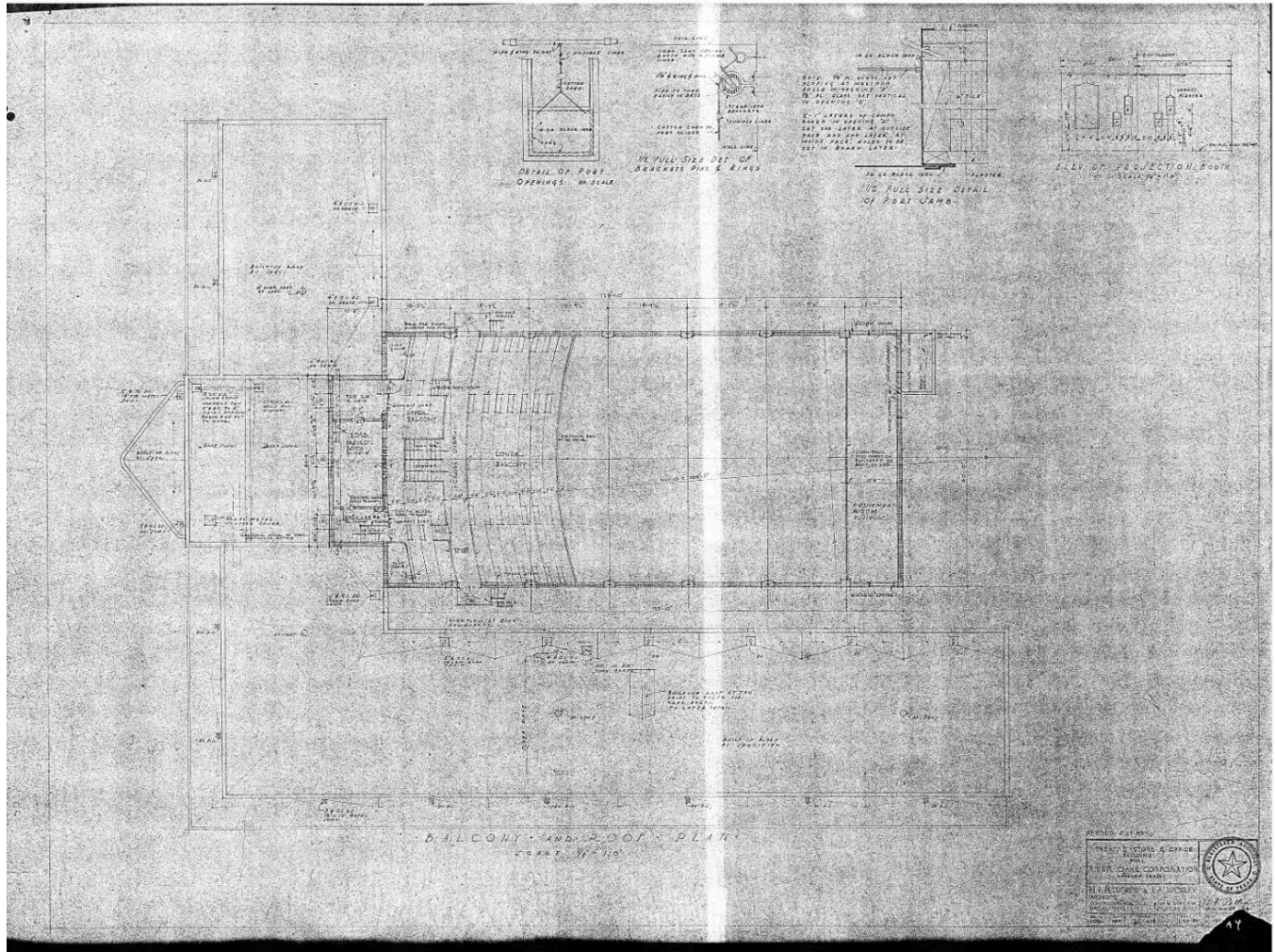
Original Drawings: Auditorium/retail mezzanine/second floor plan, Pettigrew & Worley, Architects, 1939 (Friends of River Oaks Theatre).



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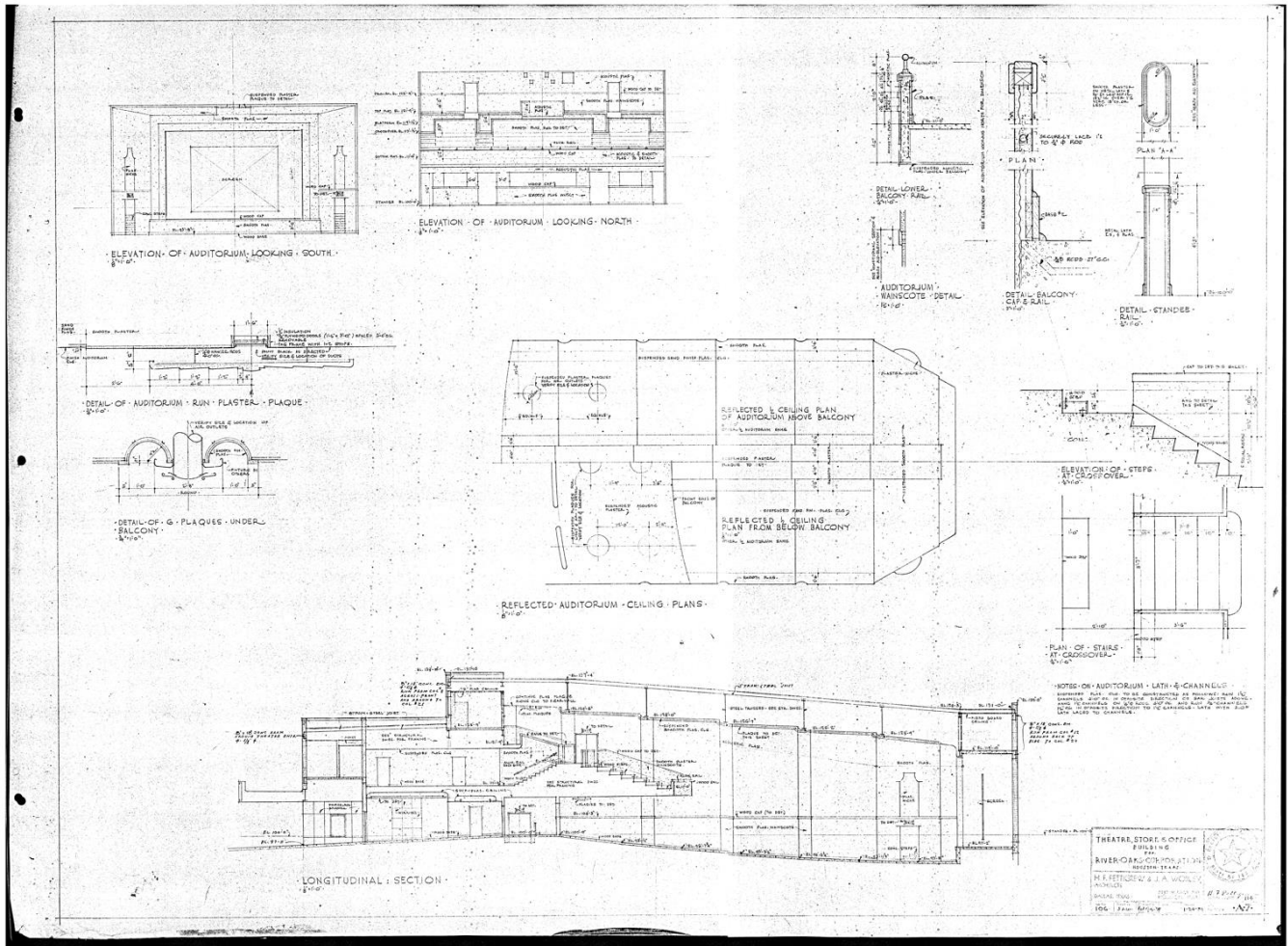
**Figure 37**

Original Drawings: Auditorium/retail balcony/roof plan, Pettigrew & Worley, Architects, 1939 (Friends of River Oaks Theatre).



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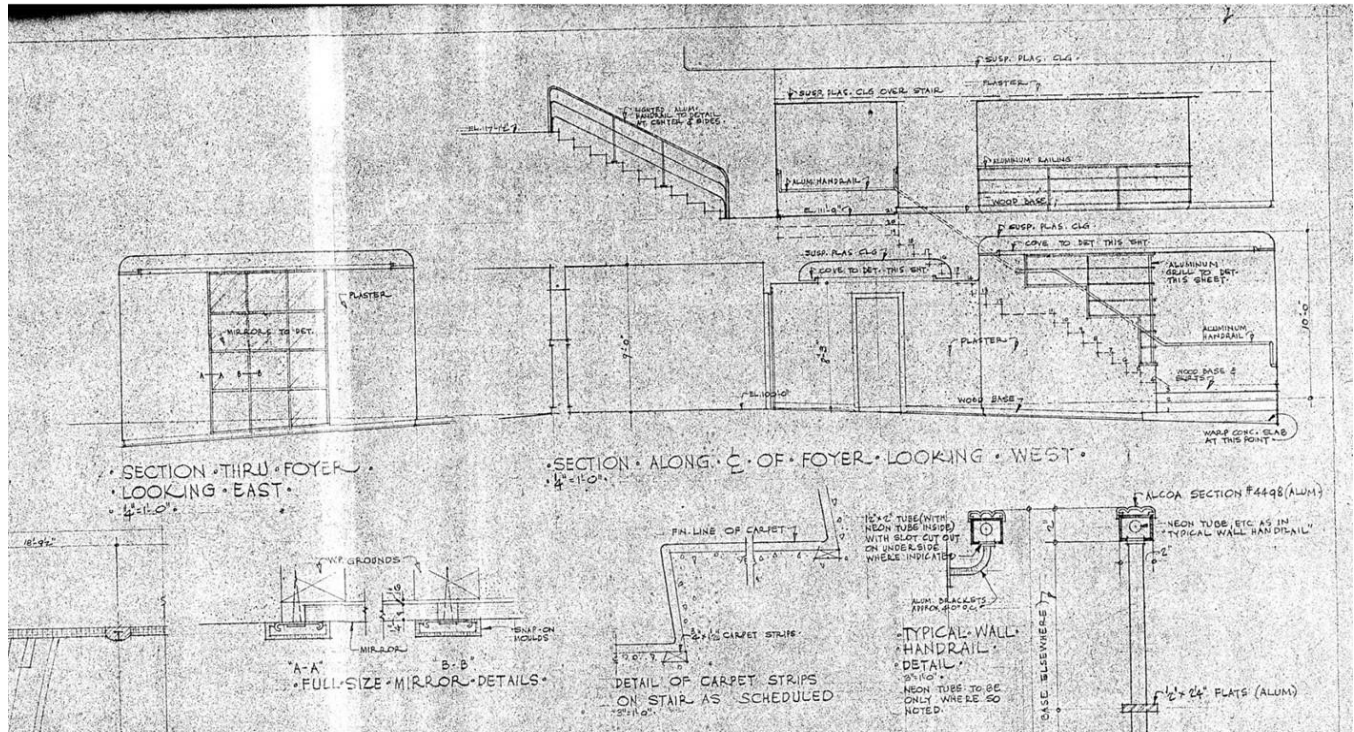
**Figure 38**  
Original Drawings: Details: auditorium and cross-section, Pettigrew & Worley, Architects, 1939 (Friends of River Oaks Theatre).



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**Figure 39**

Original Drawings: Foyer staircase details, enlarged section, Pettigrew & Worley, Architects, 1939 (Friends of River Oaks Theatre).

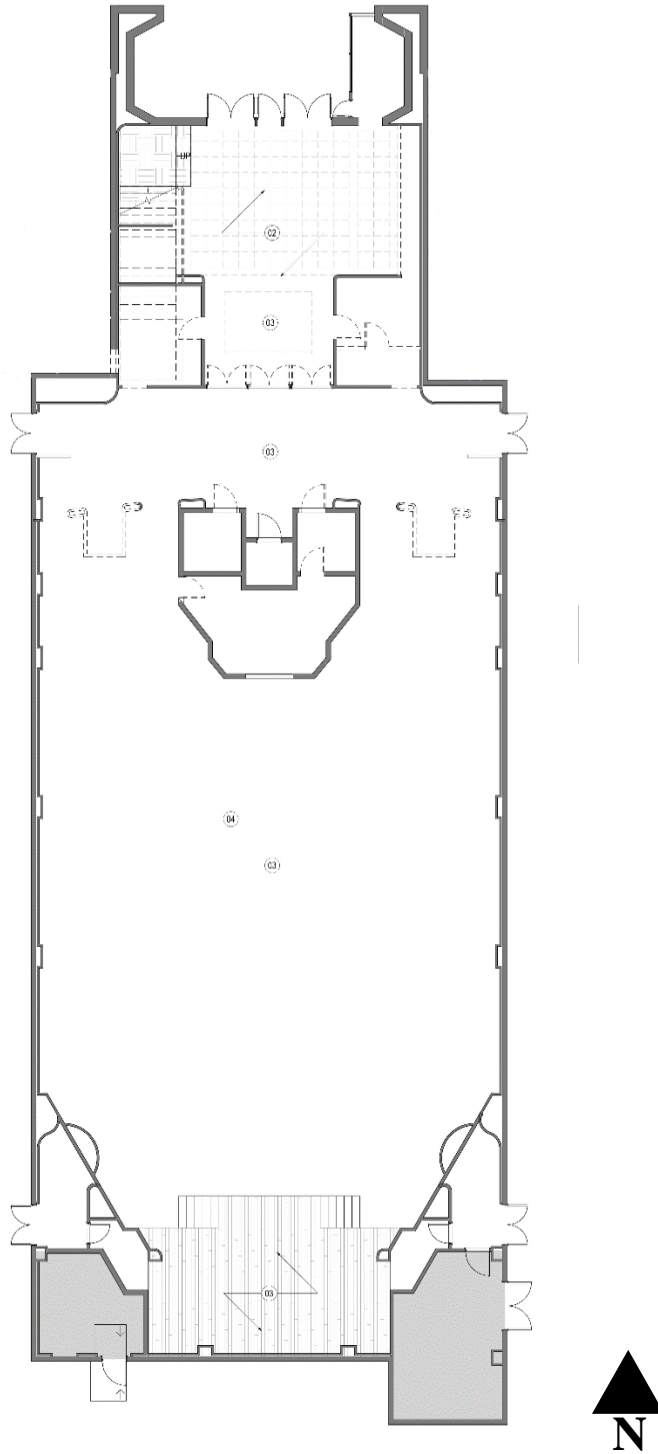




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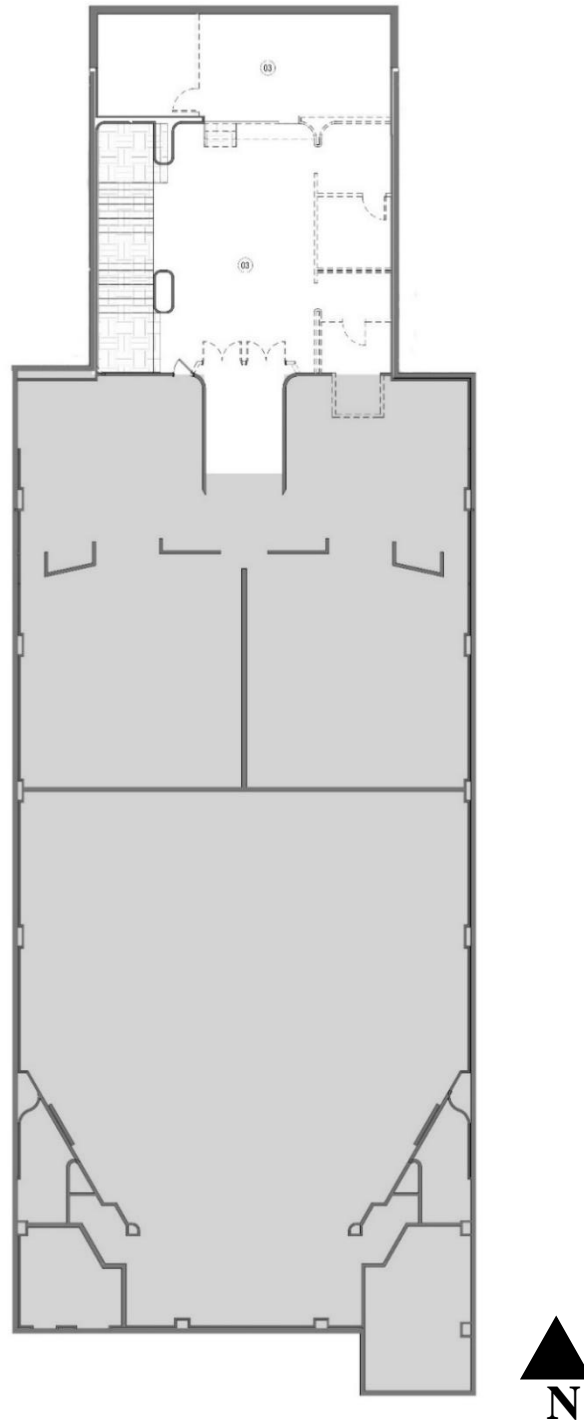
**Figure 40**  
Current floorplan, Level 01 (Gensler Architects, 2023).



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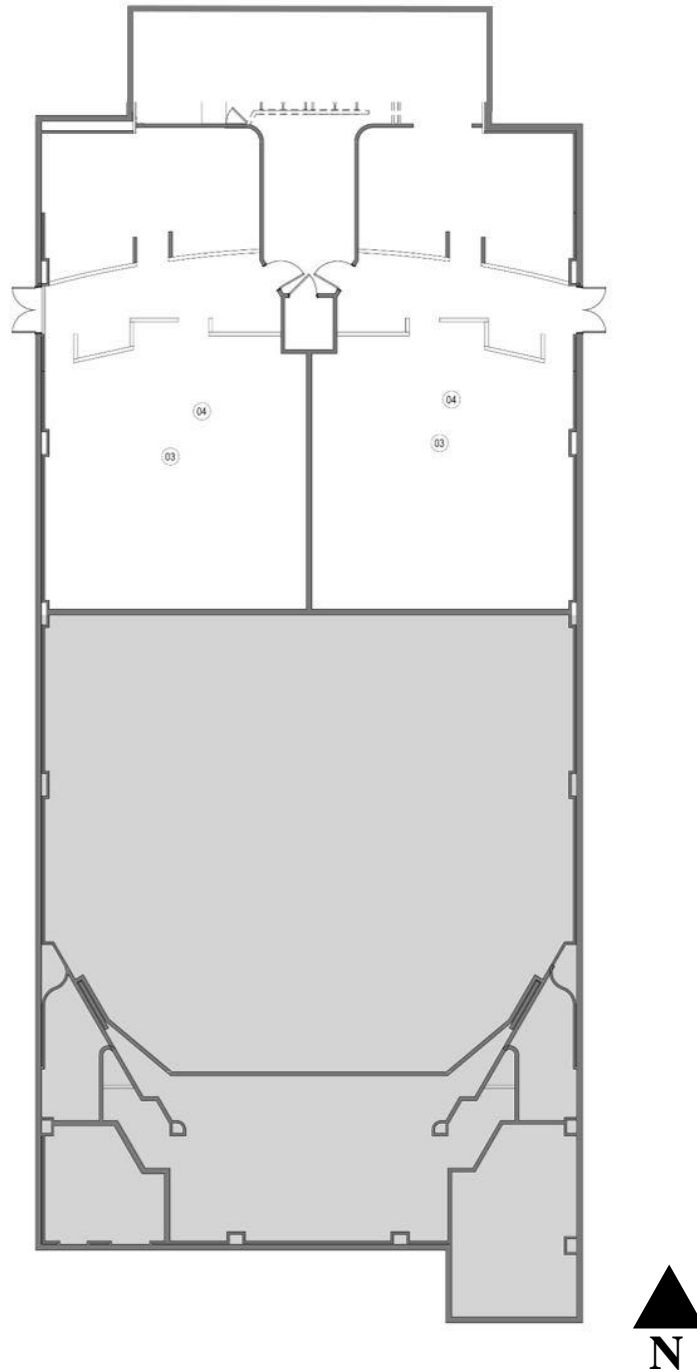
**Figure 41**  
Current floorplan, Level 02 (Gensler Architects, 2023).



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**Figure 42**  
Current floorplan, Level 03 (Gensler Architects, 2023).



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**Figure 43**

North façade, view south (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



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**Figure 44**

West (side) elevation showing fire escape, view north (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



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**Figure 45**

South (rear) elevation, view north (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



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**Figure 46**

East (side) elevation, view north (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



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**Figure 47**

Front marquee and parapet, view southwest (River Oaks Theaters, Inc. [owner], February 2023)



**Figure 48**

Roof along west elevation, view southeast (River Oaks Theaters, Inc. [owner], February 2023)





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**Figure 49**

Front entrance/lobby, view south (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



**Figure 50**

Front entrance/lobby, view west (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



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**Figure 51**

Front entrance/lobby, terrazzo inlay (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



**Figure 52**

Foyer, interior front entrance, concessions at right, stair at left, view north (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



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**Figure 53**

Entrance to standee, view north (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



**Figure 54**

Standee, view west (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



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**Figure 55**  
Stande lighting (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



**Figure 56**  
Main auditorium, view southwest (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



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**Figure 57**

Main auditorium, view southeast (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



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**Figure 58**

Main auditorium sculpture, "Sea," view southeast (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



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**Figure 59**

Main auditorium sculpture, "Land," view southwest (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, June 2023)



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**Figure 60**

Main auditorium lighting (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



**Figure 61**

Main auditorium, ceiling detail, view southwest (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)





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**Figure 62**

Foyer stair, view southwest (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



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**Figure 63**

Mezzanine concession, view southeast (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



**Figure 64**

Mezzanine concession, view northeast (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



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**Figure 65**

Second floor balcony theater stairs, view south (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



**Figure 66**

Balcony theater (left), view northeast (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



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**Figure 67**

Balcony theater (left), view west ((Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



**Figure 68**

Balcony theater (right), view west ((Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



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**Figure 69**

Balcony theater (right), view northwest ((Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



**Figure 70**

Projection room, view northwest (Amanda Barry, Ryan LLC, January/February 2023)



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**Photos**

**Photo 1 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0001)**

North façade, view south. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



**Photo 2 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0002)**

West (side) elevation showing fire escape, view north. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



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**Photo 3 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0003)**

East (side) elevation showing fire escape, view north. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



**Photo 4 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0004)**

Front entrance/lobby, view south. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



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**Photo 5 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0005)**

Front entrance/lobby, view west. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



**Photo 6 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0006)**

Front entrance/lobby, terrazzo inlay, view south. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)





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**Photo 7 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0007)**

Foyer, interior front entrance, concessions at right, stair at left, carpet removed and drop ceiling tiles removed, view north. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



**Photo 8 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0008)**

Entrance to standee area, doors stored off-site, will be ADA compliant when reinstalled, view north. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



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**Photo 9 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0009)**

Standee area, view west. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



**Photo 10 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0010)**

Standee area lighting, view east. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



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**Photo 11 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0011)**

Main auditorium, seating removed, view southwest. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



**Photo 12 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0012)**

Main auditorium, seating removed, view southeast. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



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**Photo 13 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0013)**

Main auditorium sculpture, "Land," fabric removed, view southwest. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



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**Photo 14 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0014)**

Main auditorium sculpture, "Sea," fabric removed, view southeast. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



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**Photo 15 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0015)**

Stage with exposed brick, view south. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



**Photo 16 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0016)**

Main auditorium lighting, view northwest. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



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**Photo 17 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0017)**

Main auditorium, enclosed balcony and sound attenuation material replaced, view northeast. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



**Photo 18 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0018)**

Main auditorium, enclosed balcony and sound attenuation material replaced, view northeast. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



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**Photo 19 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0019)**

Main auditorium, view northwest. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



**Photo 20 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0020)**

Main auditorium ceiling details, new can lights, view southeast. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)





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**Photo 21 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0021)**

Foyer stair, metal railing temporarily removed for construction, view southwest. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



**Photo 22 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0022)**

Mezzanine concession, new bar, railing temporarily removed from stairs for construction, view south. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



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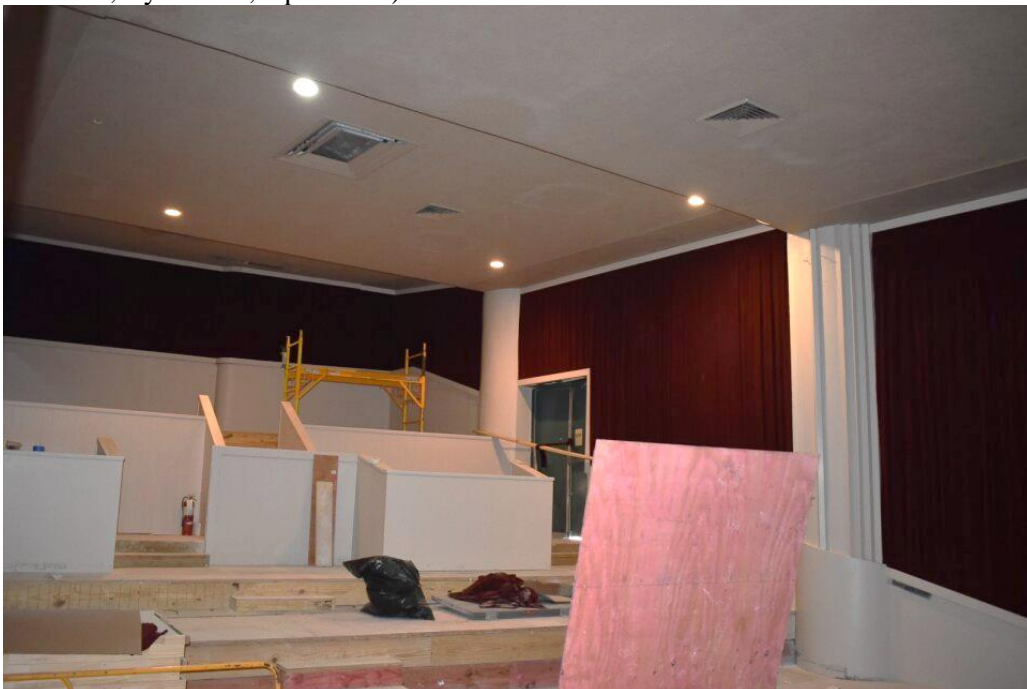
**Photo 23 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0023)**

Mezzanine concession, change in location of stairs, view northeast. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



**Photo 24 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0024)**

Balcony theater (left) with seating removed, and sound attenuation material replaced, view northeast. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



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**Photo 25 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0025)**

Balcony theater (left), sound attenuation material replaced, view west. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



**Photo 26 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0026)**

Balcony theater (right), and sound attenuation material replaced, view west. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



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**Photo 27 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0027)**

Balcony theater (right), seating removed, and sound attenuation material replaced, view northwest. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



**Photo 28 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0028)**

Projection room, newly exposed original windows (north elevation, west side), view north. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



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**Photo 29 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0029)**

Projection room (north elevation, center room), view northwest. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)



**Photo 30 (TX\_HarrisCounty\_RiverOaksTheatre\_0030)**

Projection room, newly exposed original windows (north elevation, east side), view north. (Amanda Coleman, Ryan LLC, April 2024)

