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**HERITAGE PRESERVATION APPLICATION SUMMARY**

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*Property Location:* 2900 Hennepin Ave  
*Project Name:* Uptown Theater  
*Prepared By:* Rob Skalecki, Senior City Planner, (612) 394-7851  
*Applicant:* Rita Goodrich, MacDonald & Mack Architects  
*Project Contact:* Rita Goodrich  
*Ward:* Ward 10, adjacent to Ward 7  
*Neighborhood:* East Isles, adjacent to Lowry Hill East  
*Request:* To allow for repairs and replacement of the signs and lighting at the Uptown Theater.

*Required Applications:*

<b>Certificate of Appropriateness</b>	To allow for repairs and replacement of the signs and lighting at the Uptown Theater.
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**HISTORIC PROPERTY INFORMATION**

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<b>Current Name</b>	2900 Hennepin Ave
<b>Historic Names</b>	Lagoon Theater (1916-1929), Uptown Theatre or Uptown Theater (1929-present)
<b>Historic Addresses</b>	2900 Hennepin Ave
<b>Original Construction Dates</b>	1916, 1939
<b>Original Architects</b>	Buechner & Orth (1916), Liebenberg & Kaplan (1939)
<b>Original Builder</b>	Fleisher Rose Construction Co. (1916), Carr-Dell Co. (1939)
<b>Original Engineer</b>	N/A
<b>Historic Use</b>	Movie Theater, Commercial
<b>Current Use</b>	Theater, Vacant
<b>Proposed Use</b>	Theater, Concert/Event Venue

Date Application Deemed Complete	May 30, 2023	Date Extension Letter Sent	N/A
End of 60-Day Decision Period	July 29, 2023	End of 120-Day Decision Period	N/A

## CLASSIFICATION

<b>Local Historic District</b>	N/A
<b>Period of Significance</b>	1916, 1939
<b>Criteria of Significance</b>	4. The property embodies the distinctive characteristics of an architectural or engineering type or style, or method of construction.  6. The property exemplifies works of master builders, engineers, designers, artists, craftsmen or architects.
<b>Date of Local Designation</b>	1990
<b>Date of National Register Listing</b>	N/A
<b>Applicable Design Guidelines</b>	<i>Neighborhood Movie Theater Thematic District Guidelines for Rehabilitation (1991)</i>

## SUMMARY

**BACKGROUND.** The subject property is the Uptown Theater, an individually designated Minneapolis landmark. The property was built in two phases to complete the building recognized today. The original building was completed as the Lagoon Theater in 1916, designed in the Renaissance Revival style with Baroque motifs by Buechner and Orth, architects. The original iteration of the theatre included multiple storefront spaces in the east (front) and side (north) elevation locations still recognized as storefronts today. The taller (west) section of the north (side) elevation retains its original (1916) brick cladding, first-story cornice decoration, and masonry ornament.

The building was completely remodeled in 1939 to its current Kasota stone-clad Moderne appearance as designed by Liebenberg & Kaplan, architects. The grand opening of the newly designed theater occurred on November 16, 1939. The City of Minneapolis recognizes the exterior of the building as significant for architecture as an excellent example of a Streamlined Moderne theater, and as the first movie theater in the country to have a three-sided vertical tower sign. The Uptown Theater is a very rare example of a Minneapolis landmark that is designated, in part, for the architectural significance of its signage and sign structure.

The designation for the theater notes that the 60-foot sign capped by a flashing beacon, with the theater's name on three sides, was designed to give a distinctive identity to the building in its crowded commercial district. Since it was the first of its kind in the United States, there was no precedent to base the design of the tower sign structure on, and the architects needed to have their design approved by City officials and the Civil Aeronautics Authority prior to implementation. The designation of the property records that the theater is significant as a work of master architects, Liebenberg and Kaplan, and for its association with technological developments in the construction of movie theaters—including the country's first three-sided vertical tower sign on a motion picture theater.

All sign features were designed by Liebenberg and Kaplan, per copies of their original drawings from the University of Minnesota Northwest Architectural Archives. The subcontractors associated with creating the specified sign components in 1939 were Ettel and Franx Co. (canopy and sign), LaMay Electric Co. (electric wiring), and Charles A. Anderson Co. (lighting fixtures), per *Star Tribune* archive records announcing the theater's opening.

CPED staff acknowledges that the historic sign features and lighting have been altered since the building's remodel in 1939. Vertical letters on the tower sign were originally halo lit with illumination behind the letters using 50-watt incandescent bulbs. All of the subject 24 sign letters (spelling "UPTOWN" four times— three times on the vertical tower and one on the horizontal marquee) originally included face illumination by individual 25-watt incandescent light bulbs (see Attachment 10 for a visual detail of missing historic sign features). Corners of the tower sign were planned to be illumined by 6-watt chaser bulbs. The total lighting schedule for the historic three-sided sign structure in 1939 included 765 incandescent lightbulbs, totaling 16,614 watts of illumination. Permit and photo evidence suggest the individual letter face lighting was changed to neon at some point between 1945 and 1963. The neon-illuminated letters have since become associated with the Uptown Theater's appearance even though this did not exist for the letter illumination historically.

A light box previously ran from the bottom of the three-sided tower sign to the top of the marquee structure on the front (east) elevation. The light box structure was covered with metal panels in 1989. The original tower sign beacon cap, which was historically fully illuminated, was also removed in 1989 with approval from the HPC. Thus, the character of the front elevation lighting and signage has changed with the removal of historic points of illumination originally extant in the light box and beacon tower cap structure.

In 2022, the theater's front (east) elevation doors were removed without permit approval and orders to correct were issued by the zoning inspector requiring a preservation application to review this unpermitted work (case no. CE1275107), as well as all other proposed exterior changes to the building. The property owner and applicant then submitted a Certificate of Appropriateness (PLAN14633) to address the removed doors and new replacement doors. The application also included additional exterior alterations to the corner (northeast) storefront and rear (west) elevation. The project team did not include alterations to the historic signage in their application submission at that time. The HPC approved the previous Certificate of Appropriateness on August 10, 2022.

In late September 2022, CPED noticed the historic tower sign letters had been removed without approval, and orders to correct were issued by the zoning inspector requiring a preservation application to review the unpermitted work (case no. CE1298772). All three (3) sides of the vertical sign letters (totaling 18 letters) were removed without approval, and the six (6) historic horizontal letters on the front (east) face of the marquee were the only original letters that were not removed.

In early discussions with staff after orders to correct were issued in September 2022, the property owner's representatives expressed a desire to rehabilitate the historic sign letters and update lighting features, suggesting that the project scope was for repairs, cleaning, and assessing new lighting methods. When preservation staff received the Certificate of Appropriateness application submission in April 2023, the submitted materials instead showed a plan to replace all of the 24 historic sign letters with new aluminum models. The application materials show one set of historic vertical letters, previously on the exterior tower, has already been repaired, refinished, and reinstalled horizontally on an interior wall of the theater.



**APPLICANT’S PROPOSAL.** The applicant is proposing to replace each of the 24 historic steel sign letters, which spell out “UPTOWN” in four (4) locations, with new aluminum letters. The 18 vertical letters on the tower sign structure (six letters on the south/southeast face, six on the west face, and six on the north/northeast face) have already been removed without approval. Six (6) of these letters are shown to have been repaired and installed on the property’s interior without application review or approval. Other vertical letters that were removed from the tower sign have not been repaired and are shown to be located at an unknown outdoor location. It is not known how the damage depicted in the submitted photos was incurred. Aside from the 18 vertical sign letters, the remaining six (6) historic horizontal letters on the marquee wall sign face still remain on the building and are proposed for removal and replacement.

The new sign letters were designed to match the dimensions and placement of the historic letters. Lighting changes will include replacement of all remaining incandescent lights and electrical socket components that are deteriorated beyond repair. The existing non-historic neon within in the sign letter cavity will be removed, and contemporary LED “Aurora Flex” illumination, matching traditional neon dimensions (17mm) and dimmable to traditional neon lumen range (around 200lm), will be installed in-place. Historically, the signage lighting was different than the existing condition, and the applicant’s proposal takes these changes into account when considering new lighting. The applicant is not proposing a return to the historic lighting schedule that would have included individual bulbs within letters. The contemporary LED in place of the non-historic neon is planned to achieve similar brightness and appearance to the traditional neon that has existed on the property for many decades.

**RELATED APPROVALS.**

Planning Case #	Application(s)	Description	Action (Date of Approval)
PLAN14633	Certificate of Appropriateness	Exterior rehabilitation and storefront modifications	Conditional Approval (August 10, 2022)

**PUBLIC COMMENTS.** No public comments have been received to date. Any correspondence received prior to the public meeting will be forwarded on to the Heritage Preservation Commission for consideration.

**CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS**

The Department of Community Planning and Economic Development has analyzed the application to allow for repairs and replacement of the signs and lighting at the Uptown Theater based on the following findings:

1. *The alteration is compatible with the designation of the landmark or historic district, including the period and criteria of significance.*

The applicant's planned removal of historic sign letters on a landmark that is designated, in part, for the significance of its sign features, is not compatible with the landmark's designation. The applicant has not demonstrated that all of the 24 letters are deteriorated to allow for their replacement. The applicant has proven that the letters can be repaired and has installed six (6) of the vertical sign letters on the interior after repair and repainting. As conditioned by staff, the retention and repair of the historic sign letters, and installation of contemporary light features, is compatible with the landmark designation.

2. *The alteration will ensure the continued integrity of the landmark or historic district.*

The proposed alteration to remove all of the historic sign letters will directly impact the integrity of design and materials of the subject property, which is designated partially for the significance of its original signage. Removal of all original sign letters would alter the landmark to a point that the sign no longer retains sufficient integrity under Criterion 4 as a significant sign feature. Thus, staff has conditioned that the 24 individual letters be repaired and reinstalled in their original locations.

3. *The alteration is consistent with the applicable design guidelines adopted by the commission.*

The Heritage Preservation Commission had adopted design guidelines for the theaters designated as individual landmarks following the *Final Report of the Minneapolis Neighborhood Motion Picture Theatre Study* (1990), which included the Uptown Theater. Staff has attached a copy of these guidelines to this staff report for reference (Attachment 9).

CPED has evaluated the proposed project under the relevant sections of the design guidelines. The *Neighborhood Movie Theater Thematic District Guidelines for Rehabilitation*, adopted in 1991, state the following:

A. Exterior Restoration

2. Marquee:

- a. Wherever existing materials remain, they shall be retained in their original condition.
- b. Wherever structurally unsound materials of deteriorated material require replacement that shall be constructed of materials to match the original.

**Staff Comment:** The proposed replacement of the historic "UPTOWN" horizontal wall sign on the marquee face is not allowed under the guidelines since no evidence has been submitted to show these letters are deteriorated beyond repair. These six (6) letters are the only set that have not already been removed without approval. As conditioned by staff, the repair of the letters and installation of contemporary and compatible LED lights meets the design guidelines. The marquee canopy treatment will include replacement of incandescent features with LED designed to replicate their appearance. Existing marquee reader boards will be realigned onsite.

3. Exterior Lighting and Signage

- a. Historically significant signage and lighting shall be retained.
- b. Replacement of this signage or lighting, necessary when deteriorated beyond repair shall match the original materials – and be designed in the spirit of the original lighting/signage concept.

- c. Additional signage will be permitted subject to HPC signage guidelines.

**Staff Comment:** As conditioned, the project will meet the exterior lighting and signage guidelines provided the letters will be repaired—instead of replaced—since these are significant sign features that have already been shown by the applicant to be repairable. As previously noted, CPED is aware that the original illumination scheme of the tower sign, marque, light box, and tower beacon features have been altered throughout the theater’s history. Staff also understands that incandescent lighting features are becoming more difficult to install new and maintain, while LED products continue to be available to allow for comparable glow, lumens, and color when compared to incandescent and neon fixtures. Additionally, the features like the light box and tower sign beacon have been removed, and these historic features would have emitted a much greater amount of light for the building than the present conditions. The LED lights proposed to replace the incandescent and neon features on the property signage are appropriate and have been designed in the spirit of the original lighting concept.

#### 7. Removal of Historic Fabric

- a. Selective removal of original building materials is allowed when original materials have deteriorated beyond repair or as part of an adaptive reuse for the building. HPC approval is required for removal of any historic building materials.

**Staff Comment:** The new sign letters were designed to match the dimensions and placement of the historic letters. The aluminum material would be a contemporary and appropriate material to consider when replacing deteriorated, historic steel sign letters. However, the application has not presented enough evidence to show that all of the letters can be replaced. Additionally, since the letters are individually installed on the sign board, the appropriate consideration for replacement of deteriorated-beyond-repair letters would be to only replace the individual letters that cannot be repaired and not all 24. The applicant’s submitted photos suggest all letters can still be repaired with common metal patching and rust mitigating treatments.

The applicant submitted limited evidence to show deterioration that would suggest the letters cannot be repaired. While rust is present, welding repairs, patching and/or epoxy treatment can be used to repair deteriorated steel. One set of letters has already been repaired, repainted, and installed on the interior. The applicant claims that the letters that were repaired and reinstalled on the interior are only suitable for interior use but does not expand on what this means. It is highly unlikely that repaired, refinished, and repainted steel letters, which can be—and are shown to have been—repaired and refinished, would be unsuitable for reinstallation on the exterior where they were originally meant to exist.

The already completed unpermitted work to remove 18 of the historic letters from the building’s tower sign does not meet the guideline requiring HPC approval for removal of historic building materials. Staff’s condition to repair and reinstall these will grant approval for the unpermitted work.

Like section 7. Removal of Historic Fabric in the Uptown Theater’s design guidelines, the Minneapolis Heritage Preservation Commission’s *Design Guidelines for On-premise Signs and Awnings*, adopted in 2003, require that that:

#### **1. In General:**

- b. Historic signs: Maintenance or restoration of existing historic signs is encouraged and should not be counted in number of allowable signs.

The applicant has already shown that the existing historic signs can be maintained and restored since they have done this with six of the letters and installed them without approval on the property’s interior. As conditioned, repairing the building’s 24 historic sign letters and installing them in their original location on the exterior is consistent with the *Design Guidelines for On-premise Signs and Awnings*.

4. *The alteration is consistent with the applicable recommendations contained in The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.*

The following *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties (Standards)* apply:

1. A property will be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces, and spatial relationships.
2. The historic character of a property will be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive materials or alteration of features, spaces, and spatial relationships that characterize a property will be avoided.
6. Deteriorated historic features will be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature will match the old in design, color, texture, and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features will be substantiated by documentary and physical evidence.
9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.

**Staff Comment:** The project, as conditioned, meets *Standards* 1, 2, 6, and 9, where applicable. The building will continue a similar use as former movie theater with its proposed reuse as an event and concert venue. The 24 historic sign letters are a character-defining feature of the Uptown Theater sign that should be repaired to retain the historic character of the property. As conditioned, the exterior alterations would repair the historic sign materials. The new lighting program will consider the building's original lighting as well as changes that have taken place, while utilizing contemporary LED features that can emit brightness and color that is in the spirit of traditional incandescent and neon lighting, meeting *Standards* 2 and 9 respectively. As conditioned, the deteriorated historic letters will be repaired rather than replaced since submitted evidence does not suggest deterioration is severe enough to require replacement of all 24 individual sign letters. Letters appear repairable with common rust removal, metal patching and/or welding treatments paired with outdoor-specific primer and paint finishing; the repair of the letters meets *Standard* 6.

5. *The alteration is consistent with the spirit and intent of the preservation ordinance, the applicable policies of the comprehensive plan, and the applicable preservation policies in small area plans adopted by the city council.*

The following policies and action steps from *Minneapolis 2040 (2020)* apply to the proposed project:

**Policy 60. Intrinsic Value of Properties: Increase the awareness, understanding, and appreciation of the economic and intrinsic value of older properties important to the city's heritage.**

- a. Recognize and promote the value of the built environment and landscape as an asset that enhances community identity and a sense of place.
- b. Encourage the rehabilitation of buildings and landscapes that are important to the city's heritage to stimulate economic activity, house our cultural corridors, act as business and arts incubators, and provide sustainable development.
- c. Promote the retention of properties important to the city's heritage through land use planning, economic development and other investment strategies, and infrastructure planning.

**Policy 93. Stewarding Historic Properties: Preserve, maintain and encourage the adaptive reuse of historic districts, landmarks, and historic resources, especially in locations that historically have experienced disinvestment.**

- a. Protect historic resources from alterations that are not sensitive to their historic significance.

**Staff Comment:** As conditioned, the proposed alterations are consistent with the above noted policies in the *Minneapolis 2040* plan. The alterations of this well-known Minneapolis landmark will be compatible with contemporary lighting and an appropriate appearance to replace incandescent and neon light feature with LED. The retention, repair, relighting, and reinstallation of the 24 historic sign letters is sensitive to the historic character of the building as conditioned by staff, retaining the character-defining features that existed historically.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

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The Department of Community Planning and Economic Development recommends that the Heritage Preservation Commission adopt staff findings for the Certificate of Appropriateness application by Rita Goodrich for the Uptown Theater, an individual historic landmark, located at 2900 Hennepin Ave:

**A. Certificate of Appropriateness.**

Recommended motion: The Heritage Preservation Commission **approves** the certificate of appropriateness to allow for repairs and replacement of the signs and lighting at the Uptown Theater, located at 2900 Hennepin Ave, subject to the following conditions:

1. All 24 of the historic "UPTOWN" sign letters shall be retained, repaired, and reinstalled at the exterior of the building in their original location, placement, and configuration.
2. The proposed LED lighting features shall be installed in the repaired historic sign letters.
3. New LED lights must be consistent with zoning specifications for lighting. Historic drawing and photo evidence shall be used to ensure bulb brightness and glow will emit similar appearance of original incandescent bulbs.
4. By ordinance, approvals are valid for a period of two years from the date of the decision unless required permits are obtained and the action approved is substantially begun and proceeds in a continuous basis toward completion. Upon written request and for good cause, the planning director may grant up to a one-year extension if the request is made in writing no later than June 20, 2025.
5. By ordinance, all approvals granted in this certificate of appropriateness shall remain in effect as long as all of the conditions and guarantees of such approvals are observed. Failure to comply with such conditions and guarantees shall constitute a violation of this certificate of appropriateness and may result in termination of the approval.

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## ATTACHMENTS

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1. Oblique aerial photo
2. Property owner authorization
3. Applicant letters to Neighborhood Group and Council Office
4. Written description and findings submitted by applicant
5. Plans
6. Additional materials and photos
7. Original Liebenberg & Kaplan drawings (1939)
8. Lighting product sheets
9. *Neighborhood Movie Theater Thematic District Guidelines for Rehabilitation* (1991)
10. Additional historic photos compiled by CPED