

BEACON THEATER, first floor interior consisting of the outer ticket lobby and ticket booth, inner ticket lobby and ticket booth, main lobby including the rotunda and its ceiling, the staircases leading to the loge floor, the auditorium including the staircases, orchestra pit, the stage and stage wings; the loge floor interior consisting of the promenade, the loge, the upper part of the auditorium, the upper part of the stage house, and the staircases leading up to the balcony floor interior; the balcony floor interior consisting of the promenade, the lower balcony, the upper balcony, the staircases between the upper and lower balconies, the upper part of the auditorium and ceiling, the upper part of the stage house and skylight; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, lighting fixtures including chandeliers, murals, sculpture including statues, panels, organ, and staircase railings; 2124 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1927-28; architect Walter W. Ahlschlager.

Landmarks Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1166, Lot 35.

On September 11, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Beacon Theater, first floor interior consisting of the outer ticket lobby and ticket booth, inner ticket lobby and ticket booth, main lobby including the rotunda and its ceiling, the staircases leading to the loge floor, the auditorium including the staircases, orchestra pit, the stage and stage wings; the loge floor interior consisting of the promenade, the loge, the upper part of the auditorium, the upper part of the stage house, and staircases leading up to the balcony floor interior; the balcony floor interior consisting of the promenade, the lower balcony, the upper balcony, the staircases between the upper and lower balconies, the upper part of the auditorium and ceiling, the upper part of the stage house and skylight; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, lighting fixtures including chandeliers, murals, sculpture including statues, panels, organ, and staircase railings, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 11). The hearing was continued to October 9, 1979 (Item No. 1). Both hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. Two witnesses spoke in opposition to designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Beacon Theater, an interior encompassed within the Beacon Hotel, is one of the last surviving movie palaces in Manhattan. Designed by Chicago architect Walter W. Ahlschlager, the theater, built in 1927-28, is a lavish space with stylistic effects drawn from the traditions of Greek, Roman, Renaissance, and Rococo architecture. Such stylistic variety was characteristic of movie

palaces of the period, and the intent was to create an overwhelmingly magnificent interior space. The Beacon was built in a period when the motion picture business was rapidly expanding due to improved film technology and the advent of talking pictures. New theaters in which to show the ever increasing number of motion pictures to rapidly growing audiences were a necessity. As such these theaters served as temples of popular culture. The survival of the Beacon enables us still to enjoy and understand a stunning example of a movie palace. Associated in the creation of the Beacon as a motion picture palace were two prominent entities in the New York theater business: Samuel L. Rothafel and the Chanin Construction Co.

Samuel L. Rothafel (1892-1936), better known as Roxy, had gained a reputation as the most innovative theater manager of the day. He had entered the movie business in 1911 in Pennsylvania when he transformed a large dancing hall at the rear of his father-in-law's bar into a movie house. After the success of that venture he moved on to Minneapolis and then Milwaukee, where he introduced music and dance performances to motion picture theaters. Roxy came to New York City in 1913 to manage the Regent Theater at Seventh Avenue and 116th Street. There he improved the traditional program with novel lighting effects and a 100-piece orchestra. Other theaters in New York he managed were the Strand, Rialto, Rivoli, and Capitol. While at the Capitol he began broadcasting radio programs which became famous across the country. In 1925 Roxy and the Chanin Construction Co. had joined forces to create the Roxy Theater at 50th Street and Seventh Avenue. When it opened on March 10, 1927, the Roxy--named, of course, after the impresario--seated about 6000 people and was equipped with the most up-to-date technical devices. While designed primarily as a movie house and dubbed the "Cathedral of the Motion Picture," the Roxy had film programs interspersed with vaudeville acts, music, and dance performances in accordance with Roxy's management policies. In 1931 Roxy was hired as the director of Radio City Music Hall where he played an influential role in the design as well as in the programming.<sup>1</sup>

The Chanin Construction Co., under the direction of Irwin S. Chanin (b.1892) and Henry I. Chanin (1893-1973), had been established in 1919 when Irwin S. Chanin had begun building single-family houses in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. The firm had extended its construction activities into Manhattan in 1924, building the Fur Center Building. That same year the Chanins expanded into the theater business, first building Chanin's 46th Street Theater (now the 46th Street Theater) and going on to build nine others, including one on the fiftieth floor of the Chanin Building (1927-29), 122 East 42nd Street. The Chanins also managed a number of these theaters. By 1926 when construction was begun on the Roxy, the Chanins had also built the Biltmore and the Mansfield (now the Brooks Atkinson) Theaters, and the Royale, the Theatre Masque (now the John Golden Theater), and the Majestic were under construction. The latter three were built in conjunction with the Hotel Lincoln on Eighth Avenue between 44th and 45th Streets (opened in 1928).<sup>2</sup>

Even before the Roxy Theater opened, the Chanins and Rosy were making plans to continue their collaboration in the design of a new combination hotel and theater structure on Broadway between 74th and 75th Streets.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly pleased with the success of combining three theaters with the Hotel Lincoln, thereby providing common building services for all, the Chanins saw a combination theater-hotel structure to be a logical solution for the site. The Havemeyer Construction Co. was to actually build the hotel with the Chanin Construction Co. to act as consulting engineers and builders. The theater was to be managed by Roxy through the Roxy Circuit, Inc. and the intention was to call it Roxy's Midway. Walter W. Ahlschlager, the architect of the Roxy Theater, was commissioned as the architect for the design of the Beacon Hotel and the theater.

Walter W. Ahlschlager (1887-1965), born in Chicago, had received his architectural education at the Armour Institute of Technology (later the Illinois Institute of Technology) and the school of the Art Institute of Chicago. He had joined his father in the firm of Ahlschlager & Son and then continued in his own name after the death of his father. Although Ahlschlager had achieved a reputation early in his career when he won a competition for the design of the campus of Lutheran Concordia College in West Chicago, he focussed his attention on the design of office buildings and hotels, most of which were in Chicago and other midwestern cities. He also wrote on the efficacy and design characteristics of the skyscraper.<sup>4</sup> He moved his practice to Dallas in 1940. The Roxy, undoubtedly because of the important role it played in the American theater, remains Ahlschlager's most famous work, even though the theater was demolished in 1960.

In the Beacon, Ahlschlager was able to use certain design features and effects that had been used in the Roxy. Roxy himself had specified certain features for the Roxy--the best technical equipment for showing films and extensive stage facilities including a revolving section and a movable orchestra platform. Also of importance were certain spatial effects--the contrast of the low ceiling of the ticket lobby with the large, high-ceilinged space of the lobby rotunda.<sup>5</sup> The design of the lobby was crucial to Roxy, for he believed "that the patron must begin to feel what might be called the spell of the theater before he reaches his seat."<sup>6</sup> Since Roxy was to manage the new theater in the Beacon Hotel, he wanted stage facilities to allow him to produce a program similar to that at the Roxy, even if on a somewhat less grand scale. Thus the stage has three elevators: one on the main stage, one in the orchestra pit, and one for the Wurlitzer electric organ. Spatial relationships providing a sense of contrast between the ticket lobby and the lobby rotunda are also similar. While the Roxy has been described as Moorish and "early Plateresque, which prevailed in the early Renaissance in Spain, with a touch of Italian,"<sup>7</sup> Ahlschlager varied his design sources somewhat for the Beacon. The Renaissance is not neglected, but Greek, Roman, and Rococo sources are also used.

Roxy was not destined to manage the new theater in the Hotel Beacon (which gained its name from the airplane beacon on its roof). Because of delays in the completion of the theater, the Roxy Corp., at that time a subsidiary of the Fox Film Corp., filed suit in July 1928 to vacate its lease. Meanwhile the Havemeyer Construction Co. defaulted on its mortgages and filed for bankruptcy. After a complicated series of financial transactions, the Chanin Realty Corp. purchased the Beacon Hotel and theater in April 1930.<sup>8</sup> Several months earlier a lease had been negotiated with Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., for the management of the theater.

By 1929 Warner Bros. was one of the fastest growing motion picture companies in the United States and was rapidly acquiring theaters to provide an outlet for its films.<sup>9</sup> According to press accounts, Warner Bros. found it necessary to make some modifications to the theater before opening it, paying special attention to the problems of sound.<sup>10</sup> The concern was understandable considering the pioneering role of Warner Bros. in developing talking pictures.<sup>11</sup>

The Beacon Theater officially opened on December 24, 1929, with Harry Warner making a welcoming speech, Ben Bernie, the orchestra leader, acting as master of ceremonies, and Stuart Barrie at the Wurlitzer organ. Vitaphone short subjects, a newsreel, and the feature film, "Tiger Rose," starring Lupe Velez and Rin Tin Tin, made up the film program.

The Beacon remained in business as a movie theater under various managements until 1974. That year it was taken over by a group which scheduled live performances in the theater, but the group defaulted in 1976. In February 1977 the Concert Arts Society, Inc. took over the lease of the theater and is now operating it as a multi-purpose performing arts center.

The Beacon Theater Interior survives as a great movie palace-- a tribute to the showmanship of Roxy and the design effects of Walter W. Ahlschlager. One enters the theater from Broadway through an open air outer ticket lobby set back from the line of the building. Semicircular in plan, it features a freestanding gilded and decorated ticket booth. From the outer ticket lobby gilded metal and glass doors with leaded glass transoms provide access to the inner ticket lobby. Within the marble-walled inner ticket lobby are a ticket booth and office on the south wall and sign boards and mirrors on the north wall. These walls contrast with the longer inward curving convex walls containing the entrance doors. The doors in the eastern wall are similar to those leading to the outer ticket lobby, but these doors have stained glass transoms. The low ceilings of both ticket lobbies are adorned with multicolored Renaissance-inspired moldings and ornate light fixtures.

From the low-ceilinged ticket lobbies one passes into the dramatic space of the rotunda lobby. The contrast is that specified by Roxy. The rotunda itself is often said to be based on the design of the rotunda at the Roxy Theater, but the Beacon rotunda is smaller in scale and inspired by Rococo design while the style of the Roxy rotunda was Spanish Renaissance. The rotunda extends upward to the height of the theater auditorium. Opposite the entrance is an arched opening, framed by Ionic pilasters, with screens of colonnettes at the levels of the promenades of the loge and the balcony. Richly ornamented panels are set below the screens. The entrance itself is framed by fluted pilasters. Above the doors, set behind a balustrade, is a mural painted by Valdemar Kjoldgaard depicting a mythical landscape scene. Two doorways framed in a Rococo manner, flanking the large arched opening, lead to staircases. Just below ceiling level is a swag-adorned frieze encircling most of the rotunda. The ceiling itself is adorned with rosettes and coffers. Suspended from the center of the ceiling is a massive gilt chandelier lit by electric candles.

Beyond the rotunda the lobby continues in a wide hallway which provides access to the auditorium. The auditorium with its three levels--orchestra, loge, and balcony--was designed to create an exciting theatrical experience in accordance with the wishes of Roxy. One observer on opening night called the auditorium "a true bit of Bagdad (sic) on upper Broadway" and said one had "the feeling of being in some impossibly vast tent of some fabulous oriental potentate."<sup>12</sup> Several features help create the exotic effect. The proscenium, opening onto the stage above the orchestra pit and the Wurlitzer organ, is framed by fluted columns. Above the proscenium is a plaster drape in green and gold decorated with sunburst effects and supported on slender decorated poles. The sunburst motif was a favorite of Roxy. It was used in the proscenium of the Roxy Theater, and in Radio City Music Hall, the entire auditorium was designed to simulate a sunburst. Flanking the proscenium are 30-foot high gilded statues of Greek martial women with bases depicting classical figures. The ceiling above the main portion of the auditorium is executed in such a way as to simulate a draped tent and is richly decorated in patterns of red, blue, green and gold. An enormous chandelier of Venetian-inspired design is suspended from the center. The fronts of the loge and the balcony also have rich, multicolored decoration inspired by Renaissance sources. At either side of the auditorium are exits framed by arched openings incorporated into bold architectural enframements. Not only adorned with cartouches, swags, medallions, and theatrical masks, and topped by urns, they also hold sculptured figures of seated women. Rising above these exits on the side walls are vast murals framed by fluted pilasters with crouching lions placed in front of them. Painted by Valdemar Kjoldgaard, the murals depict oriental scenes with caravans of elephants, camels, and traders, approaching large galleons.



From the lobby, staircases lead up to the loge and balcony levels. The promenades leading from the stair halls to the auditorium at these levels are decorated with pilasters and Renaissance and Rococo ornament.

The Beacon Theater Interior survives as one of the great movie palaces of New York. It has special historical interest because of the roles played by Samuel L. Rothafel (Roxy) and the Chanins in its construction. The lavish design by Walter W. Ahlschlager creates the exciting theatrical experience deemed so important by Roxy. Because it uses some of the same technical and design features as the now-demolished Roxy Theater, it provides understanding of that historic showplace. Not only a movie palace, it is now able to function as a multi-purpose performing arts center because of the stage features specified by Roxy in the original design. It is as true in 1979 as upon its opening 50 years ago that the Beacon Theater through its design offers a sense of the fantasy and drama of the theater.

Report prepared by Marjorie Pearson,  
Director of Research

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# FOOTNOTES

1. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Radio City Music Hall Designation Report (LP-0995), March 28, 1978, report prepared by Ann Bedell, Research Department, pp. 4-5.
2. The Chanins, Clipping File, New York Public Library, Theatre Division, Lincoln Center, and Landmarks Preservation Commission, Chanin Building Designation Report (LP-0993), Nov. 14, 1978, report prepared by Majorie Pearson, Director of Research, p.1.
3. New York Times, Jan. 25, 1927, p.41.
4. New York Times, March 30, 1965, p. 47 (Walter W. Ahlschlager obituary).
5. For Roxy's role see, Radio City Music Hall Designation Report, pp. 4-5.
6. Samuel L. Rothafel as told to John Cushman Fistere, "The Architect and the Box Office," Architectural Forum, 57 (September 1932), p. 195.
7. See Roxy Theatre, Seventh Avenue and 50th Street, New York City: The Show Value of the Nation, souvenir book [n.d.] in: Roxy Theatre, Clipping File, New York Public Library, Theatre Division, Lincoln Center.
8. New York Times, April 5, 1930, p.36, and New York County, Register's Office, Liber Deeds 3764, p.78. Its affiliate, the Chanin Construction Co. had helped construct the building.
9. Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc. A Financial Review and Brief History, 1923-45 (New York: Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., 1946), pp. 10-11.
10. New York Times, December 26, 1929, p. 21.
11. Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., pp. 5-9.
12. Richard Albarino, "Upper Broadway Byzantine Beacon Seeks Future as Live Act Shrine," Variety, July 17, 1974, pp. 5, 24.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Beacon Theater, first floor interior consisting of the outer ticket lobby and ticket booth, inner ticket lobby and ticket booth, main lobby including the rotunda and its ceiling, the staircases leading to the loge floor, the auditorium including the staircases, orchestra pit, the stage and stage wings; the loge floor interior consisting of the promenade, the loge, the upper part of the auditorium, the upper part of the stage house, and the staircases leading up to the balcony floor interior; the balcony floor interior consisting of the promenade, the lower balcony, the upper balcony, the staircases between the upper and lower balconies, the upper part of the auditorium and ceiling, the upper part of the stage house and skylight; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, lighting fixtures including chandeliers, murals, sculpture including statues, panels, organ, and staircase railings; have a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City, and the Interior or parts thereof are thirty years old or more, and that the Interior is one which is customarily open and accessible to the public, and to which the public is customarily invited.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Interior of the Beacon Theater survives as one of the great movie palaces of New York; that it is a lavish space with stylistic effects drawn from the traditions of Greek, Roman, Renaissance, and Rococo architecture; that it was designed by architect Walter W. Ahlschlager to create an exciting theatrical experience; that the rotunda lobby, whose design echoes that of the now-demolished Roxy Theatre, was designed to contrast with the low-ceilinged ticket lobbies and create "the spell of the theater"; that the auditorium is rich with exotic and decorative effects including vast murals; that two prominent entities in the New York Theater business, Samuel L. Rothafel and the Chanin Construction Co., were associated in the creation of the Beacon; that it was designed with technical and stage features which now allow it to function as a multi-purpose performing arts center; and that through its design the Interior of the Beacon Theater offers a sense of the fantasy and drama of the theater.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as an Interior Landmark the Beacon Theater, first floor interior consisting of the outer ticket lobby and ticket booth, inner ticket lobby and



ticket booth, main lobby including the rotunda and its ceiling, the staircases leading to the loge floor, the auditorium including the staircases, orchestra pit, the stage and stage wings; the loge floor interior consisting of the promenade, the loge, the upper part of the auditorium, the upper part of the stage house, and the staircases leading up to the balcony floor interior; the balcony floor interior consisting of the promenade, the lower balcony, the upper balcony, the staircases between the upper and lower balconies, the upper part of the auditorium and ceiling, the upper part of the stage house and skylight; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, lighting fixtures including chandeliers, murals, sculpture including statues, panels, organ, and staircase railings; 2124 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1166, Lot 35, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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