

LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



PORTAGE PARK THEATRE

4042-60 N. Milwaukee Av.; 4905-15 W. Cuyler Av.

Final Landmark Recommendation adopted by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, March 7, 2013



CITY OF CHICAGO
Rahm Emanuel, Mayor

Department of Housing and Economic Development
Andrew J. Mooney, Commissioner

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor and City Council, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law.

The landmark designation process begins with a staff study and a preliminary summary of information related to the potential designation criteria. The next step is a preliminary vote by the landmarks commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. This vote not only initiates the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until a final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.

This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation process. Only language contained within a designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.

PORTAGE PARK THEATRE BUILDING

4042-60 N. Milwaukee Ave.; 4905-15 W. Cuyler Ave.

Built: 1919-20

**Architects: Lindley P. Rowe, in association with
Fridstein & Co.**

The Portage Park Theatre Building is an excellent “transitional” movie theater in Chicago, exemplifying the period at the end of World War I during which movie theater design was evolving from relatively modest buildings to large-scale movie “palaces.” Designed by Chicago architect Lindley P. Rowe, working in association with the architectural / engineering firm of Fridstein & Co., the building was completed in 1920 and was part of a theater chain operated in the 1920s by the Ascher Brothers, one of the largest movie theater operators in Chicago during the decade.

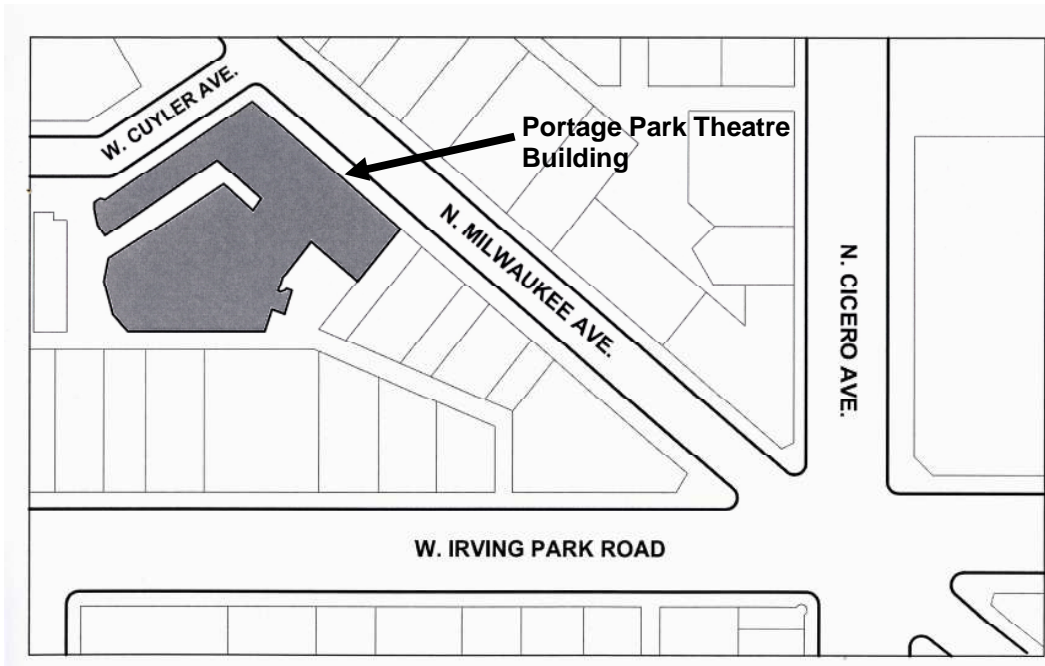
The three-story building contains a theater, stores and apartments and is an excellent example of a “theater-block,” a building type combining a movie theater with commercial and residential uses. Mixed-use theaters such as the Portage were not only entertainment venues, but commercial and residential anchors for Chicago neighborhood shopping districts such as the “Six Corners” commercial area of the Portage Park neighborhood.

Completed in 1920 and partially renovated in 1939-40, the Portage Park Theatre Building includes an unusual combination of Classical and Art Moderne stylistic influences. The elaborately decorated auditorium interior is inspired by Neoclassical architecture of 18th-century France. Classical motifs also appear in the boldly-profiled, cream-colored terra cotta decoration of the façade, most notably in the building’s emphatic arched crown. Twenty years after construction, the building’s lobbies were remodeled in 1939-40 in a sleek, spare Art Moderne mode.

The building has served for many decades as an important commercial and cultural institution in the Portage Park neighborhood. It remains a strong visual landmark on North Milwaukee Avenue as part of the “Six Corners” commercial area, centered on the intersection of W. Irving Park Rd. and Milwaukee and Cicero avenues, which historically was an important shopping district for the Northwest Side.

EARLY CHICAGO MOVIE THEATERS

The first movie houses in Chicago, built in the first decade of the twentieth century, were family-owned storefront operations known as nickelodeons after the common price of admission. They were sparsely decorated, smoky places, often no more than storefronts with a hanging sheet or a white-washed wall to act as a screen. Chairs were moveable and placed in rows, and at the rear of the room sat the projector with the operator, who might also act as the ticket vendor. This type of theater eventually gained a bad reputation for attracting only the working class



The Portage Park Theatre Building is located on Milwaukee Avenue northwest of the “Six Corners” intersection formed by Milwaukee Avenue, Cicero Avenue, and Irving Park Road in the Portage Park neighborhood. Annexed to Chicago in 1889, the neighborhood first saw significant retail development with the arrival of the Milwaukee and Irving Park street railway lines. By the late 1910s, when construction on the Portage Park Theatre Building began, Six Corners was becoming one of Chicago’s busiest neighborhood commercial districts.



In the evolution of theater design in America, the Portage Park Theatre Building stands between the era of the early “first-generation” movie theaters and the grand movie palaces of the 1920s. In addition to the theatre, the building contains street-level storefronts and apartments on the second and third floors.



The Portage Park Theatre Building also contains a wing of apartments facing W. Cuyler Ave.



A circa 1920 photograph of the Portage Theatre compared with the current photo on the facing page shows that the building retains the majority of its architectural features.

and was not considered the type of establishment suitable for women and children. In spite of unsophisticated surroundings and presentations, these early movie theaters attracted ever-increasing audiences, spurred by the rise of the motion picture industry and the creation of full-length movies such as *The Great Train Robbery*, filmed in 1903. (Before the movie industry moved to California, Chicago was the center of both the emerging motion picture studio and distribution industries, beginning in 1907-08.)

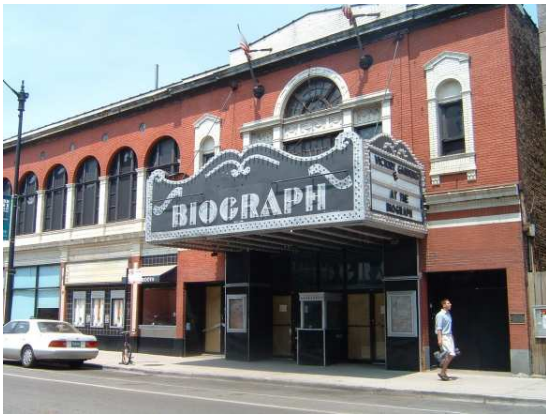
Beginning in 1908, municipal code reforms were passed and nickelodeons moved from storefronts to larger and often more sumptuous buildings (often defunct vaudeville theaters). Since the reforms required operators to obtain movie-house licensing, it gave the more affluent clientele a sense of safety and, as a result, raised the level of respectability of the movie house. By the early 1910s, “purpose-built” movie theaters, buildings designed expressly for the showing of motion pictures, began to be built in Chicago. Although larger than nickelodeons, these theaters remained relatively small in scale, fitting easily into neighborhood commercial strips in Chicago’s many neighborhoods. The vast majority of these first-generation movie theaters have been demolished or remodeled for other purposes. The Biograph Theater (1914), designated a Chicago Landmark in 2001, and the Village Theatre (1916), designated a Chicago Landmark in 2009 are among the best of those that remain.

In the years immediately after the end of World War I, movie theaters were built in Chicago that were larger and more visually elaborate than these first-generation theaters, but more visually modest than later “movie palaces” such as the Uptown and Chicago Theaters. The Central Park Theater at 3531-39 W. Roosevelt Rd., built in 1917 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2005, is widely considered to be one of the earliest of these “transitional” movie theaters in Chicago. Such theaters were larger in scale than first-generation theaters, often three-stories in height and combining a theater with stores, offices and residences. The design of these theaters was more elaborate with more extensive ornamentation, usually terra cotta, used to define theater entrances and to provide a sense of visual celebration. Lobbies and auditoriums within transitional movie theaters often are elaborate in detail while remaining more modest spatially than later movie palaces.

Many of these theaters from the beginning of the 1920s have been demolished or their auditoriums have been converted to other commercial, non-assembly uses, such as stores. The Portage Park Theatre Building, which retains the great majority of its exterior ornamentation as well as a largely intact theater auditorium, is unusual in the context of such Chicago movie theaters.

Film historian Ben Hall has described Chicago in the 1920s as “the jumpiest movie city in the world and had more plush elegant theatres than anywhere else.” The demand for motion pictures encouraged the construction of larger-scale theaters holding between 2,000 and 4,000 movie-goers. Built by major theater operators such as Balaban and Katz, Lubliner and Trinz, and the Marks Brothers, these movie “palaces”—including the Chicago, Uptown, New Regal, and Congress theaters (designated as Chicago Landmarks in 1983, 1991, 1992 and 2002, respectively)—were major centers of entertainment both in the Loop and outlying neighborhoods.

Meant to create an environment of fantastic illusion for movie patrons, the typical movie palace took its design cues from historic revival styles such as the Renaissance and Baroque. Facades



[a.]



[b.]

As a historic building type, movie theater design evolved in stages in Chicago. Early “first-generation” theaters, largely built before World War I, were relatively small, fitting into the surrounding streetscapes. Two Chicago examples are the Biograph Theater [a.] and Village Theater [b.], both designated Chicago Landmarks.

A second, or “transitional” phase occurred after World War I and were larger in scale and with more visually-impressive detailing and interiors than earlier theaters. Along with the Portage Park Theatre Building, an early example of a “transitional” theater is the Central Park Theater [c.], listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Movie theater design reached its peak with the so-called “palaces” of the 1920s, exemplified by the Chicago Theater [d.] and Uptown Theater [e.], both Chicago Landmarks.



[c.]



[d.]



[e.]

were richly detailed with terra cotta while lighted marquee and neon signs blazed at night. Upon entering, a patron experienced a grand lobby, often with sweeping staircases, and a lavish auditorium. With interiors detailed with elaborate stone and plaster work, decorative light fixtures, and plush seats, these theaters became in effect extensions of the films being shown, with their often exotic storylines and locales.

By the end of the 1920s, Chicago had more than thirty of these movie palace theaters. The economic dominance of these later movie theaters caused many of the “first-generation” and “transitional” movie theaters to be converted to non-movie use. In turn, beginning in the 1950s and accelerating in later years, a decline in movie-going, coupled with suburban development and changing motion picture exhibition practice, led to the construction of smaller movie theaters clustered in “multiplexes” and the destruction or drastic remodeling of most of these grandly-scaled movie theaters.

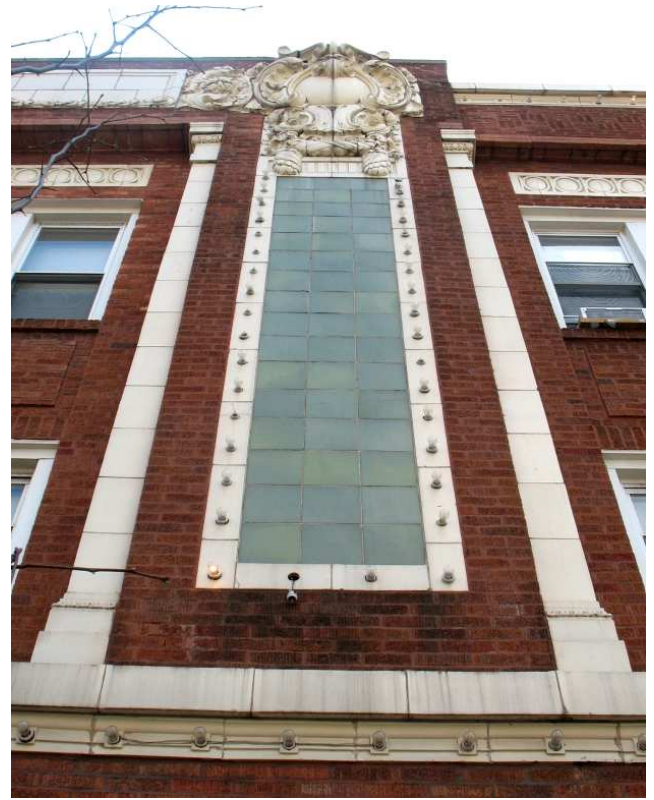
BUILDING CONSTRUCTION AND DESCRIPTION

The Portage Park Theatre Building is located on North Milwaukee Avenue in the Portage Park neighborhood, approximately nine miles northwest of the Loop. Based on available documentation, the building was conceived and constructed by J. M. Browarsky and his nephew Edward Browarsky. The Browarskys were real estate speculators who developed both residential and commercial properties in Chicago, as well as several theaters in addition to the Portage Park, including the Atlantic, Metropolitan, and West End.

In July 1919 the *Chicago Tribune* announced that Edward Browarsky was planning the construction of a new movie theater in the developing Portage Park commercial district centered on the intersection of Irving Park Road, Cicero Avenue, and Milwaukee Avenue. The newspaper reported that the architectural firm of Fridstein & Co. had designed for Browarsky a multi-purpose building that, in addition to the theater, would include eight street-level storefronts, thirty-four “high grade” apartments and a fraternal lodge hall. Construction costs were estimated at \$400,000. Two months later, in September 1919, the City of Chicago issued a building permit to Edward Browarsky for a three-story “theater, stores, and flats” to be built at 4042-60 N. Milwaukee Ave. The architect listed on the building permit was “L.P. Rowe,” or Lindley P. Rowe. The permit listed the estimated cost of the building to be \$350,000. Building permit records indicate that construction of the building was completed in January 1921, although other sources indicate that the building and theater were open and occupied before the end of 1920.

The building occupies a parcel of land on the southwest corner of Milwaukee and Cuyler Avenues with the primary street façade facing northeast on Milwaukee Avenue, and a secondary street facade facing Cuyler Avenue. The building has an irregular plan that reflects its multiple functions. The stores and apartments are housed in rectangular street-facing wings that form an L-shape. Nestled within these wings is the wedge-shaped theater that extends west to the alley between Cuyler Avenue to the north and Irving Park Road to the south.

The building is a three-story masonry load-bearing structure with a flat roof over the commercial/residential portion. The fireproof structure of the theater auditorium includes a steel truss



Cream-colored terra cotta decorates the façade of the Portage Theater with motifs derived from classical architecture. An image of a lyre (top left) rendered in terra cotta is repeated along the building's cornice and brick piers (top right) are accented along their length green tiles. Much of the terra cotta is fitted with sockets for incandescent lighting. The prominent arch and fanlight (bottom) at the top of the building makes the building a prominent visual feature of the "Six Corners" neighborhood commercial district.

Movie theater signage and marquees evolved in the twentieth century and these changes can be traced in historic photos of the Portage Theatre. The 1920 photos [a.] shows that the building had a balcony that was flush with the wall plane and lacked a projecting marquee. A vertical sign projected from the center of the façade.



[a.]

During the 1939 renovations of the building a projecting marquee [b.] was added with illuminated panels announcing current movies. At the same time the entrance doors were replaced and black glass “vitrolite” tiles were installed at the surrounding wall surfaces. In addition, the original vertical sign was replaced with a much larger version [c.] with the word “Portage” in neon. The increased use of the automobile in this period is regarded as a factor in the expansion of marquees and signs to make the theater more visible to fast moving cars. Advances in lighting technologies such as neon and chase sequences certainly contributed to the expansion of marquees and signage.



[b.]



[c.]



[d.]

The current marquee [d.] was originally installed on the Tivoli Theater and was modified and installed at the Portage Park in 1962, replacing one that was installed in 1939.

roof and concrete floor. The street-facing facades are dark-red face brick with a combed finish accented with extensive cream-colored terra-cotta ornament. Numerous sockets for incandescent bulbs that are incorporated into the terra cotta. Chicago common brick is used for the rear elevation of the building facing the alley.

The Milwaukee Avenue façade has a symmetrical composition which is dominated by the theater occupying the central bay of the building which is marked by a projecting marquee. A group of windows is located above the marquee and trimmed with terra-cotta under cast-iron balustrades. Above the windows is a terra cotta tablet with "Portage Park Theatre" in block letters. This tablet is topped with a prominent terra-cotta arch which is visible on Milwaukee Avenue from several blocks away.

At street-level, the box office and entrance doors to the theater are recessed beneath the projecting marquee. A 1939 renovation of the theater included reconfiguration of the original 1919 entrance and box office. The overall design of this Art Moderne-style renovation remains, however the vitrolite wall panels added in 1939 have been replaced with red and black glazed tile at some point in the recent past. Similarly, the current marquee was originally installed on the Tivoli Theater and was modified and installed at the Portage Park in 1962, replacing one that was installed in 1939.

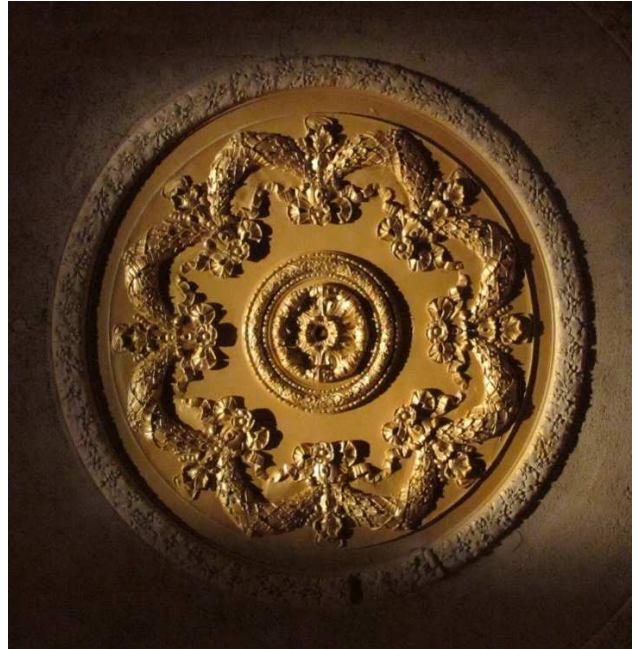
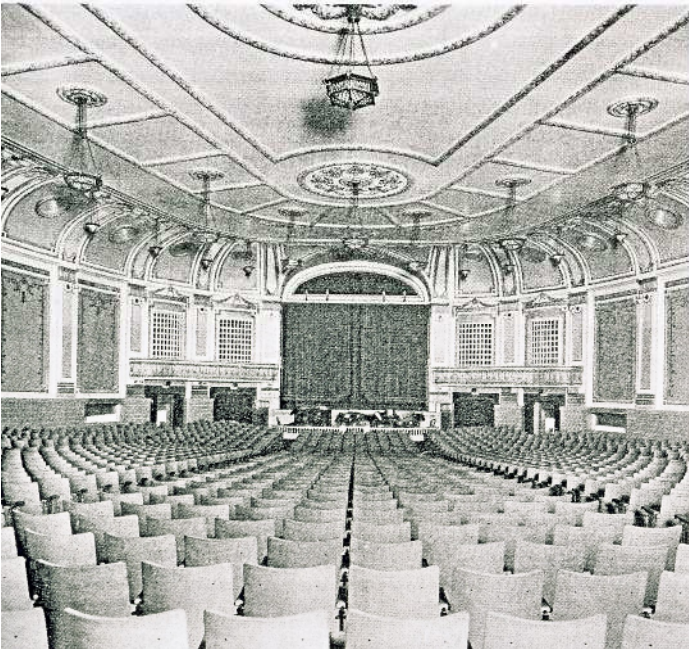
The wings flanking the central bay of the theater contain eight street-level storefronts with apartments on the second and third floors which are reached by four separate entrances. Though less decorated than the central bay housing the theater, these wings incorporate terra-cotta decoration rendered with Classical motifs such as lyres and egg and dart molding. The secondary elevation on Cuyler Avenue houses apartments on all three floors. The east half of this elevation is treated as a finished return which uses the same dark red face brick and cream-colored glazed terra cotta trim as the Milwaukee elevation. The rest of the Cuyler Avenue façade utilizes similar red brick, but in a greatly simplified design.

Theatre Interior

The interior of the Portage Park Theatre Building includes a progression of outer and inner lobbies, with a connecting rotunda, that were all Art Moderne-style renovation of 1939. These spaces lead to the theater auditorium, which retains its original 1920 appearance.

The Art Moderne style was popular in America in the late 1930s and 1940s and it is characterized by smooth surfaces, curved corners, and, in the case of interiors, minimal wall and ceiling moldings and the use of indirect lighting in recessed wall and ceiling coves. The 1939 renovation of the lobbies reflects the desire on the part of movie theater operators to update their properties in order for them to feel fashionable to theatergoers. It was not uncommon for theater entrances and lobbies to be occasionally renovated with new ticket booths, doors, wall and floor renovations, and new furnishings. Such entrance and lobby changes were often more noticeable to patrons than changes in theater auditoriums, where light levels were typically kept dim.

The outer lobby features an arched ceiling indirectly lit by fixtures concealed in a streamlined cornice. Glass doors leading to the rotunda were repurposed from the Balaban & Katz-owned Marbro Theatre, which stood at Madison and Karlov on Chicago's West Side until it was de-



The walls and ceiling of the auditorium of the Portage Theatre (above) are richly decorated with ornamental plaster inspired by French Neoclassical architecture. The historic photograph (lower left) shows the auditorium with its original chandeliers and seating. A detail of a ceiling medallion is at lower right.

molished in 1964. It was common practice among theater operators to repurpose fixtures and elements from one theater to another as properties were renovated and/or demolished.

The inner lobby continues the streamline aesthetic found in the exterior lobby. The space is irregular in plan, widening from the interior doors and showing how the auditorium is oriented at an angle from the commercial/residential portion of the building. Decorative elements include an oval coved ceiling, streamlined plaster moldings and interior doors with porthole windows.

In contrast to the renovated Art Moderne-style lobbies, the capacious auditorium retains its 1920 decoration which draws on eighteenth-century French Neoclassical architectural motifs rendered in plaster. The volume of the space is striking, owing to its unusual plan that is rounded at the corners and flares gently from front to back. The floor is raked upward from the stage that projects from the proscenium. The seating in the auditorium is not original and appears to date from the mid-twentieth century. Historic photos show ornate pendant chandeliers (no longer in place) hanging from the center of the medallions.

The Classical Revival Style

The elaborate Classical-style decorative program of the Portage Park Theater's auditorium, as well as the Classical motifs used in the terra-cotta decoration of the building's façade, are inspired by the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome and the subsequent revivals and reinterpretations of Classical traditions from the Renaissance up to the 20th century. Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 with its grandly-scaled "White City" of Classical Revival-style exposition buildings and monuments, played an influential role in reinvigorating the style both in Chicago and nationally from the 1890s through the 1920s.

The Portage Park Theatre Building, in both its exterior and interior auditorium exemplifies the Classical Revival architectural style. Inside, the theater's auditorium is a fine expression of French Neoclassical style, with its curved interior corners and coved ceiling and abundant low-relief surface decoration rendered in ornamental plaster. Other characteristic motifs of the style include the swags, running molding and the organization of the ornament within framed panels or medallions. The Classical Revival imprint is also evident in the building's exterior terra-cotta ornament which is boldly detailed with a plethora of Classical motifs.

Movie theater operators Ascher Brothers

Available information indicates that, although the Portage Park Theatre Building was built by J. M. and Edward Browarsky, it was leased and operated upon its completion by Ascher Brothers, one of Chicago's largest movie theater operators of the 1910s and 1920s. Sources differ as to the number of theaters that Ascher Brothers managed during the roughly 20 years of their existence, with counts ranging from 29 to more than 60.

Ascher Brothers was founded in 1909 and was headed by Nathan, Max and Harry Ascher. Starting with nickelodeons, the partnership steadily acquired movie theaters through the 1910s through both construction of new theaters as well as leasing theaters built by others. By 1919, the year that the construction of the Portage Park Theatre Building began, Ascher Brothers ran at least 15 theaters, including the Adelphi, Calo, Milford, Cosmopolitan, Metropolitan, and Crown. By 1921, this list had expanded to include the Portage Park Theatre Building. Ascher



The theater lobbies were renovated in the Art Moderne style in 1939-40 and exemplify this sleek, streamline, modernistic style. Top: The outer lobby has a shallow vaulted ceiling and cove lights in both walls and ceiling. (The Greek-key-ornamented tile floor is believed to be original to the building.) Bottom: A 1940 view of the “rotunda” connecting the outer and inner vestibules.

Brothers got out of the theater operating business in 1929, with their theaters taken over by other operators.

The Architect of the Portage Park Theatre Building

Some accounts of the Portage Park Theatre Building's history have indicated that the theater was designed by Chicago architect Henry L. Newhouse, or by Newhouse in association with Mark D. Kalischer. Ascher Brothers often used Newhouse for the theaters they built themselves, including the Highland and Metropolitan.

But Ascher Brothers managed a number of theaters designed by other architects, including, among others, the Colony (Lowenberg and Lowenberg), Calo (George H. Borst), and Terminal (J.E.O. Pridmore). Based on information contemporary with the construction of the Portage Park Theatre Building, including City of Chicago building permit records; the *Economist*, a Chicago-based real estate periodical; and a project ledger kept by the Midland Terra Cotta Company, which supplied terra cotta for the building, it appears that Chicago architect Lindley P. Rowe, working in association with the architectural / engineering firm of Fridstein & Co., designed the Portage Park Theatre Building.

The *Economist* (May 24, 1919) mentions that J.M. Browarsky was planning a three-story theater at Irving Park Road and Milwaukee Avenue to be designed by Fridstein & Co. The City of Chicago building permit # 53903 (issued September 17, 1919) has Browarsky's nephew Edward as the owner of a three-story "theater, stores, and flats" to be built at 4042-60 N. Milwaukee Ave. The permit lists "L.P. Rowe" as the architect. Three days later, the *Economist* (September 20, 1919) lists the building in its "Building Permits" section as the work of "L.P. Rowe, care of Fridstein & Co." The Midland Terra Cotta Company project ledger lists the "Portage Park Theatre," located on "Milwaukee Ave," as designed by Fridstein & Co. An advertisement printed in *The Rotarian* (April 1921) listed the architect of the theater as Fridstein & Co.

Architects Fridstein & Co. and Lindley P. Rowe

Fridstein & Co. is best known today for several Chicago apartment hotels and movie theaters. **Meyer Fridstein (1884-1964)**, the founder and president of Fridstein & Co., was born in 1884 in Marinette, Wisconsin, and studied structural engineering at the University of Wisconsin. Following graduation, he worked for a few years in Milwaukee before moving to Chicago, where he worked in the offices of both Richard Schmidt and the architecture firm of Marshall and Fox.

Although Fridstein trained as an engineer, he was the architect for a number of Chicago buildings, mainly apartment hotels and theaters. These include the Webster and Belden-Stratford hotels on North Lincoln Park West, built in 1920-21 and 1922 respectively. Fridstein & Co., also designed the Shoreland Hotel at 5454 S. South Shore Dr., built in 1926 and a designated Chicago Landmark. The firm was also known for its movie theaters, including the Congress Theater at 2117-39 N. Milwaukee Ave. (designated a Chicago Landmark in 2001), as well as the Logan, Tivoli, Tower and Harding theaters.

From 1920 until 1929 the Portage Park Theatre Building was operated by Ascher Brothers, one of Chicago's leading movie theater operators. Nathan Ascher (right), one of the partners of Ascher Brothers. Listings (far right) of silent movies playing at the theatre in 1920. Bottom: an advertisement touting Ascher Brothers' 10th anniversary in 1919.



**ASCHER'S
PORTAGE PARK
THEATRE**
Milwaukee Ave. at Irving Park Blvd

Week of January 9th to 16th

One Day Only Sunday, January 9th
BEBE DANIELS
IN
"She Couldn't Help It"
Holla Comedy Picturegraph Topic

—TWO DAYS ONLY—
Monday and Tuesday, Jan. 10th and 11th
—ATTRACTION EXTRAORDINARY—
We Personally Guarantee
"THE SCUTTLEERS"
WITH
WILLIAM FARNUM
To be one of the greatest features of the year
—DON'T MISS IT—

One Day Only Wednesday, Jan. 12th
A Ralph Ince Special Production
"RED FOAM"
A Story as big as Humanity Itself
Charlie Chaplin Comedy Weekly

Thursday & Friday, January 13th & 14th
Bring the Children to See
"Freckle Faced" Wesley Barry
IN
"DINTY"
Pathos, Romance, Humor, Adventure

Saturday, January 15th
The Delightful Romance of a Modern Maid
and her Prince Charming!
VIOLA DANA
IN
"CINDERELLA'S TWIN"
"SON OF TARZAN" 2nd Episode

Sunday, January 16th
Everybody's Favorite
MABEL NORMAND
IN
"WHAT HAPPENED TO ROSA"
COMEDY WEEKLY

ASCHER BROTHERS

Announce their Tenth Anniversary

Ten Years Ago

Ascher Theaters were little more than an idea. Motion pictures offered little more than the interest of a miracle of invention. Array of talent was bare. The form of photography was crude. But the Ascher genius foresaw in those elemental efforts the beginning of a new and great art.

To-Day

that early faith is expressed in the concrete form of twenty veritable palaces, amusement centers unequalled in any other city in the world. In every community blazon forth the ASCHER banner, the emblem of excellence, the assurance of delightful entertainment, the mark of the acme in silent drama's progress.

THE DAWN OF THE NEW DECADE
presents a transition in the trend of motion pictures as marked as the change the past ten years have wrought.

BIGGER, BETTER PICTURES
is already the slogan of the progressive producers from whose output Aschers choose the programs for their critical, exacting audiences.

THAT BEST PROVEN TALENT PLAYS STARS OF THE MOST RECENT FICTIONS AND THE DRAMA'S GEMS
are the premier of the coming cinema entertainment, which in degree of artistic attainment will surpass all prevailing standards, and will add to motion picture history a new and triumphant chapter.

THEATRICAL STARS:

- THEDA BARA
- WILLIAM FOX
- MIRIAM COOPER
- WILLIAM FARNUM
- YOM MIX

ASCHER THEATRES
PICTURE AND MELODY
THE ASCHER "MAGNIFY"

Adelphi Clark and State	Kenwood 47th and Kimbark
Albany Park Lawrence and Kildee	Lane Court Clark and Center
Calo Clark and Dalmorel	Metropolitan 47th and Grand Blvd.
WILSON Broadway and Grace	VALHALLA Milwaukee & Crawford
Columbus 62d and Ashland	Oakland Square Drexel and Oakwood
Cosmopolitan Halsted and 7th	Peerless Grand and Oakwood
Crown Division and Ashland	Rosewood Montrose and Lincoln
Felic Fifty-fifth and Ellis	Terminal Lawrence & Spaulding
Under Construction	
Commercial 82d and Commercial	Roosevelt State and Washington
Forest Park Forest Park, Ill.	W. Englewood 62d and Marshfield

THEATRICAL STARS:

- MARY PICKFORD
"America's Sweetheart"
- KATHERINE MAC DONALD
"The American Beauty"
- MARSHALL NEILAN
"The Director Supreme"
- ANITA STEWART
"The Dream Girl"
- CONSTANCE TALMADGE
"Divorced Conscience"
- D. W. GRIFFITH
"Wizard of the Screen"

Lindley P. Rowe (1885-1964) attended the Armour Institute on Chicago's South Side and began his architectural practice in 1910. Between 1922 and 1932, he was a partner, with his brother Charles B. Rowe and Frank G. Dillard, in the firm of Rowe, Dillard & Rowe. The office designed, among other buildings, a parish house for the Episcopal Church of the Mediator in Chicago's Morgan Park neighborhood and a clubhouse for the Forest View Club, a combination golf and riding club in the near northwestern suburbs. During the 1930s, Rowe worked as an architect for the United States Treasury's procurement office. A questionnaire completed by Rowe for the American Institute of Architects listed Meyer Fridstein, the principal of Fridstein and Co., as a structural engineer with whom he had previously done business. Rowe finished his career as an architect for DeLeuw Cather & Co., a Chicago architectural / engineering company.

ARCHITECTURAL TERRA COTTA IN CHICAGO

While many early 20th-century buildings in Chicago were clad or ornamented in limestone, others were clad or ornamented with terra cotta, including the Portage Park Theatre Building. Due to the intricacy of historic ornament, terra cotta was most often used on buildings designed in historic architectural styles such as Classical or Gothic Revival, where the plastic versatility of terra cotta allowed the easy imitation of many different architectural styles and building materials.

From the immediate post-Fire years of the 1870s through the early 1930s, Chicago was a leading American center for architectural terra-cotta design and manufacture. Terra-cotta factories took advantage of Chicago's vibrant and innovative architectural community, its strategic location at the center of the nation's great railroad transportation network, and its proximity to clay deposits in nearby Indiana. By the beginning of World War I, three nationally-important terra cotta companies—Northwestern, American, and Midland—were all headquartered in or near Chicago.

First-generation movie theaters such as the Biograph and Village theaters typically were built of brick with relatively simple terra cotta ornament in historic styles, most typically Classical Revival. Transitional theaters such as the Portage Park, while still relatively modest in scale, were more lavishly detailed with terra-cotta ornament. Later movie palaces of the 1920s were often entirely clad with terra cotta on their main entrance facades; examples include the Chicago and Uptown theaters. Terra cotta was especially suited to such buildings due to the visually-elaborate nature of their designs and ornament, embodying a degree of fantasy unlike most buildings experienced by Chicagoans.

The Midland Terra Cotta Company

The terra cotta used for the Portage Park Theatre Building was manufactured by the Midland Terra Cotta Company, one of the three major architectural terra-cotta manufacturers located in the Chicago area. Midland was founded in 1910 by William G. Krieg, a former City of Chicago architect, and Alfred Brunkhorst, son of one of the founders of the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company, the largest and best-known of Chicago's terra-cotta manufacturers. The company was located in the near west suburb of Cicero at W. 16th St. and 54th Ave. Midland's terra cot-

The Chicago architectural and engineering firm of Fridstein & Co., in association with architect Lindley P. Rowe, designed the Portage Park Theatre Building. Meyer Fridstein (bottom) was the head of Fridstein & Co. Buildings designed by the firm include:

[a.] Harding Theater (demolished)

[b.] The Shoreland Hotel (a designated Chicago Landmark)

[c.] The Belden-Stratford Hotel (listed on the National Register of Historic Places)

[d.] The Tower Theater (demolished)

[e.] The Congress Theater (a designated Chicago Landmark)

[f.] The Webster Hotel (listed on the National Register of Historic Places)



[a.]



[b.]



[c.]



[d.]

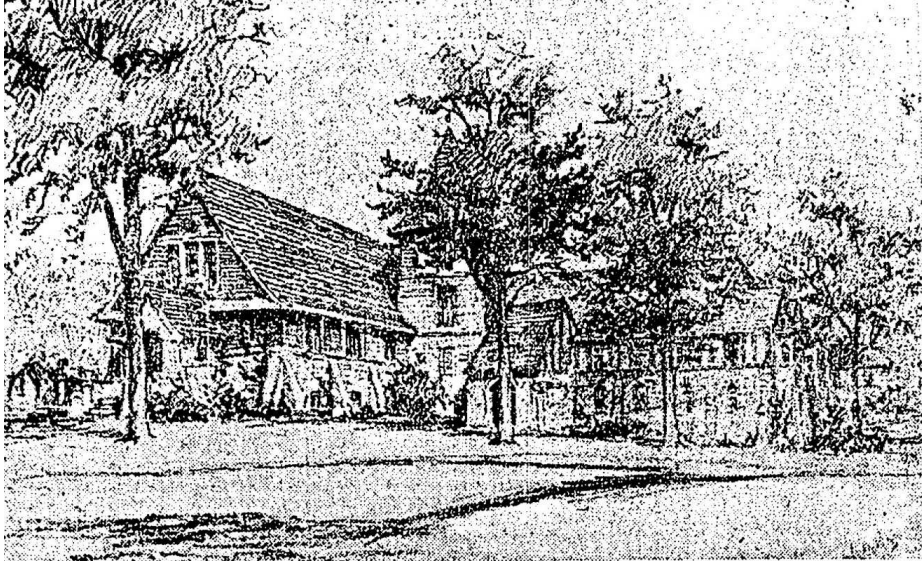


[e.]

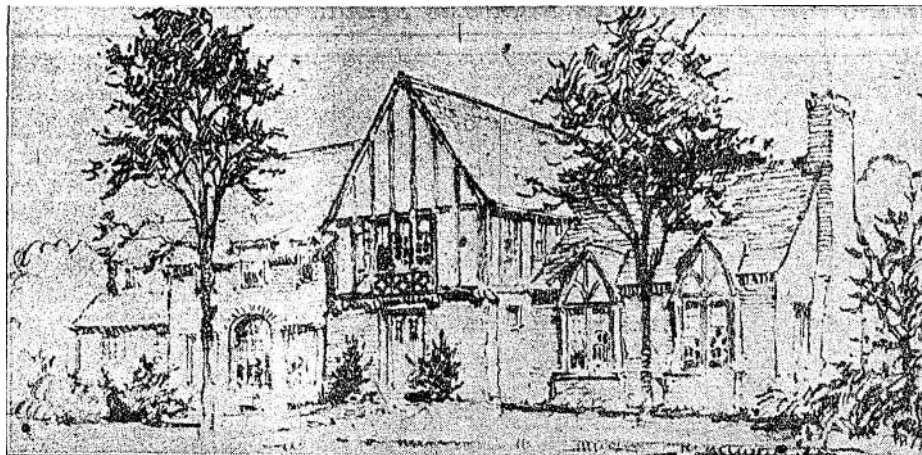
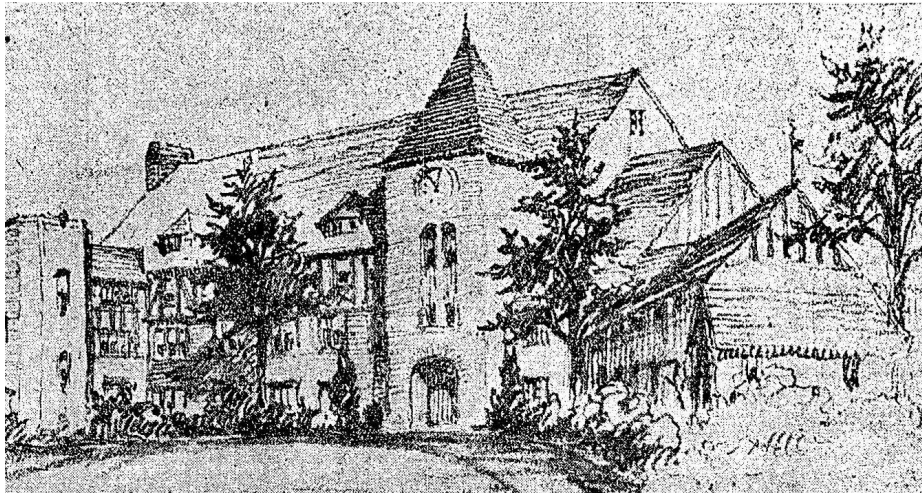


[f.]





Lindley P. Rowe, who worked with Fridstein & Co. to design the Portage Park Theatre Building, designed a number of buildings in the 1920s while a partner in the firm of Rowe, Dillard & Rowe. Top: The parish house for the Church of the Mediator in Chicago's Morgan Park neighborhood. Middle: The Forest View Country Club northwest of Chicago. Bottom: A North Shore house in the Tudor Revival style



ta was used for Navy (originally Municipal) Pier, the Medinah Temple, and a number of movie theaters other than the Portage Park, including the Marbro and Granada.

The Midland Terra Cotta Company is also known today for its popularization of terra cotta designs based on the non-historic foliate architectural ornament of famed Chicago architect Louis Sullivan. The company kept a variety of stock “Sullivan-esque” ornament that could be mixed and matched by architects for small and mid-size buildings. Such buildings can be found throughout Chicago neighborhoods.

The use of architectural terra cotta peaked in the 1920s. Business for Midland Terra Cotta slowed in the decline of building construction during the Great Depression, and the company closed circa 1939.

THE "SIX CORNERS" SHOPPING DISTRICT AND THE PORTAGE PARK NEIGHBORHOOD

Since its opening in 1920, the Portage Park Theatre Building has been a fixture of the “Six Corners” commercial district on Chicago's Northwest Side. Located on the eastern edge of the Portage Park community area, Six Corners was one of Chicago’s leading neighborhood shopping districts throughout much of the 20th century, and the Portage Park Theatre Building was historically an important commercial and cultural anchor for the neighborhood.

The Portage Park community is named after the Native American “portages,” or overland trails, noted by European pioneers to the area in the early 1800s. Natural ridges along Irving Park Rd., Cicero Ave. and Naragansett Ave. provided relatively easy overland connections between the North Branch of the Chicago River and the DesPlaines River.

Throughout most of the 19th century, the area remained a rural part of Jefferson Township, located between the railroad suburbs of Irving Park to the south and Norwood Park to the north. The Northwest Plank Road (now Milwaukee Avenue) was built in the 1840s and became the primary route to Chicago to the south and to Wheeling to the north. The road early on had a toll booth located approximately where the Portage Park Theatre Building is today.

An important early commercial institution for travelers and surrounding farmers was a small inn and tavern built in 1841 by E. B. Sutherland at what would become the corner of Milwaukee and Belle Plaine avenues, a block north of the future site of the Portage Park Theatre Building. (Later known as Dickinson Tavern, the building was a longtime community gathering place and a neighborhood “landmark” until it was demolished in 1929.)

Portage Park was annexed to Chicago in 1889, along with the rest of Jefferson Township. Despite the annexation, the neighborhood was slow to develop. Street car lines were extended through the “Six Corners” intersection of Milwaukee, Cicero and Irving Park in the 1890s and early 1900s, with a line first on Milwaukee Avenue (1894), then Irving Park Road (1896), and lastly Cicero Avenue (1913).

But much of the area was low-lying, marshy and prone to flooding, and would remain so until the widespread installation of sewers in the years prior to World War I. Also, beginning in 1915, a new park at Irving Park, Central and Long was developed. Portage Park, as the park became known, became an important amenity for the larger neighborhood.

With these infrastructure improvements, residential development grew rapidly during the 1910s and 1920s. The *Local Community Fact Book*, which provides concise histories of Chicago's community areas, states that the Portage Park neighborhood reached residential "maturity" by 1924.

The Six Corners intersection of Milwaukee, Cicero and Irving Park, and the surrounding commercial district, largely developed in the 20th century, although commercial buildings were built along the streets during the late 19th century. Contemporary photographs show these buildings to be relatively scattered, low in scale and largely of wood-frame construction. An early major developer in Six Corners was the real-estate partnership of Koester and Zander, which in 1889 bought and began the development of 82 acres of land on the southwest corner of Irving Park Road and Cicero Avenue.

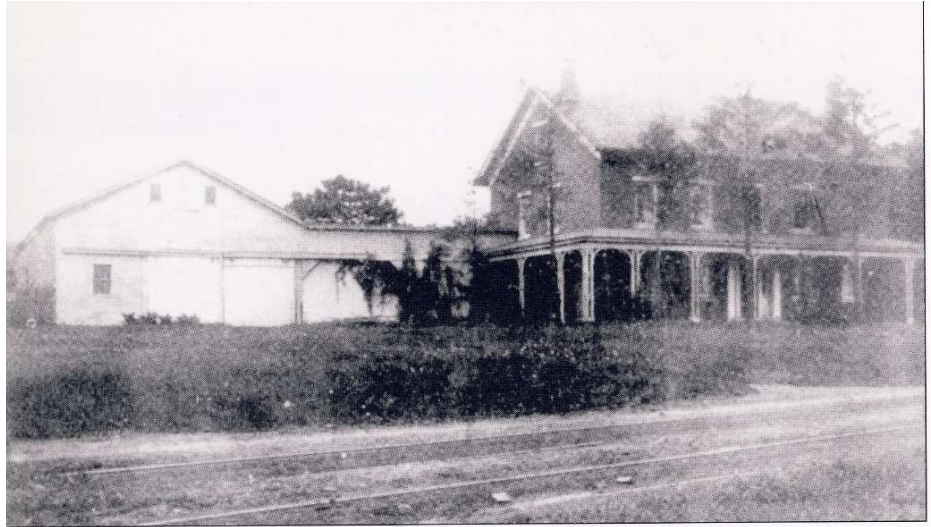
Much development came to Six Corners in the years following World War I. The Portage Park Theatre Building, built in 1919-20, was a harbinger of this development, which saw the construction of important commercial anchors for the shopping district such as the flatiron Klee Building on the northwest corner of Cicero and Milwaukee, and the Portage Park Bank Building at the southeast corner of Milwaukee and Irving Park. A *Chicago Tribune* article from 1938, looking back on the development of Six Corners, noted that the value of an unimproved corner lot at Milwaukee and Irving Park had risen from \$4,000 in 1910, to \$18,000 in 1920, then to an astounding \$199,000 in 1930.

Although the Great Depression of the 1930s depressed such land values, the Six Corners area remained a vital neighborhood shopping district. The construction in 1938 of the Sears Roebuck & Co. retail store on the northeast corner of Irving Park and Cicero only solidified the commercial importance of the intersection. This importance remained into the 1950s and 60s, declining only during the last years of the 20th century as businesses closed in the wake of the popularity of suburban shopping centers.

LATER HISTORY

In 1929, Ascher Brothers sold the Portage Park Theatre Building to Fox Chicago Theaters. In turn, the theatre was leased by Fox in 1932 to the G.C.S. theater organization, led by lawyer Mort D. Goldberg. (A year previously, the theater's name had been shortened to the Portage Theatre.) A year later, in 1933, Harry Krauspe of the State Realty Trust gained control of the theater from the Fox Chicago Theaters company, along with five other theaters, including the West Englewood, Frolic, Metropolitan, Oakland Square and Crown.

Built in 1841, the Dickinson Inn was one of the earliest buildings of Portage Park. It was located just north of the future site of the Portage Park Theatre Building. The building served as Jefferson Township Hall for a number of years in the mid-19th century and remained a community "landmark" until its demolition in 1929.



An aerial view of the then rural Six Corners area taken in 1909. The diagonal road is Milwaukee Avenue, which was built as the Northwest Plank Road in the 1840s.



The real estate firm of Koester & Zander made the first major real estate transaction in the Six Corners area, buying 82 acres of land at the southwest corner of Irving Park Rd. and Cicero Ave. in 1889, the year that Jefferson Township was annexed to Chicago.

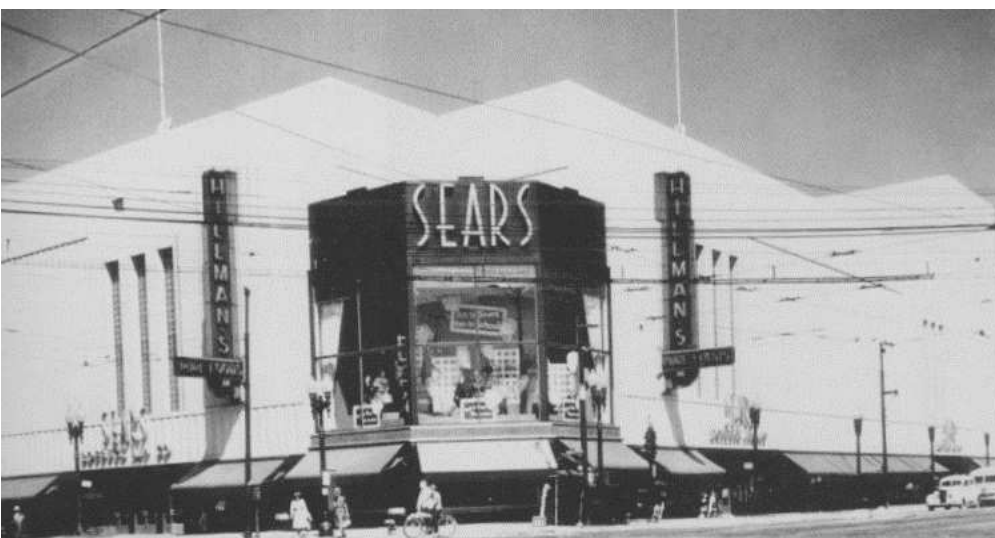




A view of Six Corners in 1934, looking north on Milwaukee Ave. from Irving Park Rd. The five-story Klee Building is to the right.



Another view of the intersection, also in 1934, looking south on Milwaukee from Irving Park Road. The Portage Park Bank Building (now Bank of America and with its exterior reclad) is on the left.



Sears Roebuck & Co., famous as a mail-order company, built an early retail building in 1938 on the northeast corner of Cicero Ave. and Irving Park Rd.

In 1939, the theater's lobby was remodeled in the sleek and spare Art Moderne style, and it was acquired by the Balaban & Katz theater chain. In 1962 the existing marquee was replaced with a restyled marquee from the demolished Tivoli Theater.

In 1975 the Portage Park Theatre Building was acquired by the Brotman and Sherman circuit; available information indicates that the theater at that time hosted live country music acts, including Conway Twitty and Loretta Lynn. In 1980 the theater was acquired by M & R Amusements, which subdivided the theater into two theaters; this subdivision has since been reversed.

More recently, the theater, which closed in 2001, then reopened in 2006, has shown a variety of movies. It is currently the location of the Silent Film Society of Chicago and the Northwest Chicago Film Society, which show historic films.

The Portage Park Theatre Building is an orange-rated building in the *Chicago Historic Resources Survey*.

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sect 2-120-690), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a recommendation of landmark designation to the City Council for an area, district, place, building, structure, work of art or other object within the City of Chicago if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated "criteria for designation," as well as the integrity criterion.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Portage Park Theatre Building be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

Criterion 1: Value as an Example of City, State or National Heritage

Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, or the United States.

- The Portage Park Theatre Building is a significant “transitional” movie theater in Chicago dating from 1919-20, exemplifying this important stage of movie theater design immediately after World War I. It remains one of the best of such remaining theaters in Chicago, many of which have been demolished or remodeled for other purposes.
- The Portage Park Theatre Building is one of the last-remaining theaters associated with Ascher Brothers, one of Chicago's largest and most important theater operators in the 1910s and 1920s. Run by Nathan, Max and Harry Ascher, Ascher Brothers operated many theaters scattered throughout the city.
- The Portage Park Theatre Building has served for decades as an important neighborhood commercial and entertainment venue for the Six Corners commercial area on Chicago's Northwest Side, showing first-run “moving pictures” in its early years, later as a venue for

second-run movies and, most recently, historic films presented by groups such as the Silent Film Society of Chicago and Northwest Chicago Film Society, among other kinds of films.

Criterion 4: Exemplary Architecture

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.

- The Portage Park Theatre Building is a rare-surviving and significant example of a “transitional” movie theater, designed in 1920 by architect Lindley P. Rowe, working in association with the architectural and engineering firm of Fridstein & Co., and built exclusively for motion picture use.
- The Portage Park Theatre Building contains a theater, street-level stores, and apartments and exemplifies “theater-block,” an historic multi-use building type in Chicago that have served as anchors in neighborhood shopping districts; and .
- The Portage Park Theatre Building is elaborately decorated with unusual and outstanding ornament in cream-colored terra cotta, exemplifying fine craftsmanship. Its distinctive details, including a grandly-scaled arch with sunburst, as well as harps, dragons and fasces, are designed in the Classical Revival architectural style.
- The theater has a finely-detailed French Neoclassical auditorium with a variety of swags, garlands, pilasters, moldings, medallions and other Classical-style details.
- The theater also has a set of lobbies that were redesigned in 1939 in the Art Moderne style, and they exemplify the style with their overall sleek, spare design and recessed cove lighting in walls and ceilings.

Criterion 7: Unique or Distinctive Visual Feature

Its unique location or distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Chicago.

- The Portage Park Theatre Building is an established and familiar visual feature on North Milwaukee Avenue in the Six Corners commercial area on the Northwest Side due to the building's dramatic terra cotta ornament, including its large-scale, rooftop arch, and its location at a bend in North Milwaukee Avenue, one of the city's distinctive diagonal avenues and the main commercial street linking Chicago's historic Northwest Side neighborhoods.

The Portage Park Theatre Building was built on North Milwaukee Avenue where the street bends at Cuyler. Top: A photo circa 1910 showing a vacant lot on the site of the future theater. The Dickinson Inn is in the background. Bottom: A view circa 1930-40 looking south on Milwaukee Ave. Next to the theater to the north is the two-story terra-cotta clad commercial building that replaced the Dickinson Inn. (This building has since been demolished.)



Integrity Criterion

The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic, community, architectural or aesthetic value.

The Portage Park Theatre Building remains in its original location. Its setting today is primarily a neighborhood commercial district as it was when the building was built. The building was designed as a multi-use building combining theater, storefronts and apartments and these three functions continue at the building and are clearly expressed in architect Lindley P. Rowe's design.

On the exterior, the majority of the building's historic exterior wall materials, brick and terra glazed terra cotta, remain in place. Historic photos indicate that the building once had a terra cotta cornice above the central arch which extended across one bay on either side of it. A low parapet was placed above this cornice and a pair of ornamental pylons flanked either side of the arch. These roofline decorative elements were removed at some point in the 1950s, probably due to deterioration which develops more quickly in roofline elements like these that are especially exposed to the effects of weather. These elements could be replaced in the future with terra cotta or a suitable substitute material, and the loss of this decoration does not significantly impair the building's integrity.

The commercial storefronts on Milwaukee Avenue are not historic, but the overall large storefront windows and recessed entrances reflect the design of the original storefronts. The windows for the apartments facing Cuyler all appear to be replacements, while the windows on the theater façade appear to be original.

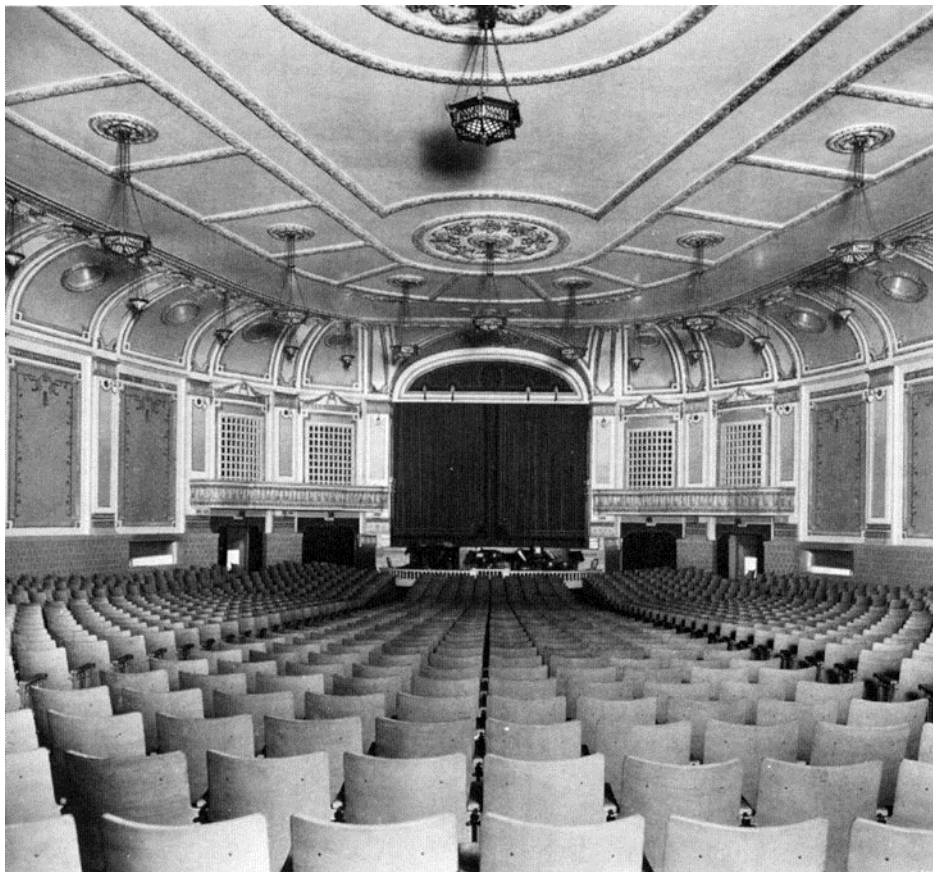
The 1939 renovation also changed the street-level box office and entrance to the theater with black and white vitrolite wall cladding and new doors. While the entrance doors and vitrolite panels have been replaced, the overall configuration and box office from the 1939 renovation remains intact. As noted above, the existing marquee was originally installed on the Tivoli Theater and was modified and installed at the Portage Park in 1962, replacing one that was installed in 1939. Photographs of the building prior to 1939 provide some evidence of the building's original marquee and signage.

On the interior, the most significant alterations to the building date to the 1939 renovation of the theater lobbies and connecting rotunda, which were remodeled in the then-fashionable Art Moderne architectural style. Though not original to the 1919-20 design of the building, these lobbies represent a significant early change to that possesses historic and architectural significance in its own right. Bump-outs in the rotunda to accommodate accessible washrooms are the most visible change to the lobbies since the 1939 renovation. Changes to the interior of the theater auditorium include the introduction of new seating, ventilation grills, the removal of original light fixtures, and changes to the original color scheme.

Taken as a whole, the alterations to the building are either significant in their own right due to their age and design, or minor and reversible, and they do not detract from the building's ability to express its historic, architectural and aesthetic value.



The circa 1920 photo (below), paired with a current photograph (top) illustrates that the Portage Park Theatre Building retains very good exterior physical integrity. The building's characteristic features such as the historic face brick, terra cotta decoration with incandescent bulbs, and the outsize fan-shaped ornament that crowns the theater all convey the historic aesthetic that set the building apart from the more common commercial buildings of the area.



A current photo of the auditorium (above) compared with a circa-1920 photo (left) shows that it retains most of its original plaster decoration, coved ceiling, and overall volume. The original light fixtures and seating have been replaced.

SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

Whenever a building, structure, object, or district is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the “significant historical and architectural features” of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark. The Commission has identified the significant features for the building, and these are defined in the Commission’s “Recommendation to the City Council of Chicago that Chicago Landmark Designation be adopted for Portage Park Theatre Building,” dated March 7, 2013.

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A 1920 rendering of the Portage Park Theatre used in advertisement for the Kewanee Boiler Corporation.

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Sollitt & Sons advertisement: p. 20 (bottom).

Marquee: The Journal of the Theatre Historical Society of America (vol. 22, #3, 1990): p. 11 (bottom left).

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Meites, *History of the Jews in Chicago*: p. 15 (top left).

Chicago Tribune Historical Archives, various dates: pp. 15 (bottom), and 18.

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“Congress Theater” landmark designation report files: p. 17 (middle left).

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The Rotarian (April 1921): p. 29.

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