

# **PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF INFORMATION**

**SUBMITTED TO THE COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS IN MARCH 2024**



**RAMOVA THEATER**  
**3508-3518 S. HALSTED ST.**



**CITY OF CHICAGO**  
**Brandon Johnson, Mayor**

**Department of Planning and Development**  
**Ciere Boatright, 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 the designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.*

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# **RAMOVA THEATER**

**3508-3518 SOUTH HALSTED ST.**

**PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE: 1929-1944**

**ARCHITECT: MYER O. NATHAN**

The Ramova Theater was completed in 1929 for Lithuanian businessman Jokūbas Maskoliūnas as a motion picture theater serving the Bridgeport neighborhood. Located mid-block on S. Halsted St., the Ramova's façade is a work in two parts: to the south stands the theater's façade executed in the Spanish Baroque style, to the north stands a row of commercial storefronts originally built in 1912 and incorporated into the theater in 1929 with a new façade. This combination of theater and commercial uses is known as a "theater block."

The theater served as a neighborhood movie palace from its opening in 1929 until it was closed and left vacant in 1985. When it was constructed, the Ramova had the largest audience capacity of any theater in Bridgeport and by far the most elaborate design. It showed first run films between 1929 and 1958 when programming switched to second-run films and other special events until its closure in 1985. The adjoining commercial block, visually tied to the theater through exterior ornament, was home to numerous neighborhood businesses.



**The Ramova Theater is located mid-block on South Halsted Street south of 35th Street in the commercial heart of the Bridgeport neighborhood.**

### **DEVELOPMENT OF THE RAMOVA THEATER**

The construction of the Ramova Theater is associated with the ethnic Lithuanian community that had established it itself in the Bridgeport neighborhood which was close to employment opportunities in the Union Stock Yards nearby. As the community grew, so too did a commercial district along South Halsted St. that catered to its cultural and social needs. Similar to the other ethnic enclaves in Chicago, Bridgeport’s Lithuanian community also developed entertainment venues, including humble storefront nickelodeons and eventually the much grander Ramova Theater.

The site of the Ramova Theater was first developed in 1912 with a single-story commercial storefront building. This building would be incorporated, expanded and refaced with the development of the Ramova 17 years later. This storefront building was developed by Fred Wolf who commissioned Chicago architect David S. Klafter to design a building with five storefronts. The \$15,000 building was soon occupied by a variety of stores, some of which were

owned by Lithuanian Americans. On either side of the 1912 storefront building stood nickelodeons, the compact, first-generation movie houses. To the north, in the extant two-story Greystone at 3506 S. Halsted St., was the 275-seat Casino Theater. To the south, at 3520 S. Halsted St., stood the non-extant Monogram Theater, which held 432-seats.

Bridgeport resident Jokūbas (Jacob) Maskoliūnas (1886-1980), who was born in Siesikai, Lithuania, initiated the development the Ramova. Maskoliūnas immigrated with his brother Ignati to the United States in 1907 at the age of 21. He arrived in Chicago and settled in the Bridgeport neighborhood, where he became the proprietor of a saloon until the beginning of Prohibition in January 1920. Maskoliūnas shifted his attention to the entertainment industry and helped establish the Chicago Lithuanian Auditorium, a new venue in Bridgeport that staged popular concerts, dances, and other entertainment. The auditorium was located at 3133 S. Halsted St. but no longer survives.

In August 1928, Maskoliūnas expanded his interests in entertainment in Bridgeport by obtaining a building permit to build what is known today as the Ramova Theater. The theater was planned to have 1,200-seats, nearly four times more than any of the several nickelodeons that lined South Halsted Street at the time, and larger than the 920-seat Milda Theater, a sizable theater built in 1914 at 3140 S. Halsted St. (nonextant), by a fellow Lithuanian community member. Maskoliūnas intended to build a theater with the scale and presence of other first-run movie palaces that had been built across the city in other neighborhoods. Inside, the Ramova was to be equipped with the latest technology, including the Vitaphone sounds system for playing newly popular movies with spoken dialogue known as “talkies.” The Ramova’s highly ornamental Spanish Baroque façade lent the building a prominent visual presence in the Bridgeport neighborhood.

The location that Maskoliūnas selected for his new theater was the same site where Fred Wolf built a single-story row of five storefronts in 1912. Maskoliūnas acquired the storefront building and a two-story frame building to the south at 3518 S. Halsted St. According to Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, it appears that the rear of the single-story storefront building was partially demolished to accommodate the footprint of Ramova’s auditorium, while the remaining storefront building had a second story added and was refaced to visually unite it with the new theater’s



**Jokūbas (Jacob) Maskoliūnas (1886-1980), who initiated the development of the Ramova.**  
*Source: Bridgeport News, April 11, 1940.*

facade. The frame building to the south was demolished and replaced with the grand entrance lobby for the theater.

In March 1929, advertisements for the new theater began to appear in the local Lithuanian language *Margutis* magazine. The full-page advertisements featured a rendering of the 1,300-seat theater complex and a translation exclaimed, “The pride of the Lithuanian community, a beautiful, spacious deluxe theater at 35th & Halsted Street!” The neighborhood’s Lithuanian residents were invited to invest in the new theater by purchasing shares in the Corporation, “Whether you buy one or one hundred shares – you will earn a proportional part of the profits.”

The \$500,000 cost to build the theater was to be paid off by selling shares and then paying interest to shareholders as the theater was leased annually for \$36,000. The lessors were to be the Greek American movie theater operator Harry A. Reckas and his brothers Aristides and Stelianos. Maskoliūnas entrusted the day-to-day operations of the theater to the Reckas brothers, who had experience in the cinema operations. This was somewhat unusual as smaller movie theaters were generally managed by the owners. However, this was likely more common in Chicago, when theater developers or owners were likely involved in more than one enterprise. While the Reckas family did not appear to be part of a major statewide circuit, meaning four or more theaters owned by a particular organization or collective, all parties involved with the Ramova seemed to have ambitions to grow into a full fledged circuit.

Early in 1929, advertisements referred to the theater as the “Roxee.” Over the summer of 1929, a contest was held by *Draugas*, the local Lithuanian language newspaper, to name the theater. That honor was given to Rev. Anicetus M. Linkus who chose “Ramova,” which means either “peaceful place” or “serene place” in Lithuanian. A marquee and a blade sign were built with the name “RAMOVA” in orange neon, and the theater officially opened on August 18, 1929. The Ramova Theater’s opening was held three days before its “sister” theater the Music Box Theater on the city’s northside (3733 N. Southport Ave.). The two theaters were dubbed “sisters” due to their similar architectural ornamentation. The inaugural program included a concert performance by the Little Symphony Orchestra of Chicago, a performance by Chicago Civic Opera baritone singer Howard Preston, and several films on Lithuanian life. The following week, regular first run film features started with Sigmund Romberg’s musical *The Desert Song* (1929), presented with Vitaphone sound. Maskoliūnas worked as an usher in his new theater.

Next door to the theater, the complex’s commercial block, also developed by Maskoliūnas, was occupied by a variety of stores and businesses. One news story from 1934 stated that the then five-year-old property contained seven storefronts at street level and commercial lofts on the second floor. One of the first and longest lasting businesses was the Ramova Grill, which was famous for its homemade chili and occupied a storefront at 3510 S. Halsted St.. The grill outlived theater operations, opening with the theater in 1929 and closing in 2012. Other businesses that occupied the commercial block included Stella’s, a woman’s clothing store (3514-16 S. Halsted St.) and Dr. Powell’s Optometrist Office (3505 S. Halsted St.). Many of these neigh-

# RAMOVA

## Teatro Atidarymas

3518 South Halsted Street, Chicago, Ill.

### Sekmadieny, Rugpiučio-August 18 d., 1929

GRANDIOZINĖ PROGRAMA

<p>Little Symphony Orchestra of Chicago</p> <p>Howard Preston — Chicagos Operos Baritonas</p> <p>Antanas Vanagaitis</p> <p>Naujienu Pikniko — Gražuolių Kontesto Krut. Paveikslai</p> <p>Vilnius Pikniko Krutamieji Paveikslai</p>	<p>Vitafonas — Movietonas</p> <p>Specialiai Suorkestruotos Lietuvių Liaudies Dainos, kurias grieš Simfonijos Orkestras</p> <p>Krutamieji Paveikslai imti 1929 metais — Lietuvių Laisvės Varpo Laikais</p> <p>Ir kiti Siurprizai apie kuriuos bus pranešta vėliau.</p>
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**Tikietų Kainos \$3.00**

Advertisements featuring the Ramova Theater, formerly the “Roxee.”

Top left: 1929 rendering and advertisement in Lithuanian for the Ramova Theater’s opening day program on August 18, 1929. Source: Margutis, August 15, 1929, *The National Library of Lithuania*.

Top right: 1929 rendering and real estate bond advertisement. Sourced: The Chicago Daily Tribune, July 1, 1929.

Bottom right: 1929 rendering and advertisement in Lithuanian for investing in shares of the theater corporation. Source: Margutis, March 15, 1929, *The National Library of Lithuania*.

1929.

59 YEARS' CONSERVATIVE INVESTMENT SERVICE 59

### \$200,000 West Central Building 6% FIRST MORTGAGE BONDS

**Location:** Four miles from the Loop center at 3508-3518 S. Halsted Street. Land area 1,304.150. Recent nearby sales indicate a land value of approximately \$12,000.00 per foot.

**Improvements:** Now nearing completion and illustrated above. Entire premises under cash deposited, guaranteed, long time net (except taxes) Lease of \$3,000 per month, equaling three times the annual interest charge.

**Suitability:** The neighborhood is densely populated by a local trading type class, which gives added assurance that the undertaking will prove successful and profitable.

**Valuation:** Independent Land Appraisal, with improvements at actual cost, total \$412,000.00.

**SERIAL PAYMENTS**

\$ 7,500.00 due August 1, 1930	\$10,000.00 due August 1, 1934
7,500.00 due August 1, 1931	10,000.00 due August 1, 1935
10,000.00 due August 1, 1932	10,000.00 due August 1, 1936
10,000.00 due August 1, 1933	10,000.00 due August 1, 1937
\$125,000.00 due August 1, 1939	

Bonds Certified — Title Guaranteed — Corporate Trustee  
Par 6% Plus

**W<sup>M</sup> C. HEINEMANN & CO.**  
ANTHONY W. STANMEYER, Presy.  
10 SOUTH LA SALLE ST. CHICAGO

BEST CHICAGO REAL ESTATE BONDS AND MORTGAGES ARE MARKED HEINEMANN

## LIETUVIAMS PASIDIDŽIUOTI

Naujas Pukius Didelis Teatras prie 35-tos ir Halsted St., Chicago, Ill.

**1200 akcijų, \$50,000.00 garantuotas rodois ir metai, Vertė \$50,000.00**

### Lietuvių Teatras "ROXEE"

"Atviro dangaus" lubos, augšta, dideli ir pulki oras. Naujasis scena lentysimtai. Vita-fonas.

Tai bus vienas iš gražiausių ir įaukliausių viešųjų teatrų Chicagoje. Įėjo į šį teatrą žmogus jausias pakopos tikro molonumo ir nuostabiame vietoje. Artistikai išdabinta augšta anga, pūkūs ir erdvus teatro vidus su milina dangumi, kuriames mikiški molės ir tvirtas, kaip ir didžiausias "Capitol" teatras. Jaukumą pavieklia perstatymus šiame teatre ves H. A. Beckas su savo broliais, kurie yra ekspertai savo fakoje ir kuriems teatras savo finansuata didžiuliam metui po \$30,000.00 metais.

Li tavalis šis teatras sumanė ir pastatė. Lietuvių rankose jis yra šlaudien ir lietuvių rankose jis turės pasaulinį li litoviana neši pelnas.

Žmonėms yra sunkiai apveklamas dalykas valdyti didią didele nuosavybe. Būklia vieniems suadinti ir dabar tu-toviniai, bet ir todėl, kad tai yra pelningas klėmis ir augius šimtiniama savartojimas pinigų. Šio teatro sumat-avioja atidėdžia visa pelnia nuosavybe ir klėmi už nominali kainai. Nešiorint ar kas šieris vienas bėra ar šimta jis bus lygus savininkas ir gaus savo pritaikoma dalį pelno.

Siu teatro korporacijos bėra turi klėdian savo pilną vertę. Pavinėlis, kurie bus sumokėti už bėra, bus iš \$50,000 garantuotos metais rodois. Nuomotojai turi šliyti, tašyti ir priliūgti teatras savo klėtais. Jis talpni savo klėtais turi intaisyti vitafonas, vargonai, scena sulimėms ir tt. Taii teatros savininkams pelkis šitais bus \$15,000; atėjusiu ta is gausiamu \$50,000.00, ilks apie \$20,000.00. Iš šios sumos už metai bus numokė-ta \$7,000.00 pirmo morgidėsis, o klėkvėra pirmo morgidėsis klėkvėra savininkams.

Taii teatras ne tik pats užsimokėsi, bet ir visą klėkvėra duos savininkams gėra metini pelnia ant indėtu pinigų. Tuo tarpu vėre bėra mudat augis su klėkvėra pirmo morgidėsis numokėdėms.

Šonku yra rasti vietas, kur pinigai galims buti indėti taip saugiai, taip pelningai ir su tokia didele nauda ir gėra, kaip šį pūklėdėsiu lietuviu teatru Chicagoje.

Negaiskėkite. Naukoklės oręra tuojau. Šloktite tūlkom. Šilie visos savo klėkliai tapkite vienu iš savininku mūsų puikliavio teatro. Šiai tuvi dabar šliorkite čia užkėtu klėkvėra ir pūskėkite indėtu adresu, kad žavus daugius informacijų.

Įšliorpkite šį kupona ir tuojau prisliūkite Vardas \_\_\_\_\_  
THEATRE BUILDING CORPORATION, Adresas \_\_\_\_\_  
810 W. 35th St., Chicago, Ill.

Nėriašant manęs, prašu suteikti man pilnų žinių, kaip as galėčiau tapti vienu iš savininku Lietuviu "ROXEE" teatru Chicagoje.

"Securities in Class 'D' under Illinois Securities Law—These are Speculative Securities".



boring businesses used the Ramova Theater in their advertisements for their business by using language like “next to the Ramova Theater” further emphasizing the anchoring effect the theater had on the commercial block and the businesses that occupied it.

## **BUILDING DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION**

The Ramova is bordered by South Halsted Street along the east, a public alley along the west, a vacant lot cleared of a single-story building in 2003 to the south, and a two-story mixed-use building to the north. The theater and commercial block together form a mostly square footprint with the exception of an egress alley dividing the auditorium from the commercial block. The two-story masonry theater and commercial block share some terra cotta ornament and internal communication, but the building is essentially a work in two parts with each having its own description below.

### *Theater*

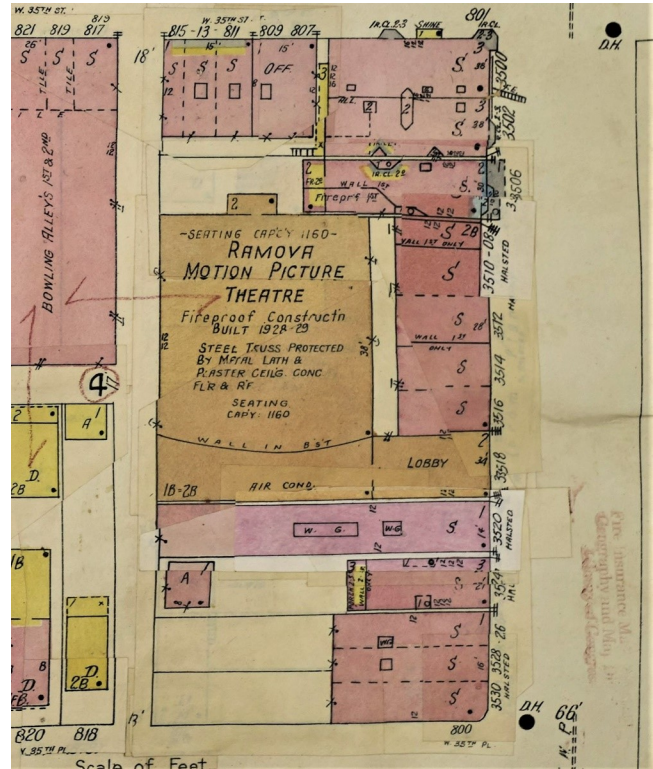
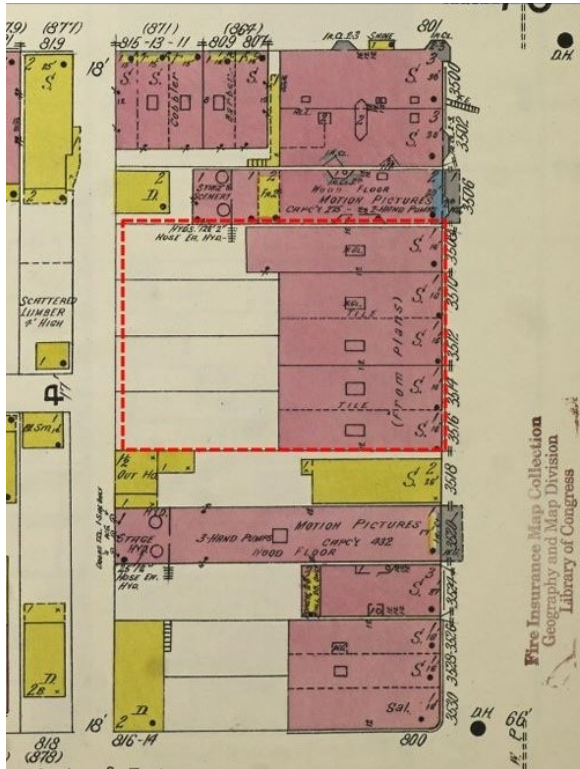
The Ramova Theater’s façade is a symmetrical composition with a Spanish Baroque architectural treatment rendered in buff colored terra cotta. Layered on top of this is a prominent blade sign and marquee from 1944, replacing the theater’s original 1929 sign and marquee. At street level, terra cotta piers with arabesque ornament frame the six entrance doors to the theater which are clear glass with metal frames. A ticket booth marks the center of the entrance. Above the entrance, the 1944 marquee projects from the building to the curb. The marquee has top and bottom bands of chaser lights that frame illuminated side panels and a central panel of green enameled metal with the name “RAMOVA” in neon.

Above the marquee, Spanish Baroque ornamentation dominates the treatment of the façade including twisted columns, cartouches, scallop shells, scrolls, pinnacles, niches, and swirling, naturalistic plant forms. All of this is rendered in terra cotta on a ground of flat terra cotta blocks. The façade is articulated as three vertical bays: the center bay being dominated by a large window, the bays one either side are decorated with

The large, deeply recessed window consists of multiple panes with a decorative round medallion in stained glass. The window is framed by two attached columns that are delicately twisted. The window opening has a complex arched top and baluster columns at the sides. Two terra cotta finials flank either side of the irregular shaped arch which forms the bottom of the extravagant gable that tops the facade.

Along the south side of the elevation and extending above the roof there is a historic steel structure that supports a circa 1944 neon blade sign that is clad in green enameled metal like the marquee. The sign reads: RAMOVA on both sides.

The south elevation of the theater facing a vacant lot, and the west elevation facing an alley are both Chicago common brick and devoid of architectural treatment.



**Top left: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1912.** The red outline shows the former commercial block with five separate retail spaces later incorporated into the Ramova Theater.

**Top right: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1950,** showing the theater block and attached commercial space.

Source: Library of Congress.



**Current view of the Ramova Theater looking north on South Halsted Street.** The theater's façade at left is from 1929. The commercial wing at right was built in 1912, then a story and a new façade were added in 1929 to compliment the theater.



The façade of the theater combines an elaborate Spanish Baroque façade in terra cotta with a marquee and blade sign from 1944.



**The theater lobby (above) and auditorium (below) have been completely restored in 2023 after decades of neglect and water infiltration. Both spaces continue the Spanish theme of the exterior to create the atmosphere of a Spanish courtyard rendered in decorative plaster. The auditorium has been converted from a motion picture theater to a performance venue requiring the removal of seating, floor leveling, a new stage and stage lighting.**

### *Commercial Block Facade*

The commercial block is arranged into six bays and is topped by a low, asphalt-shingled, mansard roof above a terra cotta parapet. Each bay holds one storefront at the ground-level and two pairs of windows with non-historic double-hung sashes at the second floor. The second bay from the north end of the commercial block projects slightly and is entirely clad in terra cotta. A recessed main entrance is centered in this bay; it accesses the block's upper floor commercial loft space. The first story entrance has a simple terra cotta surround with restrained pilasters and a curvilinear gable. Above the entrance is a pair of replacement double-hung windows framed in an elaborate terra cotta design complete with cartouches, garlands and wreaths, and a prominent round arch. Terra cotta banding caps the first story and is decorated with a sea scroll pattern. At the second floor, windows have a continuous terra cotta sill and feature terra cotta lintels with a blind balustrade pattern and a central cartouche flanked by scrolls.

### *Architect Myer O. Nathan*

The Ramova Theater was designed by architect Myer O. Nathan (1891-1971). Nathan was born in 1891 in Carson, Iowa. His parents (Abraham and Mollie Nathan) were born in Russia and Poland. He received his degree in architecture from the University of Illinois at Champaign in 1914 began practicing as an architect in Chicago.

In 1917, Nathan was working for architect for A.L. Levy, who was establishing himself as a specialist in movie theater design. By 1920, Nathan was working as an independent architect and had returned home to Iowa. By 1930, he had married and returned to Chicago as a working architect.

By 1942, Nathan was working for the South Shore High School in Chicago and 1940 census records show Nathan had retired from architecture and was teaching drawing in Chicago Public Schools. Other known Nathan-designed buildings in Chicago include a c.1930 commercial block at 1227 N. Milwaukee Ave. in the Art Moderne style.

### **HISTORY OF CHICAGO'S BRIDGEPORT NEIGHBORHOOD**

The Bridgeport neighborhood has long been home to working-class families and is known as one of the city's oldest communities. Once traversed by Native Americans, European settlers first came to the area in the late 1700s as French explorers while English settlers came later and settled small scale farms. In the 1830s, Irish immigrants settled in the area when it consisted of just a small fur trading settlement known as "Hardscrabble."

The construction of the Illinois and Michigan Canal transformed the frontier settlement into fledgling community of Bridgeport at the northeastern end of the canal which lay at the transition point for freight traveling between the canal and Chicago River. The town of Bridgeport was plotted in the early days of canal building in 1836, prior to the canal's construction, and was annexed by the city of Chicago in 1863.



**Above: the commercial block of the building includes 5 storefronts and an entrance bay.**

**Bottom Right: The terra cotta decoration of the entrance bay is visually related to the Spanish Baroque of the theater façade, though in a simplified form.**

**Bottom Left: The theater at the far end of the commercial block serves as an anchor for the storefronts.**

Construction of the Illinois and Michigan Canal attracted workers to dig it, railroads and shipping industries to ship their goods through it, along with the establishment early roadway systems, making it a microcosm of 19th century transportation. In 1900 the Sanitary and Ship Canal replaced the older Illinois and Michigan Canal, creating a larger route for modern ships. The portion of the canal that once ran through Bridgeport is now buried under the Stevenson Expressway, completed in the 1960s. Along with the footprint of the canal, the neighborhood is shaped by the footprint of Archer Avenue. This prominent diagonal road dictated future street planning in the neighborhood, setting the area apart from the rest of gridded Chicago.

The importance and influence of the canal further attracted industry to the area and working-class immigrants in search of jobs. The nearby railroads and Union Stock Yard, established in 1865, provided laborious work for eager immigrants in the area. Other early industries in Bridgeport included lumber, a stone quarry, a whiskey distributor, and meatpacking. River industries included stone and coal yards, building supplies, and electricity and gas plants. Thus, the working-class neighborhood of Bridgeport was born. 19th and later 20th century immigrant groups came from Ireland, Germany, Poland, and Lithuania. South Halsted Street, home to the Ramova, would later earn the name “Lithuanian Downtown” as the center of Lithuanian commercial enterprise.

Early residents of Bridgeport built and lived in small frame cottages or rooming houses. Later, residential areas of the neighborhood were lined with small frame cottages and brick bungalows. Some larger greystones were also built around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as residents gained more economic capital. Commercial enterprises subsequently followed and eventually entertainment venues began to pop up around the neighborhood. Archer Avenue was home to two 300-seat theatres and a bowling alley while taverns and dance halls were found near the river and throughout the neighborhood. These commercial and industrial areas were concentrated primarily along Archer Avenue, Halsted Street, and along the river.

Today, Bridgeport consists of a built environment as diverse as its population. Adding to the history with Irish and Lithuanian ethnic groups, Bridgeport is now home to a thriving Chinatown and Mexican American communities.

#### **LATER HISTORY OF THE RAMOVA THEATER**

Shortly after the dedication of the Ramova Theater, the national economy entered the Great Depression. Despite anticipated profits from its operation, the theater failed to survive and had to be liquidated in 1939. The building was sold to the theater’s movie operator Harry Reckas for a quarter of the building’s estimated value at \$130,000.

Ramova’s original owner Jacob Maskoliūnas returned to the tavern business, opening his J.M. Tavern across the street from the theater, at 3503 S. Halsted St., and he remained an active Bridgeport community leader and businessman. As Harry Reckas assumed ownership of the Ramova, he entrusted the management of the theater to John Smedal, a prominent figure in



**Left: Ramova Theater entry with historic blade sign and projecting marquee, 1930.**  
*Source: Cinema Treasures.*

**Below: Theater and commercial blocks, facing north on S. Halsted Street, 1933.**  
*Source: Cinema Treasures.*





the Greek community. Semedallas was widely reported on for his charity efforts, largely organized through the Ramova Theater. He would often organize shows where the price was a food or charitable donation for those in need in the community and hosted regular children's shows featuring cartoons and complimentary snacks.

The Ramova Theater continued to show first run films until the 1950s, when television and migration to the suburbs reduced demand for neighborhood cinemas. During this time, the Reckas brothers turned management of the theater over to Gus Konstantelos, whose brother also managed another prominent local theater, The Milda. As late as 1958, the Ramova had policy of only showing "Class A" films ensuring "Bridgeporters will be able to see the best pictures available."

The theater made improvements to attract patrons during this period, including adding air conditioning to the theater in time for the summer of 1940 and a new marquee and signage in 1944. Even with updates, the Ramova continued to struggle financially. Making matters worse, smaller neighborhood theaters like the Ramova had to compete with large chain theaters for film circuits, which were controlled by Hollywood studios and their subsidiaries. First run films played at chain theaters first before playing at local theaters such as the Ramova. Consequently, the Ramova became a second run theater until closing in April 1985. The commercial block carried on continuing to house neighborhood businesses such as the Ramova Grill, several retail clothing stores, a shoe repair shop, a dry cleaners, and a boxing club on the second floor.

### **EVOLUTION OF CHICAGO'S THEATERS AND THE "THEATER BLOCK"**

Through its intact form and architectural detailing, the Ramova Theater is a representative example of broader trends in Chicago's neighborhood theaters in the late 1920s. It is a specific building type that was increasingly popular in the late 1920s: the theater-block. The theater-block consisted of a traditional commercial block anchored by a prominent theater, tied together visually through architectural detailing. Architectural styles were ornate, exotic, and rich in detail designed to stand out among smaller storefront nickelodeons and any other commercial enterprises on the block. Styles ranged from the exotic to classical, and often utilized a combination of influences to attract patrons. The Ramova employs elaborate Spanish Baroque ornamentation.

When movies first appeared in Chicago in the 1890s, they were often shown in existing vaudeville houses or places that served as entertainment halls and social gathering places. As movies became more popular, existing spaces began to evolve and new spaces were created to showcase this new form of entertainment. Early examples were small storefront operations referred to as nickelodeons. Nickelodeons cost a nickel for admission and were generally equipped to seat a few hundred patrons at most. They showed early silent films and news reels using simple projection equipment typically shown on white sheets while patrons sat in movable chairs. The popularity of these early nickelodeons was seen throughout American cities, both large and small, primarily in the first few decades of the 1900s. They were often associated with lower

income communities due to their relatively inexpensive costs and easily accessible equipment. The Bridgeport neighborhood for example, had nearly a dozen small-scale theaters by 1930, most of which were smaller, storefront nickelodeons which were meant to be easily converted back to commercial or other retail space. For this reason, very few, if any, former nickelodeons in Bridgeport survive in an unaltered state.

Theaters evolved into larger enterprises with the advent of “talking pictures” in the 1920s as well as the burgeoning influence of Hollywood movie firms who hoped to benefit by increasing theater capacities and therefore increase ticket sales. Opening in 1929, the same year that talking pictures were widely distributed throughout the country, the Ramova was among the first wave of newly constructed Chicago theaters to show films with sound. These specific circumstances gave way to the birth of the “movie palace” called so because of the whimsical and regal designs of many of these theaters, producing an entirely new form of architectural expression in the United States. Movie palace design drew greatly from revival and exotic styles including Moorish, Egyptian, Spanish, and Indian architecture that were utilized to transport patrons from their everyday worlds to an exotic, faraway place. These movie palaces were large and lavishly ornamented operations with grand lobbies, extravagant auditoriums, and rich interior and exterior decoration.

Unlike smaller storefront theaters and nickelodeons that were housed in former retail or commercial spaces, every feature of the movie palace was designed to contribute to the experience of the cinema. The Chicago Theater, constructed in 1921, is considered to be the country’s first movie palace and was constructed as a standalone enterprise, which was more common in the early 1920s. However, by the time the Ramova was completed in 1929, it was more typical for movie theaters to be constructed alongside a commercial block to maximize profitability and ensure stability for investors, particularly when constructing theaters in Chicago’s many smaller neighborhood communities. These were known as “theater-blocks” consisting of two- to three-story commercial buildings with leasable commercial and residential space all anchored by a large theater. Prominent examples in Chicago include the Congress, Portage Park and Apollo theaters, all designated Chicago Landmarks.

## **CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION**

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sections 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation of landmark designation for an area, district, place, building, structure, work of art, or other object with the City of Chicago, if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated “criteria for designation,” as well as possesses a significant degree of historic integrity to convey its significance.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Ramova Theater 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 Ramova Theater, completed in 1929, is an excellent example of a historic motion picture theater, a novel building type that emerged in the early twentieth century designed to entertain its patrons through the new medium of cinematic art.
- With its practical combination of commercial storefronts with a theater, the Ramova Theater is a fine example of a “theater block,” a historic building type found in Chicago’s neighborhood commercial districts combining entertainment and commercial storefronts in a single building.
- The Ramova Theater represents the contributions of newcomers to Chicago’s cultural and economic heritage as the theater was built by Jokūbas (Jacob) Maskoliūnas, a Lithuanian immigrant to serve the immigrant neighborhood of Bridgeport.

### ***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.*

- With its twisted columns, cartouches, scallop shells, scrolls, pinnacles, niches, and swirling, naturalistic plant forms, the façade of the Ramova Theater exemplifies the Spanish Baroque style of architecture examples of which are rare in Chicago.
- The elaborate decoration of the façade is rendered in glazed terra cotta which was formed in hand-carved molds requiring a high degree of design and handcraftsmanship.
- The scale and ornate quality of the building’s architecture reflect the ideals of historic movie theater design to use architecture as advertisement and to attract customers with a promise of luxury and escape from the ordinary.

- The Ramova Theater representative of a practical building type that developed in the late 1920s. The theater block was characterized by a traditional commercial block anchored by a prominent theater visually tied together through exterior architectural detailing.

### ***Integrity Criteria***

*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 interest or value.*

The Ramova Theater retains very good integrity. Character defining features, including overall form, location of fenestration and entrances, and masonry details remain on the exterior. Throughout the Ramova's history, its theater and commercial blocks were improved and modernized to reflect changing fashion. The primary east elevation along Halsted Street remains largely unchanged from the building's competition in 1929. The most significant early alteration was in 1944 with the replacement of the theater's marquee and blade signs. The Moderne style blade sign was restored, and the marquee rebuilt, as part of the building's overall rehabilitation in 2023.

The Ramova Theater closed in 1985 and remained vacant and deteriorating, while its commercial block retained businesses until it was closed in 2012. In 2007, significant masonry work was performed on the east elevation of the commercial block. This included the full reconstruction of the second floor east wall. Historic terra cotta and matching replacement units were reinstalled with replacement face brick. New double-hung windows and modern storefronts were also installed. As part of the 2007 renovation, some significant features were removed, including the decorative wrought iron balconette railings in the second floor windows and terra cotta finials along the roofline. The building featured a clay tile roof above the commercial block, which was replaced with asphalt shingles in 2007.

A second renovation to the commercial block in 2012 involved the replacement of the original metal and glass storefronts and the construction of a taller brick knee wall with modern metal and glass storefront windows.

In 2023, the Ramova underwent a very substantial restoration. The project was aided by more than \$9 million in tax-increment financing from the city, and the Federal Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit. The terra cotta along the Halsted Street elevation was restored and the missing finials were returned to the roofline. New metal and glass storefronts were installed, and the theater entrance was restored with new metal and glass doors. Although the terra cotta pilasters flanking the theater entrance were covered by metal panels as part of the 1944 modernization, the terra cotta was restored and exposed during the 2023 renovation.

The interior of the Ramova was also fully restored in 2023. The theater experienced heavy water damage to its decorative plaster finishes and other features during its decades of vacancy. However, the overall atmospheric style of the main lobby and auditorium retained important

plaster features, including faux Spanish Revival style courtyard building facades and rounded smooth plaster ceilings resembling a night sky. During the 2023 rehabilitation, the lobby and auditorium plaster finishes were secured, and areas of loss were recreated. A new balcony was built at the rear (south) end of the auditorium. The Ramova's commercial block was renovated to create a new ground floor restaurant and upper floor event space. The recent restoration of the Ramova Theater has transformed it into a multi-use building that will include a live-performance music venue, a brewery and tap room, and restaurants.

#### **SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES**

Whenever an area, district, place, building, structure, work of art or other object 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.

Based upon its preliminary evaluation of the Ramova Theater, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the Building, including the blade sign and marquee from 1944.

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1954 view of the Ramova Theater. Source: *Chicago History Museum*.

# **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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