

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

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property**DRAFT**Historic name: Plaza TheatreOther names/site number: N/AName of related multiple property listing: N/A

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. LocationStreet & number: 128 S. Palm Canyon DriveCity or town: Palm Springs State: California County: RiversideNot For Publication: ☐ Vicinity: ☐**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this ___ nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___national ___statewide ___local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

___A ___B ___C ___D

Signature of certifying official/Title:

Date

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official:

Date

Title :

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ☐ entered in the National Register
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register
☐ removed from the National Register
☐ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private: ☐
Public – Local ☒
Public – State ☐
Public – Federal ☐

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s) ☒
District ☐
Site ☐
Structure ☐
Object ☐

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing

Noncontributing

0

buildings

sites

structures

objects

Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE: theater

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE: theater

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

LATE 19TH & 20TH CENTURY REVIVALS

Spanish Colonial Revival

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: Roof: CLAY TILE; Walls: CONCRETE;

Foundation: CONCRETE; Windows: STEEL; Doors: WOOD

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

Constructed in 1936 in downtown Palm Springs, Plaza Theatre was designed by architect Harry J. Williams. The building is an excellent example of a 1930s Spanish Colonial Revival atmospheric theater and is associated with the early twentieth century commercial development of Palm Springs. It embodies the significant features of the style and property type, including its complex massing, clay tile hipped roof, painted concrete exterior walls, arched fenestration, steel windows, and wood paneled primary doors at the exterior; and its double-height auditorium with coved ceiling, Spanish-themed sidewalls, raised stage and sloped seating, and main entry foyer at the interior. The approximately 15,110-square-foot concrete building has undergone few alterations since its original construction and retains all aspects of historic integrity. The building is undergoing rehabilitation for use as a performing arts and motion picture theater. The Historic Preservation Certification Application Part 2 was approved in August 2024. Rehabilitation is expected to be completed in October 2025.

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Narrative Description

Setting

The Plaza Theatre is on the east side of S. Palm Canyon Drive, south of E. Tahquitz Canyon Way, in downtown Palm Springs. It is surrounded by low-scale commercial development primarily dating from the 1930s to the post-World War II period. The topography of the area is flat, and streets adhere to a rectilinear grid pattern. The building takes up its entire rectangular parcel at the center of the block and directly abuts one- and two-story commercial buildings on its north and east sides. A narrow quarry tile paved plaza, which also serves as an outdoor dining area for adjacent properties, provides access to the building's main (west) entrance off of S. Palm Canyon Drive. An original freestanding flag sign that reads "THE PLAZA THEATRE" ("Theatre" copy larger and arranged vertically) is located at the entrance to the plaza, adjacent to the sidewalk. The plaza has undergone some alterations since its original construction, including removal of the original ticket booth that sat at the center of the plaza in 1977, as well as modification of the entry steps and quarry tile paving. The building's south elevation overlooks a paved courtyard enclosed on all three sides by adjacent buildings. The courtyard is used and managed by neighboring tenants and is not associated with the theater building. A narrow concrete right-of-way path enclosed by a non-historic gate off Indian Canyon Drive provides access to the east back-of-house entrance to the building. The west entrance plaza, south courtyard, and east right-of-way path are located on separate parcels than the building.

Building Exterior

The Plaza Theatre is a reinforced concrete building, two stories in height and rectangular in plan, with a partial basement. It has a predominantly low-pitched hipped roof covered in clay tile and featuring shallow eaves with exposed rafter tails. Three exterior masonry chimneys project from the eave along the south side of the building. A decorative sign with two faces reading "PLAZA THEATRE" extends from the west roof plane above the primary façade. Exterior walls are primarily painted cast-in-place concrete, with painted concrete masonry units comprising the upper portions. Original fenestration is confined to the primary (west) façade and includes multi-light steel casement windows and paired wood paneled doors. Various pipes, gutters, and other non-historic conduit lines are mounted to the roof eaves and exterior walls.

Primary (West) Façade

The building's west façade faces a paved plaza bound by one-story wings of adjacent commercial buildings along S. Palm Canyon Drive. The façade is characterized by a recessed outer entrance lobby at the first story and a recessed balcony at the second story. The outer entrance lobby is recessed within three arched openings; the openings are infilled with plywood during the building's rehabilitation. The lobby features a decoratively painted, coffered ceiling and painted cast-in-place concrete walls. Two openings along the back wall of the lobby provide

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access to the interior main foyer. Stairwells enclosed by decorative wrought iron gates and entrances leading to office spaces are located at the north and south ends of the lobby.

The west façade balcony is framed by three rectangular openings with chamfered corners, and exposed painted wood rafters and sheathing comprise the balcony ceiling. Non-original metal chandeliers and sprinkler lines (added 1989) hang from the ceiling. The balcony floor is painted concrete. Four wood doors line the back wall of the balcony. The north and south balcony doors are partially glazed and multi-light; they lead to stairs accessing the control booth. One of the center doors is paneled, while the other is flush; these doors provide access to storage rooms beneath the control room. Both of these doors appear to have been replaced after 1989, per renovation drawings. To the north and south of the balcony, also at the upper level, are recessed entrances containing partially glazed multi-light wood doors that lead to the auditorium balcony seating and restrooms. Other fenestration at the west façade includes multi-light steel windows secured by decorative metal security bars at the balcony level and at the exterior stair leading to the balcony. The window at the stair has multiple broken lights and is plastered over from the interior.

West Façade Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation work at the west façade includes removal of obsolete and abandoned fasteners, hardware, and surface-mounted conduit; repair of cracks at concrete walls; repainting the façade and entry lobby in their original color palette (including decorative stenciling, where present) based on a historic paint analysis; and repair and restoration of original steel windows. In order to accommodate more usable interior space for new concession use, the outer entrance lobby will be rehabilitated as an interior space, connected to the original main foyer. The original wood doors along the back wall of the lobby, entering the main foyer, have been removed and salvaged for reuse at the entrances to the auditorium. The arched openings providing access from the entrance plaza into the lobby will be enclosed with custom paired multi-light steel doors with tempered, insulated glazing. Glazing will be clear so as to retain unobstructed exterior views to and from the lobby space. Three non-historic ticketing windows on the south wall of the lobby have been demolished, and a partially glazed, paneled Dutch door and sidelight will be reinstated where an original door and sidelight were originally located on this wall; a new smaller operable ticket window will also be added.

South Elevation

The south elevation of the building faces a courtyard used as an outdoor dining area for adjacent commercial tenants; it is partially obscured by the one-story wings of abutting commercial buildings. The first story of the elevation contains five round arched openings that were infilled with plywood around 1991; some of the openings are covered by vegetation. The center arch holds a pair of flush doors surrounded by wood infill. The upper level of the elevation is largely unarticulated, with the exception of three inset quatrefoil details.

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South Elevation Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation work at the south elevation includes removal of vegetation, repair of cracks at concrete walls, and repainting the elevation in its original color palette based on a historic paint analysis. The non-historic infill and paired doors within the south elevation arched openings will be removed, restoring historically unobstructed exterior views to and from the south exit corridor. The center arched opening will receive a new pair of custom multi-light steel doors, and flanking arched openings will be enclosed with custom multi-light steel windows.

East Elevation

The first story of the east elevation is mostly obscured by adjacent buildings, with the exception of a small portion at the northeast corner, where two pairs of non-historic flush metal utility doors lead to a concrete path that connects to Indian Canyon Drive to the east. The upper level of the east elevation features modest decorative vent details. Gutters, downspouts, and various conduit lines are mounted to the upper level of the elevation.

East Elevation Rehabilitation

As part of the building's rehabilitation, obsolete and abandoned fasteners and hardware and non-historic downspouts and leader heads will be removed from the east elevation, and remaining holes will be patched in-kind. Masonry at the top portion of the elevation will be repointed and new wall-mounted gutters, leader heads, and downspouts will be added. Exterior masonry and concrete will be repainted based on a historic paint analysis.

Building Interior

The interior of Plaza Theatre centers around a large, double-height auditorium space bound on the west end by a main foyer, restrooms, and other secondary spaces and on the east end by a raised stage. To the north and south of the auditorium are circulation corridors that run the length of the space. The upper level of the building consists of balcony seating (at the west wall of the auditorium), restrooms, a control room, and storage. The basement encompasses dressing rooms, water closets, an orchestra pit, and other back-of-house spaces.¹

Auditorium

The auditorium is roughly rectangular in plan with a raised wood stage at its east end and a cantilevered balcony along its west wall. The stage is framed by a proscenium featuring decorative painting and a clay tile pent roof. Below the balcony, at the west end of the auditorium, are slightly arched, recessed openings with paired double doors accessing the main foyer. Paired wood paneled exit doors access the north and south circulation corridors at the northeast and southeast corners of the space. The auditorium's ceiling is coved, clad in textured

¹ The basement was not accessible during the site visit for this nomination.

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plaster, and painted a flat gray to emulate the starry night sky. The space's north and south sidewalls were designed to evoke a Spanish Colonial Revival-themed streetscape with architectural elements including ironwork, light fixtures, faux balconies, faux windows with shutters, and clay tile pent roofs. The walls are clad in textured plaster, and catwalks/lighting galleries run behind them.

Auditorium Rehabilitation

As part of its rehabilitation, the auditorium's sloped concrete floor slab was demolished to allow for further excavation of the plenum space at the basement level to accommodate a new HVAC system. The floor slab has been replaced with a new sloped concrete slab. The auditorium's non-historic carpet and seating were removed and will be replaced with new carpet and seating in the same general configuration. A small sound mix control booth will be added to the west of the main level auditorium seating.

The auditorium ceiling has been cleaned, repaired, and repainted to match its original color based on a historic paint analysis. The Spanish Colonial Revival-theme sidewalls have been restored to their historic design based on original drawings and repainted based on a historic paint analysis. New speakers and a suspended lighting truss will be installed, and new small LED lights have been placed across the ceiling in a seemingly random pattern to enhance its original starry night sky effect.

Main Foyer

The auditorium is accessed from the west end by the main foyer. The foyer is rectangular in plan with a decoratively painted plaster ceiling traversed by painted, plaster encased beams. The foyer's walls are painted cast-in-place concrete. The original concession area, which comprised an alcove along the east side of the foyer, was enclosed and converted into a sound booth and storage room and replaced with new concession counters at the center and north ends of the space.

Main Foyer Rehabilitation

The main foyer's decoratively painted ceiling was cleaned, and obsolete/abandoned fasteners, wiring, etc. have been removed. The historic decoratively patterned color scheme was restored based on a historic paint analysis. The space's painted cast-in-place concrete walls will also be cleaned, repaired, and repainted. Non-historic carpet and tile flooring has been removed and will be replaced with new carpet. The historic main entrance lobby doors will be relocated to the east/back wall of the main foyer, replacing the non-historic doors leading into the auditorium. The wall enclosing the non-historic sound booth has been demolished, and a new concession stand will be added.

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Restrooms

Men's and women's multiple occupancy restrooms as well as two single-occupancy accessible restrooms are located to the north and south of the main foyer. The single-occupancy restrooms replaced storage/back-of-house space in the late 1980s/1990s, and all restrooms feature non-historic finishes and fixtures. Two additional single-occupancy restrooms (finishes and fixtures replaced ca. 1990s) are located off the auditorium balcony at the upper level.

Restrooms Rehabilitation

Non-historic fixtures, partitions and flooring in the restrooms have mostly been removed and will be replaced with new finishes and fixtures.

Alterations

1974² Permit issued to add a snack bar to the foyer

1977³ The plaza fronting the theatre was remodeled and the original ticket booth demolished

1983⁴ Permit issued to re-roof the building and reconstruct the roof drain

1989⁵ Lighting nests and new lighting added in the auditorium

New house lighting

Auditorium side walls modified with new wall panels and decorative light fixtures

Office to the south of the exterior main entrance lobby remodeled into a ticket sales booth

Door infilled and three new fixed windows installed along south wall of lobby for ticketing

Accessible restroom added in original usher's room to the north of the main foyer

Existing doors removed at either end of north exit corridor/passage

New concessions booth added in main foyer

New window openings installed, and existing ones infilled at second floor control booth; booth was remodeled

1990⁶ New recessed downlights added to the auditorium ceiling

New screen hoist system and lighting truss added at the stage

Orchestra pit added

New drinking fountain installed, lavatory removed

² City of Palm Springs Building Permit #A7273, 4/19/74.

³ "Theater Work Slated," *The Desert Sun*, July 9, 1979.

⁴ City of Palm Springs Building Permit #B1346, 4/13/83.

⁵ City of Palm Springs Building Permits #B16780 and #B16690, 3/8/90; R.F. McCann & Company Theatre Architects, "The Plaza Theatre Adaptive Reuse Project, Palm Springs, California," prepared for the City of Palm Springs Redevelopment Board, 1989.

⁶ City of Palm Springs Building Permit #B19360, 11/15/90.

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- 1991⁷ HVAC upgrades, including new exhaust fans, fan coils, ductwork, etc.
Air handler, compressors, pumps and piping removed from the mechanical room under stage
New mechanical equipment installed at flat roof at rear of the building; roof strengthened to support new equipment
Existing electrical room (original janitor's closet) remodeled into accessible restroom to south of main foyer
South exit corridor/passage arches enclosed with doors and fixed glass and a ramp added
- 1992⁸ Return and supply air tunnels under auditorium slab were abandoned
Mechanical room in basement remodeled into a dressing room
- 1996⁹ Basement and orchestra pit remodeled; stage extended

The following work has been completed or is on-going as part of the rehabilitation of the Plaza Theatre. The rehabilitation is expected to be completed in October 2025 and has been designed to conform to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, per the building's approved Historic Preservation Certification Application, Part 2 for federal historic preservation tax credits.

- Clay tile roofing temporarily removed to install new sheathing, underlayment and insulation, and tiles reinstalled
- Flat roof portions of building re-roofed and new decking installed
- Mechanical enclosure and new mechanical equipment added at lower east rooftops
- Obsolete and abandoned fasteners, hardware, gutters, and surface-mounted conduit removed from exterior walls
- Cracks at exterior concrete walls repaired as needed and walls repainted their original color based on historic paint analysis
- Original exterior west entrance lobby enclosed with compatible multi-light steel doors to accommodate more usable interior space
- Three non-historic ticketing windows on the south wall of the lobby demolished and a paneled Dutch door and sidelight reinstated where an original door and sidelight were originally located
- Non-historic infill and paired doors within south elevation arched openings removed and compatible multi-light steel windows and doors added
- All original interior ceilings and walls cleaned, repaired, and repainted to match their original color palette based on historic paint analysis
- Auditorium concrete floor slab demolished and replaced with new reinforced slab

⁷ City of Palm Springs Building Permits #B20780, 5/21/91; Kaptur and Cioffi, Architects, "Plaza Theatre Improvements," City of Palm Springs, 1991.

⁸ Krown Mechanical Design, "Renovations to the Plaza Theater," City of Palm Springs, 1991.

⁹ Mark B. Valentino, AIA Architect, "Stage Remodel," City of Palm Springs, 1996.

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- New compatible carpet and seating added in the auditorium
- New sound mix control booth added at west end of auditorium
- Spanish Colonial Revival-themed auditorium sidewalls restored to their historic design based on original drawings and repainted based on historic paint analysis
- New speakers and a suspended lighting truss installed, and new small LED lights placed across the auditorium ceiling to enhance its original starry night sky effect
- Non-historic carpet and tile flooring removed and replaced with new compatible flooring throughout
- Wall enclosing non-historic sound booth demolished, and a new compatible concession stand added
- Second floor control room expanded
- New shotcrete shear walls added in discrete locations and roof truss reinforced with sistered wood framing and new steel plates
- New HVAC systems, lighting, and electrical equipment added throughout

Character-Defining Features

Exterior

- Freestanding flag sign at Palm Canyon Drive that reads “THE PLAZA THEATRE” (“Theatre” copy is larger and arranged vertically)
- Complex massing
- Clay tile hipped roof with shallow eaves with exposed wood rafter tails and faux chimneys along the south roof eave
- Rooftop sign with decorative surround and two faces reading “PLAZA THEATRE” above the west (primary) façade
- Painted concrete exterior walls
- Inset quatrefoils along the south elevation wall
- Arched fenestration at the first story of the west and south elevations
- Steel windows (some with wrought iron grilles) at the west façade
- Wood paneled doors at the west façade
- Recessed balcony centered on the west façade
- Exterior stairs with decorative tile on risers
- Recessed west entry lobby with decoratively painted, coffered ceiling, painted concrete walls, and wrought iron gates at north and south stair entrances

Interior

- Central auditorium surrounded by circulation corridors to the north and south, a main entry foyer to the west, and secondary/back-of-house spaces to the east, west, and basement level
- Double-height auditorium space with coved ceiling; Spanish-themed north and south sidewalls (including clay tile gables, faux balconettes, windows with shutters, and ironwork); raised stage with decoratively painted proscenium capped by clay tile pent roof; sloped floor; and curved balcony (west end)

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- Main entry foyer with decoratively painted ceiling beams and painted cast-in-place concrete walls

Integrity

The Plaza Theatre retains sufficient integrity to convey its historic associations with the early twentieth century commercial development of Palm Springs as well as its significance as a 1930s Spanish Colonial Revival-style atmospheric theater. While some changes have been made to the building, notably during renovations in the late 1980s and 1990s, alterations are primarily confined to the interior and secondary elevations and are largely cosmetic in nature, including changes to interior floor finishes and fixtures, systems upgrades, and boarded up window openings. The building sits in its original commercial *setting* and *location* on S. Palm Canyon Drive, within the La Plaza commercial complex. Plaza Theatre retains the majority of its historic materials and character-defining features, including its complex massing, clay tile hipped roof, painted concrete exterior walls, balcony and recessed entry lobby, arched fenestration, steel windows, and wood paneled doors at the exterior; and its double-height auditorium with coved ceiling, Spanish-themed sidewalls, raised stage and sloped seating, and its main entry foyer with decoratively painted ceiling, at the interior. The building's intact *design* and original *materials* help to convey its original *workmanship*, as well as its historic *feeling* and *association* as a pre-World War II, Spanish Colonial Revival-style atmospheric commercial theater.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- ☐ A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- ☐ B. Removed from its original location
- ☐ C. A birthplace or grave
- ☐ D. A cemetery
- ☐ E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- ☐ F. A commemorative property
- ☐ G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

ARCHITECTURE

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

Period of Significance

1936-1955

Significant Dates

1936

1955

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Williams, Harry J.

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

Plaza Theatre, originally owned and operated by prominent theater impresario Earl Strebe, is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places at the local level under Criterion A in the area of Entertainment/Recreation for its association with the early twentieth century commercial development of Palm Springs and under Criterion C for in the area of Architecture as a building that embodies the distinctive characteristics of the Spanish Colonial Revival style and the early commercial movie theater property type, with its exterior entrance plaza and atmospheric auditorium. The period of significance is 1936 to 1955, beginning with the year the theater opened and encompassing its height in use as a venue for star-studded charity events and benefit shows, live theater and variety show performances, and several live-audience radio show recordings.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Criterion A: Entertainment and Recreation

Early Twentieth Century Development in Palm Springs

Plaza Theatre is significant for its association with the early twentieth century commercial development of Palm Springs. In the years between World War I and World War II, Palm Springs transitioned from a modest desert town of intrepid seasonal residents and health-seekers to a bustling resort town geared towards well-to-do visitors from nearby Los Angeles and colder climates. The shift was heralded by the establishment of several luxury hotels, followed by residential subdivisions and larger, architect-designed estates, all of which supported a growing seasonal and year-round population. This development relied on the rise of private automobile ownership and increased federal, state, and regional investment in the region's roadways, which made it possible to travel to what had previously been a remote area of the Coachella Valley. Most new businesses established during the interwar years in Palm Springs were located on the primary automobile thoroughfare of Palm Canyon Drive, spreading north and, to a lesser degree, south of the intersection with Tahquitz Canyon Way. Resorts, hotels, shops, restaurants, nightclubs, theaters, and office buildings were constructed along this main thoroughfare. The Plaza Theatre is located within La Plaza shopping center, which was designed by architect Harry J. Williams for owner Julia Shaw Patterson Carnell and constructed in 1936.¹⁰ When it was built, La Plaza was the most ambitious commercial development in Palm Springs and explicitly catered to the needs of patrons arriving by car. Located on a three-and-one-half acre parcel comprising most of the block bounded by S. Palm Canyon Drive, W. Tahquitz Canyon Way, S. Indian Canyon Drive, and W. Arenas Road, La Plaza included a 100-foot-wide midblock thoroughfare that accommodated cars and pedestrians. Advertisements courted auto-driving

¹⁰ Historic Resources Group (HRG), "Palm Springs Citywide Historic Context Statement & Findings," prepared for the City of Palm Springs, 2016, 119.

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patrons, who, when they arrived, were supported by surface parking lots, a subterranean parking garage described as the largest in the county, chauffer service, and a full-service gas and automobile repair station.¹¹

In addition to Plaza Theatre, an anchor tenant and the largest single component of the commercial complex, La Plaza encompassed a broad variety of services, including a grocery store and pharmacy, hair salons, restaurants, clothing and curio shops, and professional offices, as well as residential bungalows and penthouses (**Figure 1**).¹² As observed by architectural historian Richard Longstreth, a variety of “new architectural types” emerged in Southern California during the 1920s and 1930s in response to the pervasive use of the automobile.¹³ Plaza Theatre, as a component of La Plaza, is an example of these new architectural types and is historically significant for its association with this era of automobile-oriented commercial development in Palm Springs.

Plaza Theatre Development and Use

Prominent Palm Springs theater impresario Earl Strebe owned and operated the Plaza Theatre from its completion in 1936 through 1974. In addition to several star-studded film premieres, many famous performers took the stage during Strebe’s almost four-decade tenure of ownership. In the immediate years following its opening, several star-led theater troops performed at the Plaza, including the Ben Bard Players and Major Bowes’ International Amateurs.¹⁴ The 1940s and early 1950s marked a particularly prolific period for the theater, during which time it hosted an array of charity events and benefit shows, live theater and variety show performances, and several live-audience radio show recordings. Local Palm Springs enthusiasts Frank Sinatra and Bob Hope were especially known to periodically host and perform at the Plaza Theatre, often in collaboration with visiting stars like Jack Haley, Joan Blondell, Greer Garson, Marilyn Maxwell, Phil Hars, and many others.¹⁵ During the same period, the theater was a popular venue for celebrities to do their broadcasting as radio continued to dominate the entertainment market prior to the rise of television. On January 5, 1943, Bob Hope recorded an episode of his nationally beloved “Pepsodent Show” at the theater for a live audience of servicemen with guest star Rita Hayworth, thus “bringing national attention to downtown Palm Springs.”¹⁶ During the 1940s,

¹¹ “Plaza Opens With Ceremony Sunday,” *The Desert Sun*, October 30, 1936.

¹² “Plaza Shops Present Forceful Sales Promotion Campaign to Shoppers of this Area,” *The Desert Sun*, January 15, 1937.

¹³ HRG, “Palm Springs Citywide Historic Context Statement & Findings,” 120.

¹⁴ “Ben Bard Players Here Feb. 17-18,” *The Desert Sun*, February 4, 1938; “Major Bowes’ Amateurs to Be Here Tuesday,” *The Desert Sun*, January 14, 1938.

¹⁵ Various event ad placements, *The Desert Sun*, 1943-1949; “Ticket Sales for Frank Sinatra Show, Benefit for Legion Memorial Fund, Increasing, Feekings Reports,” *The Desert Sun*, February 15, 1946; “Polio Benefit Show Nets \$5000 for Kenny Hospital,” *The Desert Sun*, March 6, 1952; “A Brief History of Palm Springs Music Scene,” *Visit Palm Springs*, August 18, 2021, accessed June 2025, <https://visitpalmsprings.com/history-of-palm-springs-music-scene/>.

¹⁶ Greg Niemann, *Palm Springs Legends: Creation of a Desert Oasis* (San Diego: Sunbelt Publications, 2006), 139; “Ferrying Command News Notes,” *The Desert Sun*, January 8, 1943; “Pepsodent Show, Camp Young, California, January 5, 1943,” Box 54, Folder 10, Bob Hope Collection, Library of Congress, accessed June 2025, <https://catalog.loc.gov/vwebv/search?searchCode=LCCN&searchArg=2018628950&searchType=1&permalink=y>.

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Bing Crosby used Plaza Theatre to record several episodes of “The Bing Crosby Show,” as did Jack Benny, whose recording of “The Jack Benny Program” caused local Palm Springs residents to go “completely ga-ga” over tickets, with more than 3,000 applicants on a waitlist to fill the 1,600 seat theater for two performances.¹⁷ Perhaps the most beloved long-running stage performance in the early years of Plaza Theatre was the annual “Village Insanities,” a variety show directed by local performer Melba Bennett and starring local actors, singers, dancers, and musicians.¹⁸

Beginning in 1974, the theater was leased to distributor, exhibitor, and producer Fred Stein.¹⁹ Stein made alterations including adding new stucco interior walls and a snack bar.²⁰ The theater was sold in 1977 to Metropolitan Theaters, a Los Angeles-based multiplex theater corporation that removed the theater’s historic ticket booth and subdivided the auditorium into two smaller theaters.²¹ Metropolitan Theaters ceased operating Plaza Theatre in 1987, and the auditorium was restored to its original size the following year.²² In 1989, the City of Palm Springs took ownership of the theater and instigated a substantial interior remodel, including lighting, electrical and mechanical/HVAC upgrades; installation of sprinklers; enclosure of the south exit arcade; alterations to the auditorium side walls; remodeling of the control booth; and construction of a ticket booth and accessible restrooms. Work was largely completed between 1989 and 1992 based on building permits and renovation drawings. In 1990, the Plaza Theatre began to host the Palm Springs International Film Festival.²³ In 1991, the building became a Palm Springs Class 1 Historic Resource and was home of a musical revue show titled “The Fabulous Palm Springs Follies,” which ran seasonally for almost fifteen years.²⁴ This show closed permanently in 2014, since which time the City of Palm Springs, in collaboration with the advocacy group the Palm Springs Plaza Theatre Foundation and other interested parties, have been working to fully restore the historic theater.

¹⁷ “Benny Broadcasts Create Furor; Ticket Demand So Great There Is Some Possibility of Further Shows,” *The Desert Sun*, February 21, 1941; Palm Springs Historic Site Preservation Board, “Palm Springs Historic Architectural Highlights,” 21, *Accessing the Past*, accessed June 2025, <https://collections.accessingthepast.org/?a=d&d=PSHAH>.

¹⁸ “Insanities to Top Features of 11th Circus,” *The Desert Sun*, April 8, 1947; “The Shady History of the Village Insanities,” *The Desert Sun*, March 16, 1951.

¹⁹ “Strebe’s Downtown Theatres Leased to Stein,” *The Desert Sun*, February 2, 1974.

²⁰ City of Palm Springs Building Permit #B706, 3/19/74.

²¹ City of Palm Springs Building Permit #B1629, 10/31/77.

²² Janice Kleinschmidt, “It Takes a Village,” *Palm Springs Life*, November 30, 2011, accessed June 2025, <https://www.palmspringslife.com/it-takes-a-village-2/>; Chattel Inc., “Plaza Theatre Recommendations and Performance Report,” prepared for the City of Palm Springs, 2018, 6.

²³ Ibid, 5-6; City of Palm Springs Building Permits #B16780, 11/8/89; #B16690, 10/30/89; and #B19360, 11/15/90; “Council will lease, buy Plaza Theatre,” *The Desert Sun*, February 2, 1989; R.F. McCann & Company Theatre Architects, “The Plaza Theatre Adaptive Reuse Project, Palm Springs, California,” Kaptur and Cioffi, Architects, “Plaza Theatre Improvements.”

²⁴ Kleinschmidt, “It Takes a Village,” Shelley Nunley, “TV producer enlists Plaza Theatre for musicals,” *The Desert Sun*, October 29, 1991.

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Criterion C: Architecture

1930s Commercial Movie Theater Design and Construction

The Plaza Theatre embodies the distinctive characteristics of the early twentieth century commercial movie theater property type, most notably its entrance plaza and atmospheric style auditorium. Starting in the 1920s, theater designers began to capitalize on the consistently pleasant climate of Southern California and incorporated the design of open courtyards or plazas in front of theater entrances.²⁵ This arrangement allowed crowds of movie-goers to gather in a way that was visible from the street, bolstering a theater's publicity by drawing the attention of fast-moving, auto-driving passersby. The entrance plaza lent itself to spectacle and was popular in places that embraced movie premiers and their stars. Examples include Grauman's Egyptian (1922) and Chinese (1927) Theaters in Hollywood; Pasadena Playhouse (1925) in Pasadena; Fox Theatre (1925) in Fullerton; Masonic Affiliates Club (1929, later Geffen Playhouse) in Los Angeles; and Arlington Theatre (1930) in Santa Barbara.²⁶ The effect was perfectly encapsulated by press coverage at the opening night of Plaza Theatre and the premier of the film *Camille*, with a reviewer stating, "As a setting for the display of important and brilliant people, the approach to the Plaza Theatre has few equals."²⁷

The theater also has an atmospheric style auditorium, with a coved plaster ceiling, lit to create a blue starry night effect, and side walls that are modulated and lit to replicate the informal appearance of a Spanish village scene (**Figures 2-5**). Atmospheric theaters emerged in the mid-1920s and represented a departure from the precedent design of 1910s and early 1920s movie palaces, which were characterized by a large auditorium, multiple balconies and boxes, classically plastered ceilings, large expensive chandeliers, and murals.²⁸ In contrast, atmospheric style theaters were more economical to construct, as they eschewed excessive decorative ornament, and the coved plaster ceiling did not require specialized plaster craftsmen, whose labor costs increased significantly after World War I.²⁹ The style could also be built comparatively quickly and could be adapted to the design of smaller theaters as markets dictated. After the start of the Great Depression, the European themes used in the interior design of most atmospheric theaters remained popular, as people turned to movies for affordable entertainment and a welcome escape from their usual surroundings. While hundreds of atmospheric theaters were constructed throughout the United States during the interwar era, the Plaza Theatre is the only known example within the Coachella Valley.

²⁵ Mike Hume, "Plaza Theatre," Atmospheric Theatres, accessed June 2025, <https://www.historictheatrephotos.com/Atmospheric/Plaza-Palm-Springs.aspx>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ "Palm Springs Goes Hollywood with Klieg Lights and Celebs at Opening of Plaza Theatre," *The Limelight*, December 19, 1936, accessed June 2025, <https://www.historictheatrephotos.com/Atmospheric/Plaza-Palm-Springs.aspx>.

²⁸ Mike Hume, "Atmospheric Theatres," accessed June 2025, <https://www.historictheatrephotos.com/Research/Atmospherics/>.

²⁹ Ibid.

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Spanish Colonial Revival Architecture

The Plaza Theatre is also significant for embodying the distinctive characteristics of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture. The Spanish Colonial Revival style became popular throughout Southern California after the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego. The Exposition featured buildings designed in a highly ornamented Spanish architectural aesthetic known as Churrigueresque. The Exposition's lavishly adorned buildings were created by Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue and aimed to highlight the richness and variety of Spanish precedents found throughout Spain and Latin America.³⁰ The style was an attempt to create a "native" California architectural expression that drew upon and romanticized the state's colonial past. The increased popularity of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture in Southern California coincided with a population boom in the region during the 1920s. The versatility of the architectural idiom, allowing for builders and architects to construct buildings as simple or lavish as money would permit, helped to further spread its popularity throughout Southern California.³¹ The style's adaptability also lent its application to an array of building types, from institutional and commercial buildings to single- and multi-family residences. Spanish Colonial Revival architecture often borrowed from other styles, including Churrigueresque, Gothic Revival, Moorish Revival, and Art Deco. Complex building forms, arched openings, tile roofs, stucco cladding, and decorative grilles are characteristic of the style. The style was the most popular of all Period Revival styles in Palm Springs due to its perceived relationship to early California and visual similarities to adobe construction, common in the American southwest, as well as its adaptability to the desert climate with thick stucco walls and ample porches, balconies, and courtyards. It remained popular through the 1930s and early 1940s, with later versions often simpler in form and ornament.³²

Harry J. Williams, Architect

Plaza Theatre was designed by architect Harry J. Williams. Williams practiced most of his professional career in Dayton, Ohio, where he developed a working relationship with Julia Shaw Patterson Carnell, heir to the National Cash Register Company fortune.³³ When Carnell began investing in Palm Springs real estate, she invited Williams to design several new commercial ventures for her. Williams proved to be a quick study in the Spanish Colonial Revival style.³⁴ Williams' first commission for Carnell was a mixed-use commercial, office, and residential building at 196 N. Palm Canyon Drive, constructed in 1935. While 196 N. Palm Canyon Drive represented a rather modest (and since altered) interpretation of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture, Williams' next commission for Carnell, La Plaza shopping center and Plaza Theatre, reflected a more highly articulated example of the style, incorporating the full

³⁰ Virginia McAlester and Lee McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 418.

³¹ City of Los Angeles, Office of Historic Resources, Architecture and Designed Landscapes, Revival Architecture Derived from Mediterranean and Indigenous Themes, final draft, June 4, 2010, 13.

³² McAlester and McAlester, 418.

³³ Kleinschmidt, "It Takes a Village."

³⁴ HRG, "Palm Springs Citywide Historic Context Statement & Findings," 111.

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complement of character-defining features of the architectural idiom. Reportedly inspired by a research trip Williams took to Santa Barbara, where the commercial district had been uniformly rebuilt in the Spanish Colonial Revival style after a devastating earthquake in 1922, the Plaza Theatre comprises all of the distinctive characteristics of the architectural expression, including its complex massing with multiple interlocking forms; light-colored cladding with wide, uninterrupted expanses; hipped roof with red clay roof tiles and exposed rafter tails; arched openings and second-story balcony at the primary façade; multi-light steel windows; and more decorative design details such as iron grilles, glazed ceramic tile, quatrefoil motifs, and stenciled painted ceilings.

Conclusion

The Plaza Theatre is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places at the local level of significance under Criterion A in the area of Entertainment/Recreation for its association with the early commercial development of Palm Springs. Completed in 1936 as the centerpiece of the La Plaza commercial shopping complex, the building is significant for its association with early twentieth century automobile-oriented commercial development in the city. Originally owned and operated by prominent theater impresario Earl Strebe, the building was a prime venue for star-studded charity events and benefit shows, live theater and variety show performances, and several live-audience radio show recordings. Under Criterion C at the local level of significance in the area of Architecture, the building is eligible as an excellent example of a Spanish Colonial Revival style atmospheric theater. The building embodies the distinctive characteristics of the architectural style and property type, including its complex massing, hipped clay tile roof, arched openings, multi-light steel windows, and decorative design details—iron grilles, glazed ceramic tile, quatrefoil motifs, and stenciled painted ceilings—as well as its central entrance plaza and atmospheric style auditorium with Spanish-themed sidewalls.

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9. Major Bibliographical References

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Williams, Harry J. Architect, Plaza Theatre Drawings, undated. City of Palm Springs. On file with the Palm Springs Art Museum.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
☐ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

☐ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☐ Other
Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1. Latitude: 33.822568 Longitude: -116.546257

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

City of Palm Springs, Riverside County, California, Parcel Number 513-144-010 (**Site Map**).

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary lines are the legally recorded property lines associated with the property.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Evanne St. Charles/Associate Principal
organization: Architectural Resources Group
street & number: 360 E. 2nd Street, Suite 225
city or town: Los Angeles state: California zip code: 91602
e-mail: e.stcharles@argcreate.com
telephone: (626) 583-1401 x125
date: July 2025; Revised August 2025

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

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Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property: Plaza Theatre
City or Vicinity: Palm Springs
County: Riverside
State: California
Photographer: Architectural Resources Group
Date Photographed: June 19, 2025

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

- 1 of 10 View east of the west façade and plaza
- 2 of 10 View north of the fan sign
- 3 of 10 View east of the west façade
- 4 of 10 View north of the south elevation
- 5 of 10 View southwest of the east elevation
- 6 of 10 View south of the exterior stair to the west façade balcony
- 7 of 10 View northeast of the entrance lobby
- 8 of 10 View east of the auditorium
- 9 of 10 View southeast of the auditorium
- 10 of 10 View south of the main foyer

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Location Map



Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for nominations to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.). We may not conduct or sponsor and you are not required to respond to a collection of information unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for each response using this form is estimated to be between the Tier 1 and Tier 4 levels with the estimate of the time for each tier as follows:

- Tier 1 – 60-100 hours
- Tier 2 – 120 hours
- Tier 3 – 230 hours
- Tier 4 – 280 hours

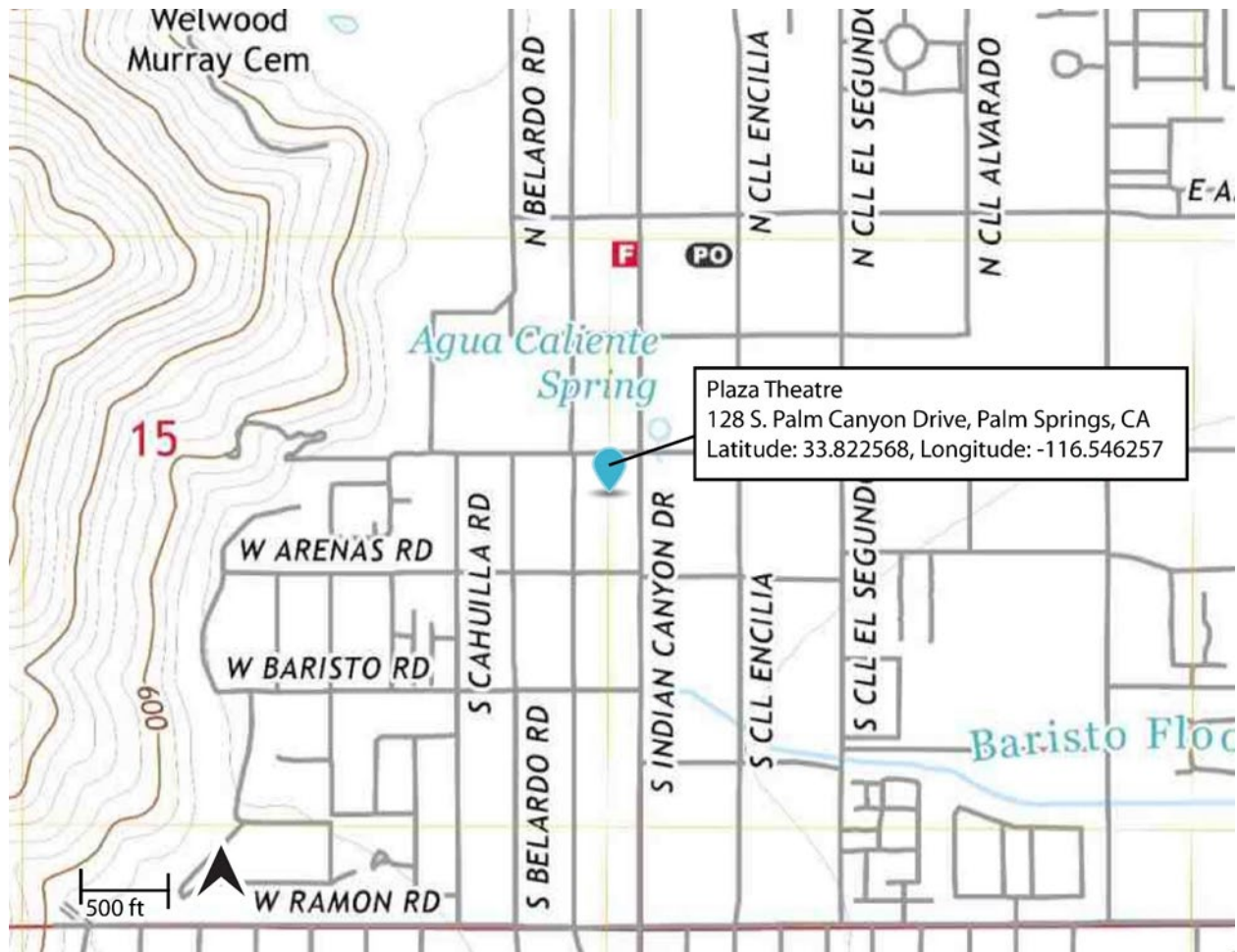
The above estimates include time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and preparing and transmitting nominations. Send comments regarding these estimates or any other aspect of the requirement(s) to the Service Information Collection Clearance Officer, National Park Service, 1201 Oakridge Drive Fort Collins, CO 80525

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USGS Map

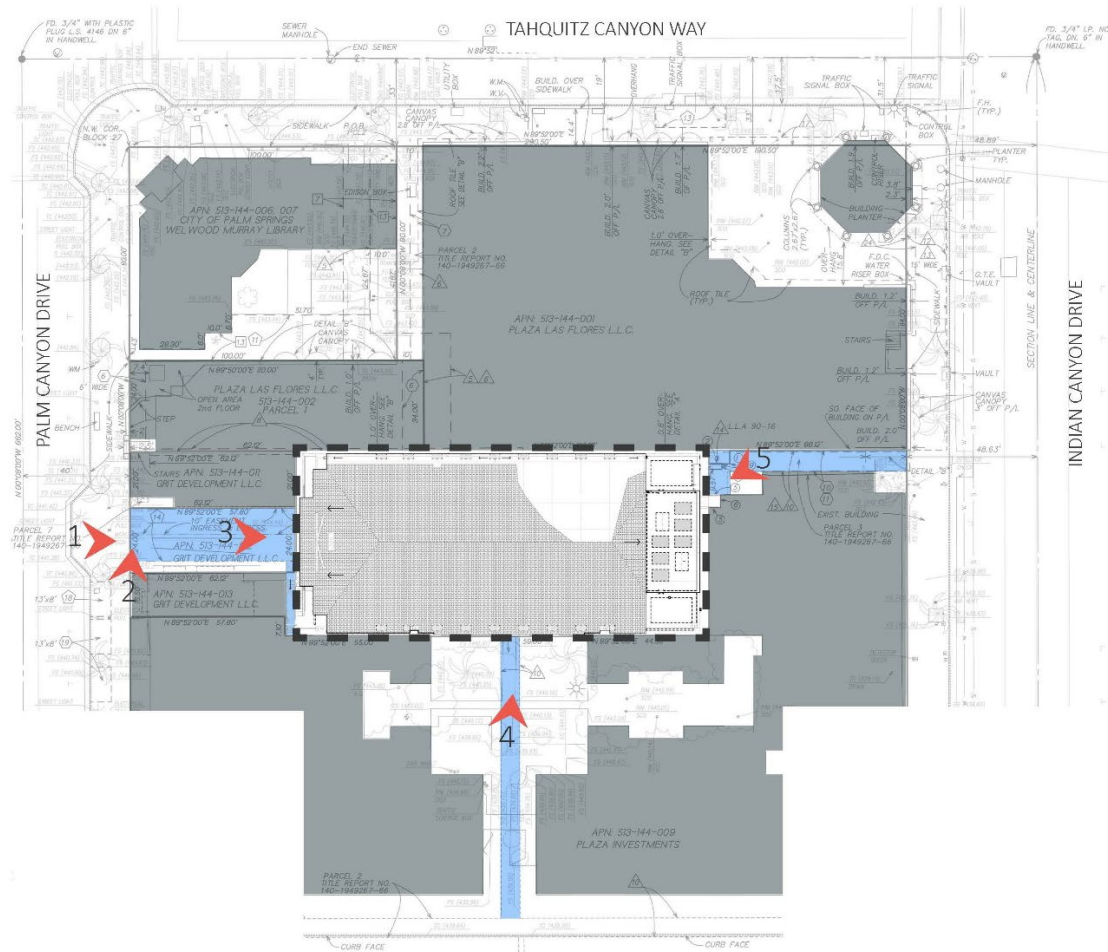
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Sketch Map/Photo Key 1 of 2



SITE PLAN

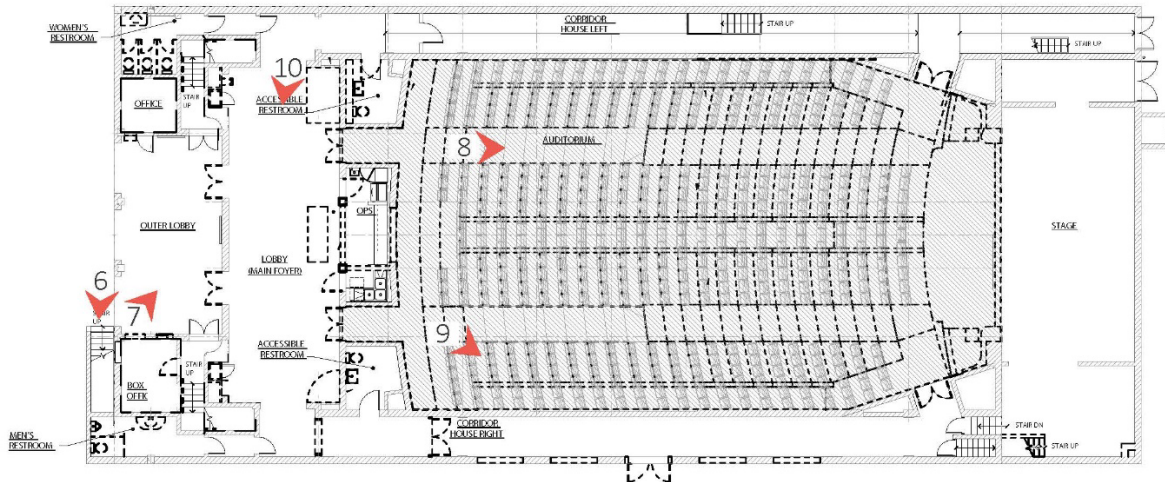
Subject property outlined in dashed black line
Not to scale



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Site Map/Photo Key 2 of 2



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

Not to scale



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Figure 1 Sanborn map, 1962 (Los Angeles Public Library), oriented north and illustrating La Plaza shopping center development surrounding the subject building (delineated by dashed red line)

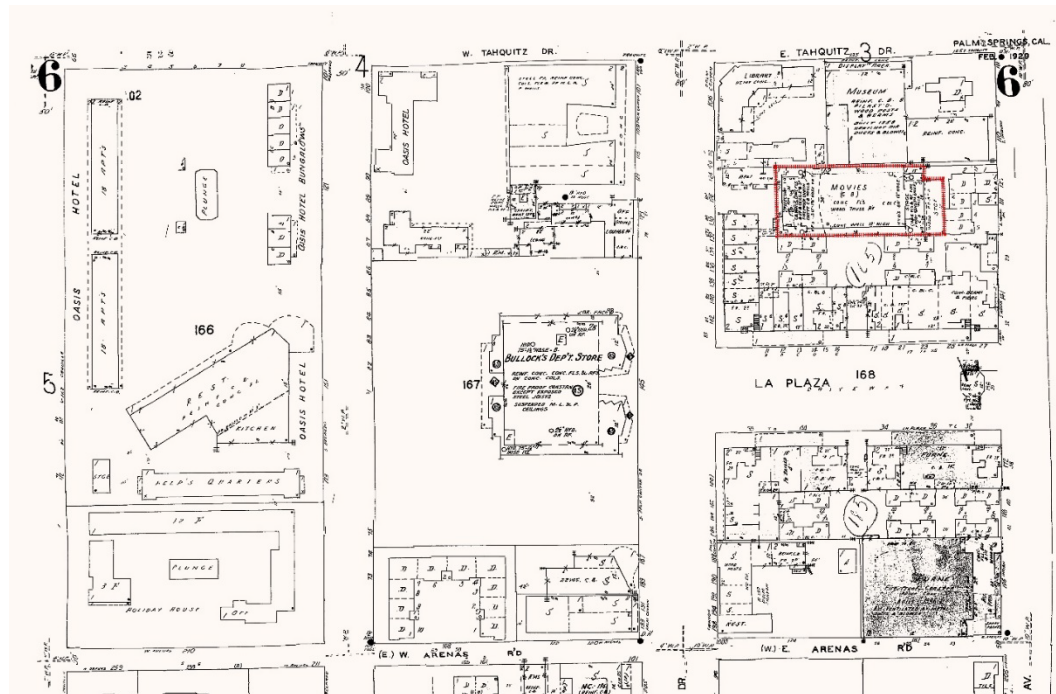
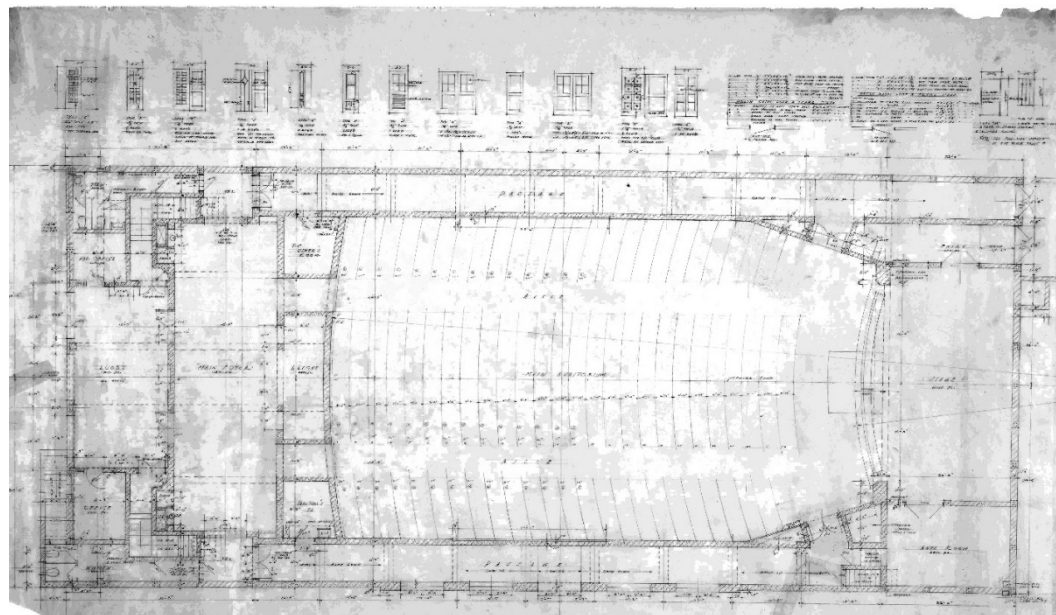


Figure 2 Harry J. Williams, Architect, Plaza Theatre, "First Floor Plan," undated; City of Palm Springs, on file at the Palm Springs Art Museum



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Figure 3 Harry J. Williams, Architect, Plaza Theatre, "Second Floor Plan," undated; City of Palm Springs, on file at the Palm Springs Art Museum

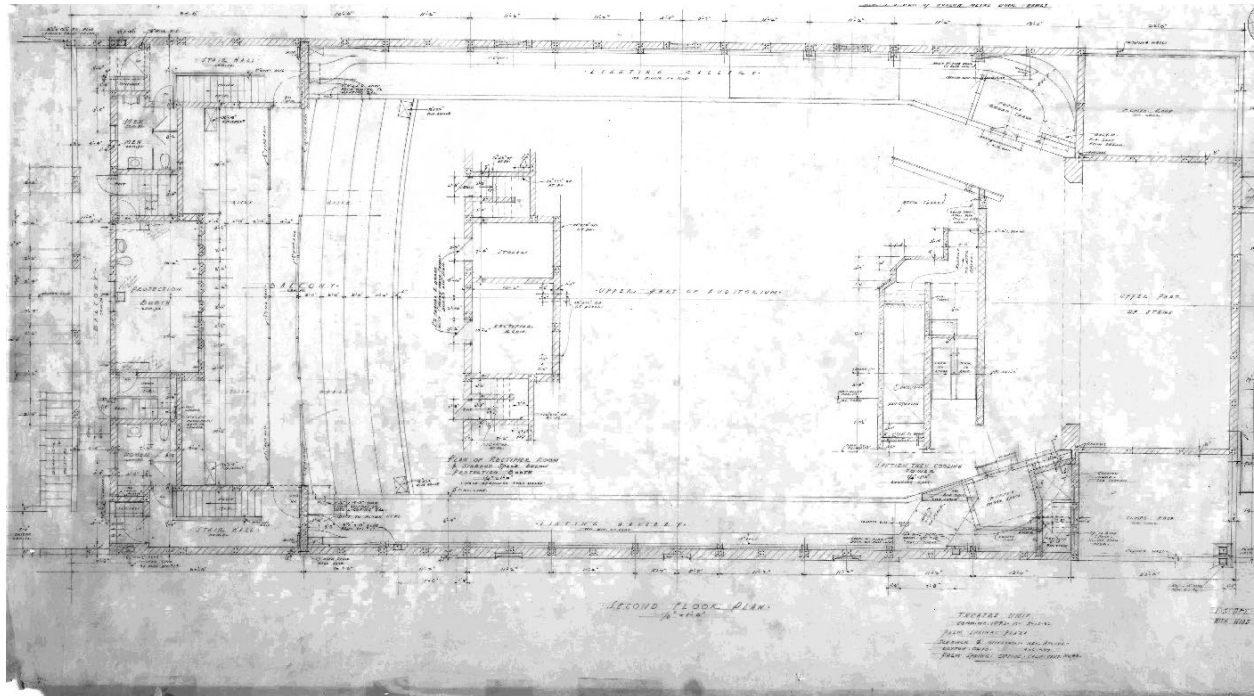
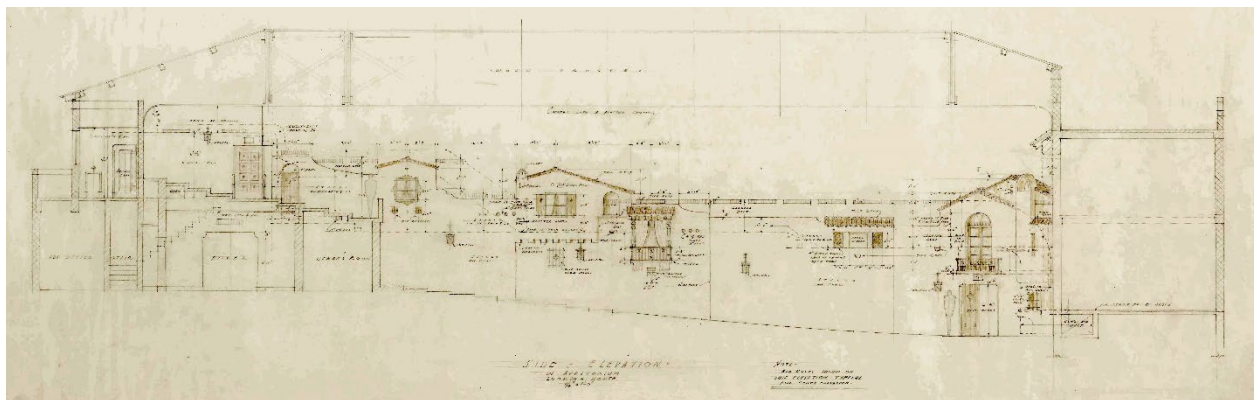


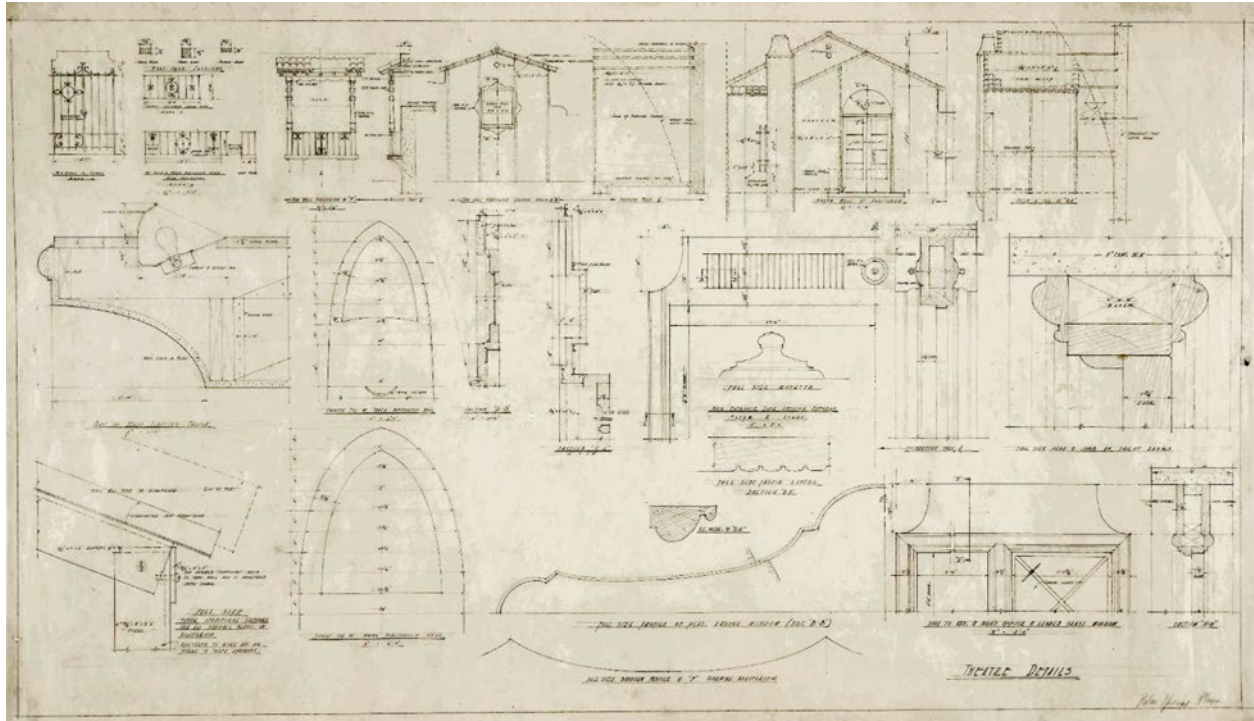
Figure 4 Harry J. Williams, Architect, Plaza Theatre, "Side Elevation in Auditorium," undated; City of Palm Springs, on file at the Palm Springs Art Museum



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Figure 5 Harry J. Williams, Architect, Plaza Theatre, "Theatre Details," undated; City of Palm Springs, on file at the Palm Springs Art Museum



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Photo 1 View east of the west façade and plaza



Photo 2 View north of the fan sign



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Photo 3 View east of the west façade



Photo 4 View north of the south elevation



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Photo 5 View southwest of the east elevation



Photo 6 View south of the exterior stair to the west façade balcony



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Photo 7 View northeast of the entrance lobby



Photo 8 View east of the auditorium



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Photo 9 View southeast of the auditorium



Photo 10 View south of the main foyer

