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Alondra Pulido

Preserving Heritage Theaters:
A Mixed-Use Approach to Building Community Anchors

Alondra Pulido

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Thesis Committee:

Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, Chair
David Strauss
Kathryn Merlino

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Abstract

**Preserving Heritage Theaters:
A Mixed-Use Approach to Building Community Anchors**

Alondra Jarnet Pulido

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Jeffrey Karl Ochsner
Department of Architecture

Seattle's historic neighborhood theaters are disappearing, resulting in a loss of cultural heritage and crucial community spaces. Due to the growth of streaming services, increasing real estate costs, and shifting neighborhood development, these historic landmarks are under threat. This thesis begins with an exploration of the history, architectural significance, and potential for mixed-use adaptation of historic theaters. From this foundation, it explores the design and transformation of one of those theaters through adaptive reuse. The goal of the project is to establish and demonstrate a framework for preserving this architecturally and culturally significant building type, while increasing economic sustainability by integrating gathering spaces, housing, and commercial uses. Finally, this thesis proposes guidelines for designing vibrant heritage spaces, ensuring these theaters serve as community anchors for future generations.

PRESERVING HERITAGE THEATERS

A MIXED-USE APPROACH TO BUILDING COMMUNITY ANCHORS

DIRECTED BY

ALONDRA PULIDO

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PRODUCED BY

JEFFREY OCHSNER, CHAIR

DAVID STRAUSS

KATHRYN MERLINO

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PROLOGUE



Because I grew up in a suburban town with limited entertainment, attending films showings in movie theaters has long been a favorite pastime. The weeks of saving allowance, the allure of the bright marquee, and the thrilling escape offered by my favorite films are some of my favorite childhood memories. When I moved to Seattle to begin my studies, I found myself instantly drawn to the local theaters, especially the Varsity on University Avenue and the Guild 45th in Wallingford.

Both theaters combined loud, intensely commercial elements (the bright lights of the marquee, the attention-grabbing billboards, the vibrant coloring) with Art Deco stylings and a rich cultural history. This mixing of cultural and attention-grabbing features is typical of cinema as an art form, and of the community theaters which are significant landmarks of its golden age. When I began my study of architecture, I found it enriched my appreciation for these theaters; I began to recognize them as architecturally significant structures, each with its own distinctive language and place in their communities.

One of the things I missed most during COVID-19 was my regular trips to the theater. As the pandemic wound down and the world began re-opening, I was heartbroken to discover the toll it had taken on small theaters in general and on the Guild 45th in particular. When I visited for the first time post-pandemic, I discovered the building falling into disrepair. Graffiti littered the front facade, the prominent marquee had disappeared, and a sign out front indicated the structure was condemned. This was a stark contrast to the vibrant community space I remembered. This moment was the genesis of my thesis: it caused me to question why these important community buildings were not being preserved as city landmarks, and to wonder whether there was anything that could be done. In this thesis, I share my journey of exploration through Seattle's cinema history, the preservation issues affecting these historic buildings, and my suggestion for a way to keep them from completely disappearing.

Figure A: Stadium 14 movie theater in Turlock, California.



CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE MOVIE THEATER DILEMMA

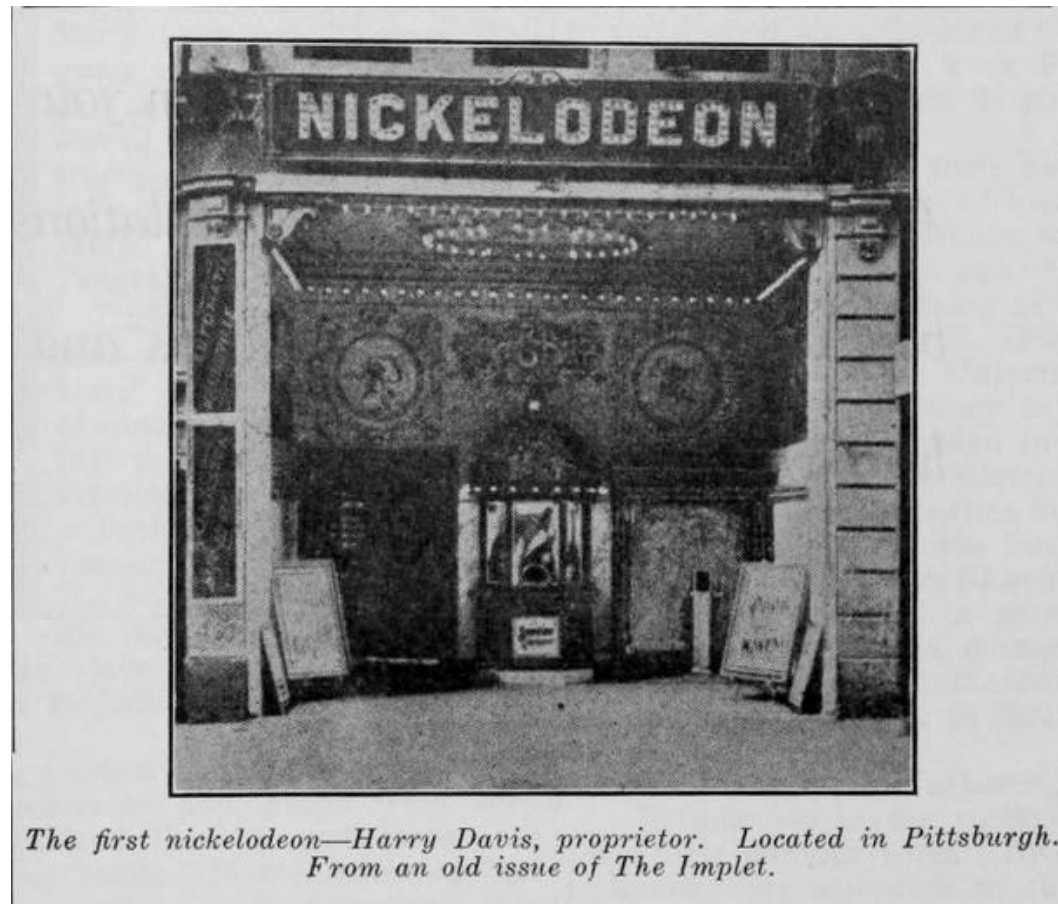
Movie theater attendance has been gradually declining for years, coinciding with the rise of streaming platforms and at-home entertainment.¹ While this is an issue that theaters have been weathering for years, it accelerated dramatically with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, movie theaters saw a 73% drop in revenue, and they have not fully recovered from this decline despite some progress thanks to recent popular film releases.² This trend is especially worrying for independent theaters, which are not able to screen as many films and typically do not showcase popular blockbusters. As a result, historically significant movie theaters are closing their doors at alarming rates. As they disappear, communities are losing valuable shared spaces and essential aspects of their heritage.

Despite serving as key urban markers of commercial districts, movie theaters often struggle to achieve recognition as historic landmarks. This is commonly due to the failure of recognition by local or state preservation boards, which cite excessive alterations or insufficient maintenance as reasons for a “lack of integrity.” Compared to the opulent performance theaters downtown, independent theaters in urban neighborhoods were built for a diverse audience at a smaller scale. Building styles such as Art Deco, Art Moderne, or vernacular commercial do not garner as much praise and recognition as the Neoclassical styles of the downtown movie palaces and performance stages. The emphasis on purely architectural elements for preservation fails to appreciate the important role a building’s cultural significance plays in protecting the urban landscape.

This thesis explores the narrative of heritage theaters as social infrastructure with the ability to bring community together and serve as central gathering spaces.³ It proposes mixed-use adaptation as a viable solution for declining movie theaters. While often interpreted as neighborhood attractors, theaters also serve as economic generators that drive secondary uses. This thesis examines the characteristics of a movie theater that can be preserved and adapted to meet the needs of an evolving neighborhood and provide a place for community.

Figure 1: Neptune Theater in U-district before becoming a performance venue (Macdonald).

1.1.1 HISTORY OF MOVIE HOUSES

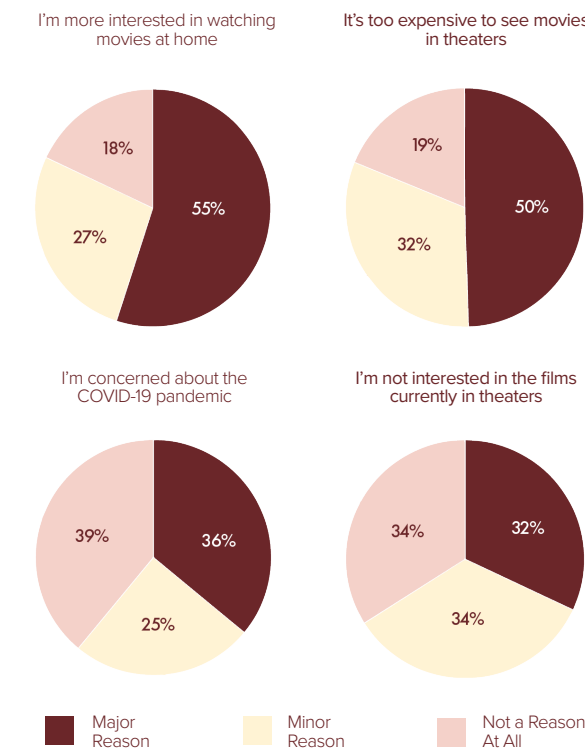


The earliest film screenings in the United States took place in storefronts called “Nickelodeons,” known for their five-cent admission tickets. These theaters were typically small, narrow storefronts, with seating for 200 or fewer.⁴ As the demand for the cinema grew throughout the 1910s, “movie palaces” gradually started replacing smaller theaters. These were typically ornate, lavish neoclassical buildings accommodating 1,000 to 5,000 seats. These movie palaces were opulent spaces meant to attract visitors with a luxurious experience while remaining available to the everyday person.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, the golden age of Hollywood set the tone for a new type of theater. Neighborhood theaters rose due to suburban sprawl, introducing the Art Deco and Streamline styles, as well as studio-owned theaters. These flashy styles brought about many of the themes we see today, such as neon lights, brightly lit marquee, and new screening technology. By the end of the 1940s, there was a steep decline in attendance due to the drive-in theater and rise of televisions in the home.⁵

Figure 1.1: First Nickelodeon in the US, from 1911 issue of The Implet (Zoe 1911)

From the 1980s and onward, multiplex theaters emerged and dominated the scene as they catered to larger audiences and boasted blockbuster films and modern facilities. Despite movie theater innovations, a decline in attendance continued due to the rise of television/streaming services and increased ticket prices (Figure 1.2). Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically reduced ticket sales, which have still not returned to pre-pandemic levels (Figure 1.3).



Despite these issues, independent theaters across the United States that have survived continue to play important roles within their neighborhoods, serving as arthouse centers for independent films and community centers for local organizations and events. However, the function of these buildings as movie theaters is not protected through preservation, and many lack the economic viability to adapt to changing needs. Therefore, this thesis explores heritage theaters within Seattle to determine methods of preservation and adaptive reuse to “future-proof” the identity of the neighborhood theater as a community anchor.

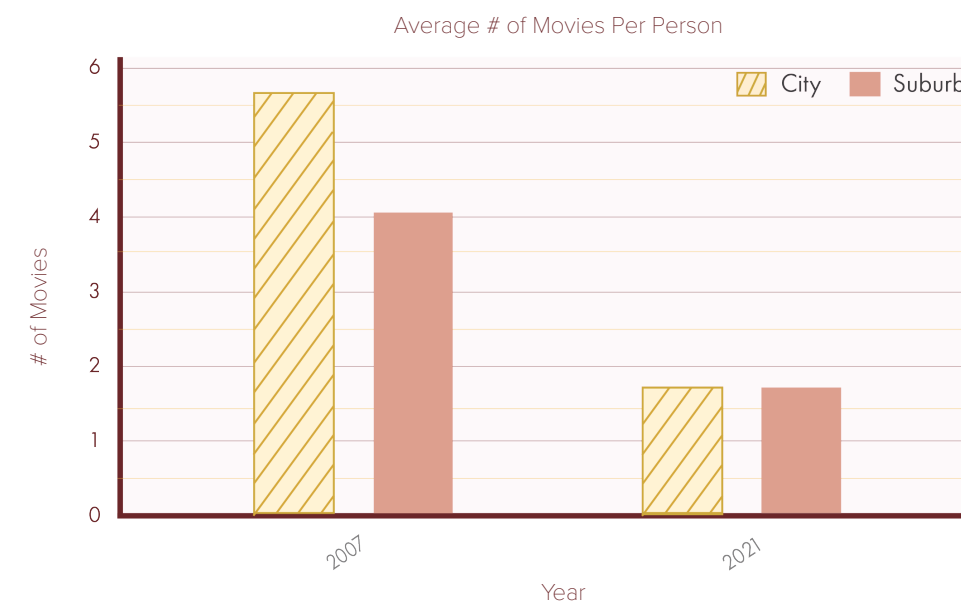


Figure 1.2: Pie chart illustrating the reasons people are not showing up to the movies (US:2022 - 2023)
 Figure 1.3: Chart illustrating the average # of movies per person pre-pandemic and post-pandemic (The Numbers n.d.).

1.1.2 SEATTLE'S NEIGHBORHOOD THEATERS



Seattle's movie theater scene follows a similar timeline to the national rise and fall of movie houses and cinema attendance, with a steep decline in the 1980s. However, the unusual makeup of suburban/urban mix neighborhoods in Seattle has fostered the longevity of small-scale theaters across several commercial districts. These movie theaters, with only 1-3 screens, have become beloved attractions within their neighborhoods.

Despite the prominence of these smaller theaters in Seattle's history, the theaters that are most often preserved are the grand movie palaces from the early twentieth century which now often serve as performing art spaces. The Paramount Theatre, Coliseum Theatre, and the Moore Theatre are all older theaters that fit this description and have been recognized as landmarks. Amongst smaller-scale heritage theaters, only the Admiral Theater in West Seattle has been nominated by the city, while nominations for the Cinerama and the Guild 45th Theatre have been denied.

Figure 1.4: Timeline of Seattle movie house scene.

As of 2024, thirteen independent movie houses in the Seattle area remain, but their future is uncertain: one has been recently demolished, another scheduled for demolition, and many more are struggling to survive due to maintenance issues, declining sales, or development from upzoning (Figure 1.5). Since the early 1900's, at least sixty-four theaters have been demolished and many more were forced to shut down.⁶ While some theaters found the support of philanthropic donors, non-profit organizations, or volunteer efforts, not all movie theaters have a sustainable model for their continued survival.

To address the challenges faced by Seattle's independent movie houses and explore their potential for revival, this thesis begins with a comprehensive analysis of their historical context, physical condition, and cultural impact. The following sections outline the organization of the thesis, providing an overview of key terms related to preservation, architecture, and community, and concluding with the thesis statement.

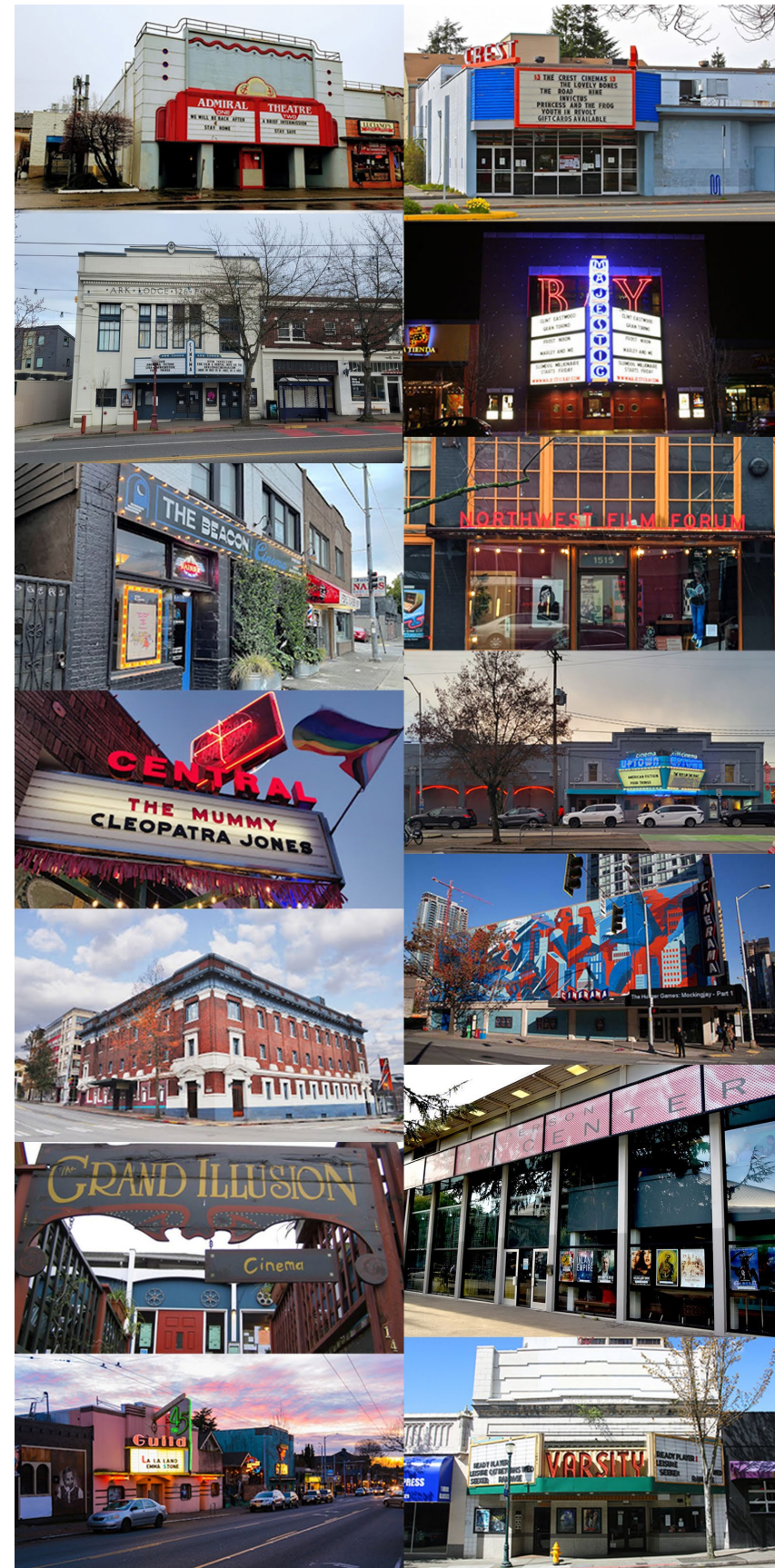
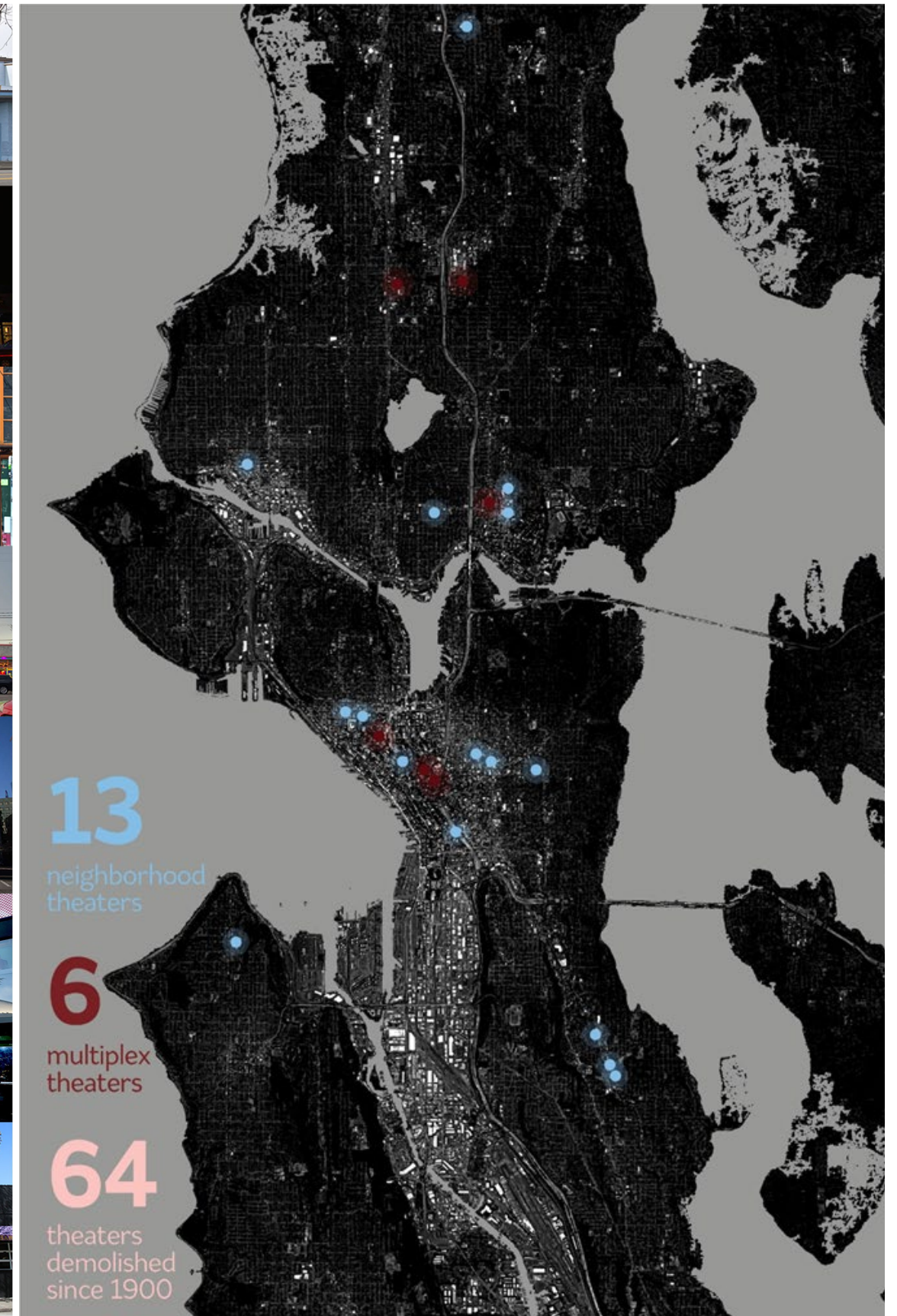


Figure 1.5: Seattle's current independent theaters. (Left)

- Admiral Theater, West Seattle (Jonathan Fischer)
 - Ark Lodge Cinema, Columbia City
 - Beacon Hill Cinema, Beacon Hill (Ryan Lane)
 - Central Cinema, Capitol Hill (Christina Szirmai)
 - Egyptian Theater, Capitol Hill (SIFF)
 - Grand Illusion Cinema, U-District (The Grand Illusion)
 - Guild 45th Theatre, Wallingford (Day Media Company)
- (Right)
- Landmark's Crest Cinema Center, Shoreline (Steven Robinson)
 - Majestic Bay Theater, Ballard (Majestic Bay)
 - Northwest Film Forum
 - SIFF Uptown Cinema, Uptown
 - SIFF Cinema Downtown (Cinerama), Downtown (SIFF)
 - SIFF Film Center, Uptown (SIFF)
 - Varsity Theater, U-District (Bruce C., Cinema Treasures)

Figure 1.6: Map of Seattle's independent and multiplex theaters.





1.2 THESIS STRUCTURE

This thesis is structured in seven chapters with a series of subsections within each chapter. The first two chapters provide the thesis statement, general framework, and framework of the project. **Part I** (Chapters 3-4) focuses on the analysis of four historic theaters and their feasibility for preservation and expansion through adaptive reuse. **Part II** (Chapters 5-7) provides the design proposal for a preservation and adaptive reuse project, process documentation, and concluding findings.

Chapter 1 describes the structure of the thesis, historical context of movie theaters in Seattle, definition of relevant terms, and thesis statement.

Chapter 2 outlines the thesis framework, methods, preservation, and community theories. Adaptive reuse of neighborhood theaters will be examined as a social solution to preserving community.

Section 1 examines the loss of heritage movie theaters due to preservation criteria, economic, and architectural issues through the perspective of downtown and neighborhood theaters.

Section 2 proposes adaptive reuse as the solution to preserving these historic movie theaters

Figure 1.7: Landmark Crest Theater in Shoreline, WA (Steven H. Robinson 2018)

and future-proofing buildings for continued community use.

Section 3 analyzes the characteristics of heritage movie theaters that should be saved for adaptive reuse.

Section 4 describes the research methods and reference materials for examining the significance of the proposed theaters through historical documentation, nominations, and site visits.

Part I: Four Theater Case Studies

Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the thesis through site selection, landmark significance, building surveys, and neighborhood analysis.

Section 1 presents the methodology for examining historical independent theaters and the thesis goals.

Section 2 introduces the 4 sites, providing background information, historical context, architectural features, and neighborhood analysis. The four sites for selection include:

Site 1: Ark Lodge Cinemas located in Columbia City, Seattle and built in 1921.

Site 2: Guild 45th Theater located in Wallingford, Seattle and built in 1919.

Site 3: SIFF Uptown Cinema built in 1926 is located in Uptown/Lower Queen Anne.

Site 4: Varsity Theater located in the U-district was built in 1921.

Chapter 4 focuses on establishing program and presents conceptual sketches as well as schematic feasibility studies for all four theaters.

Section 1 examines methods to programming spaces depending on community needs, building layout, and economic viability.

Section 2 presents early process and concept sketching for all sites.

Section 3 demonstrates final feasibility studies for all 4 theaters.

Part II: Adaptive Reuse Design Project

Chapter 5 includes the design process and model photos for the chosen movie theater site.

Section 1 includes early site analysis and zoning restrictions.

Section 2 describes the non-negotiable items to be preserved.

Section 3 & 4 presents the final massing model iteration design.

Chapter 6 outlines the final building design and drawings.

Section 1 includes the final technical drawings of the adaptive reuse project.

Section 2 demonstrates the housing solution.

Section 3 examines combining old and new materiality.

Chapter 7 presents concluding results and commentary on thesis.

1.3 DEFINED TERMS

The examination of historical movie theaters through an architectural, preservation, and community perspective has a diverse terminology. The key terms used in this thesis are defined in this section for clarity.



1.3.1 PRESERVATION TERMS

This thesis addresses the realm of historic preservation and adaptive reuse of a building type to create community spaces. Various preservation and regulatory terms are used throughout the thesis including historic preservation, significance, integrity, landmark nomination, and adaptive reuse.

Historic Preservation is the process of protecting something. This could be a building, landscape, archeological site, or a culture/tradition. This thesis focuses on the preservation of the building form and cultural qualities of movie theaters and how the individual or the architect plays a role in this process. The preservation process for this project means retaining the value or integrity of this building type through surveys, adaptive reuse, landmark nominations, and rehabilitation.⁷

Significance is a measure used to evaluate properties for the National Register (and for local Landmark designation). According to the National Register of Historic Places, a property is significant if it is either associated with “events, activities, or developments that were important in the past,” or “with the lives of people important to the past, with significant architectural history, landscape history, or engineering achievements.”⁸

Figure 1.8: The City of Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board (City of Seattle)

Integrity is used in this thesis to evaluate a building’s retention of “location, design, setting, material, workmanship, feeling, and association” in evaluating a building for historic preservation along with significance.⁹

A **Landmark nomination** in this thesis describes the initial step of a building qualifying for the city of Seattle’s Landmark designation. The Landmark nomination describes the building’s significance and integrity; it is reviewed by the city’s historic preservation staff and, once accepted, is considered by the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board at two public meetings.

Adaptive reuse is the repurposing of an existing structure for a new use. Adaptive reuse in this thesis is used to preserve a continuation of cultural heritage through structures, their materiality, and the collective memory they embody in the built environment.¹⁰

Intangible Heritage in this thesis is used to describe a different understanding of preservation that goes beyond the physical artifacts of objects and deals with the practices, expressions, and knowledge of how communities interact with their environment and with each other.¹¹

1.3.2 MOVIE THEATER TERMS



Figure 1.9: Interior view of SIFF Uptown Theater (Durham 2019)

The movie theater, as a building type, has a rich history of architectural styles such as Art Deco, Googie, Art Moderne, Neoclassical, and so forth. While style may be important, this thesis focuses primarily on specific characteristics that contribute to a theater's use as a community space (such as, neighborhood theater, marquee, auditorium)

The term **neighborhood theater** is used to describe the building type explored in this thesis. This type of theater is characterized by its location in a lower-density area, or a non-downtown neighborhood. Such theaters are typically located on the commercial streets within their respective neighborhoods, and small in scale, with 1-3 screening rooms.

A **marquee** is a type of canopy and sign that usually extends over the main entrance of a movie theater. They are often adorned with flashing lights, neon signage, and lettering with the theater name and the name of the movie title showings. These are prominent urban markers that attract visitors and are often associated with the glamour of the golden age of cinema.

The **auditorium** is the section of the movie theater for viewing a performance and typically includes the main seating area, screen, and balconies.

1.3.3 COMMUNITY TERMS

The preservation of neighborhood movie theaters is heavily influenced by the communities of which they are a part. Community terms that are relevant to the social impact of movie theaters include, social infrastructure, third places, community anchor, and collective memory.

Social infrastructure is a “network of physical spaces and institutions—from sidewalks to public parks, libraries to cafes—that when robust, promote community-building activities.”¹² In this thesis, movie theaters are referred to as important elements of social infrastructure for their respective neighborhoods.

Third places are spaces outside of the home where people go to interact with other community members. Third places can include libraries, cafes, parks, and similar spaces of social interaction.¹³

The term **community anchor** is inspired by the theories of Jane Jacobs in which old buildings need to be preserved to create spaces that foster healthy and economically diverse neighborhoods so that they may “help to anchor diversity.”¹⁴

Collective memory is a term used to describe the identity of a neighborhood or a community as a dynamic process that is “connected to the idea of time.”¹⁵ This thesis will explore the theme of collective memory of these theaters as an argument to preserve and reuse these structures.

1.4 THESIS STATEMENT

How do we preserve the identity of historic movie theaters as community spaces?

Significant movie theaters across major cities in the U.S. are facing declining attendance and deterioration, with few initiatives for refurbishment or preservation despite public support. This decline threatens the cultural identity and architectural heritage of these buildings, many almost one hundred years old. However, their association with community identity and engagement provides a building stock that stands ready for a mixed-reuse approach, supporting economic viability and renewal of neighborhoods as cultural centers. This thesis addresses these issues through a two-part exploration. First, the thesis presents a comprehensive evaluation of four Seattle movie theaters as case studies (Ark Lodge Cinema, the Guild 45th Theatre, SIFF Uptown Cinema, and Varsity Theatre)—all are located within neighborhoods experiencing upzoning and redevelopment. These theaters have either been at risk of demolition or closure or have been denied designation as protected Landmarks. The thesis presents evaluations through feasibility studies to develop an approach to treatment, programming, and guidelines for communities to implement in their own neighborhood development models. Second, the thesis presents a complete adaptive reuse design project for one of these theaters to showcase the potential issues and solutions for future projects.



CHAPTER 2: FRAMEWORK

2.1 WHY ARE COMMUNITY ANCHORS DISAPPEARING?

Historical movie theaters are valued as important community markers within their neighborhoods, but often struggle to qualify as historic landmarks at the local, state, or national level. This chapter explores the process of Landmark recognition and preservation in the City of Seattle, revealing failures in the system caused by political, architectural, and economic issues pertaining to this building type. The proposed solution is an adaptive reuse framework that combines cultural principles of preservation with a community's programmatic needs for future-proofing a building.

2.1.1 PROCESS OF LANDMARK PRESERVATION

Any individual can nominate a building to be a City of Seattle Landmark. The nomination is then reviewed for adequacy by city staff and scheduled for a public meeting of the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board. During this meeting, the Board considers the nomination based on the City's standards for Landmark designation. If the Board votes to accept the nomination, it will be reviewed for the next month, during which Board members typically visit the nominated building. In a second meeting, the Board votes on whether to designate the building as a City of Seattle Landmark. Once the nomination is approved and the building is designated, then any alterations to the significant features of the building require a "Certificate of Approval." Additionally, the building may qualify for tax credits. If the building is rejected at either the nomination stage or the designation stage, it cannot be considered again for a period of five years.

The requirements for designation in the City of Seattle are like, but distinct from, the national and state designations. A significant difference is the age requirement. Seattle only requires buildings to be at least 25 years old, while national and state registers have a 50-year requirement. The remaining designation requirements are listed in the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Ordinance (SMC 25.12.35).¹⁶

Figure 2: Demolition of Guild 45th Theater (Santos 2022).

- A. It is the location of, or is associated in a significant way with, an historic event with a significant effect upon the community, City, state, or nation; or
- B. It is associated in a significant way with the life of a person important in the history of the City, state, or nation; or
- C. It is associated in a significant way with a significant aspect of the cultural, political, or economic heritage of the community, City, state or nation; or
- D. It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or of a method of construction; or
- E. It is an outstanding work of a designer or builder; or
- F. Because of its prominence of spatial location, contrasts of siting, age, or scale, it is an easily identifiable visual feature of its neighborhood or the City and contributes to the distinctive quality or identity of such neighborhood or the City.

The criteria for nomination in Seattle include several intangible qualities, such as: “heritage of the community” (Criterion C), identity of a neighborhood (Criterion F), and significant association with a significant event or time period (Criterion A).¹⁷ Despite this, the evaluation of buildings most often focuses heavily on its physical characteristics and how well it has been maintained since the “time of significance.” This means the integrity of the building is scrutinized intensely during the application process.

An important issue with the focus on integrity is a lack of focus on cultural significance, as culture is more subjective and may not be captured in the survey of different building types and pathologies. Cultural significance is not even listed among the criteria for listing on the National Register. In Seattle, despite the general cultural significance of neighborhood theaters, only the Admiral Theater in West Seattle has been accepted as a City of Seattle Landmark. The Admiral Theatre was designated a Seattle Landmark in 1989 for its significance as the last surviving movie house in West Seattle, and its demonstration of five out of the six applicable criteria:¹⁸

- *Criteria B:* Designed by B Marcus Priteca,
- *Criteria D, E:* Nautical theme, curvilinear “leisure,” and streamline-moderne style.
- *Criteria C:* Representative of 20th century film culture and the popularity of neighborhood movie theaters.
- *Criteria F:* Last remaining neighborhood theater in West Seattle.

While the Admiral Theatre is a great example of preserving these important heritage structures, it remains an isolated case. Other neighborhood theaters of the same type and cultural impact have too often not been regarded as “historic,” and instead have become detriments to their communities as they have fallen into disrepair or undergone extreme renovations.

The Guild 45th Theater in Wallingford is an unfortunate example of a failed nomination. In this case, a relatively weak nomination was filed. While the nomination was factually accurate, it placed significant focus on the renovations the building experienced in the 1940s and 1980s.¹⁹



These renovations were typical of classic movie houses, since both of these time periods were eras of significant technical and stylistic innovations in the film industry, but excessive focus on them likely undermined the Board’s understanding of the building’s integrity.²⁰ During the Board discussion, members stated the “significance was tied to use” and that its “visible architecture is from the 1970s” and they did not deem it to have integrity from its period of significance in the 1920-40s.²¹ This decision led to the building’s eventual demolition starting in 2022.

The Landmark Board’s rejection ignored the last 50 years of significance, the building’s distinct Art Deco style, humorous marquee signage, and its large theater space as integral parts of the community and special attractions for visitors. Wallingford residents must now go without a theater and large gathering space within their neighborhood, highlighting the importance of preservation efforts.

2.2 ADAPTIVE REUSE AS THE SOLUTION

Unlike historic preservation, adaptive reuse often does not return a building to its original purpose and condition. Instead, it aims to adapt the use and function of the building while still preserving important elements of its character and history. Adaptive reuse has important practical benefits as well: it is a sustainable method of architecture that reduces carbon footprint by reusing materials and not tearing down or building entirely new structures.²² Additionally, the recognizable character of the preserved building can often serve as a substantial draw, synergizing with new uses to enhance the total value of the building. While historic preservation can be “perceived as freezing a moment in time,” adaptive reuse may often open up opportunities for innovation and creativity.²³

The neighborhood movie theaters explored in this thesis have made a large impact in their respective communities. Although their original uses as moviehouses are in decline, the buildings have the potential to continue serving their communities by retaining the characteristics that make them so integral to the collective memory of their patrons.

Figure 2.1: Admiral Theatre, West Seattle (Admiral Theatre - Photos 2016)

2.2.1 CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The process of adaptive reuse can be a difficult undertaking for an owner, posing financial, regulatory, and technical challenges. In both academic and professional settings, there is often a preference for starting from a “clean slate.” This approach avoids the complexity of the unknown, especially with a building constructed before the digital age of architectural documentation. Despite these challenges, adaptive reuse is an essential solution for preserving cultural heritage and ensuring the longevity of historic buildings, while offering an opportunity to future-proof existing movie theaters. Important considerations for reuse of theaters, in particular, include:

1. **Flexible Spaces:** Designing for adaptable spaces that can accommodate a variety of community uses through movable partitions, open planning, and preserved auditoriums will offer a much more dynamic space that can change over time.
2. **Zoning and Development:** Planning for future zoning or development in the neighborhood will help assess the needs of the community and survive change.
3. **Structural Reinforcement:** Several of Seattle’s neighborhood theaters need seismic retrofits and preservation techniques to strengthen and protect the building for future use. Structural reinforcement helps ensure the preservation of a building’s significance into the future and can be included as part of adaptive reuse.

2.3 WHAT SHOULD BE SAVED?



Figure 2.2: Empty lot at the location of the former Guild 45th Theater

How does an architect determine which parts of a building should be saved? While every adaptive reuse project is unique, effective ones are often guided by a few key questions:

1. What makes the building distinctive or even unique?
2. What elements are characteristic of its cultural identity and previous uses?
3. What elements are not necessary, and can be readily adapted to make space for new uses?
4. Conversely, what elements of the building’s new intended use are essential, and which can be adapted to fit within the context of the existing building?

Successful adaptations involve blending aspects of the existing structure and its new intended use, rather than simply forcing new spaces intended for the new use into completely remade portions of the existing structure.

In addition to questions about the character of the building and its new intended use, the architect should take a careful approach to understanding the new role of the building within the community. Just as the new use must not be forced bluntly into the structure, the adaptively reused structure cannot be forced into the community. By starting from a broad context of the city and neighborhood, and gradually narrowing to street relationships and exterior connections, an architect can ensure the building works well within, and adds to, the existing community.

2.3.1 DETERMINING SIGNIFICANCE

A. Physical Characteristics

Movie theaters are often distinctive for their eye-catching architectural styles, brightly lit marquee signage, and vibrant color palettes. Neighborhood theaters from the 1920s and 1930s also represent a period where grandiose Art Deco and streamlined styles dominated this building type to draw crowds and offer a unique and affordable entertainment experience. The movie theater’s front elevation and signage often became representative of the neighborhood itself and became ingrained into the collective memory of local residents and visitors. Therefore, this thesis treats the preservation of the exterior facade as a critical goal in order to preserve a building’s identity in the neighborhood urban fabric. Additions to the building must support the original. Significant architectural elements to be considered (and retained if possible) include:

- Marquee/signage
- Canopy or covered areas
- Original façade materiality & ornamentation
- Central entry/openings
- Building shape, parapet
- Lighting and light fixtures



2.4 SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Due to the historical character of neighborhood movie theaters, available documentation, including digital drawings, is limited. As a result, this thesis draws on a varied set of materials to establish context and understand the history of the buildings addressed. In particular, this thesis draws on the following resources:

- Site visits
- Seattle Microfilm, Permit Records
- King County Property Records
- Property Record Cards - Puget Sound Regional Archives
- Seattle Times digital archives (online)
- Neighborhood and Cinema Blogs
- City Of Seattle Landmark Nominations
- Seattle Historical Sites listings at the Department of Neighborhoods

B. Spatial Significance

The spatial quality of movie theaters is demonstrated by a sequence of spaces that add to the film-going experience. The procession typically begins under a brightly lit canopy, passes through an open lobby, into a vestibule or hallway, and culminates in a large, dimly lit auditorium space. This procession is important for transporting people from their stressful daily lives into the fantasies of film and offers a space for shared experiences. This thesis recognizes the importance of these spatial sequences and the design project in Part II specifically seeks to retain the processional aspect, as well as a theater's capacity to transform into an adaptable community space. Key spaces to consider include:

- Auditorium/Balconies
- Stage
- Open Space/Lobby, Mezzanine
- Covered outdoor space

Figure 2.3: Siff Uptown Cinema's Original Theater (Spacefinder 2024)

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 THESIS GOALS & OBJECTIVES

The goal of the thesis is not only to preserve the existing building typology of heritage movie theaters, but also to indicate methods for analyzing and assessing buildings of this type for potential reuse. This thesis offers comparative case studies of four existing Seattle neighborhood movie theaters. The case studies reveal patterns of programming, circulation, architectural details, and neighborhood cultural impact, and allow evaluation of potential for rehabilitation and adaptive reuse. The thesis provides a survey, a statement of significance, and a neighborhood analysis before considering a set of programs that can be used to develop feasibility studies for adaptive reuse of each theater. This approach highlights the distinct identity of these movie houses within their respective neighborhoods, while at the same time testing each for a similar program of adaptive reuse. This process aims to evaluate the constraints of different site dimensions and configurations, adjoining buildings and other aspects of the theater's context. This thesis advocates for the preservation of these theaters, recognizing them not only as relics of the past but as vital contributors to the ongoing narrative of Seattle's evolving urban environment. It tests adaptive reuse as both a means to preserve then and to make them even more vital as community anchors.

3.2 SITE SELECTION AND ANALYSIS

The determining factors for selection of the four case studies were based on the building's significance as one of the remaining Seattle neighborhood theaters and the potential of each for Landmark designation. The criteria for the four theaters include:

- Date from 1920-1930's
- Recent use as a theater
- 1-3 Screens (neighborhood theaters)
- Located in commercial district of neighborhood
- Experiencing increased density/upzoning
- Significant architectural style
- 1-2 story building
- Not a designated Landmark in the City of Seattle

Using this list of criteria, the following movie theaters were selected: Ark Lodge Cinema, Varsity Theatre, Guild 45th Theatre, and the SIFF Uptown Cinema. The following sections provide an overview of each individual theater, including a survey of the property, neighborhood context, and timeline of any changes to its physical fabric.

Figure 3a: Varsity Theatre, U-district (Puget Sound Regional Branch)
Figure 3b: Ark Lodge Cinema, Columbia City (Puget Sound Regional Branch)
Figure 3c: Guild 45th Theatre in 1982, Wallingford (Cinema Treasures/needs)
Figure 3d: SIFF Uptown Theatre, Uptown (Puget Sound Regional Branch)



3.2.1 SITE 1: ARK LODGE CINEMAS, COLUMBIA CITY



A. Overview

Date of Construction: 1921

The Ark Lodge Cinema is located in the commercial district along Rainier Avenue South in Columbia City and continues to operate as a movie theater as well as an event space for local organizations. The Ark Lodge is currently a family-owned business operated by the McRea family. It is a cherished community space that has survived through fundraising and the support of its local community.²⁴ Although the building is located in the Columbia City Historic District, and is protected from certain changes, its use as a community space is at risk. The theater continues to provide a place for film lovers, but economic and regulatory factors are an issue affecting its future.

Figure 3.1: Front Elevation of Ark Lodge Cinema

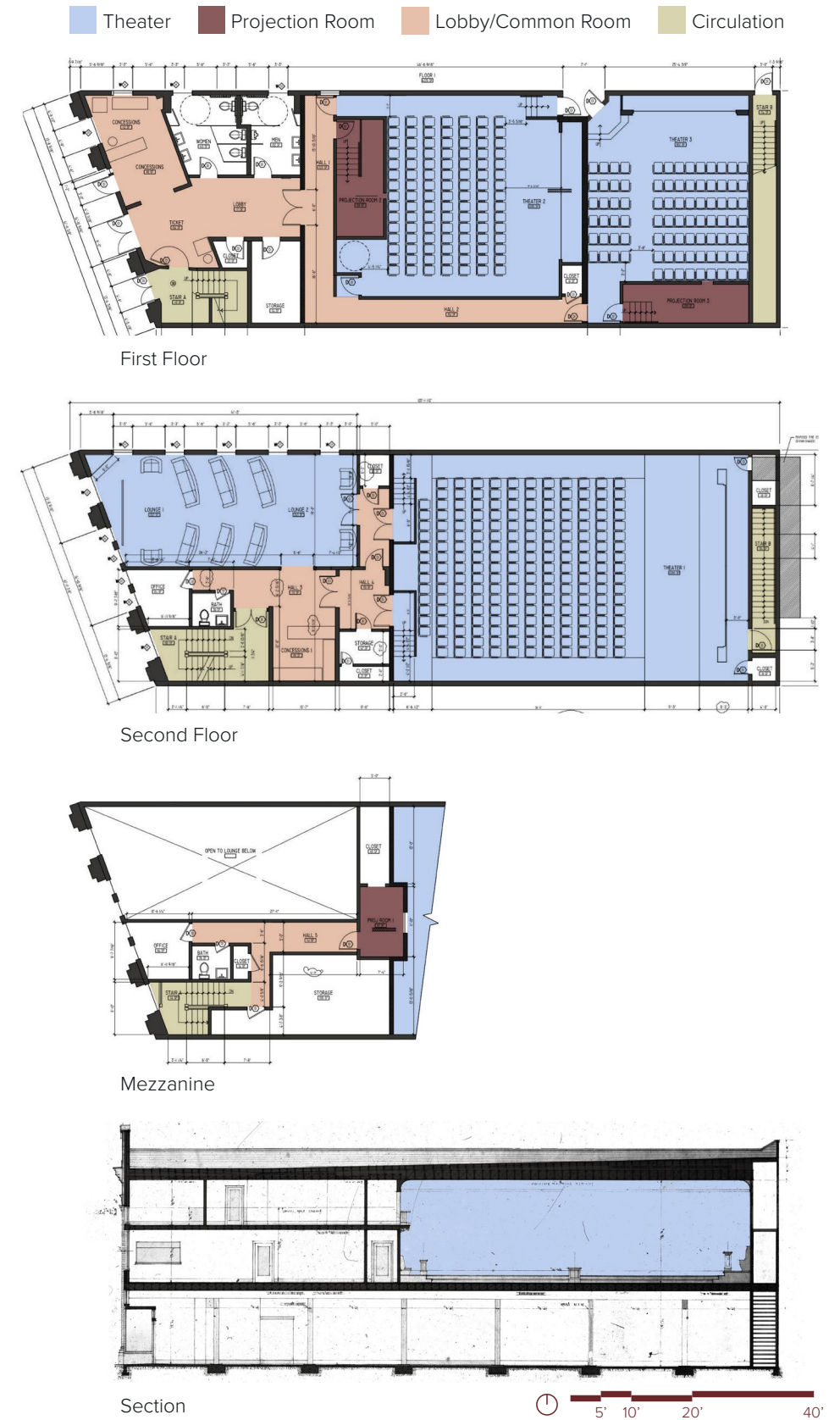


Figure 3.2: Architectural plans and section of Ark Lodge Cinema.

B. Physical Description

The Ark Lodge is a well preserved 2-½ story building constructed of wood framing with a concrete foundation and brick and stucco veneer. The plan is a slightly irregular rectangle with a sharp northwest corner that faces Rainier Avenue South and an alley to the north side. The west-facing front elevation is characterized by a neoclassical style with four ionic pilasters extending from the ground floor to the second story of the façade. The building has a flat roof with a tiered parapet form and is decorated with the Masonic symbol and a square ruler crest. The fenestration type of the front elevation includes a fixed window above a single hung window, with a set of two four-over-four windows and a set of four two-over-two windows in the center. The front facade is bilaterally symmetrical except for the entry doors, marquee, and canopy, which are offset towards the south end. Movie posters decorate the ionic pilasters at ground level advertising current releases.

The interior of the Ark Lodge houses four movie screening rooms, with the original Masonic hall and lounge screening room located on the second floor. The first floor was originally a commercial space providing revenue for the Masonic lodge but has since been converted to two additional theater spaces. Interior walls and doors have been painted with murals and community artwork during its time as a theater.

C. Physical Survey

**The following historic property data is based on the Washington State Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation data collection form.²⁵*

Date Recorded: 2/10/24

Field Recorder: Alondra Pulido

Parcel #: 170290-0680

Site Address: 4816 Rainier Ave S

City/Town/County/Zip Code: Seattle, 98118

Historic Name: Ark Lodge

Neighborhood: Columbia City

Year Built: 1921

Architect: John L. McCauley

Classification: Building

Acreage (Lot size): 0.10

Quarter-Section-Twp.-Range: NW-22-24-4

Plat Block-Plat Lot: POR-6

Owner's Name: ELKS CORNER LLC

Owner's Address: 2585 Magnolia Blvd W
Seattle, WA 98199

Materials & Features/Structural Types:

Building Type: Social – Meeting Hall

Plan: Rectangular, slightly irregular

Structural System: Wood Frame – Balloon/
Platform framing

No. of Stories: 2 1/2

Roof Type: Flat roof w/parapet

Roof Material: Asphalt/Composition

Foundation: Concrete - Poured

Cladding: Brick, Stucco

High Styles/Forms: Beaux Arts –
Neoclassical, Vernacular

Integrity:

Changes to plan: Slight

Changes to Windows: Intact

Changes to original cladding: Intact

Changes to interior: Moderate

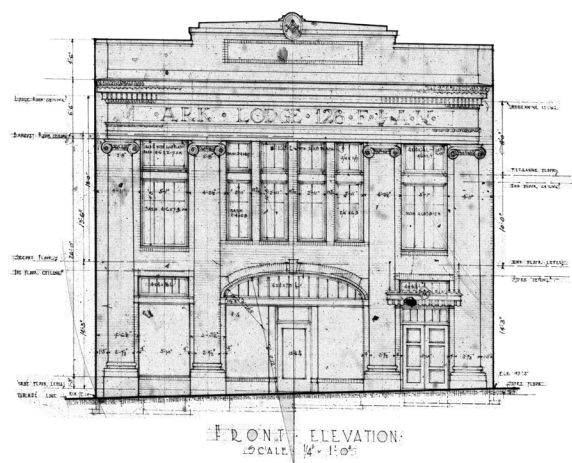
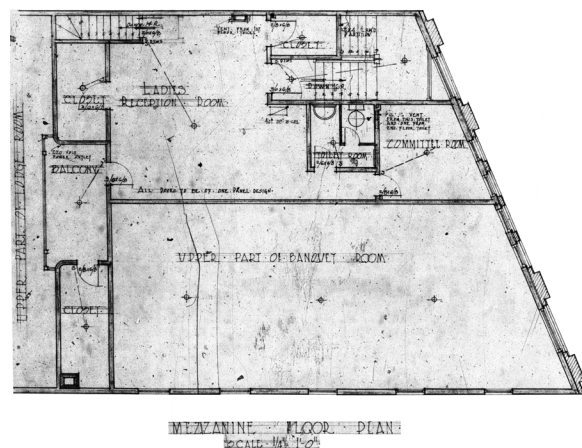
Changes to Front Elevation: Moderate



Figure 3.3: Ark Lodge in 1954 (Seattle Municipal Archives)

Figure 3.4: Photo of Ark Lodge as a Masonic Lodge (Puget Sound Regional Branch Post 1972)

Figure 3.5: Ark Lodge Cinema brand overhaul (Amy Ray)



D. Renovation/Ownership Timeline:

- **1921:** Date of construction.
- **1949:** An awning was added to the front entryway. Steel beams were added to the first floor to strengthen the building after the earthquake in 1949.
- **1951:** Masonic Lodge reclaimed the first floor and converted it into a dining room and kitchen.
- **2000:** Sold by ARK LODGE NO 126 FREE AND ACCEPTED MASONS of Seattle, Bought by Jill Young Rosenat and Alex Rosenat for \$500,000. The couple were advocates of bringing historic buildings to life.²⁶
- **2001:** Property owner Alex Rosenat formed Elks Corner LLC to transfer ownership. LLC is now controlled by Keith Robbins.
- **2003:** Building is renovated from a fraternal meeting hall and opens as the Columbia City Cinema, a 204-seat movie screening room operated by Paul Doyle. Two 100 seat screening rooms were added to the first level after remodeling.
- **2011:** Columbia City Cinema closed.²⁷
- **2012:** Reopened and renamed Ark Lodge Cinema run by business owner David McRae and his family.
- **2016:** Two theater rooms on the first floor and two on the second floor.
- **2020:** Owners put building up for sale, so McRae Launched a GoFundMe asking for \$750,000 for back rent and renovations.²⁸
- **2020:** Joined by Justin Pritchett as managing partner with plans to take over in 5 years (est. 2025).
- **Present:** Ark Lodge is still managed by David McRae and Justin Pritchett as a movie theater.

Figure 3.6: Mezzanine Level from Seattle Property Records microfiche.

Figure 3.7: Front Elevation of original Ark Lodge Cinema from Seattle Property Records microfiche.

E. Statement of Significance

*Designation standards taken from the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Ordinance (SMC 25.12.350) ²⁹

Criterion D:

“It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or a method of construction;” ³⁰

Architect: John L. McCauley, **Building Type:** Masonic Lodge, Neoclassical Style

The Ark Lodge was designed by John L. McCauley, an architect and member of the Masonic order. McCauley worked for the City of Seattle Building Department and became chief field inspector. In 1911, McCauley was the sole proprietor of J.L. McCauley, which stopped operating in 1931. McCauley has been the architect of various historic buildings in Seattle, including the Rainier Masonic Temple, the historic King County Courthouse, the Bush Hotel in the international district, and the Governor Apartments.³¹ McCauley is also listed as the design architect for many buildings that have been demolished or did not reach construction in the Seattle area; one of these includes a commission for the Wilson Modern Business College, now known as the Griffin Building.³² McCauley played an integral role in shaping Seattle’s urban landscape, at both design and policy levels.

Masonic Lodges have a rich history in Seattle that follows the growth of the city itself. The masons used Ark Lodge #126 (now known as Ark Lodge Cinema) as an assembly space and an income property, collecting rents from first floor commercial spaces. The focus of lodge halls was to serve the needs of the members and hold the organization’s meetings and functions. The spaces would often be rented out to other organizations, community groups, and non-members. Membership in Masonic fraternal organizations peaked in the 1950s and has since declined, leading to the demolition of these buildings throughout the Seattle region. The conversion of Masonic lodges into movie theaters is not uncommon to the region; other examples include the Egyptian Theatre in Capitol Hill and the Temple Theatre in Tacoma.

The neoclassical style of the Ark Lodge Cinema is characterized by its symmetry, ionic capitals, and decorative pediments. These neoclassical elements stood out within the commercial district of Columbia city, offering a sense of order and feeling of grandeur for residents in the community.

Criterion F:

“Because of its prominence of spatial location, contrasts of siting, age, or scale, it is an easily identifiable visual feature of its neighborhood or the city and contributes to the distinctive quality or identity of such neighborhood or the City” ³³

The Ark Lodge has served as a community gathering place for Columbia City residents for more than 100 years. The theater is the largest movie house in the neighborhood and provides a place for independent art and film to be showcased. The owners created long lasting relationships with residents and garnered community support and financial aid during COVID-19. The Ark Lodge has long supported the commercial and historic district of Columbia City and drives secondary use for nearby local businesses. New ownership has ambitions to keep the theater as a community place, offering workshops, a place for municipal outreach, and for a community kitchen.³⁴ The current owner David McRae describes the theater experience:

“When you’re at a theater, you’re with a bunch of strangers, you’re all sharing the same experience, laughing, or scared or crying together — that’s special. When things start to get back to normal people are going to yearn for that”³⁵

An important element of the Ark Lodge building is its contribution to the Columbia City Historic District that is both a Seattle Historic District and listed on the National Register, first designated in 1978. This building, along with more than 40 historic commercial and residential buildings is maintained as a pedestrian-friendly neighborhood with a “renewed feeling of vitality” and a “look of a turn-of-the-century milltown.”³⁶

F. Neighborhood

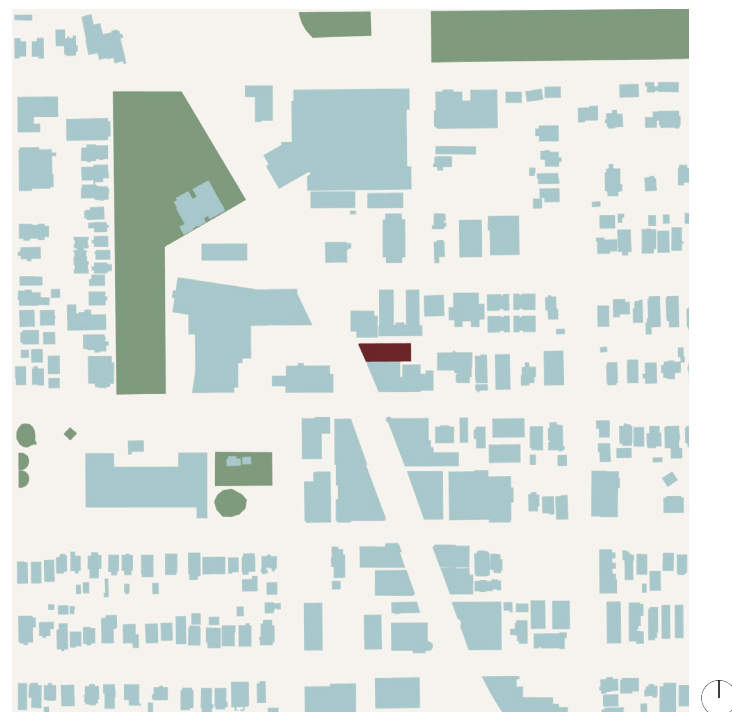
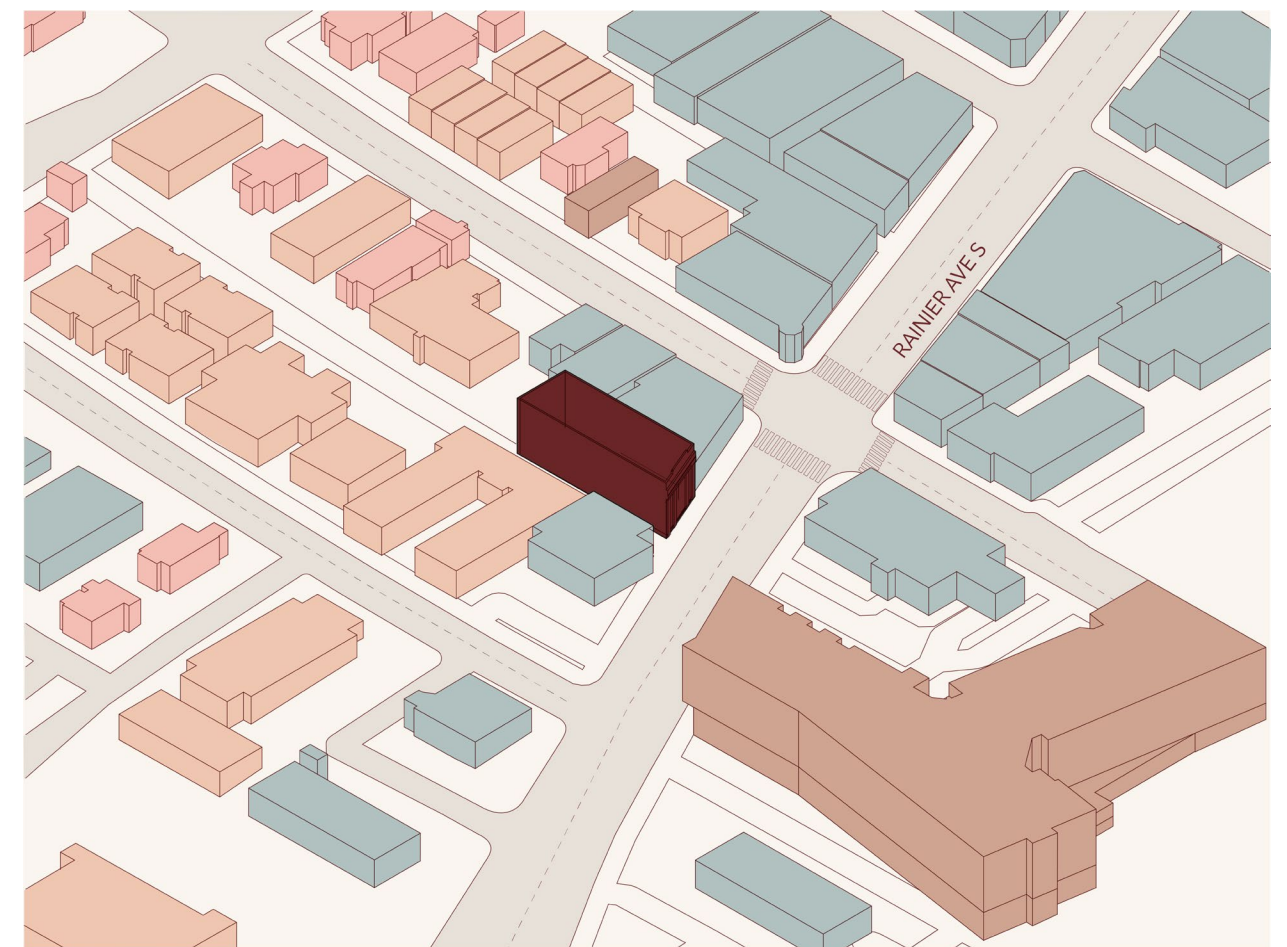


Figure 3.8: Density map of Columbia City.



- Theater
- Single-Family
- Multi-family
- Mixed-Use
- Commercial
- Event Space

Figure 3.9: Building Use Diagram of Columbia City.

B. Physical Description:

Pink Theater, Date of Construction: 1920, **Architect:** George B. Purvis 1920, Bjarne H. Moe 1930s

The one-story rectangular building originally housed one large screening room and was constructed from concrete with stucco cladding. The front elevation faced north and was characterized, after 1950, by curved edges on the lower level and rounded windows and ticket booth openings. The front elevation was also adorned with horizontal bands and a tiered parapet with vertical and horizontal fluting. These features, along with the neon and metal accents are characteristic of the Art Deco/Art Moderne style. The triangular marquee canopy was located over the arched entryway to the original structure.

Blue Theater, Date of Construction: 1915, **Date of Renovation:** 1984, **Architect:** Unknown

The “Blue” theater, or the Guild 45th Annex was located on the same block as the “Pink Theater” two lots to the west. This theater was a rectangular plan constructed with wood framing and blue painted stucco cladding. The building matched the original pink theater’s style with rounded windows, neon decoration, and horizontal bands. The annex building did not contain a canopy over the entrance and instead had a flat marquee and theater sign at the center of the front façade. The entry and exit doors were not centered and were located at opposite ends of the front elevation. When the building was renovated in the 1980s, from an existing structure, it followed the Art Deco/Art Moderne style for consistency with the older building.

C. Physical Survey:

**The Guild 45th Theater has been demolished as of 2024, the physical description and statement of significance are based on the time before the theater was closed to the public and torn down.*

**The following historic property inventory form is based on the State of Washington Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation data collection form.³⁷*

Identification & Location Section:

Parcel #: 051000-2360, 051000-2560

Site Address: 2115 & 2105 N 45th St

City/Town/County/Zip Code: Seattle, 98103

Site Name: Guild 45th Theater, Guild 45th Annex

Neighborhood: Wallingford

Year Built: 1920, 1915

Classification: Building

Acreage (Lot size): 0.20, 0.07

Quarter-Section-Twp.-Range: NW-17-25-4

Plat Block/Plat Lot: 15/2-3-4-5-6, 15/25-26-27

Owner’s Name: 2115 N 45th LLC

Description Section:

Materials & Features/Structural Types

Building Type: Recreation & Culture - Theater

Plan: Rectangular

Structural System: Masonry, Wood-frame

No. of Stories: One story

Roof Type: Flat roof w/ parapet

Roof Material: Unknown

Foundation: Concrete

Cladding: Stucco

High Styles/Form: Art Deco/Art Modern

Integrity:

Changes to plan: Intact

Changes to Windows: Extensive

Changes to original cladding: Moderate

Changes to interior: Moderate

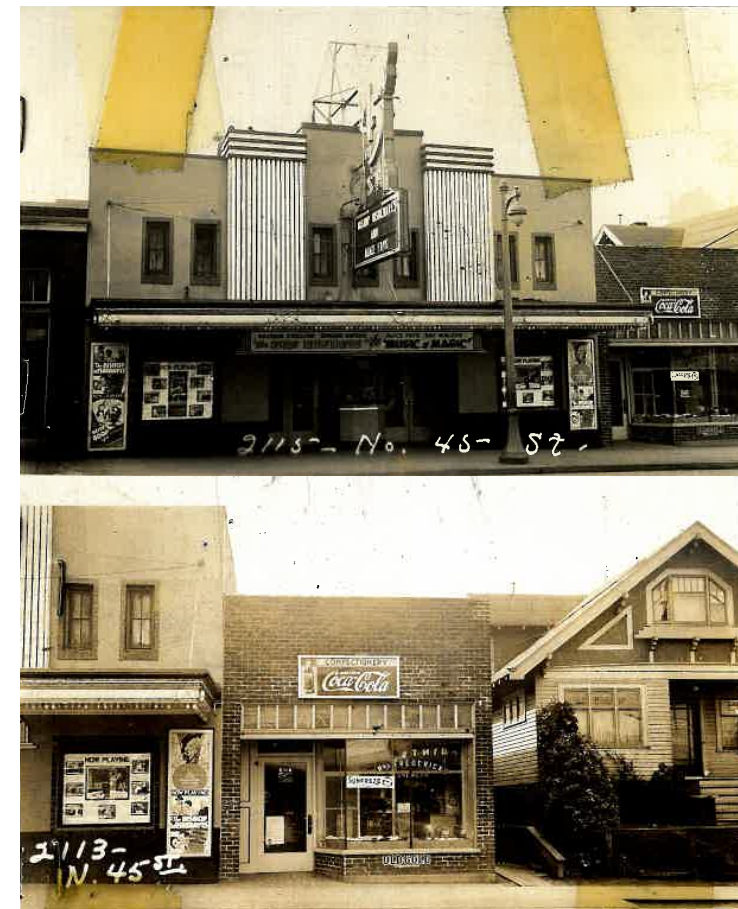


Figure 3.12: (Top Left) Guild 45th Theatre after Art Deco renovations (Puget Sound Regional Branch Post 1930s)

Figure 3.13: (Bottom Right) Commercial building that became extension of the Guild 45th Theatre (Puget Sound Regional Branch, post 1972)

Figure 3.14: (Right) Guild 45th Theatre renovations (Puget Sound Regional Branch)



D. Renovation/Historical Timeline:

- **1920-1921:** The 45th Street Theater was constructed and called the “Paramount Theatre.” The original style was Mediterranean Revival.
- **1923:** The theater was expanded, and the theater’s length increased by approximately 32 feet with a seating capacity of 500 seats.
- **1933:** Hugh W. Bruen became the new owner and rehabilitated the theater with architect Bjarne H. Moe. The style was updated to its iconic Art Deco style. The marquee and canopy were updated with a new name, “Bruen’s 45th St.”
- **1949:** The theater was purchased by Jack B. Neville and renovations were completed. The most notable is the installation of an angled marquee.
- **1957:** The theater was again sold and purchased by Robert S. Clark. The name was changed to the Guild 45th Theatre and was reopened as an art house.
- **1977-1978:** Most recent rehabilitation. The theater was connected to the 2113-2113 ½ N 45th Street commercial building to appear as one front facade with Art Moderne elements. Renovations included replacement of auditorium seating and existing movie screen, reducing seating to 481 seats and 10 wheelchair accessible spaces.³⁸
- **1984:** The second screen was built and called the “Blue Theater.” The building is approximately 40 feet west of the original “pink theater.” The auditorium seats 200.
- **1989:** Seven Gables Theatre Corporation and Landmark Theatres acquired the property.

Figure 3.15: (Left) Guild 45th Theatre Annex (Puget Sound Regional Branch)

Figure 3.16: (Right) Street View of Guild 45th Theatre in 2017, before closure. (Day Media Company 2017)

Improvements were made to the restrooms, lobby, and auditorium.

- **2003:** 2929 Productions (Mark Cuban and Todd Wagner’s L.A. Media company) acquired the property from Landmark Theatres chain.³⁹
- **2016:** Landmark nomination submitted by owner and was rejected by the City of Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board based on lack of integrity.⁴⁰
- **2017:** Landmark Theatres closed both movie theaters for “refurbishment.”
- **2017:** Marquee on Pink theater removed after being hit by truck.
- **2019:** 2929 Productions sold the property to Cohen Media Group. Mark Cuban and Wagner’s Company retained ownership of the Wallingford real estate.⁴¹
- **2023:** Both buildings are demolished.
- **2024:** The lots remain empty with no plans for future development.

E. Statement of Significance

**Designation standards taken from the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Ordinance (SMC 25.12.350)⁴²*

Criterion D:

“It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or a method of construction;”⁴³

Architects: George B. Purvis, Bjarne J. Moe **Architectural Style:** Art Deco, Art Moderne Style

George B. Purvis was the original architect for the “Paramount Theatre” before it became the Guild 45th Theater. Purvis was a well-known architect in the Pacific Northwest, British Columbia, and Alaska, who designed several movie theaters and performance theaters. He not only designed but owned several theaters in Alaska. His theater designs were also located in Bellingham, Tacoma, Olympia, and Everett. Some of his notable work include: the Mack Theatre, Columbia Theatre, former Montlake Theatre, Arabian Theatre, and several more that have either been demolished or reused for a new purpose.⁴⁴

In the 1930s, the original Guild 45th Theater received rehabilitation by the architect Bjarne J. Moe, to update the theater’s facade and interior into the Art Deco style. Moe specialized in the architecture of movie theaters and is well known across the Pacific Northwest. In Seattle, Moe is credited with the Varsity Theater, Green Lake Theater, Renton Theater, Crest Theater and many others.⁴⁵

The Guild 45th Theatre was not originally constructed in the Art Deco style, but since the 1930s served as an iconic symbol for the Streamline Moderne style which was characteristic of

movie theaters during that time. This era of architecture represented a new and modern representation of industrial aesthetics. The distinctive characteristics of this type included painted bands across the facade, metal accents, vertical fluting on the exterior, curved fenestration and building corners, and colorful painted accents.

Criterion F:

“Because of its prominence of spatial location, contrasts of siting, age, or scale, it is an easily identifiable visual feature of its neighborhood or the city and contributes to the distinctive quality or identity of such neighborhood or the City”⁴⁶

The Guild 45th Theater was a community marker in the Wallingford neighborhood and a beloved symbol of architecture, film, and gathering. In its later years, the theater was known as an arthouse and screened various independent and foreign films during its operation. The marquee sign was famous for displaying humorous alternatives to movie titles which was a memorable and interactive experience for the community. The bright neon signage and colorful exterior was also a neighborhood attractor for the commercial area. The Guild 45th not only drove primary use but created business for nearby restaurants, bars, and retail. With the demolition of these theaters, residents have lost an integral gathering place in their neighborhood with few alternatives close by.

F. Neighborhood:

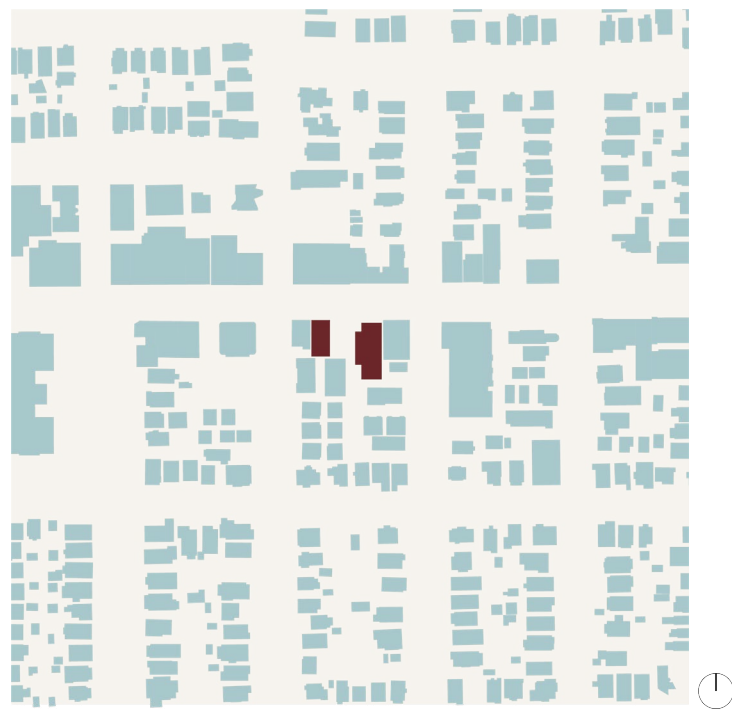


Figure 3.17: Figure Ground Map of Guild 45th Theater in Wallingford

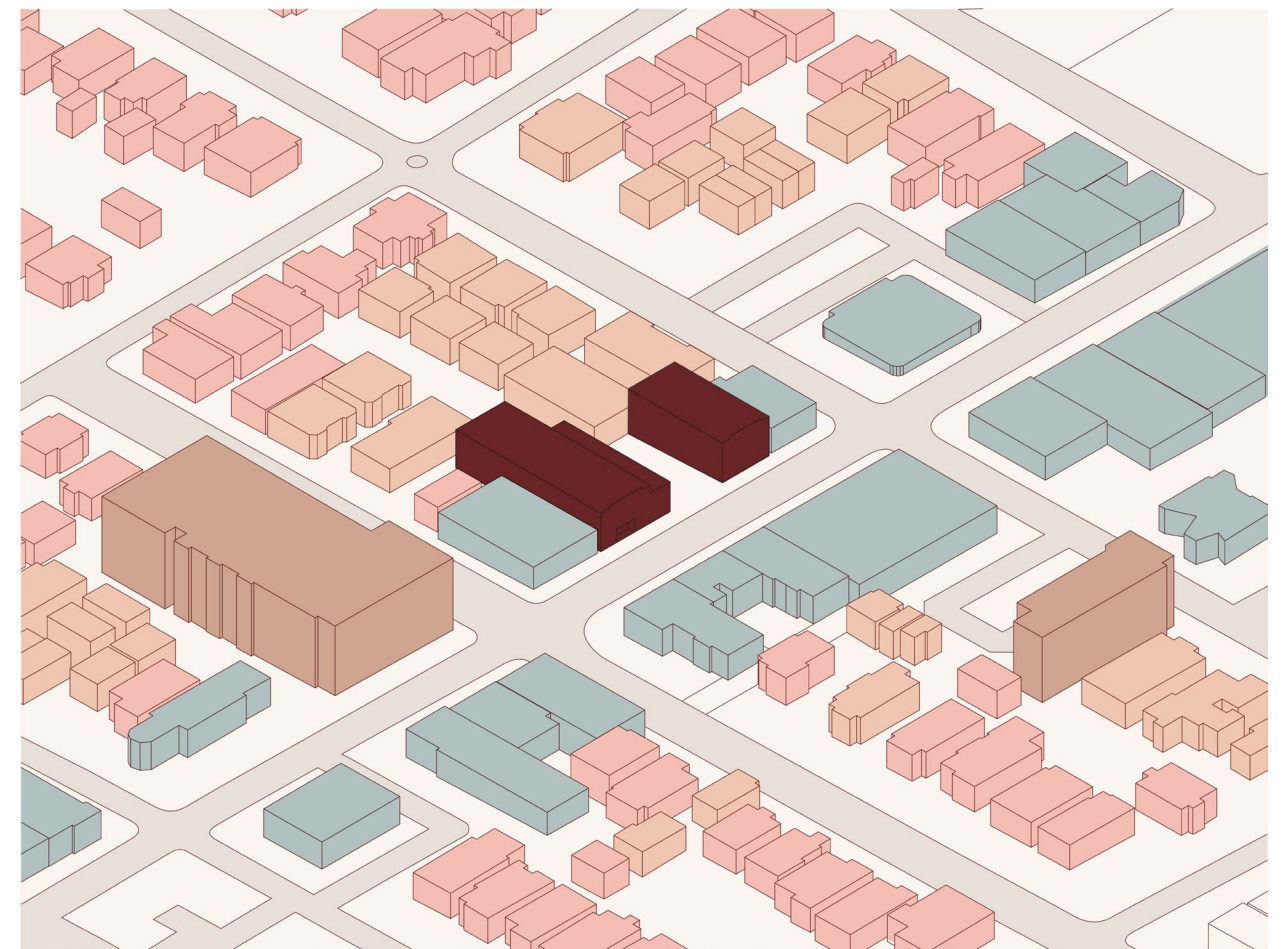


Figure 3.18: Building use diagram of Wallingford.

3.2.3 SIFF UPTOWN CINEMA, UPTOWN/QUEEN ANNE



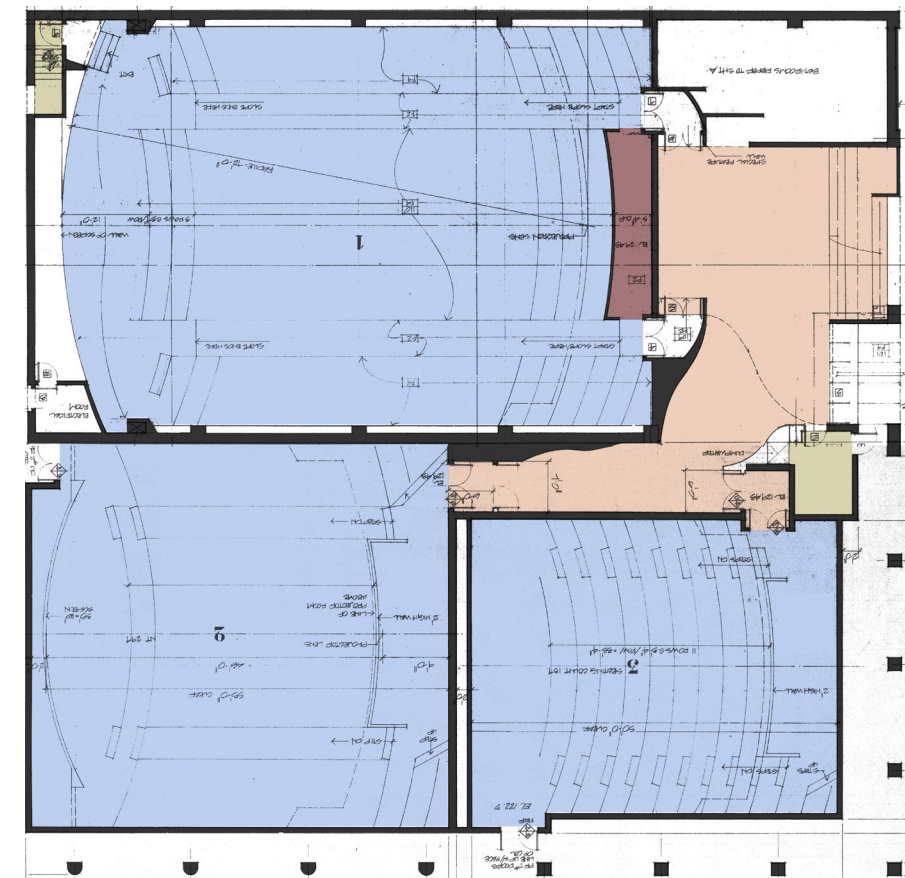
A. Overview

Date of Construction: 1926

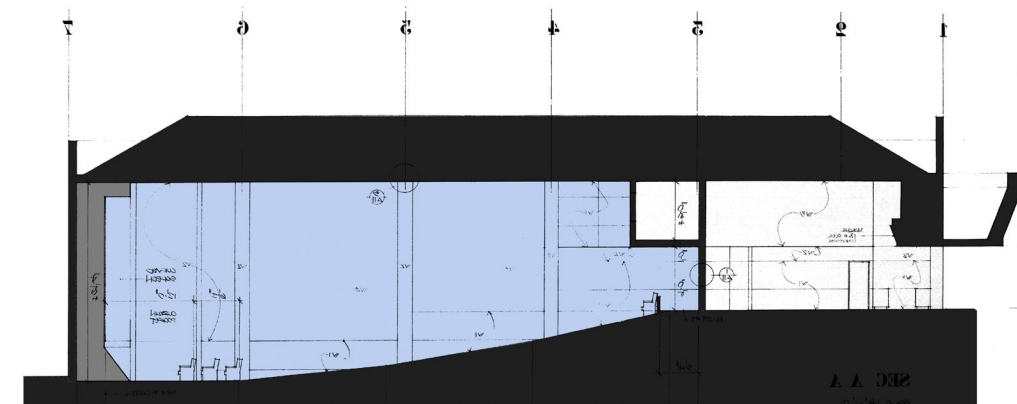
The Uptown Theater is located at the northwest corner of Queen Anne Avenue N and W Republican Street in the lower Queen Anne/Uptown neighborhood. It was originally a single screen theater; in the 1980s two additional screens were added in the adjacent commercial building. It is currently operated by SIFF (Seattle International Film Festival), a nonprofit organization.

Figure 3.19: Architectural Drawings of SIFF Uptown Theater.

Theater Projection Room Lobby/Common Room Circulation



First Floor



Section

5' 10' 20' 40'

Figure 3.20: Architectural Drawings of SIFF Uptown Theater.

B. Description of Physical Appearance:

Date of Construction: 1926, **Architect:** Victor W. Voorhees (1926), B. Marcus Priteca (1940)

The Uptown is a rectangular building made of masonry construction with brick cladding. The front façade is on the east facing side and has retained the original theater’s character with a two-story façade and tiered parapet. The facade is characterized by an Art-Moderne style, and a triangular marquee from a 1940 addition highlighting the “SIFF Uptown Cinema” in neon signage. The marquee is situated between two windows with ornamental cast stone rosettes and scrolls. The south side of the building is a 1980’s addition (designed by Barnett Schorr Architects) that contains the original pilasters and capitals at the exterior. The front wall of this additional structure is set 6 feet back to create an open arcade of columns on the front elevation wrapping around to the south side. The box office is located at the center of the primary facade under the marquee and the entrance, constructed of an aluminum storefront system, is to the south. The north end of the front elevation houses the metal movie poster frames and showtimes. The theater has been painted several times and is currently a light blue color with cyan accents.

C. Physical Survey:

**The following historic property inventory form is based on the State of Washington Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation data collection form.⁴⁷*

Identification & Location Section:

Field Recorder: Alondra Pulido

Parcel #: 199020-0480

Site Address: 511 Queen Anne Ave N

City/Town/County/Zip Code: Seattle, 98109

Historic Name: Uptown Theater

Neighborhood: Uptown/Queen Anne

Year Built: 1926

Classification: Building

Acreage (Lot size): 0.33

Quarter-Section-Twp.-Range: SE-25-25-3

Plat Block/Plat Lot: 23/6-7

Owner’s Name: SIFF

Owner’s Address: 167 Republican St, Seattle, WA 98109

Materials & Features/Structural Type:

Building Type: Recreation & Culture Center - Theater

Plan: Rectangular

Structural System: Masonry, Unreinforced

No. of Stories: One Story w/ mezzanine

Roof Type: Flat w/ Parapet

Roof Material: Unknown

Foundation: Concrete

Cladding: Brick, Concrete Blocks

High Styles/Forms: Commercial, Vernacular, Art Moderne

Integrity:

Changes to plan: Moderate

Changes to windows: Extensive

Changes to original cladding: Slight

Changes to interior: Slight



D. Renovation/Ownership Timeline:

- **1926:** Theater opened as Hamrick’s Uptown Theatre, developed by John Hamrick, and accommodating 750 seats. John Hamrick owned several theaters and was the first to show “talking pictures” in Seattle.
- **1936:** Moritz Family recorded as movie theater operator.
- **1940s:** Alterations by B. Marcus Priteca, Art Moderne style facelift and present marquee was added.

Figure 3.21, 3.22, 3.23, 3.24: The SIFF Uptown Cinema in 4 time periods pre 1940s to 1980s (Puget Sound Regional Branch 1940-1980s)

- **1984:** Theater expanded by taking over the adjacent commercial building on the south side. Two additional screening rooms were added with 170 seats each. The remodel preserved the original ornamental brick façade with an additional concrete block structure inside (original theater seats 450, second theater seats 250, and third theater seats 150).
- **1994:** Uptown operated by Moritz LLC.
- **2010:** AMC operator announces closure.
- **2011:** SIFF takes over and reopened as an art house.
- **2013:** The Uptown is at risk of being acquired and developed, but an off-market purchase of the property was done through a philanthropic supporter to safeguard the theater and allow SIFF to continue its use of the space.⁴⁸
- **2020:** Movie theater closures due to COVID-19.
- **Present:** Continues to operate as a movie theater under SIFF ownership.



Figure 3.25: Street view of theater in 2024.

E. Statement of Significance

Criterion D:

“It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or a method of construction;”⁴⁹

Architect: Victor W. Voorhees (1926), B. Marcus Priteca (1940) **Architectural Style:** Commercial Vernacular, Art Moderne

The original architect for the Uptown Theatre was **Victor W. Voorhees**, a well-known Seattle architect. Voorhees was well known for his book of house plans, titled *Western Home Builder*, and was recognized for promoting the standardization of architectural drawings and specifications. Voorhees is credited with designing over 110 projects in Seattle spanning commercial buildings, hotels, churches, apartments, and factories.⁵⁰ His design of the Uptown has gained prominence over time with stylistic renovations over the years.

The second notable architect to work on renovations for the Uptown was **B. Marcus Priteca**. Priteca is a notable architect well known for designing theaters; he designed Seattle’s first movie palace, the Coliseum Theater. Over his career he designed numerous theaters starting with live performance venues like the Seattle Pantages (later Palomar) and Vancouver Pantages and including hybrid designs like the Orpheum Theater for both live performances and films. He also designed movie theaters including the Seattle Paramount Theater, Coliseum Theater and Admiral Theater in West Seattle. Priteca was well known for his classical architecture style, but in the 1930s he began to apply the Art Deco style into his work due to its increasing popularity in theaters all over the nation.⁵¹

Throughout the last century, the SIFF Uptown Cinema has undergone occasional additions, but its original architectural style as a commercial building with Streamline Moderne elements is still apparent. The theater’s rectangular plan and brick cladding maintain a commercial language with adjacent businesses, while the 1940s facelift is seen in the iconic triangular marquee, metal accents, and lobby interior finishes. The Uptown Theatre, a collaborative building of various architectural styles, brings together historical preservation and architectural adaptations, contributing to its longevity as a cultural landmark (Figure 3.21-3.24).

Criterion F:

“Because of its prominence of spatial location, contrasts of siting, age, or scale, it is an easily identifiable visual feature of its neighborhood or the city and contributes to the distinctive quality or identity of such neighborhood or the City”⁵²

The SIFF Uptown Cinema is located in the Queen Anne/Uptown neighborhood, in a prominent intersection of the commercial district, and in an area experiencing increased density and development. The Uptown’s historical character provides a distinct architectural contrast to the modern developments and contributes to a long-standing visual identity on Queen Anne Avenue. Its recognizable architectural elements, such as its marquee and signage, make the building easily identifiable and serve as a visual marker for visitors (Figure 3.19).

F. Neighborhood

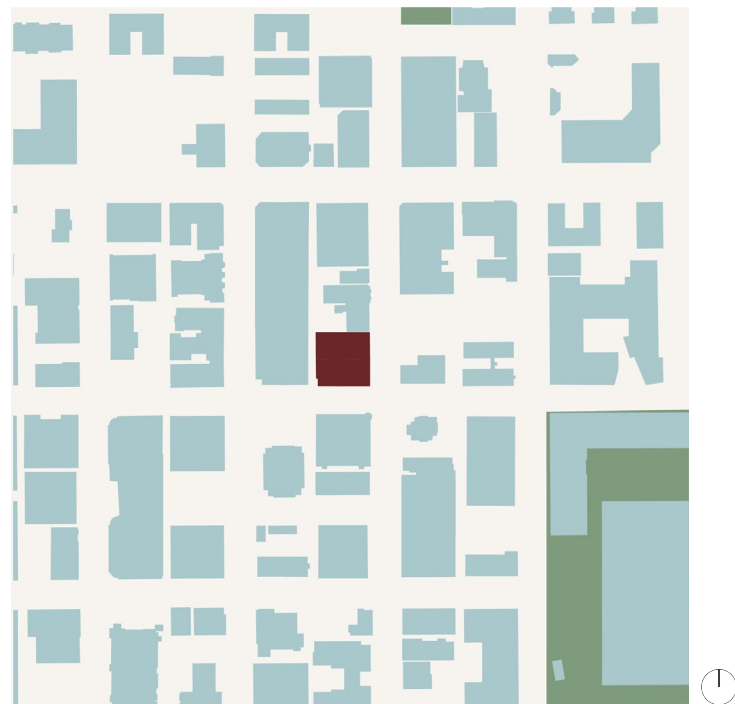
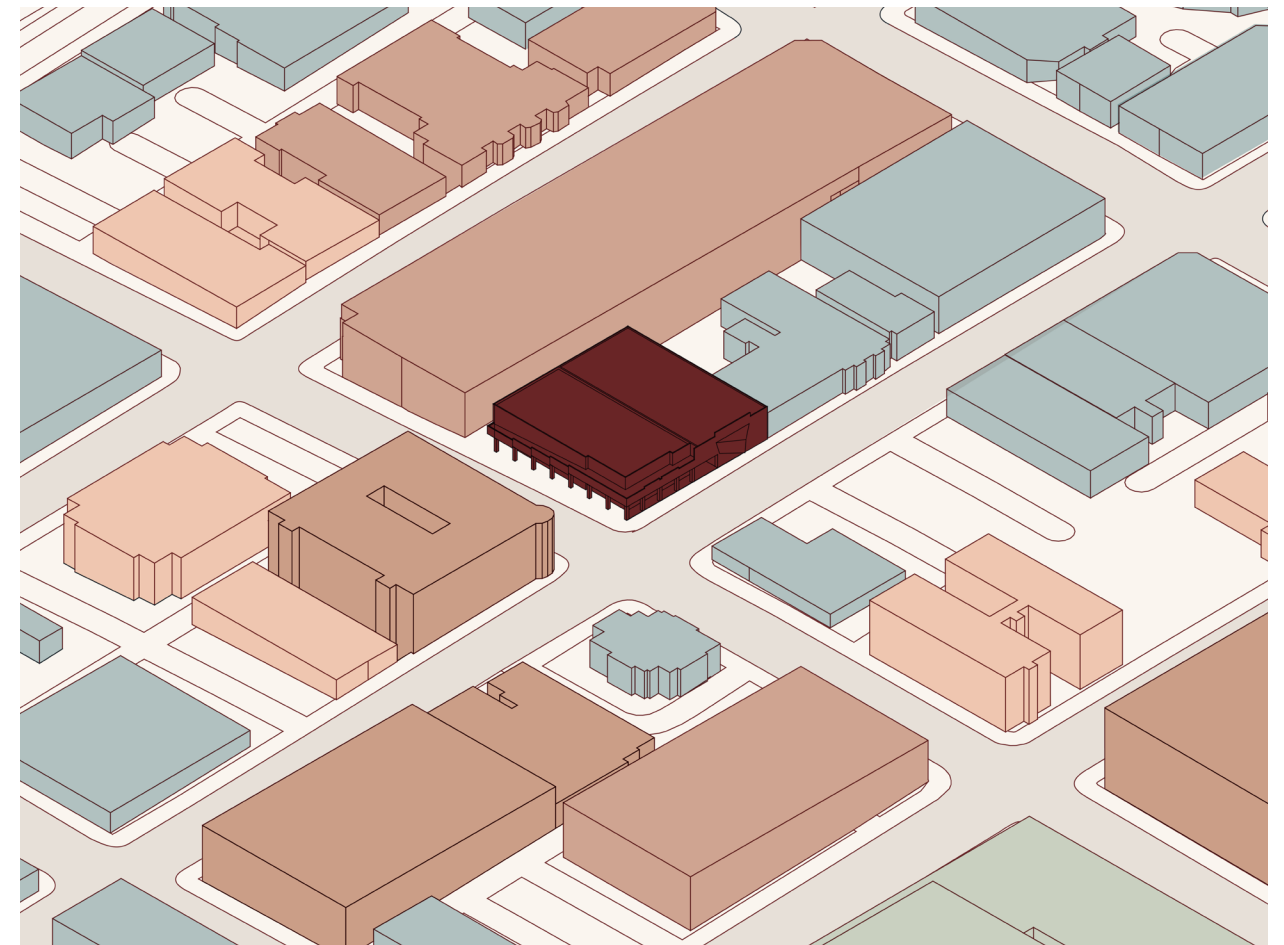


Figure 3.26: Density map of Uptown neighborhood.



- Theater
- Single-Family
- Multi-family
- Mixed-Use
- Commercial
- Event Space

Figure 3.27: Building Use Diagram of Uptown.

3.2.4 VARSITY THEATRE, U-DISTRICT



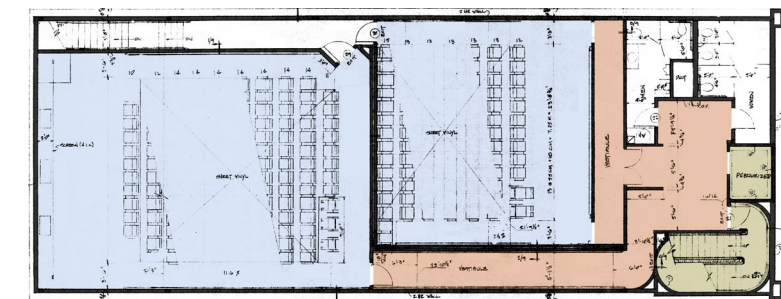
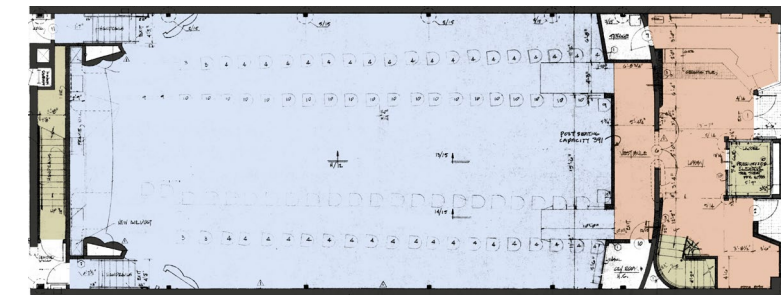
A. Overview

Date of Construction: 1920

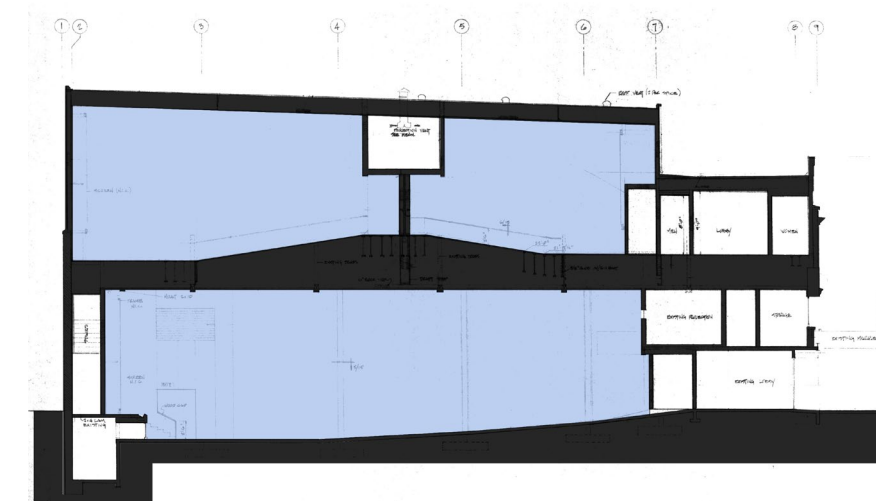
The Varsity Theatre is located on University Way NE (also known as “the Ave”) an active commercial street that is populated by University of Washington students, staff and faculty. The building was originally a marketplace and was converted into a theater in the 1940s. Today, it displays a mix of small-budget art house films and mainstream cinema, and continues to be a popular destination for the University of Washington community.

Figure 3.28: Front Elevation of Varsity Theater.

Theater Projection Room Lobby/Common Room Circulation



First & Second Floor



Section



Figure 3.29: Architectural Drawings of Varsity Theater.



Figure 3.30: Meister building pre 1940s conversion into movie theater (Puget Sound Regional Branch)

Figure 3.31: Varsity Theatre after 1940s renovation (Puget Sound Regional Branch)

Figure 3.32: Varsity Theater in 2018. (Bruce C., Cinema Treasures)

B. Physical Description

Date of Construction: 1921, **Architects:** William White (1921), Bjarne Moe (1940)

The Varsity was originally a one-story commercial building with cast stone and stucco cladding, similar to the adjacent commercial businesses. It is now a two-story structure, but the original cornice and pediment remain intact, and the additional roofing and façade mirrors the form of the original pediment. The building's east-facing elevation is adorned with a large triangular marquee that extends over the sidewalk and the entry cladding is composed of tiles and octagonal cutouts at the doorways. The original screening room is intact and located on the first floor, while two additional theaters are located on the second floor. The building shares party walls with the adjacent commercial buildings to the north and south, so access is only possible from the street or the alley on the west side.⁵³

C. Physical Survey:

**The following historic property inventory form is based on the State of Washington Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation data collection form.⁵⁴*

Identification & Location Section:

Field Recorder: Alondra Pulido

Parcel #: 114200-0145

Site Address: 4329 University Way NE

City/Town/County/Zip Code: Seattle 98105

Historic Name: Meister Building

Neighborhood: U-District

Year Built: 1921

Classification: Building

Acreage (Lot size): 0.09

Quarter-Section-Twp.-Range: NE-17-25-4

Plat Block/Plat Lot: 2/5

Owner's Name: UDPA 4329 LLC

Owner's Address: 4710 University Way Ne Suite 110 Seattle, WA 98105

Materials & Features/Structural Types:

Building Type: Recreation & Culture - Theater

Plan: Rectangular

Structural System: Masonry, unreinforced

No. of Stories: One Story

Roof Type: Flat w/ Parapet

Roof Material: Asphalt/Composition

Foundation: Concrete

Cladding: Stone, Terra Cotta, Tile

High Styles/Forms: Commercial, Vernacular

Integrity:

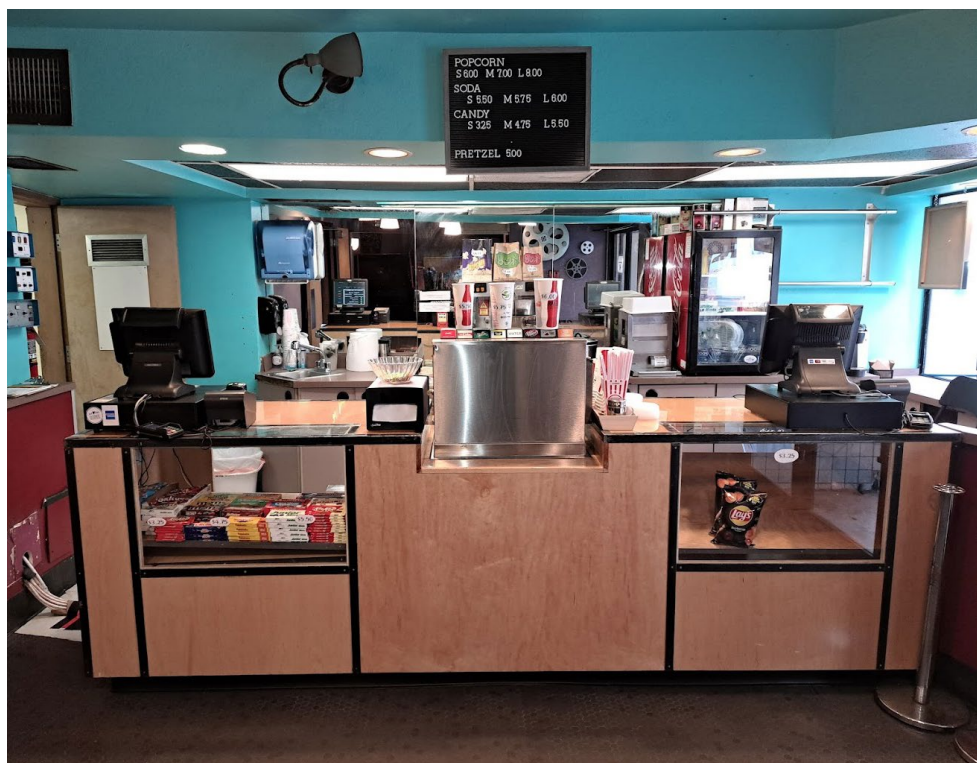
Changes to plan: Intact

Changes to Windows: Intact

Changes to original cladding: Intact

Changes to interior: Moderate

Changes to Storefront: Moderate



D. Renovation/Ownership Timeline:

- **1921:** Meister Building date of construction, designed by William White. Originally operated as a marketplace with stalls.
- **1940:** Started operating as a movie theater, with a single screen, seating 471. Designed by Bjarne Moe.
- **1955:** Interior rehabilitation by B.F. Shearer Company added new seating.
- **1980:** Operated by Landmark Theatres
- **1985:** Expanded vertically into two-story building with 3 total screens
- **2015:** Ownership taken over by Far Away Entertainment
- **2020:** Closures due to COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Present:** Continues to operate as a movie theater serving the community and student population with independent and box office films.

Figure 3.33: Concessions and ticket booth inside Varisty Theatre (Borgman 2023).

E. Statement of Significance

Criterion D:

“It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style, or period, or a method of construction;”⁵⁵

Architects: William White (1921), Bjarne Moe (1940), **Architectural Style:** Commercial Vernacular, Neoclassical

The building was designed for commercial use and was originally named after the building owner Roy E. Meister, a retired commission merchant. The Meister Building was designed by William P. White, an architect who practiced in Seattle from 1902-1922 and who specialized in the designs of apartment buildings; he wrote an article, “Apartment Buildings,” published in a 1907 issue of Pacific Builder and Engineer. Some of his notable work included the Kinnear Apartments, Wellington Court, and the Manhattan Flats. White also designed several hotels and small-scale commercial buildings.⁵⁶

The 1940s conversion into a movie theater was designed by Bjarne J. Moe, who also designed the renovation of the Guild 45th Theatre in Wallingford.

The Meister Building was characterized by its original terracotta and stone cladding as well as its neoclassical pediment and cornice. It resembled similar commercial buildings on the University Way street and is characteristic of popular commercial styles in the 1920s. The Streamline Moderne renovations and the change in signage are also significant architectural elements on their own, contributing to the building’s historical character.

Criterion F:

“Because of its prominence of spatial location, contrasts of siting, age, or scale, it is an easily identifiable visual feature of its neighborhood or the city and contributes to the distinctive quality or identity of such neighborhood or the City”⁵⁷

The University District is currently experiencing massive development and high-rise construction (a response to the Link Light Rail station opened in 2021) leading to the disappearance of historical buildings. The Varsity and its iconic signage provide a visual marker for residents and enriches the diverse character of a neighborhood that is changing with numerous new larger buildings.

F. Neighborhood:

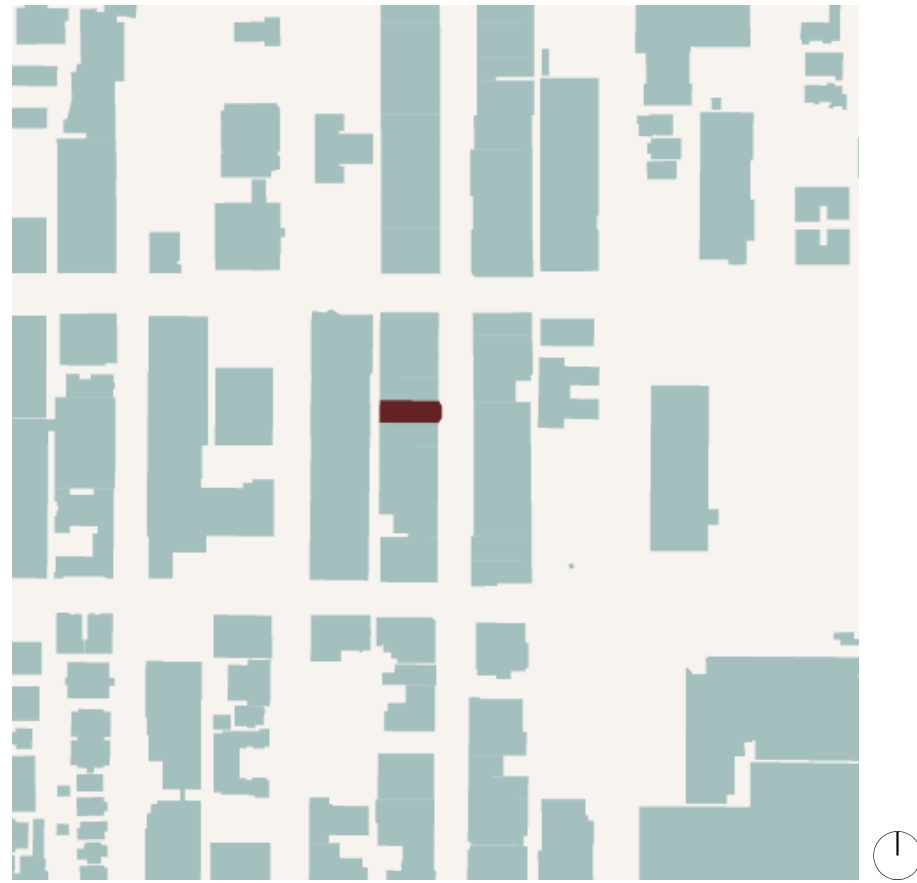


Figure 3.34: Figure ground map of Varsity Theater in U-district.



- Theater
- Single-Family
- Multi-family
- Mixed-Use
- Commercial
- Event Space

Figure 3.35: Building type diagram of the U-district commercial district.

3.3 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

A. Significance

In accordance with the standards of the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Ordinance and based on the brief analysis of the history, significance and integrity of these four theaters, it can be argued that each would qualify for Landmark designation. These movie theaters, both individually and collectively, played an important role in shaping commercial districts in Seattle and remain as cultural icons to the urban fabric of the city. The historical timeline of these theaters reveals a shared path of economic peaks and downfalls, including construction in the 1920s, architectural renovations in the 1930s and 1940s and expansions in the 1980s. Under the criteria for preservation, these theaters satisfy the requirements for Criteria D and F. However, Criterion C also presents an opportunity for further evaluation of the cultural impact of these buildings. According to **Criterion C:**

“It is associated in a significant way with a significant aspect of the cultural, political, or economic heritage of the community, City, state or nation.”⁵⁸

The challenge in evaluating these buildings under Criterion C is providing evidence of both the significance of film and film theaters to the “cultural, political or economic heritage of the community” and that the association of each theater to this heritage is, itself, significant. Too often the cultural impact of these theaters, associated with their use as a film theater, is judged as not sufficient for Landmark. However, it can be argued that these theaters are much more than movie houses; they serve as community hubs, functioning as gathering spaces and fostering connections to the neighborhood through generational ownership and engagement. The impact of these theaters in their neighborhoods goes beyond their architectural integrity and use as movie theaters, highlighting an important community element in a rapidly changing city. In other words, the assessment of these theaters should take into account their role as an element of neighborhood social infrastructure.



Figure 3.36: (Top Left) Ark Lodge Cinema parnters David McRae and Justin Pritchett (Cedar Pritchett)
Figure 3.37: (Top Right) SIFF Uptown Cinema reopening graphic after 2021 renovations (Graham n.d.)
Figure 3.38: (Bottom Left) Movie screening event in SIFF Uptown Theatre (Spacefinder Seattle 2024)
Figure 3.39: (Bottom Right) Ark Lodge remiagined by marketing team for future renovations (Streefkerk, Ark Lodge Cinemas 2020)

B. Neighborhood Contexts

Each theater is located in a neighborhood experiencing rapid growth or upzoning for future upward development. Neighborhood commercial areas often face issues with density, housing affordability, and the preservation of cultural spaces. The preservation of the historic theaters as communal spaces provides a connection to the past while offering a resource for the future. Currently, these theaters are one of the only resources offering the increased community space these growing neighborhoods require. The lack of social infrastructure (and its disappearance as so many neighborhood theaters have disappeared) is an indicator of the value of preserving and repurposing these movie theaters as significant collective community hubs.

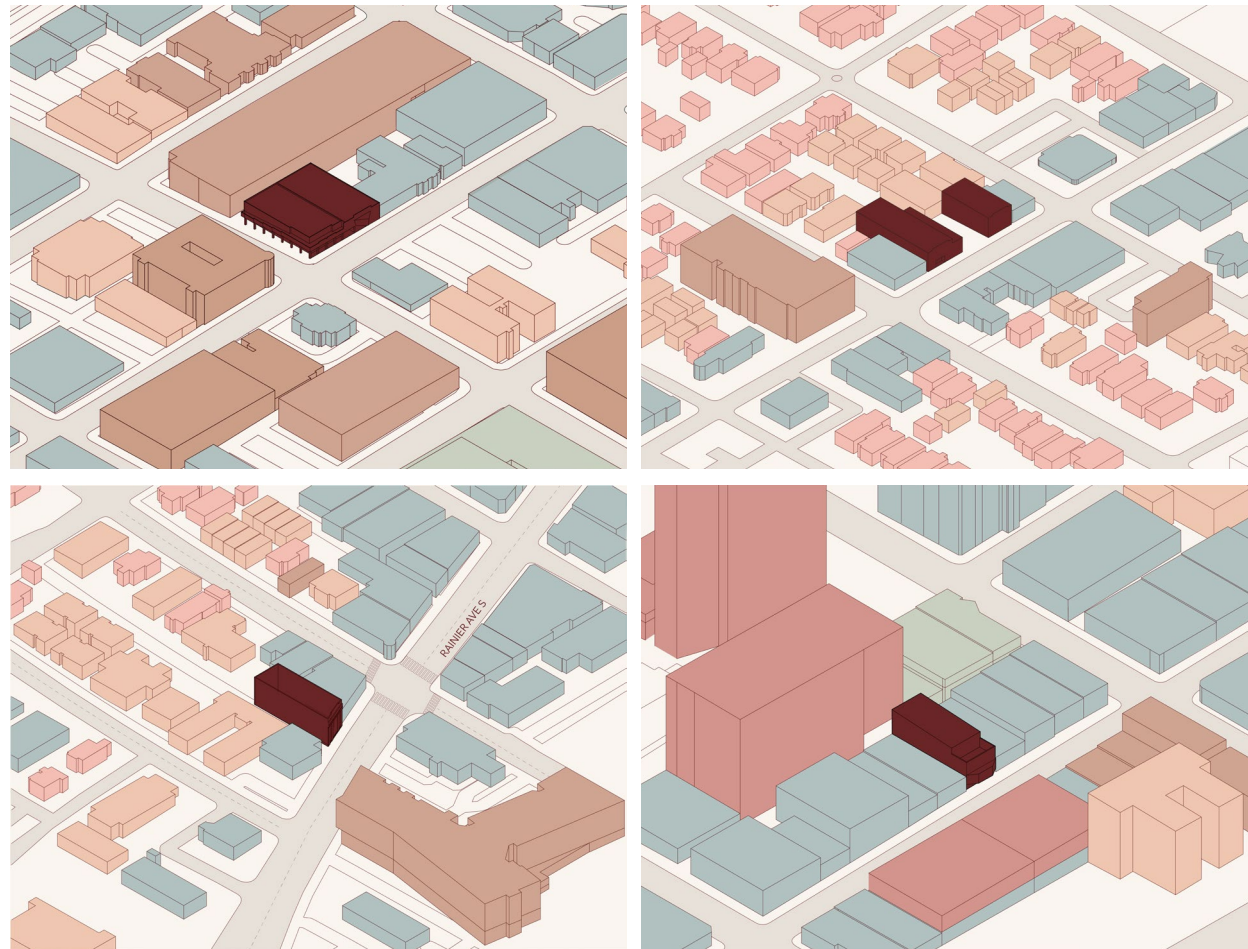


Figure 3.40: Comparison of neighborhood building uses and social infrastructure. (Top Left) SIFF Uptown Cinema, (Top Right) Guild 45th Theatre, (Bottom Left) Ark Lodge Cinema, (Bottom Right) Varsity Theatre

C. Potential for Mixed Use

Evaluating the plans of historic movie theaters is important to determine their potential for adaptive reuse. The four case study theaters in this thesis have largely been able to retain their original plan configurations, including open screening rooms and small supporting spaces (projection rooms, vestibules, and associated spaces); some theaters also include additional theaters on different levels or adjacent properties, but each historical auditorium remains largely intact.

Theaters constrained to their original footprint, including the Ark Lodge Cinema and the Varsity Theatre, display narrow plan configurations with widths spanning approximately 40 feet. In these two buildings, screening rooms occupy the full width of the structure, with party walls on one or two sides. Theaters with this layout present significant challenges for introducing new program elements as long as the goal is to retain and protect the historical auditorium space. In contrast, theaters that have expanded to an adjacent lot do not have the same constraints and offer more opportunities for introducing new program elements.

	Ark Lodge Cinema	Guild 45th Theatre	SIFF Uptown Cinema	Varsity Theatre
Neighborhood & Zoning	Columbia City (Historic District/Commercial), NC3P-40	Wallingford (Commercial Center), NC2P-55 (M)	Uptown (Commercial Center), SM-UP 85 (M1)	U-District (Commercial Center), NC3P-65
Architectural Style	Neoclassical/Commercial	Art Deco/ Art Moderne,	Art Moderne/ Commercial Vernacular	Neoclassical, commercial
Significance	Criteria C, D, F	Criteria C, D, F	Criteria C, D, F	Criteria C, D, F
Integrity	Plan: Intact	Demolished	Plan: Moderate	Plan: Intact
Scale	Bldg. width: 41' Lot size: 4, 563 sf	Bldg. widths: 40' & 38' Lot size: 11,359 sf	Bldg. width: 120' Lot size: 14,400 sf	Bldg. width: 40' Lot size: 4, 120 sf

Table 1: Comparison Table of Four Theaters

3.4 ESTABLISHING BUILDING GROUPS FOR REUSE

Based on their site constraints and the neighborhood zoning, the four case study theaters in this thesis can be divided into two distinct groups: (1) those with theater plans are under 5,000 square feet lot size, and (2) those with expanded theaters, with over 10,000 square feet lot size. The narrow theater category includes the Ark Lodge Cinema and the Varsity Theatre, and the expanded theater category includes the Guild 45th Theater and the SIFF Uptown Cinema. Classifying these theaters simplifies the process for evaluating feasibility and assessing the possibilities of different theaters, including those not studied in this thesis, that may fall into one of these categories.

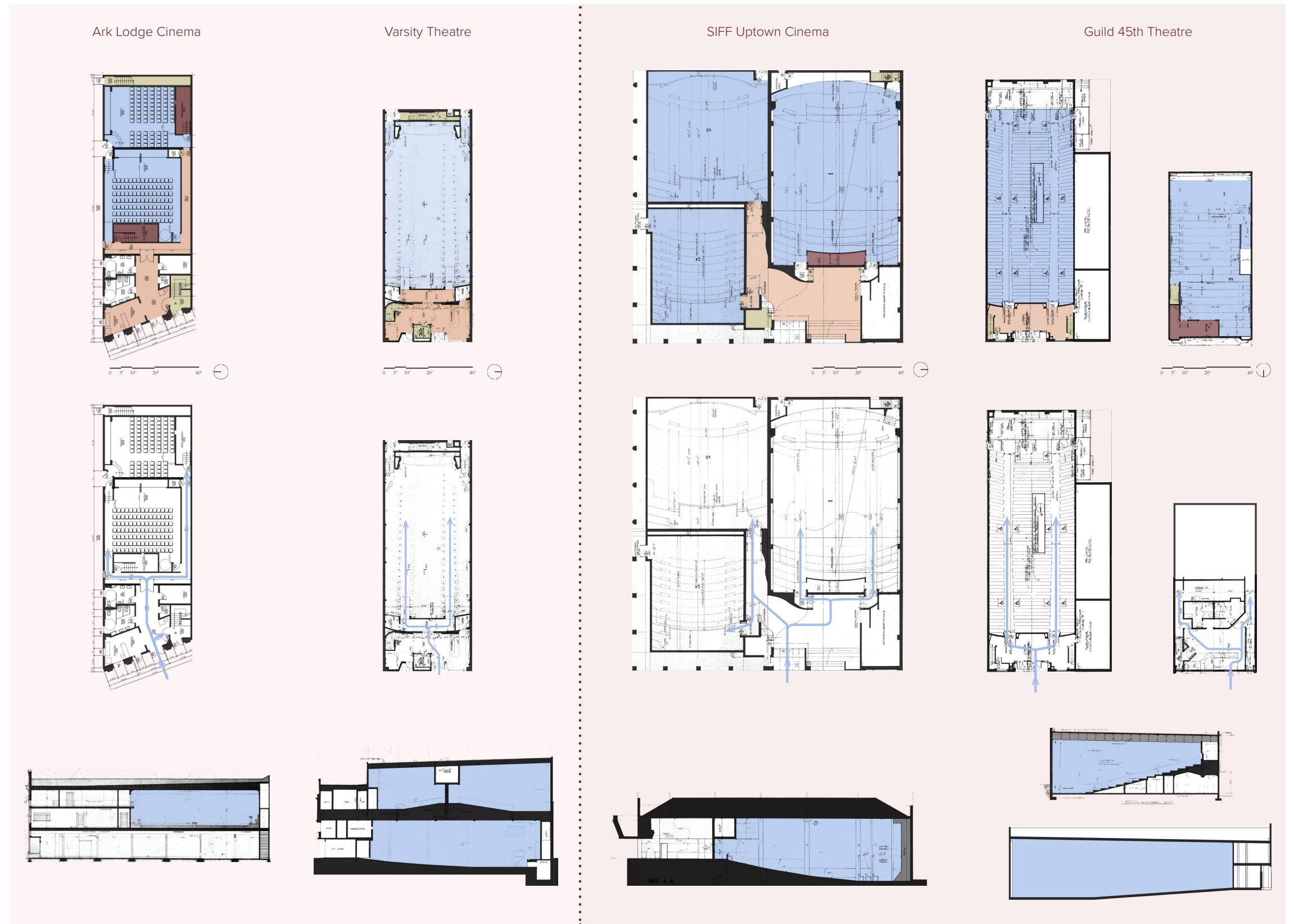
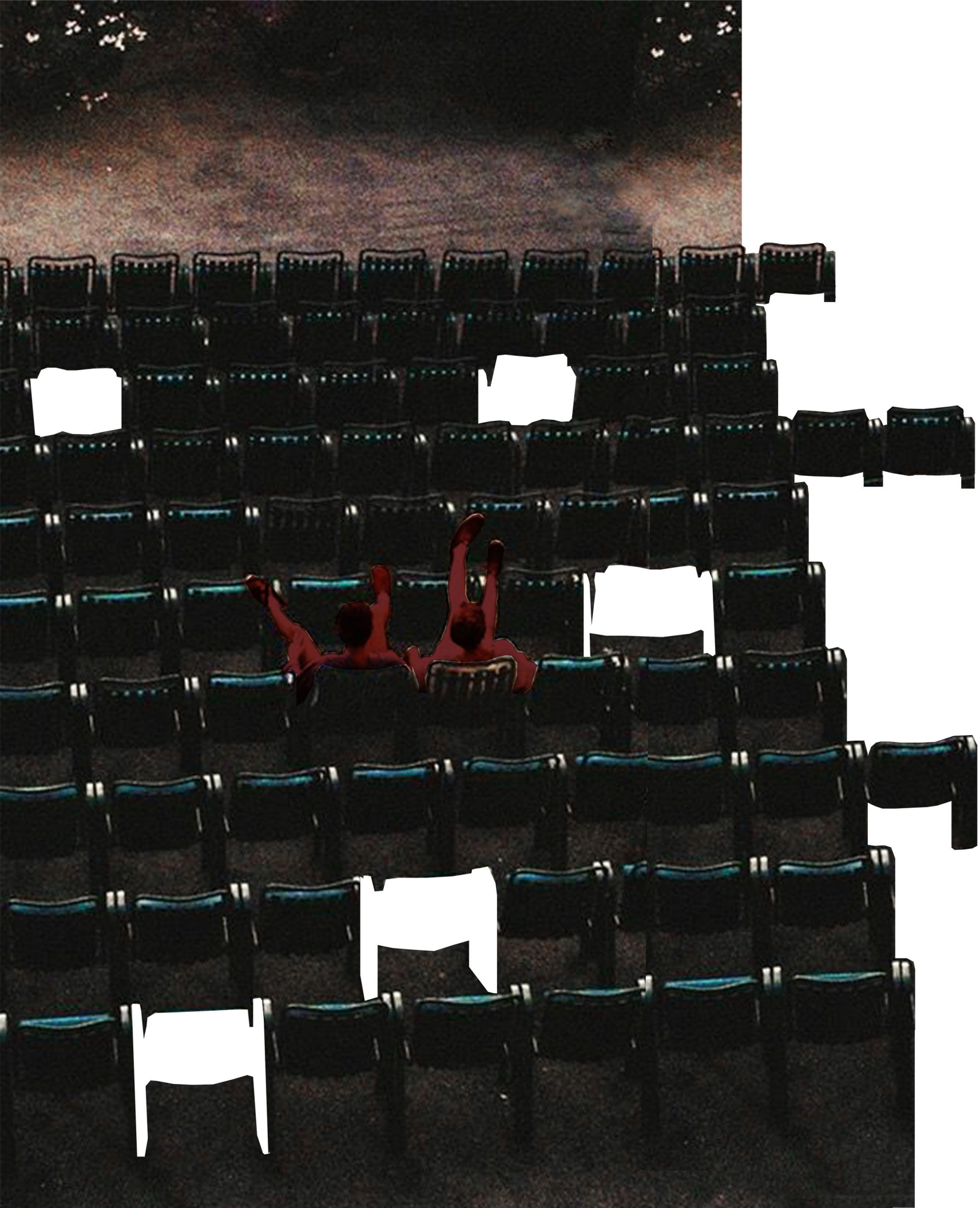


Figure 3.41: All theater plans, elevations, and density maps for comparison.



CHAPTER 4.

PROGRAMMING & FEASIBILITY

4.1 DETERMINING PROGRAMMING

Programming for the adaptive reuse of historic movie theaters includes a wide range of possibilities. For the four case studies in this thesis, architectural character, neighborhood context and community needs are addressed through a mixed-use approach. The primary needs addressed include:

1. **Large assembly space.** This will be the primary communal space of the adapted building and protect the identity and physical configuration of the original movie theater.
2. **Housing.** The feasibility of the adapted building for housing is an important consideration given the increasing need for housing options in Seattle's neighborhood urban centers while also providing a place for communities to develop.
3. **Commercial Space.** Each of the four case study theaters is located in neighborhood commercial districts. The adapted building should contribute to enhancing neighborhood vitality and the activity of the pedestrian realm, with options for diverse commercial spaces addressing the community.
4. **Open Space.** Each neighborhood demonstrated a need for a public space, whether indoor or outdoor. Providing flexible space can support gathering and can offer a connection between the other program elements.

Figure 4: Auditorium collage. Base image from

4.2 PROGRAM + USES



Figure 4.1: Collage of movie theaters as a gathering place.

A. Gathering Space:

Providing or maintaining a gathering space allows for the preservation of important spatial qualities of the neighborhood theaters, including the original screening room and lobby. This adapted space can serve as a community center to hold large numbers of people. By preserving the large gathering space, this programming also preserves the possibility for screening of films in the auditorium, allowing the theater to continue to fulfill its traditional purpose while expanding its flexibility and community value.

- **Uses:** Community Meetings, Performances, Movie Screenings, Event Hall, and so forth.
- **Size:** 1,505 sf (movie theater room) min.



Figure 4.2: Housing collage

B. Housing:

Providing multi-family housing options to suit the needs of a diverse population with a focus on livability and community connection is a goal of every Seattle neighborhood commercial center. However, it may not always be possible to add this to an existing theater due to site constraints.

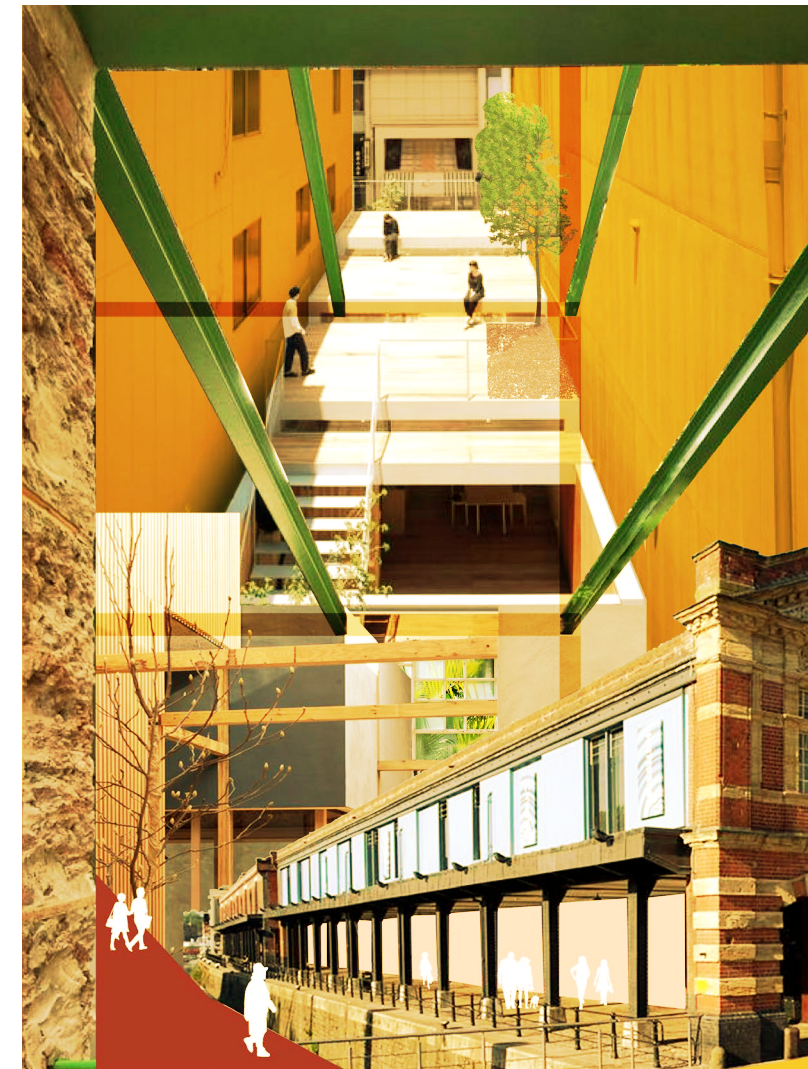
- **Uses:** Units, shared spaces (roof deck, patio, lounge).
- Lobby (400 - 500 sf)
- Studio (300-420 sf), One Bdrm(500-650 sf), 2 Bdrm (750-1000 sf), 3 Bdrm (1,000-1,100 sf)



C. Commercial:

Providing one or more commercial spaces with flexible uses that can activate the structure and the adjacent sidewalks at different times of the day is a goal for every structure in a Seattle neighborhood commercial district.

- **Uses:** Retail, Bars/Restaurants, etc.
- **Size:** 400 - 3,000 sf (depending on site)



D. Open space:

To the extent feasible, the building should provide indoor and/or outdoor spaces for community use and for the residents to use.

- **Uses:** Courtyard, square, alley, arcade
- **Size:** 300 - 1,000 sf min.

E. Supporting Spaces:

Essential support spaces for the various programs in the building include but are not limited to the following.

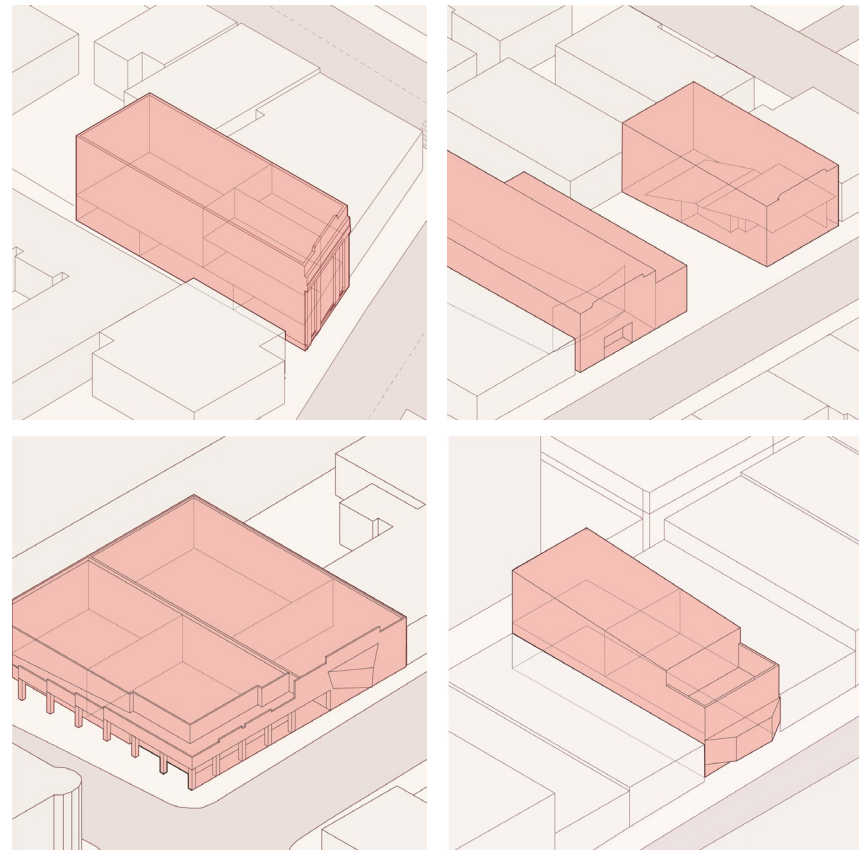
- **Uses:** Trash Room, Utility Room, Bathrooms, Storage Room

Figure 4.3: Collage of commercial spaces in adaptive reuse projects.

Figure 4.4: Collage exploring public spaces within existing buildings.

4.3 EARLY-STAGE REVIEW

As the first step in addressing the feasibility of adaptively reusing the four case study theaters, the existing theaters were modeled in BIM software (Revit) based on historical records, architectural drawings, and site visits. This step provided familiarity with the building type, enabling the identification of significant areas to be preserved, as well as less critical areas which could be altered or adapted for new program elements.



4.3.1 PROCESS DOCUMENTAION

Each theater was tested with a series of plan drawings and 3-dimensional analyses to assess whether it would be possible to add new uses while retaining the historical theater spaces based on site context, allowable square footage, required access (new vertical circulation) and similar issues. These early studies revealed challenges for introducing ground level commercial spaces and upper levels with housing due to the limited available ground level space given the configuration of the existing theater that was to be preserved.

Figure 4.5: Four theaters modeled in Revit for feasibility studies.

A. Ark Lodge

The Ark Lodge Cinema's original auditorium space is on the second floor of the building, allowing the addition of new commercial spaces on the ground level. However, potential housing access would necessitate dividing this ground space almost in half, creating a long and narrow commercial area. Additionally, the party wall on the south side and the alley on the north side limit the introduction of housing on upper levels. The required vertical access, including exit stairs and an elevator cannot fit into the ground floor without such significant alterations that the historical theater space would effectively be destroyed.

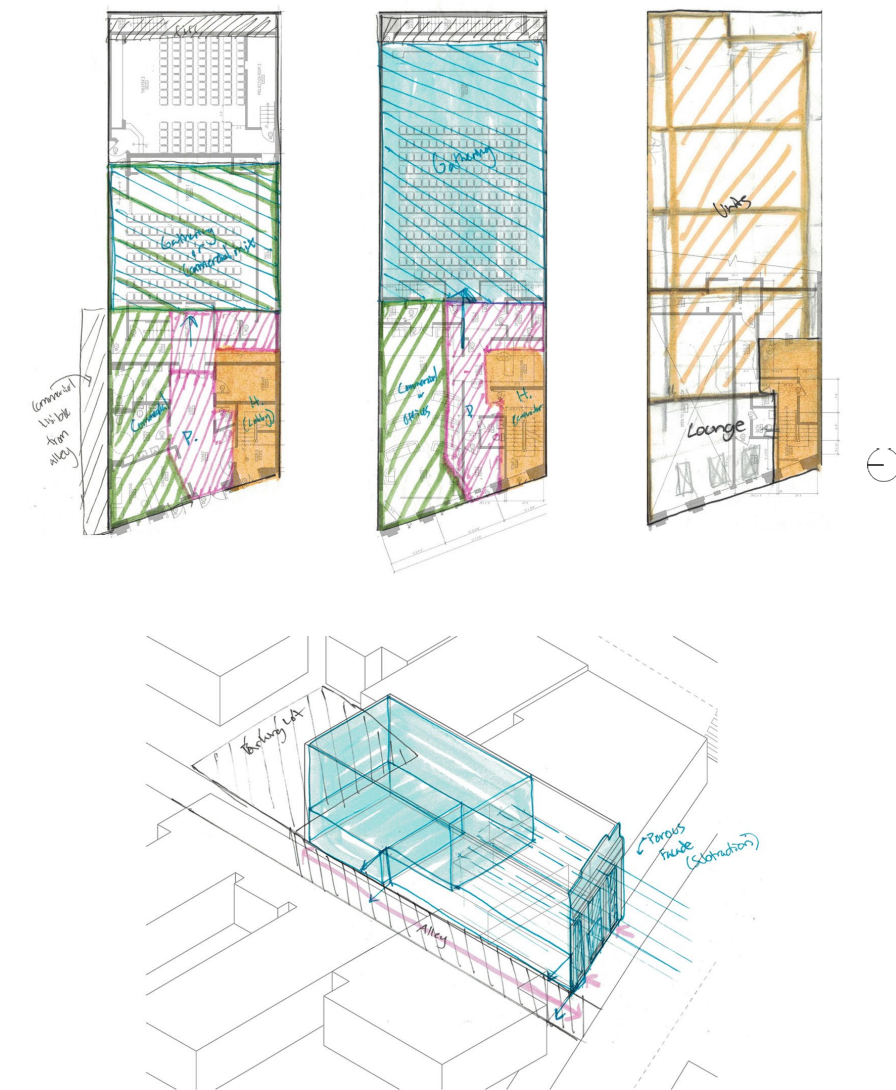


Figure 4.6: Ark Lodge Cinema initial programming sketches. Theater (Blue), housing (yellow), commercial (green), public space (pink).

B. Guild 45th Theatre

The Guild 45th Theatre is a unique site that included an additional lot that divided the two theater buildings. This configuration provided more space for ground-level programming and for both theater rooms to be preserved as community spaces. Upper floors with housing could easily be added because the larger site provided much greater access to light and air and also multiple options for bringing stairs and an elevator to the ground level; space would also be available for a ground level residential lobby, utility and trash rooms and other support spaces.

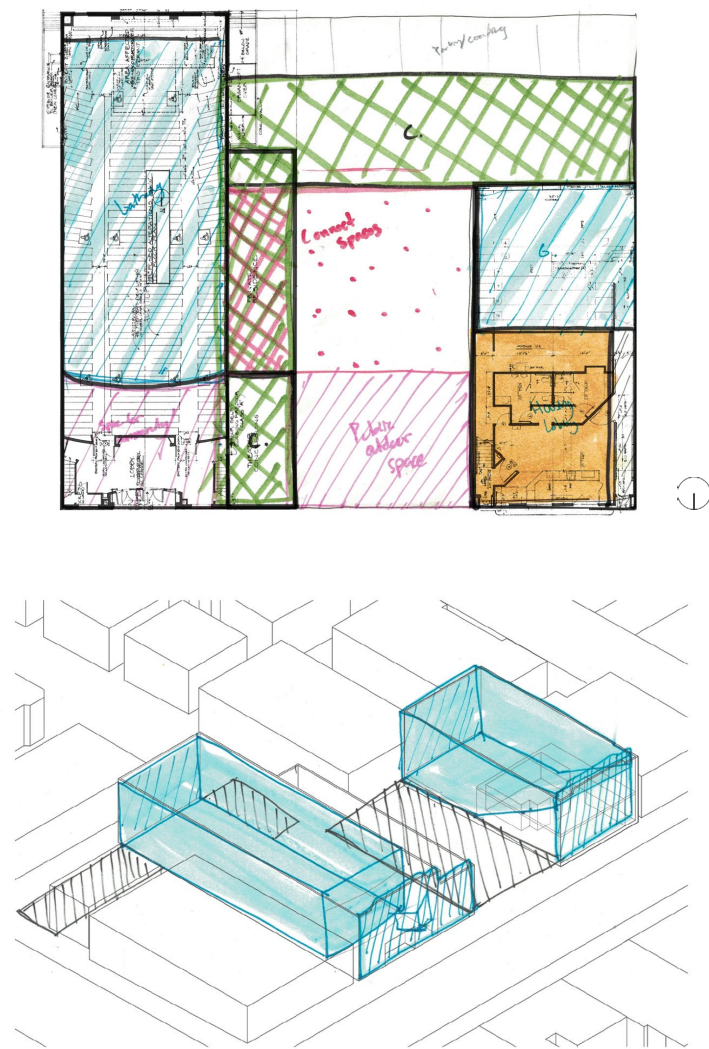


Figure 4.7: Guild 45th Theatre initial programming sketches. Theater (Blue), housing (yellow), commercial (green), public space (pink).

C. SIFF Uptown Cinema

The SIFF Uptown Cinema, similar to the Guild 45th, allows for additional uses while preserving the original theater and lobby space. However, the two theaters added in the 1980s would need to be removed to accommodate the new programming required for the ideal mix of uses as outlined earlier in this thesis chapter. Important environmental factors include the sloped site on the south elevation, the party wall on the north side and the existing arcade space stretching along the south-facing and east-facing elevations. The historical theater space has a party wall adjoining the building to the north, which limits options for a second means of vertical egress (fire exit); however, a feasible solution remains possible.

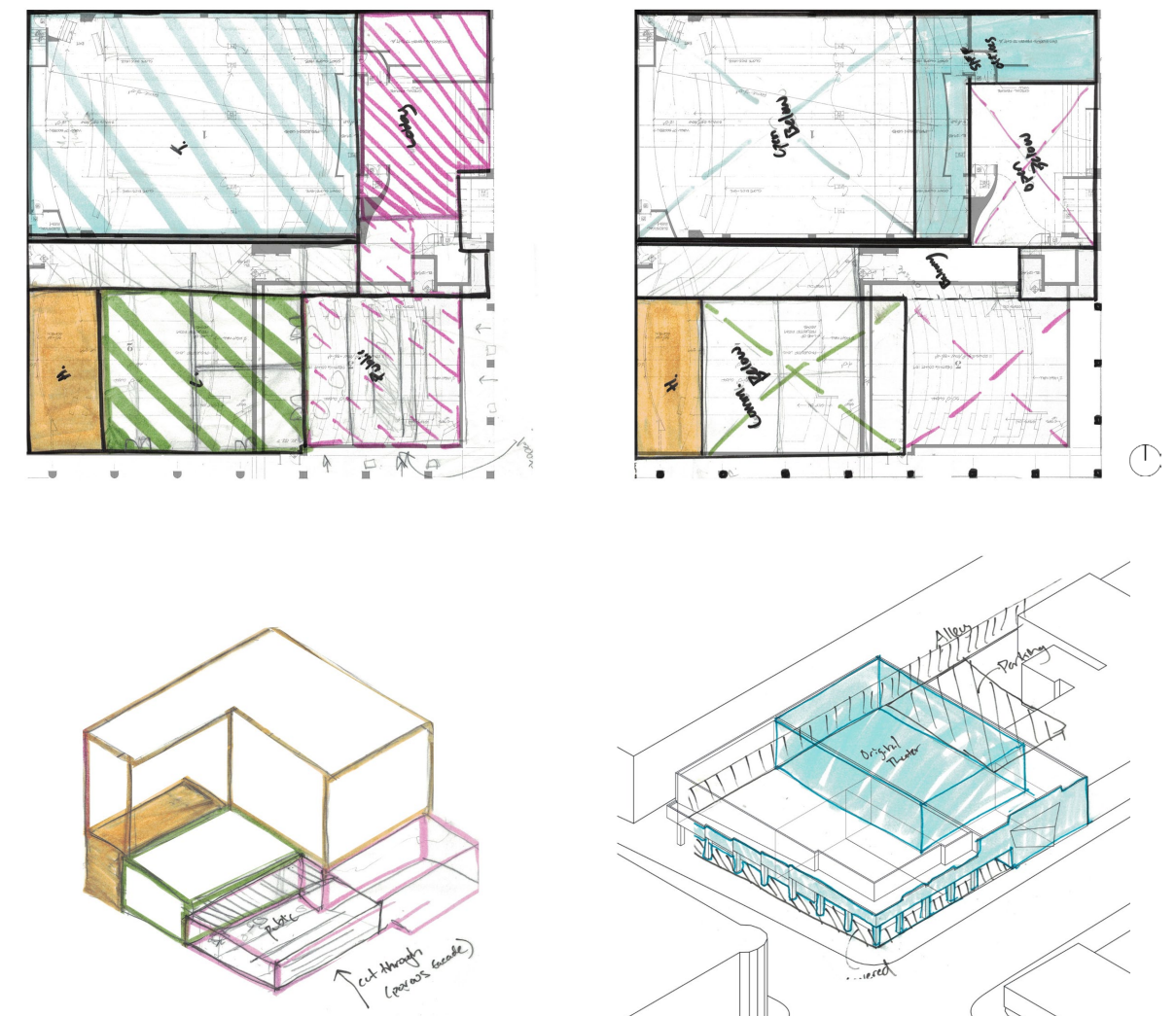


Figure 4.8: SIFF Uptown Cinema, initial programming sketches. Theater (Blue), housing (yellow), commercial (green), public space (pink).

D. Varsity Theatre

The Varsity Theater, located on a narrow lot, faces the most constraints due to party walls on the north and south sides, with access limited to the narrow east elevation where the theater entrance is located. The original theater, lobby, and supporting spaces are located at the ground level. The second level, currently housing two screening rooms, can be converted into housing or commercial use, but access is limited. Adding housing at the upper levels is infeasible due to the two long party walls which provide access to light and air only at the east and west ends of the 40-foot-wide lot. The other challenge is the lack of ground floor space for two stairs and an elevator (plus trash room and other needed spaces) while simultaneously preserving the historical theater space and lobby.

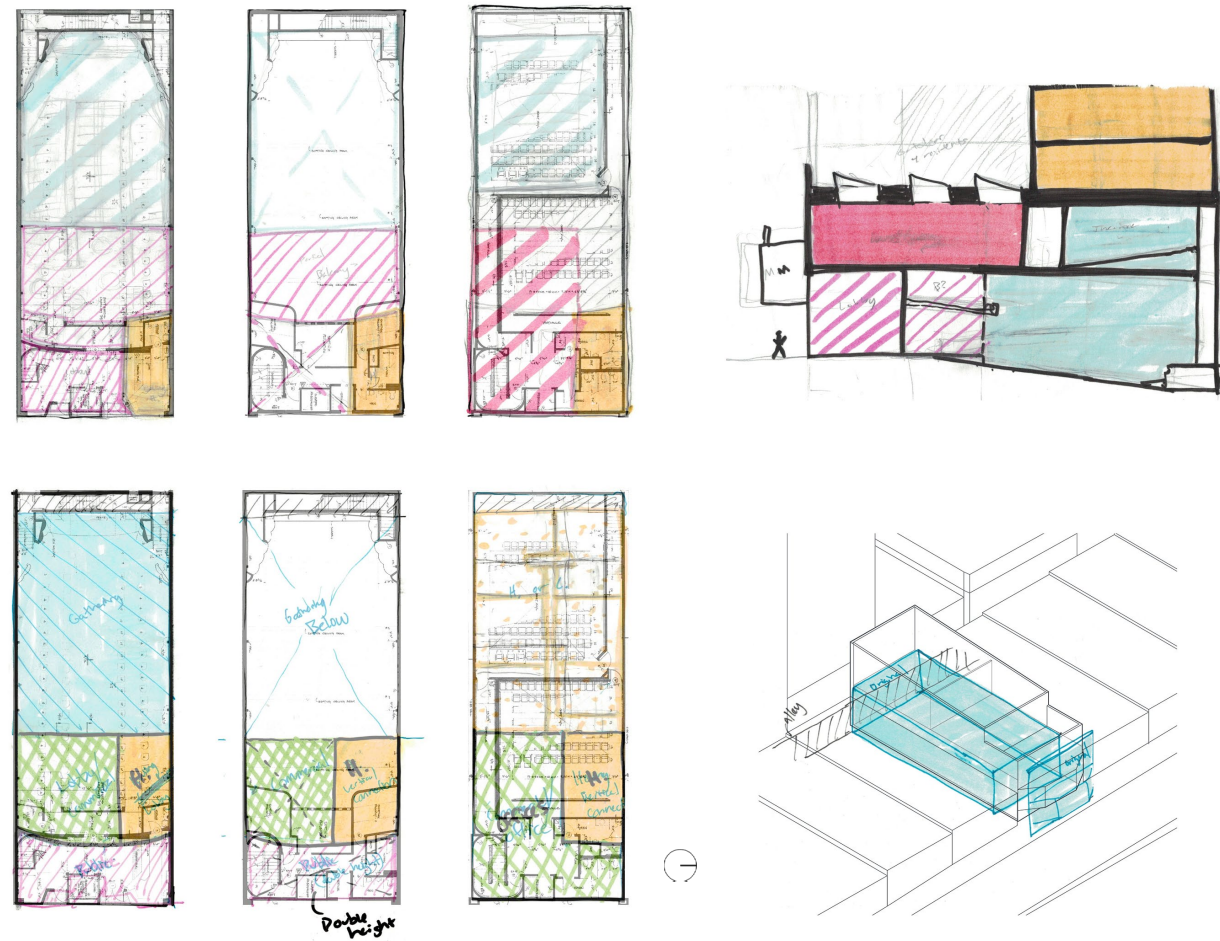


Figure 4.9: Varsity Theater, initial programming sketches

4.3.2 SCHEMATIC FEASIBILITY STUDIES: COMPARISON

The plan diagrams shown in Figure 4.10-13 are all drawn to the same scale. These show attempts to find workable solutions for housing at each of the four case study theaters while simultaneously protecting the historical auditorium in each building. The issue of ground floor access for the new upper level housing was tested along with upper floor unit configurations that maintained two exit pathways. The housing configurations tested included point-block housing, double-loaded corridors, and single-loaded corridors.

A. Ark Lodge Cinema

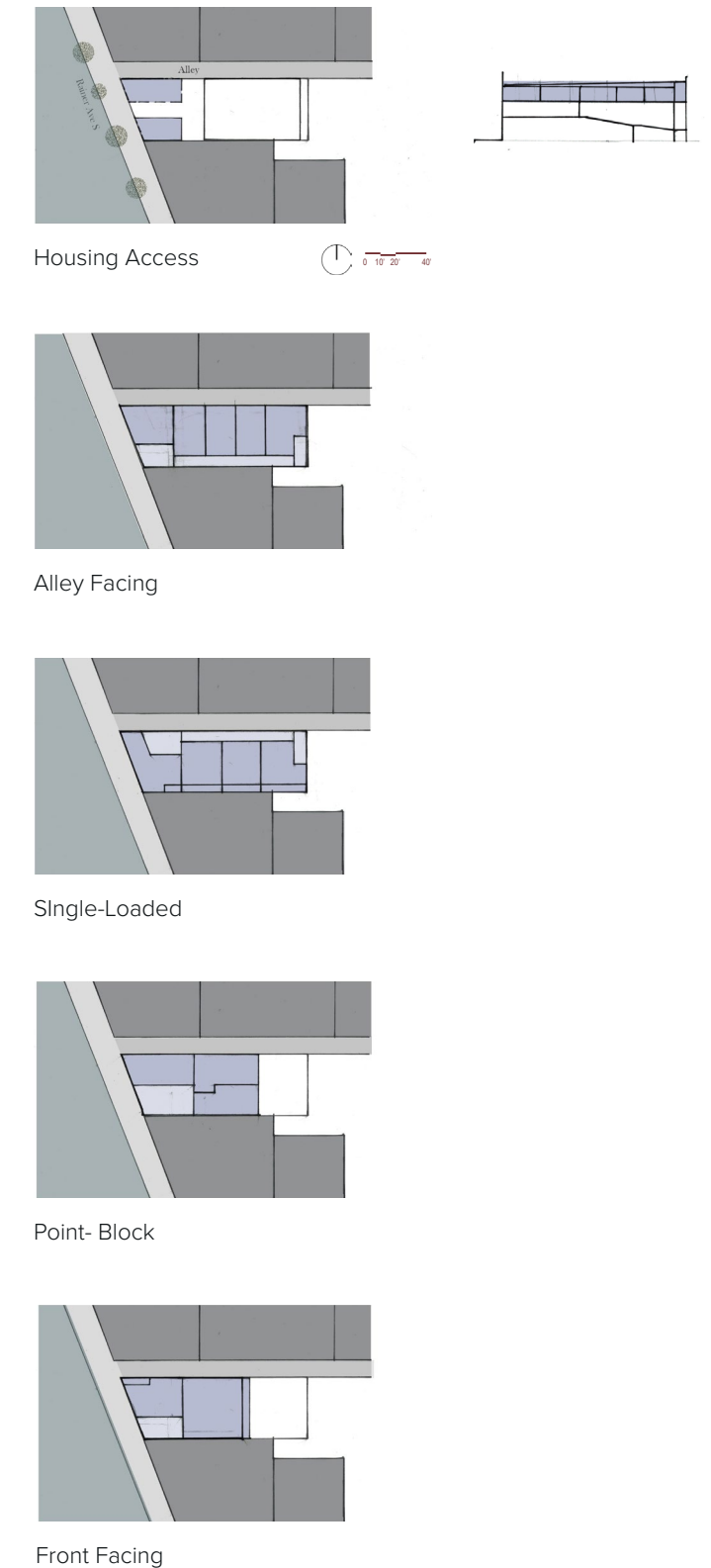
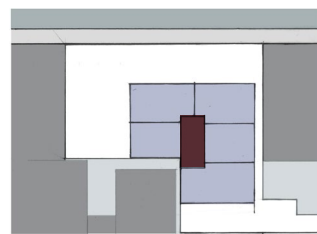
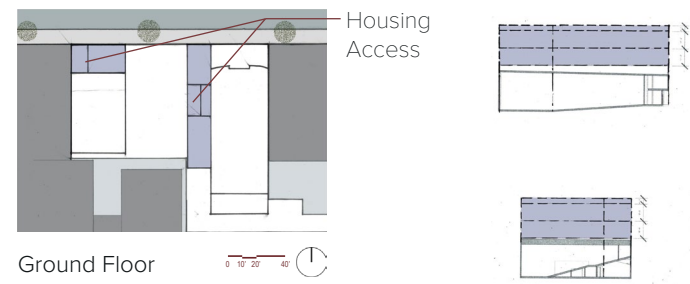
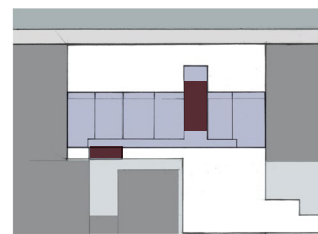


Figure 4.10: Ark Lodge Cinema housing scheme feasibility study

B. Guild 45th Theatre



Point Block



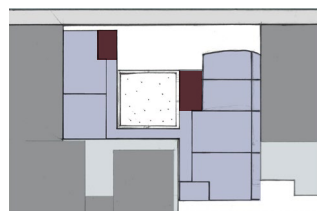
Rectangular Plan



2- Point Block



L-Shaped Plan

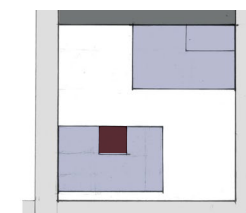
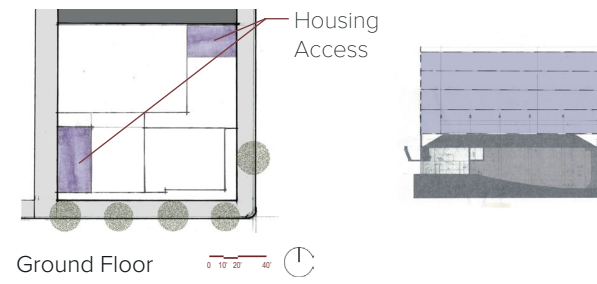


U-Shaped Plan w/ garden

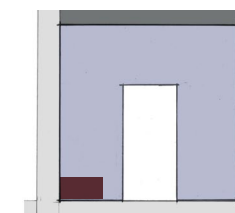


L-Shaped Plan

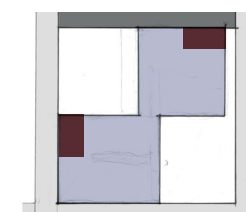
C. SIFF Uptown Cinema



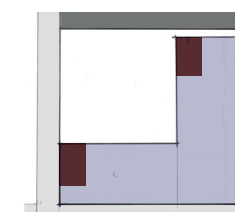
Point Block



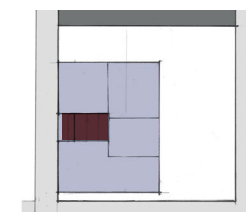
U-Shape Plan



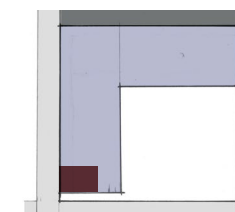
Cross-Plan



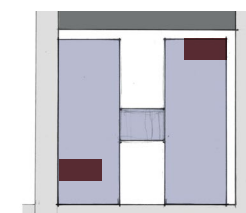
L-Plan



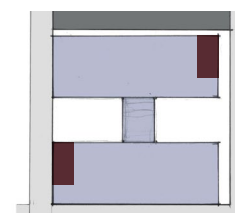
Point Block (2)



L-Plan (2)

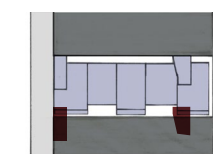
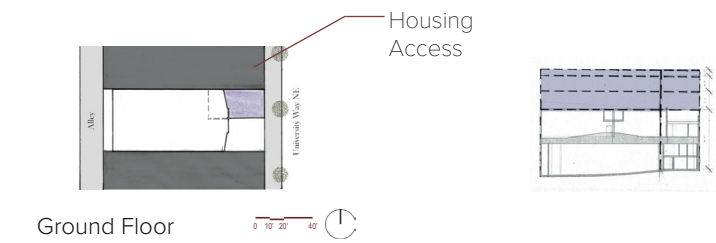


H-Plan

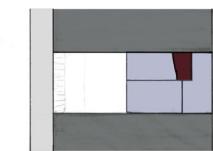


I-Plan

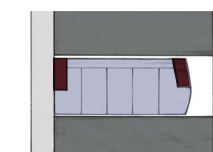
D. Varsity Theatre



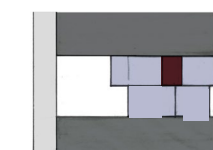
Rectangular Plan



Point Block



Single Corridor



Point Block 2

Figure 4.11: Housing scheme feasibility studies of Guild 45th Theatre, SIFF Uptown Cinema, and Varsity Theatre.

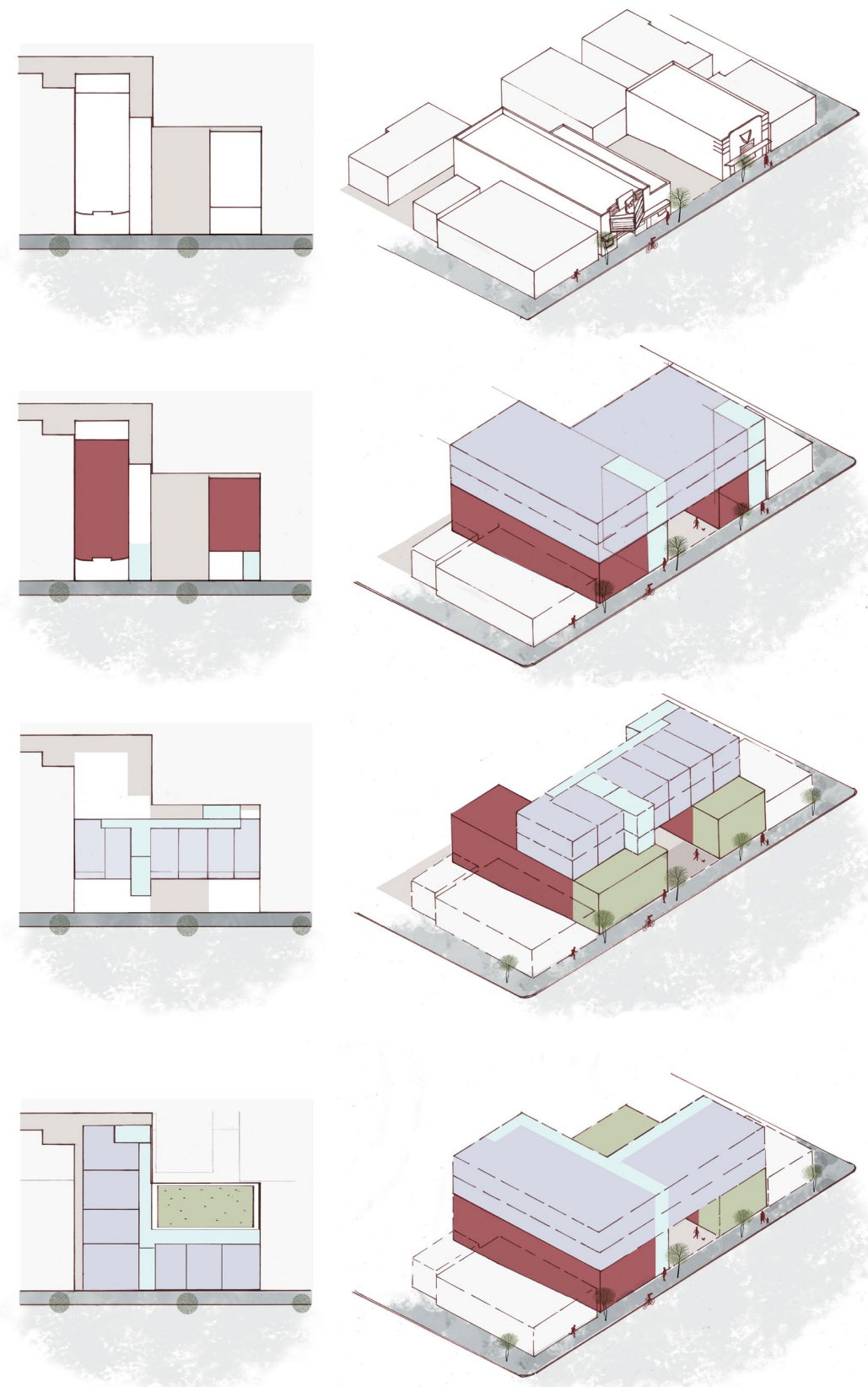
Unit Types Included:
 Lobby (400 - 500 sf)
 Studio (300-420 sf)
 One Bedroom (500-650 sf)
 Two Bedroom (750-1000 sf)

4.3.3 OUTCOME

The feasibility studies revealed that buildings in the narrow theater group were not viable candidates for adaptive reuse with the proposed programming, especially when considering both a preserved space and housing/commercial spaces. The combination of limited area at the ground level, party walls on one or more sides, height restrictions, fire safety requirements, and access to light and air proved to be too constraining. While addition of a small amount of housing might be feasible, the amount of housing desired to create a sense of community cannot be accommodated. Further, the cost of adding such a small amount of housing likely exceeds what is reasonable given the many needed changes to the existing building in order to accommodate even a very limited number of residential units. The narrow theaters may, however, have potential for reuse if the programming is limited to preserving the original assembly space and possibly adding office space instead of housing.

As a result, the expanded theaters, such as the Guild 45th Theater and the SIFF Uptown Theatre, exhibit much more potential for a mixed-use approach that preserves the existing theater and introduces housing, commercial uses and public spaces. Between the two expanded case study sites in this thesis, the SIFF Uptown Theater was chosen as the best site to develop a complete adaptive reuse project due to its existing use as a theater and its role as an iconic community landmark (even though it is not currently protected as a designated Seattle Landmark building).

Expanded Theater



Narrow Theater

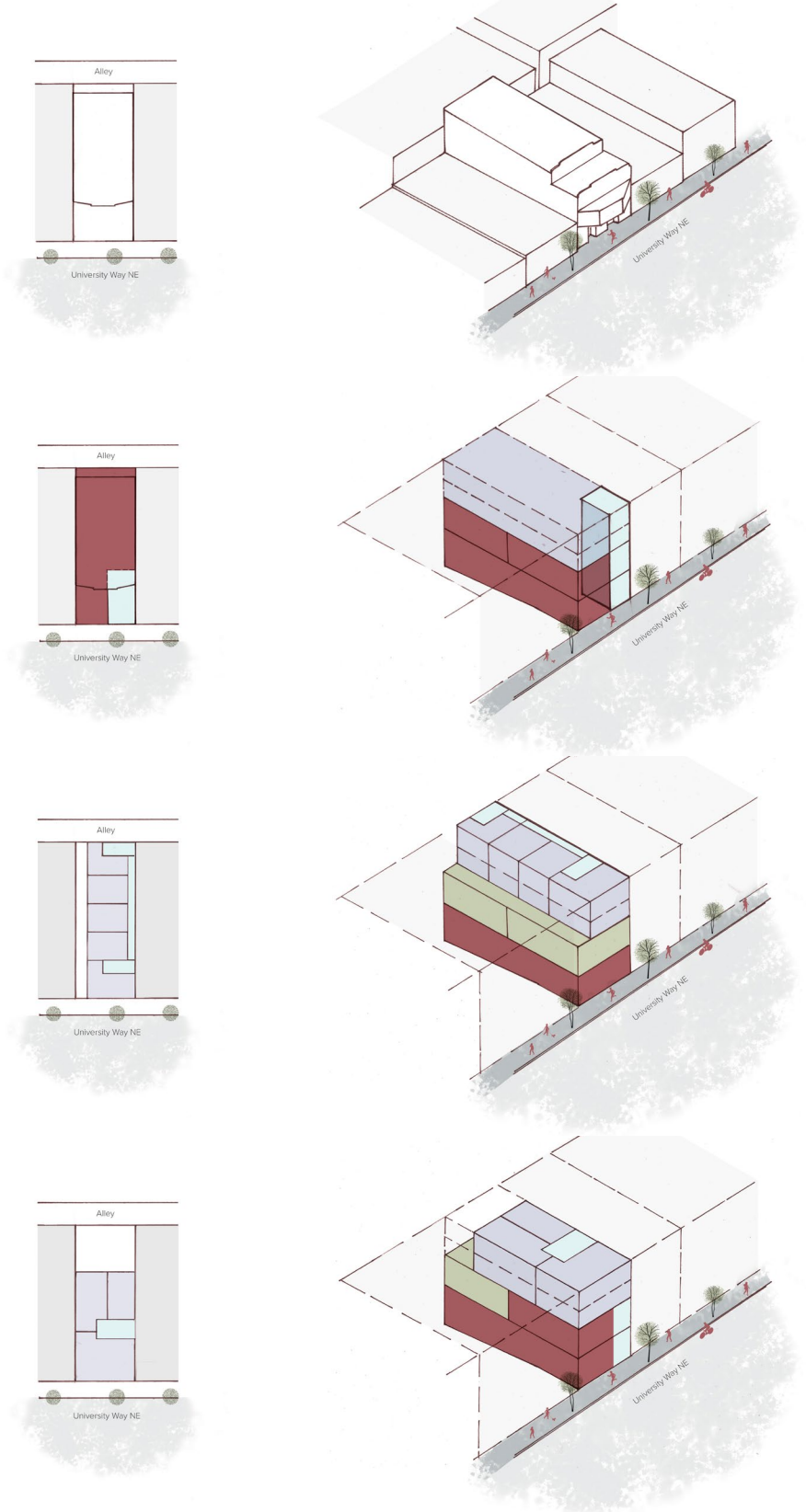


Figure 4.12: (Left) Expanded Theater Type (Guild 45th Theatre), and (Right) Narrow Theater Type (Varsity Theatre)



CHAPTER 5. BACKGROUND & DESIGN PROCESS

Based on the feasibility studies presented in Chapter 4, the SIFF Uptown Cinema was chosen as the site for full design exploration. This chapter provides detailed background information regarding the existing SIFF theater building and its community context before presenting the design ideation process that led to the final proposal.

5.1 THE SITE + ZONING

The SIFF Uptown Cinema is located in the Lower Queen Anne/Uptown neighborhood at the corner of Queen Anne Avenue N and W Republican Street. The building stands on a parcel measuring 120' x 120', with a party wall on the north side and an alley on the west side. The theater entrance is located on the east elevation. The sidewalk along the south elevation slopes down (or westward) from the front (east) elevation on W Republican Street to the alley on the west side of the property. The building site and adjacent lots are zoned "Seattle Mixed Uptown" with an 85' height limit (SM-UP 85 (M1)); this zoning allows for an additional five levels to be added to the existing theater. The design proposal in this thesis rises to the allowed height limit to provide much needed additional housing in the neighborhood.

Figure 5: SIFF Uptown Cinema, December 2023.



Figure 5.1: Map of Uptown Neighborhood with SIFF Uptown emphasized. SM-UP 85 (M1) zoning highlighted in blue.

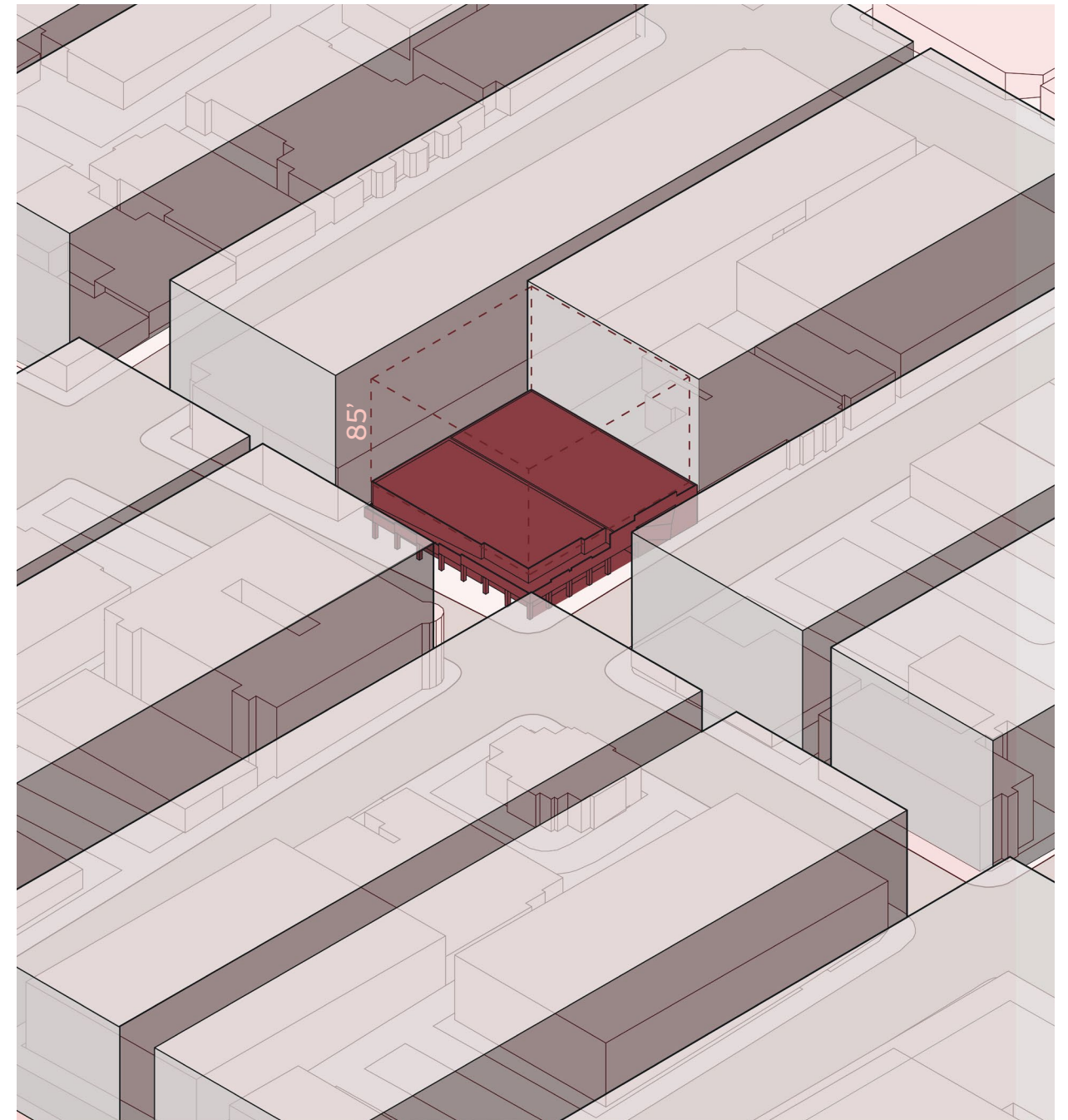
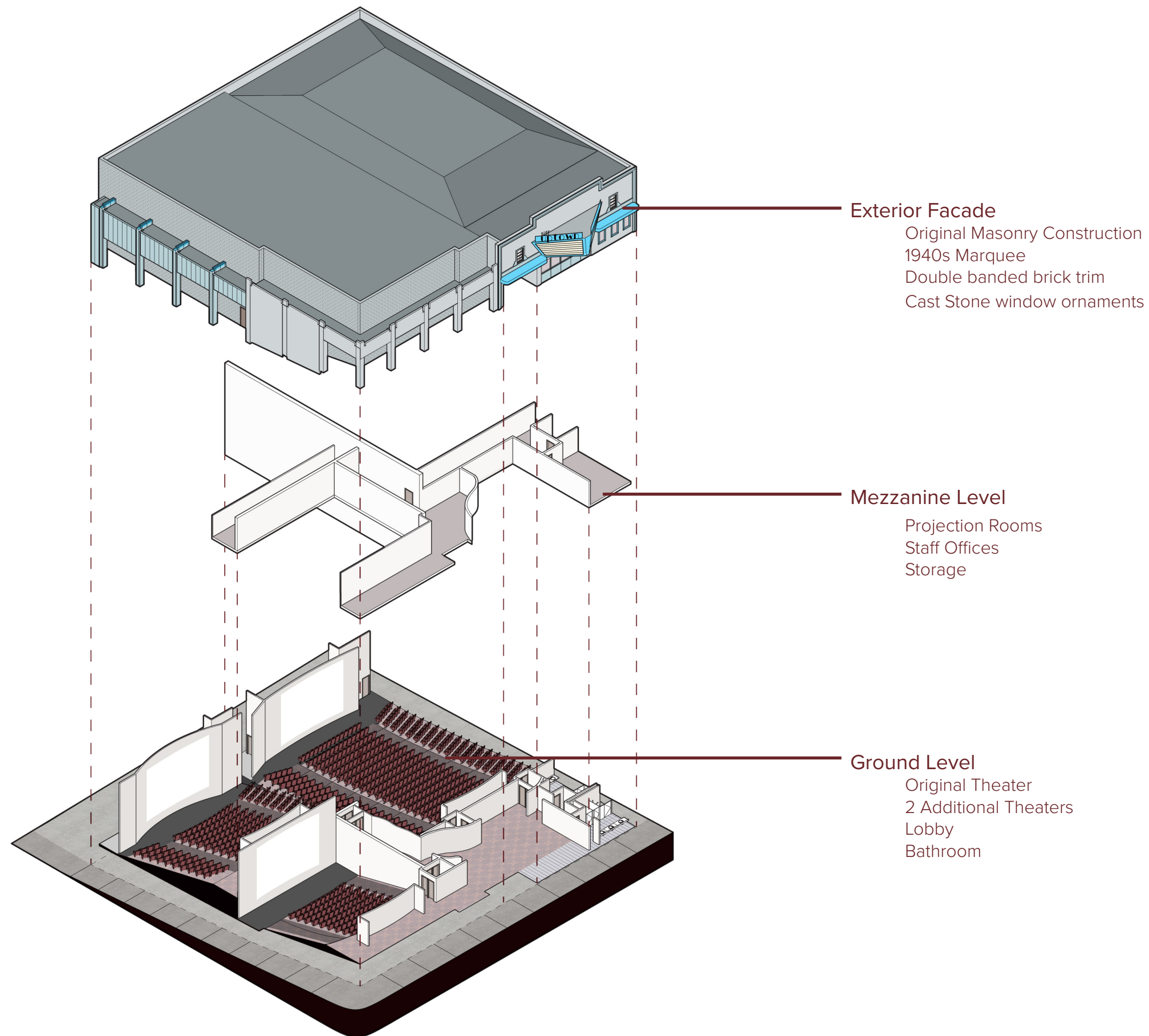


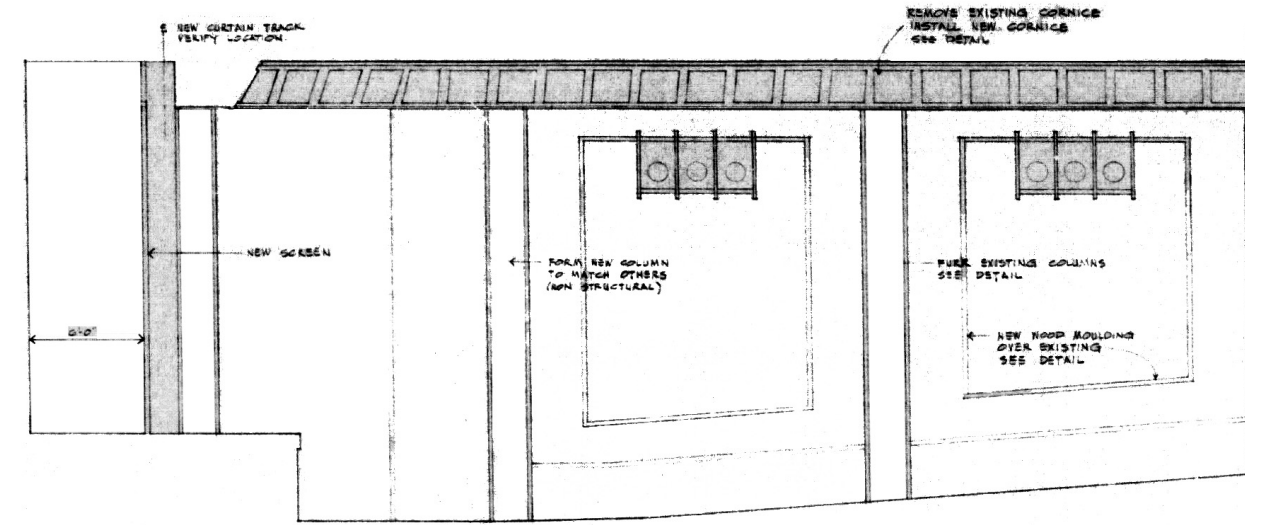
Figure 5.2: Axonometric diagram showing existing building as well as zoning envelope the building site and on adjacent sites.



5.2 EXISTING BUILDING

The existing SIFF Uptown Cinema has largely retained its original features, including the north structure's original brick construction and façade, as well as the brick arcade wrapping the southeast corner. The theater's programming and spatial layout are relatively straightforward. The theater features one main level (ground level), which includes the original theater, two 1980s theater additions, and a double height lobby. The second level includes a private mezzanine for staff, projection rooms, and storage. Despite a series of structural updates and renovations over the years, such as advanced projection systems, upgraded seating, and improved accessibility, the overall plan has remained largely intact. The renovations aimed to modernize the facility while accommodating larger audiences and preserving its character. The lasting character of the building is representative of the cultural influence of the cinema as a heritage space.

Figure 5.3: Exploded Axon of Existing SIFF Uptown.



5.2.1 BUILDING SIGNIFICANCE

Determining what is “significant” is not always straightforward, and can change over time, but consideration of both historical and contemporary elements is necessary for a successful adaptive reuse process. At the beginning of the design process for the reimagined Uptown Theater, a set of “non-negotiables” were established based on an assessment of the building’s architectural, cultural, and community value. These include items that will be protected and not altered for new use in order to protect the identity of the building for current and future patrons.

The original brick facade, ornamental cast-stone window details, streamline accents, double-banded parapet, and marquee signage are all significant historically, architecturally and for building and community identity; therefore, all these elements must be retained, and, to the extent feasible, should be restored. These elements call attention to the Uptown as a visual marker in the neighborhood, and also serve as symbols of an important era in Seattle’s cinema history. Significant interior elements to be preserved include the original central lobby and the sloped-floor theater space. Interior elements that have been lost, including the stage and surface ornamentation, will be restored or reconstructed. The large theater space with almost 500 seats is home to a thriving film scene in Seattle and has served as the backdrop for various community events.

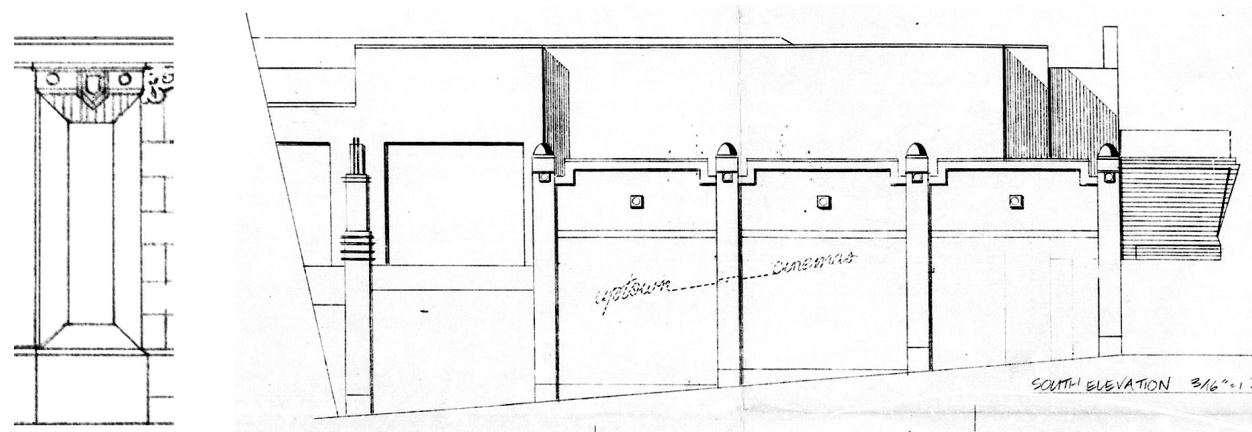


Figure 5.4: Images and drawings of “elements” of significance (identification based on historical drawings and site visits), Photos from Jennifer Durham. Drawings from SDCI Microfilm Library.

The significant spaces are illustrated below in the ground floor plan (Fig. 5.5). The existing theater plan (left) provided the framework for the proposed adapted plan (right) with areas to be preserved (red) and optimal areas for reuse or additions (blue). Given the goals for the project as a community-oriented hub, the two south theaters must be removed in order to introduce new programming at the street front and open the building up for residential and community use. The design preserves the original theater and lobby while allowing sufficient flexibility for new programming for street activation.

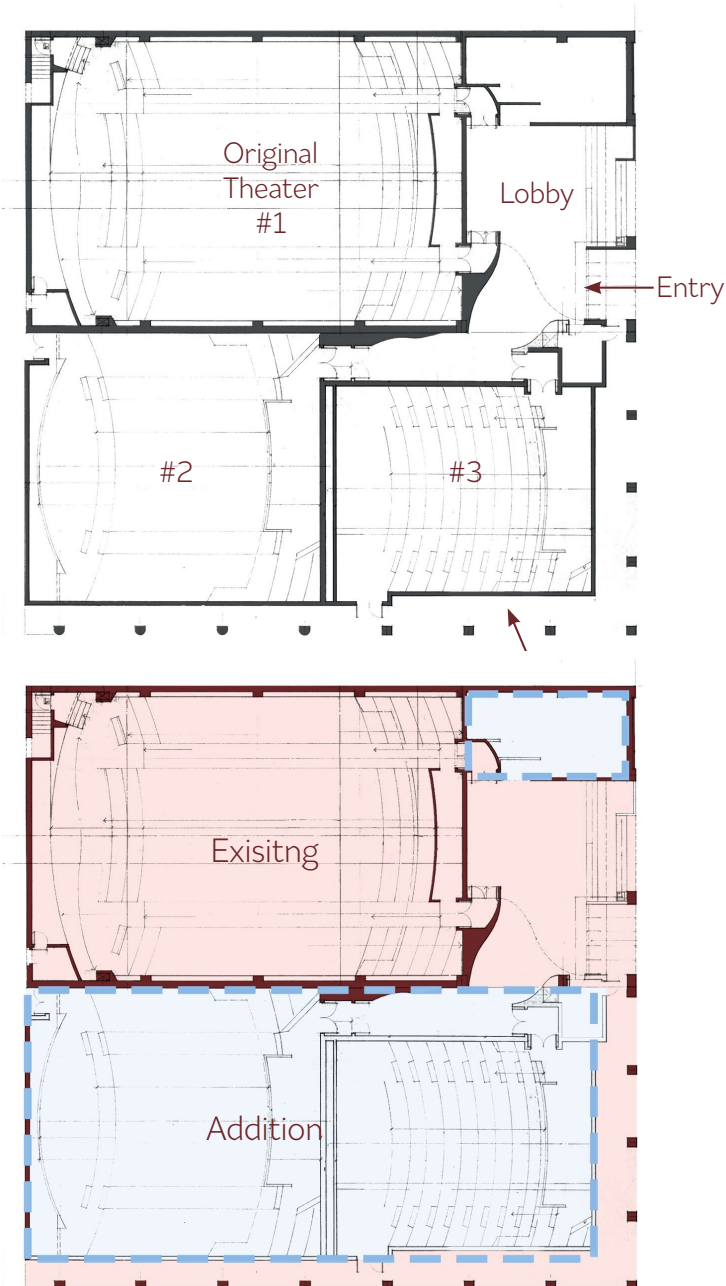


Figure 5.5: Existing Ground Floor Plan of SIFF Uptown Theatre

5.3 DESIGN IDEATION

The design process began with the existing theater building and a reconsideration of the ground floor level. The insertion of theaters 2 and 3 (in Fig. 5.5) required closing off the ground level along most of the south elevation and part of the east elevation. Theater spaces that could be darkened for films to be shown required elimination of all transparency. The new design introduced potential commercial spaces, housing access, exit stairs, and a new community space in this area, but avoided any significant impact to the original historic theater. The redesign created two primary challenges at the ground floor level. First, on the north portion of the site, the original historic theater needed to remain intact, but fire exit stairs needed to be inserted. On the south portion of the site, the downward slope west on Republican Street and the downward slope south on the alley meant that ground level access would need to be at different elevations along the different sides of the site. Finally, the available volume also meant there was space at the former mezzanine level that could be used if adequate access could be provided. A series of sketches (Fig. 5.6) revealed some of the resulting design complexity.

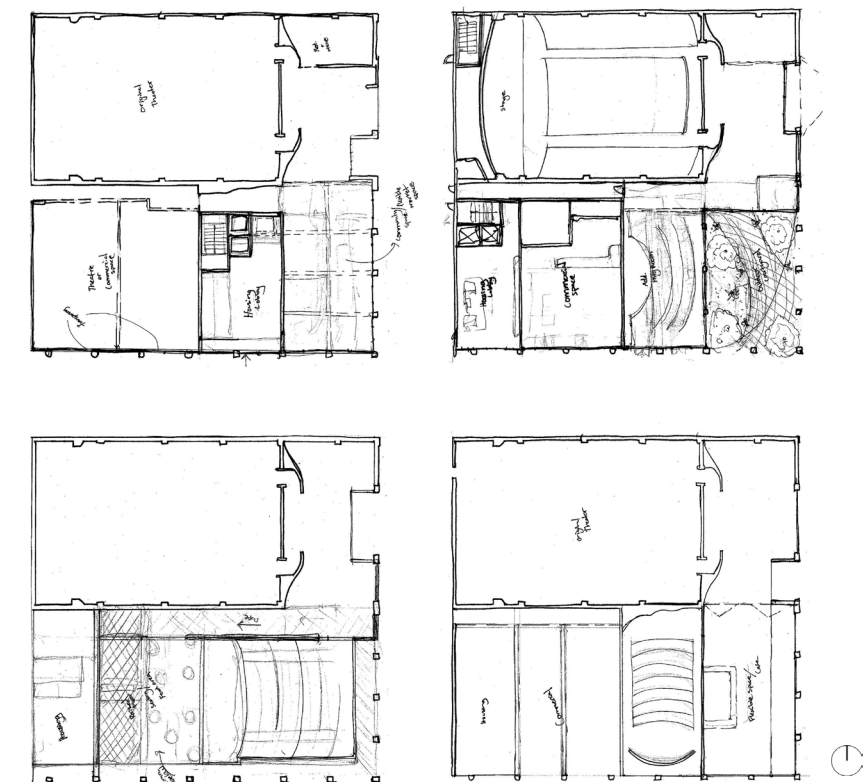
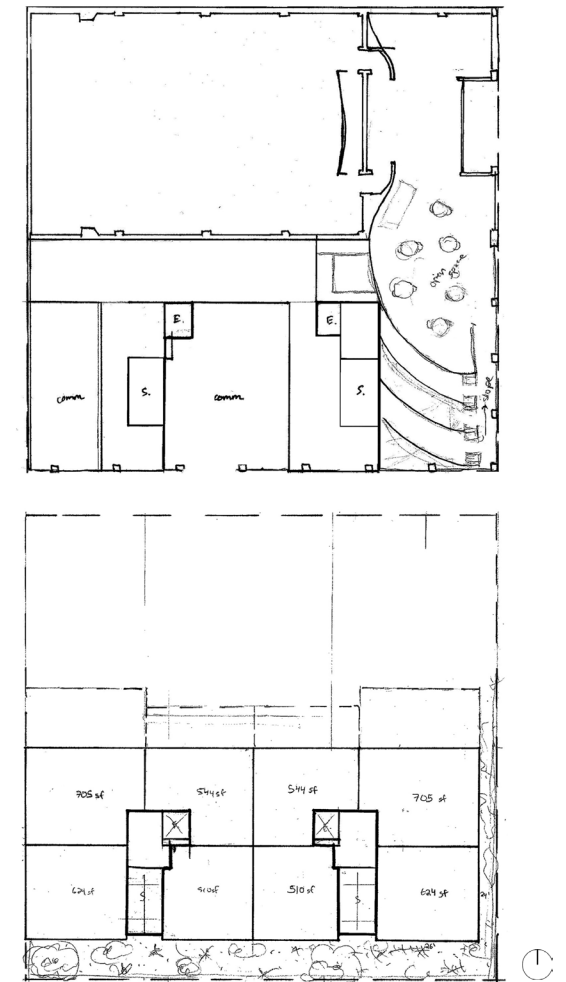
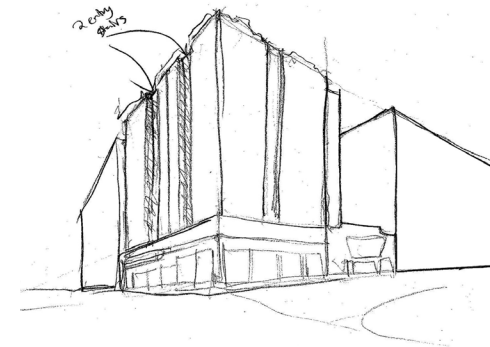
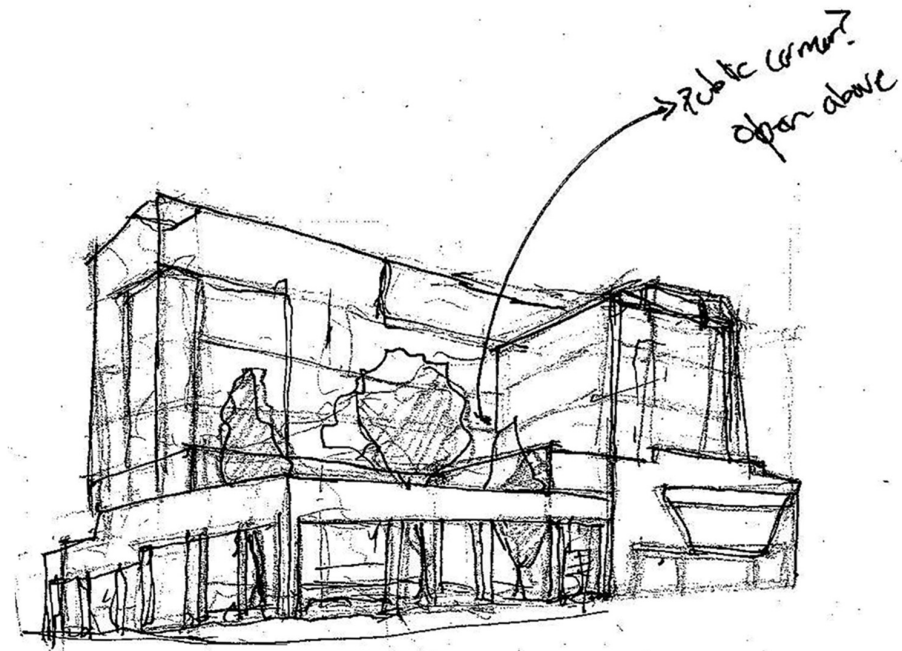


Figure 5.6: Initial sketches of ground floor exploration. Introduces an exterior courtyard, a housing lobby, commercial spaces, and supporting spaces.



5.3.1 HOUSING STUDIES

Although preserving historic theaters was the first goal of this thesis, it was not the only goal. When it was determined that the theaters could best be preserved and contribute to their neighborhoods through a mixed-use adaptation, it was essential that the housing meet high standards for design quality and livability. It would make no sense to enhance the neighborhood by preserving its historic theaters only to compromise the effort through poor quality unlivable housing. Thus, the goal for the housing component was to provide well-designed housing with options for different family types and sizes. In the city of Seattle, with the current pressure for more residential units, too many projects are designed to maximize the number of units (and profit) while compromising on quality. This thesis project focused on housing for livability. It sought to create a sense of community that can support the identity of the theater as a long-standing landmark with strong community ties.

Given the goals for housing, preliminary concept schemes for a variety of approaches to housing design were tested through drawings and sketches. Initial schemes tried such as point-block housing, double-load corridor plans, single-loaded corridor plans, and open galleries. Figures 5.8-5.13 show and describe some of these schemes.

Figure 5.7: Initial perspective sketch of adapted Uptown Theater.

Figure 5.8: Point Block Housing Scheme #1.

This scheme explored two housing cores at the south part of the plan which can accommodate 4 units per core. This scheme produced a compact housing configuration with a smaller housing community and no need for an additional fire exit stair. However, this scheme did not allow for much of the north portion of the site to be utilized and did not allow good communal space for residents; although the roof above the historic theater might be considered for shared outdoor use, it would almost always be in shadow. At the ground level, the separate housing cores required two smaller lobbies or one larger lobby leaving less space for additional programming.

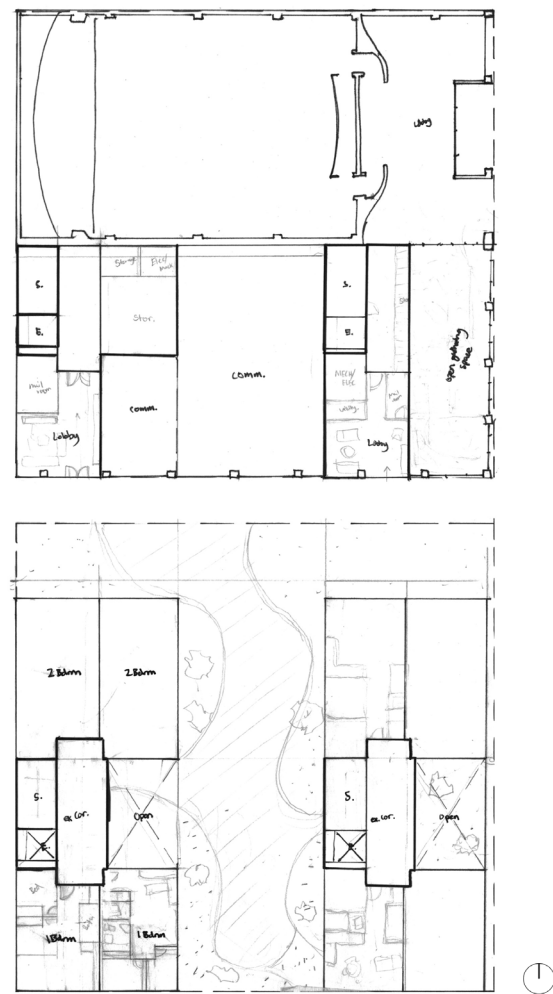


Figure 5.9: Point-Block Scheme #2.

This housing scheme created two separate housing blocks spanning north and south and created a central corridor between the two. This scheme occupied more of the available roof space and allowed much larger family units. However, similar to the previous point block solution, there was not much connectivity between these blocks or options for shared space. At the ground level, the split housing lobbies created disjointed spaces in between for commercial or community space, instead of one centralized housing lobby. The point-block solution might be more realistic for projects that are smaller in scale or purely residential.

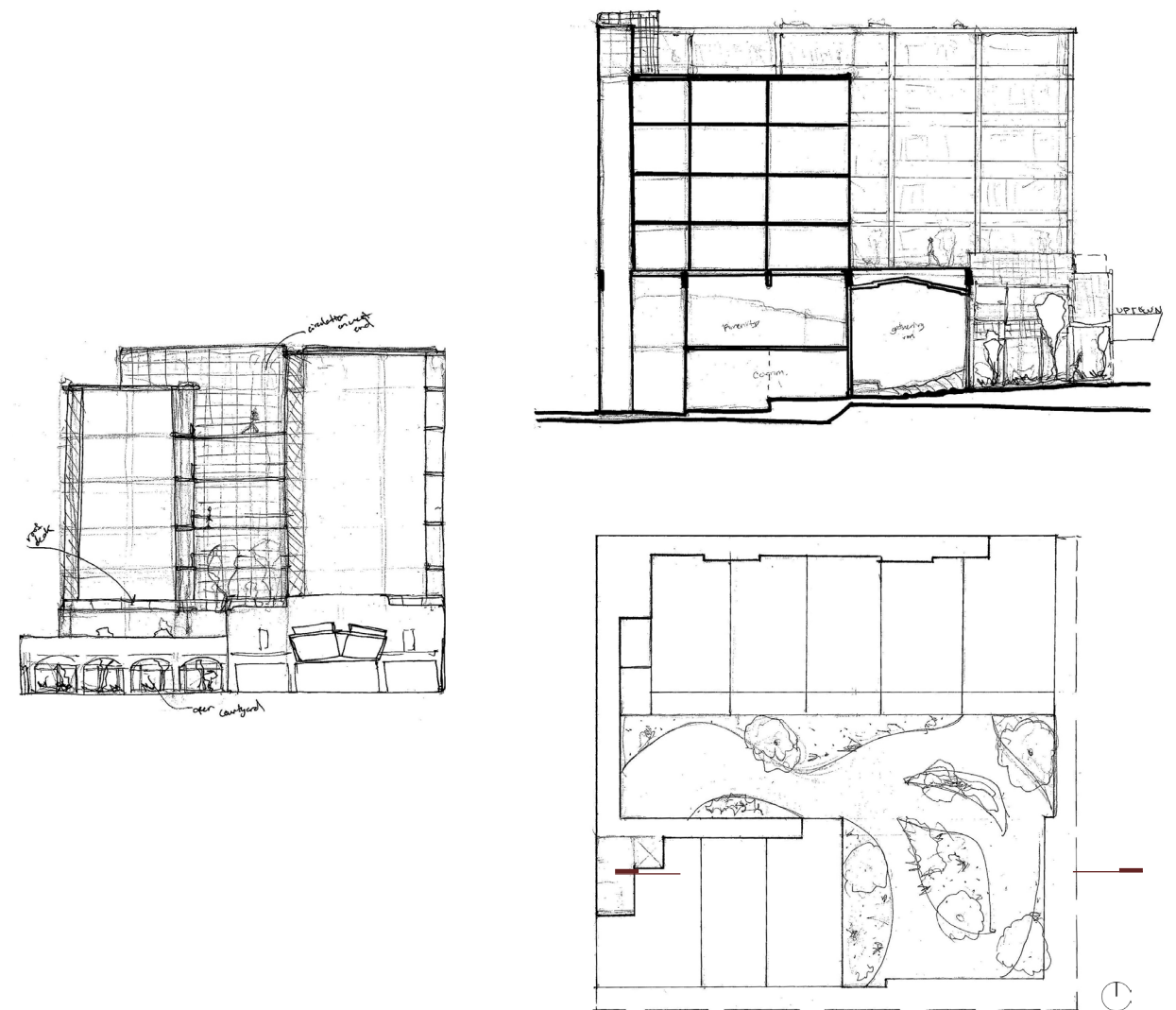


Figure 5.10: U-Shaped Housing.

This scheme provided two housing blocks to create a large communal space and builds separation between the housing addition and the theater base. However, the east-west access created sun exposure issues for the central facing units; the corridor on the north side of the north wing adjoined the party wall of the adjacent building and might have been a dark and uninviting space.

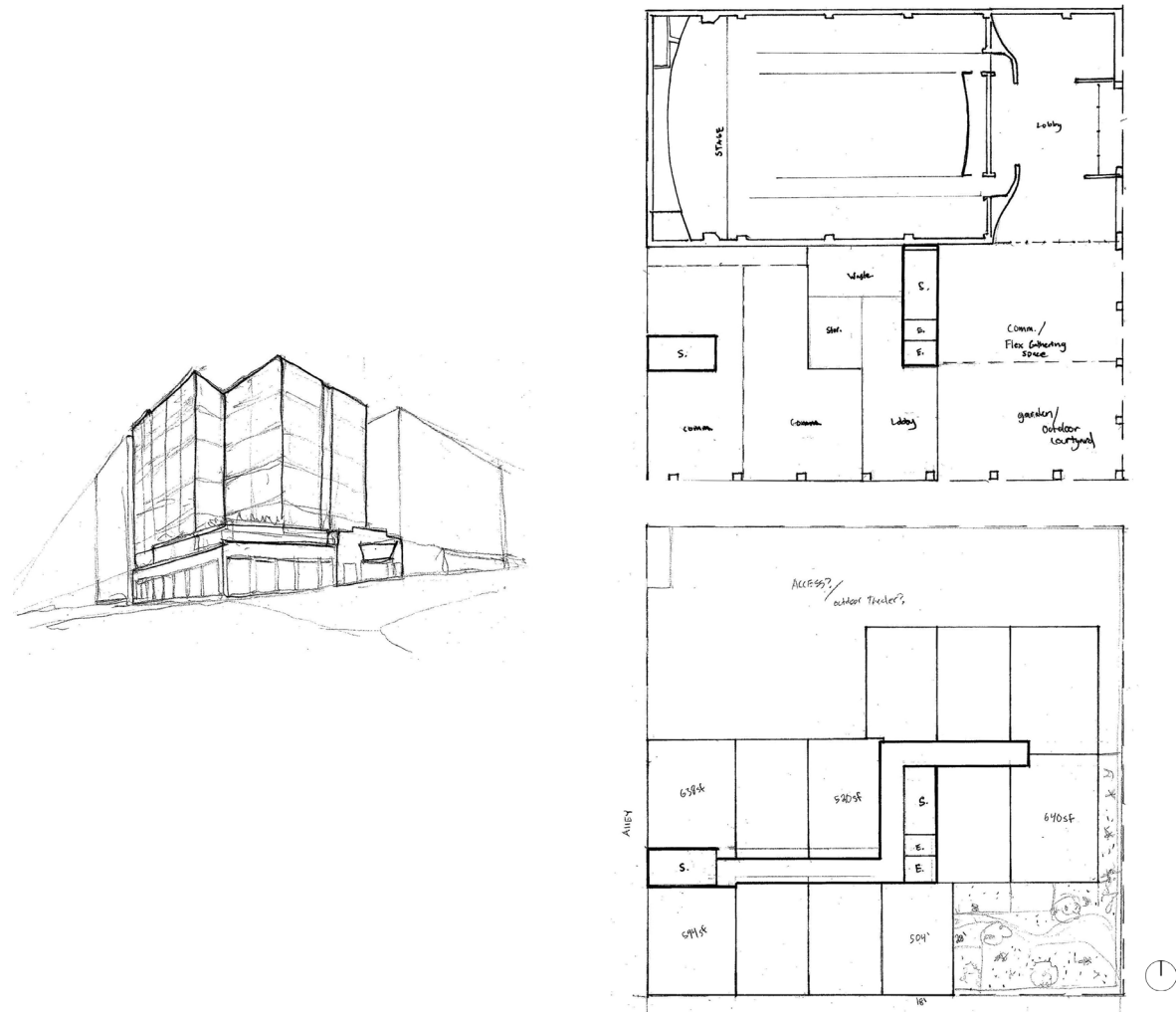


Figure 5.11: S-Shaped Housing Scheme.

This housing scheme allowed for more flexibility at the ground level for other programs while protecting the historic theater, but at the housing level did not take advantage of the space above the theater auditorium and was not optimal for access to light and air for all units.

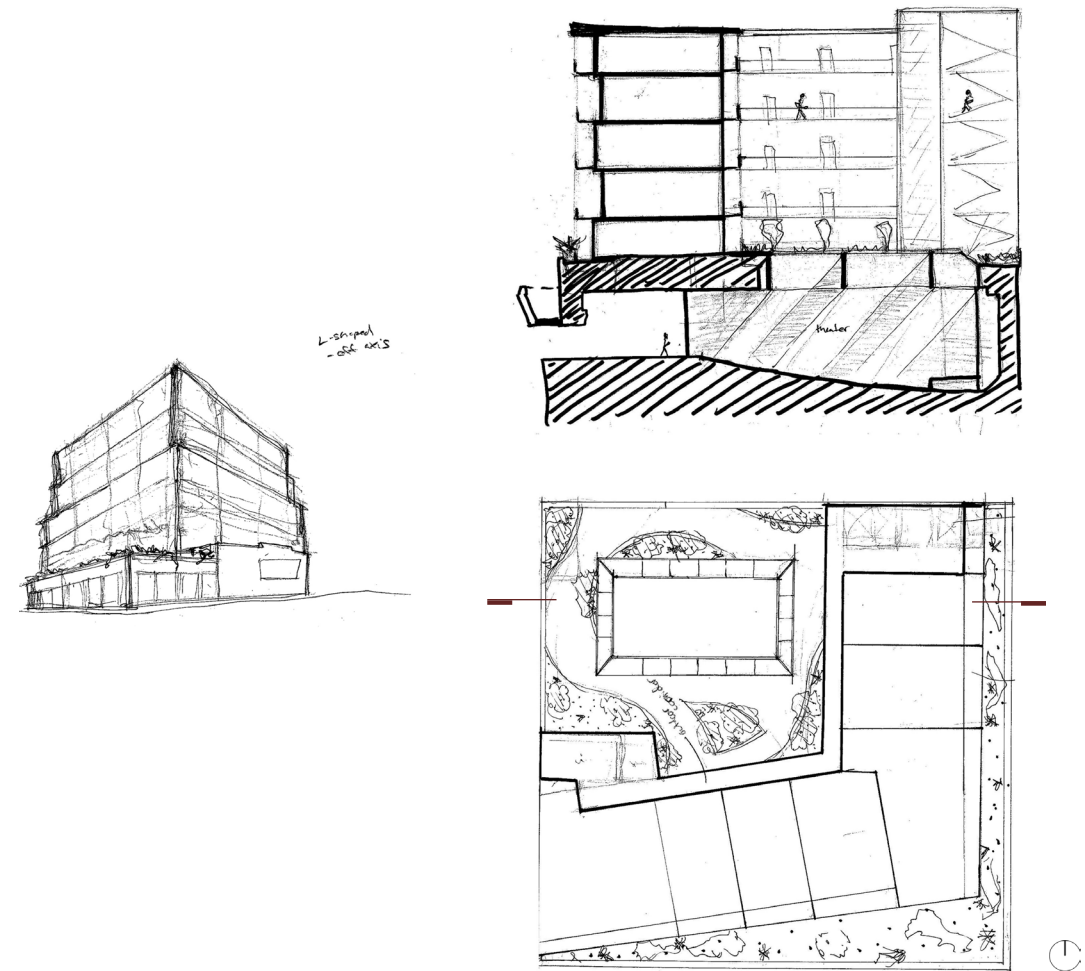


Figure 5.12: L-Shaped Scheme.

This housing scheme visually reinforced the strong corner at the street level with housing facing both the east and south elevations, and also provided privacy for the residents' circulation and outdoor space. This layout also allowed for daylight to penetrate the original theater space if that proved desirable. However, the residents' outdoor space on the north side had little sun exposure and would be in shadow most of the year due to the location of the housing and the likely redevelopment of the parcel on the west side of the alley which would block afternoon sunlight.

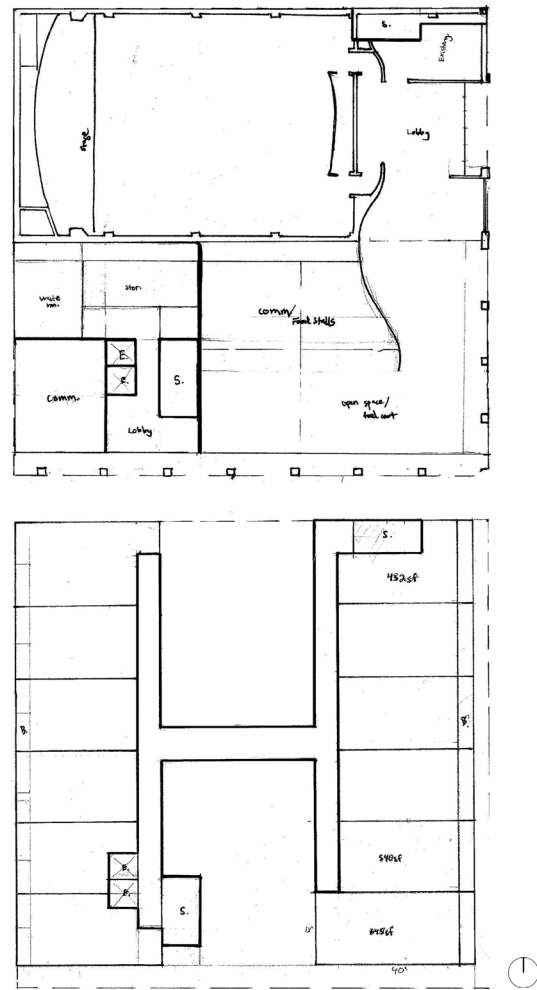


Figure 5.13: H-Shaped Scheme.

This housing scheme had two north-south wings with exposure on both sides and produced a centralized courtyard running north to south, providing access to light and air in a communal space for residents. This plan also allowed for more space at the ground level for additional programming. However, with housing to the perimeter of the east and west, the units facing the alley might be blocked by redevelopment of the adjacent site to the west and the housing block facing east might have overpowered the existing base.

Based on these explorations, the final design proposal draws on elements from several of these schemes, primarily H-Shaped and the Point Block #2 schemes. Combining these schemes allows for more efficient use of the full parcel, provides shared communal spaces, and provides more access to light and air through the single-loaded exterior corridor which overlooks the shared space.

5.4 FINAL DESIGN: MASSING

This section focuses on the massing development of the building design based on the analyses of the alternative design concepts in the previous section.

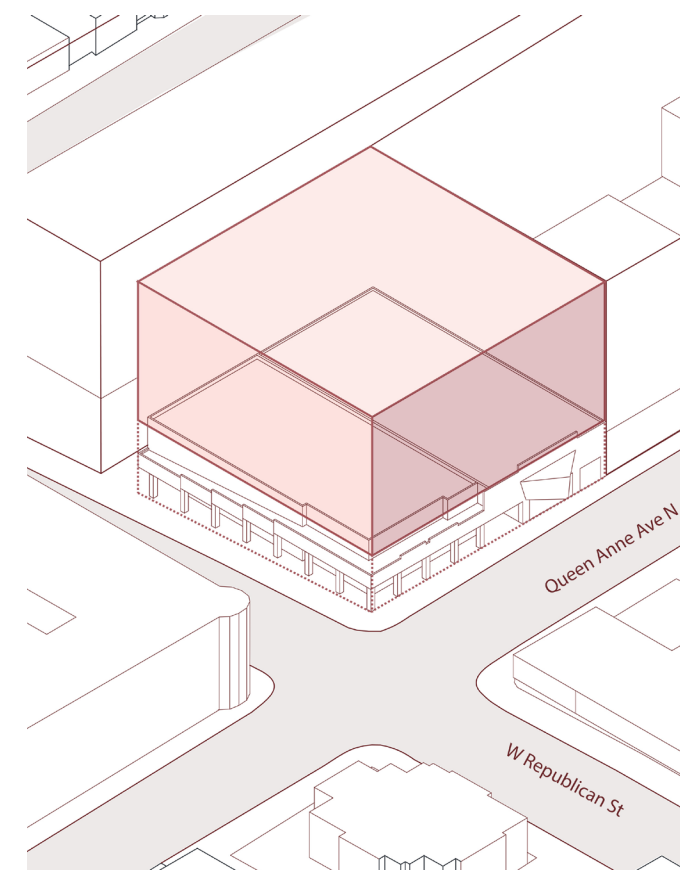


Figure 5.14: Massing Diagram #1.

The volume of allowable height for the Uptown is at 85 feet, accommodating 5 additional levels.

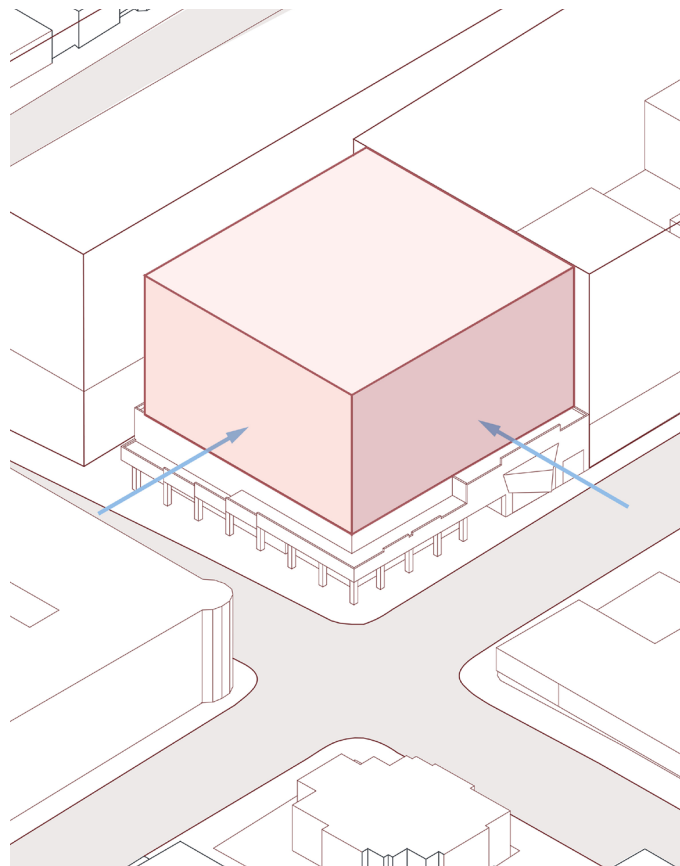


Figure 5.15: Massing Diagram #2.
The housing is pushed back from the street corner and the alley to allow for separation between the existing “base” and the upper-level addition, and to provide more space between housing and the adjacent properties.

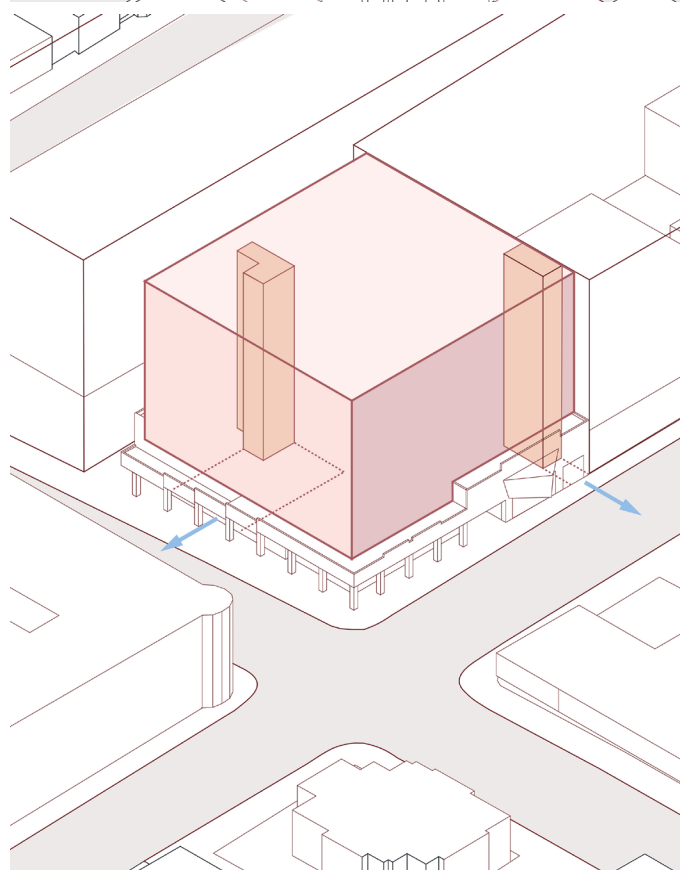


Figure 5.16: Massing Diagram #3.
A primary concern in adding housing above the existing structure is the integration of circulation and fire exit stairs with limited impact at the ground level. For this configuration, the best option was to utilize the south side as the main circulation core and have an additional exit stair to the northeast side that does not impact the original theater auditorium and has minimal impact of the original theatre lobby.

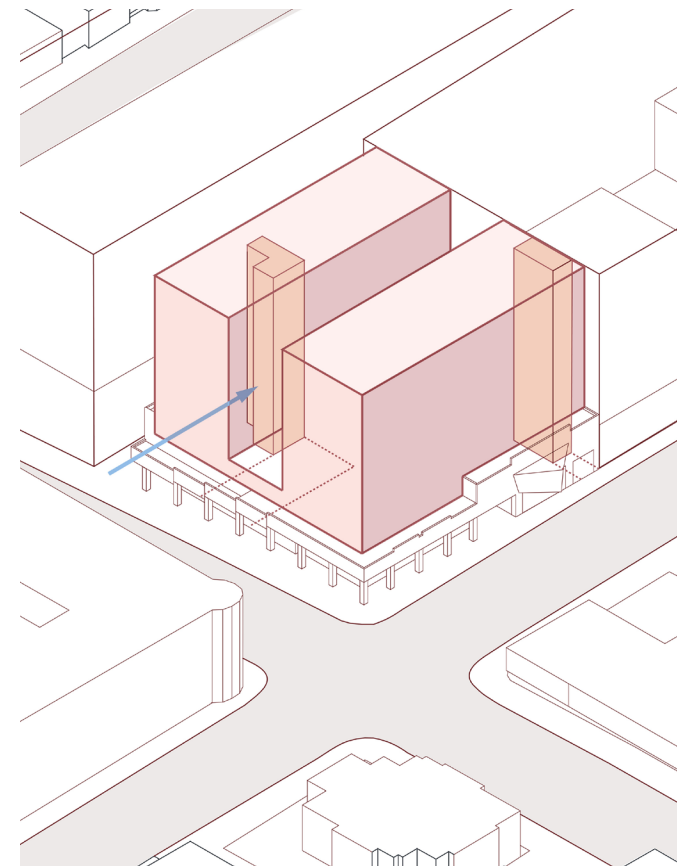


Figure 5.17: Massing Diagram #4.
Providing a central courtyard creates a communal space for residents and allows access to light and air on two sides of the housing units. The courtyard, oriented north to south, brings in light and air (and sunlight at mid-day) and provides crossover circulation. The courtyard on the roof of the existing building becomes a vibrant communal space.

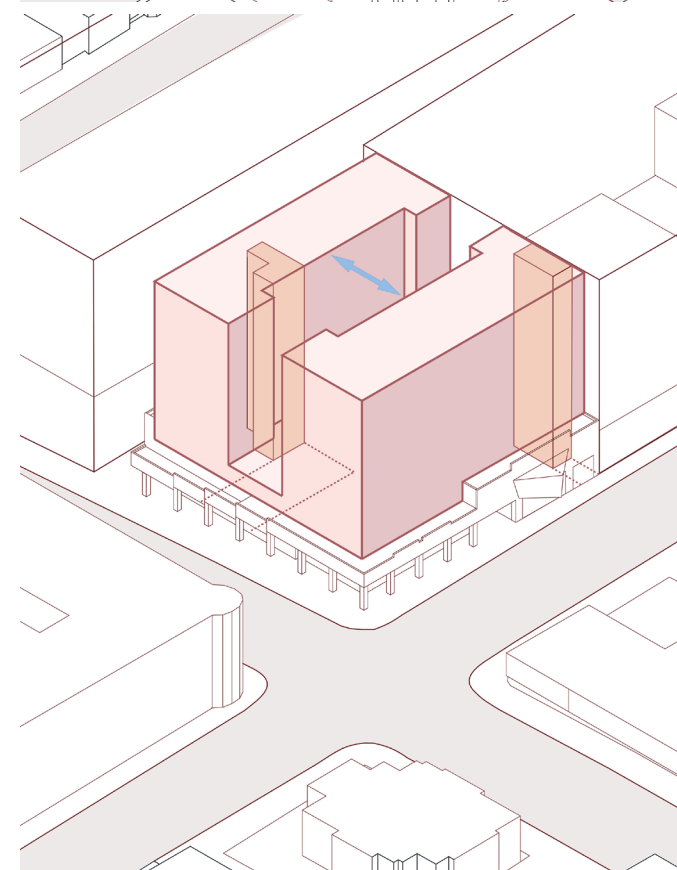


Figure 5.18: Massing Diagram #5.
With two separate housing masses, a centralized exterior corridor provides residents with a circulation space that also serves as an extended balcony space that feels separate from the busy commercial street but also creates a dynamic space for residents to interact. Units at the lowest residential level are configured so they look out to the shared space, which can function as supervised space for children to play.

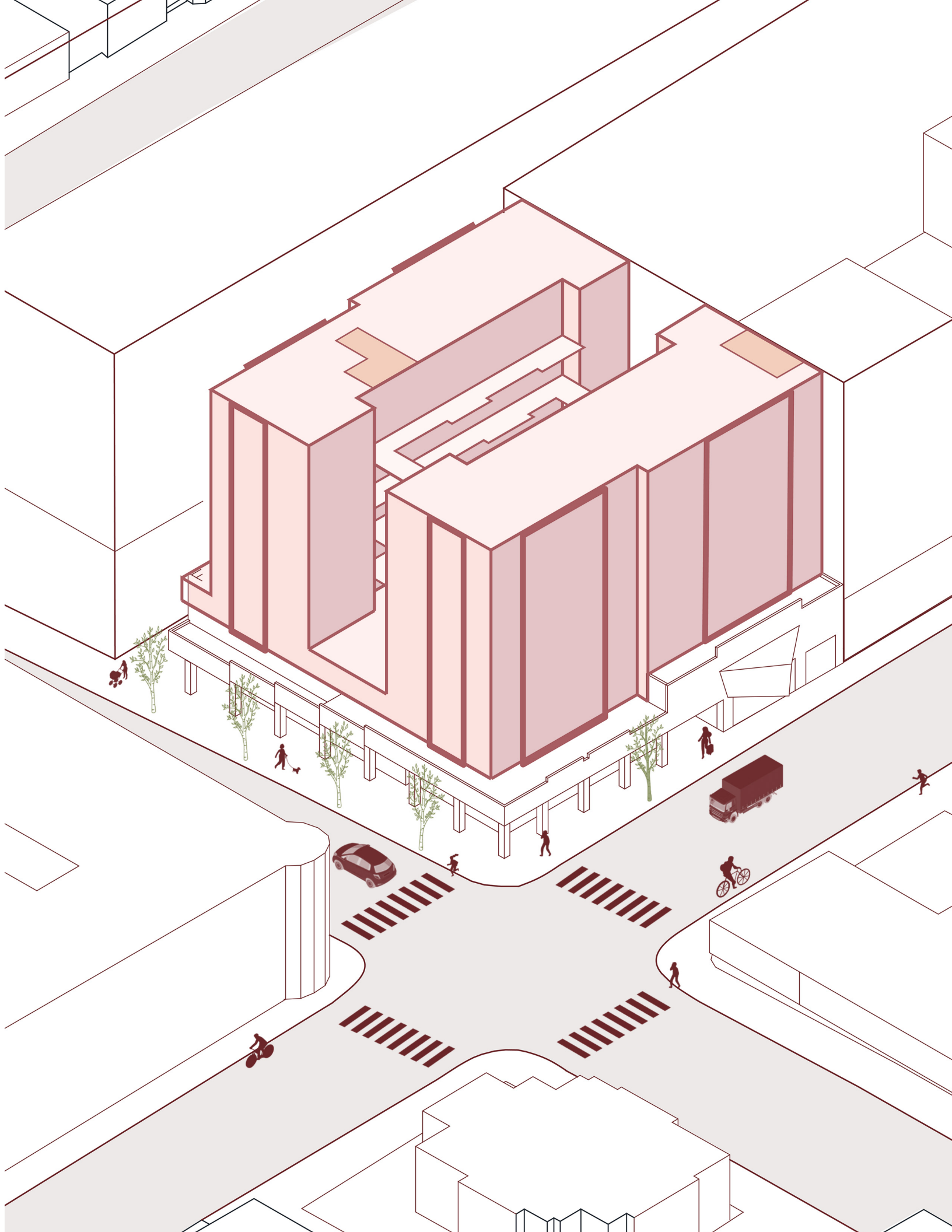


Figure 5.19: Massing Diagram #6.

The final housing scheme creates contrast between the east-facing orientation of the theater and the north-south orientation of the shared space serving the housing. Despite the contrast of old and new, the housing addition and the theater level together occupy the corner and blend modern and historical elements in a coherent design.

CHAPTER 6.

DESIGN PROPOSAL



This chapter presents the final iteration of the Uptown Theatre reimagined as a vibrant mixed-use building integrating a community hub, diverse multi-family housing with shared amenities, commercial spaces, and an outdoor communal area.

Figure 6: Street corner view of adapted Uptown Theatre.

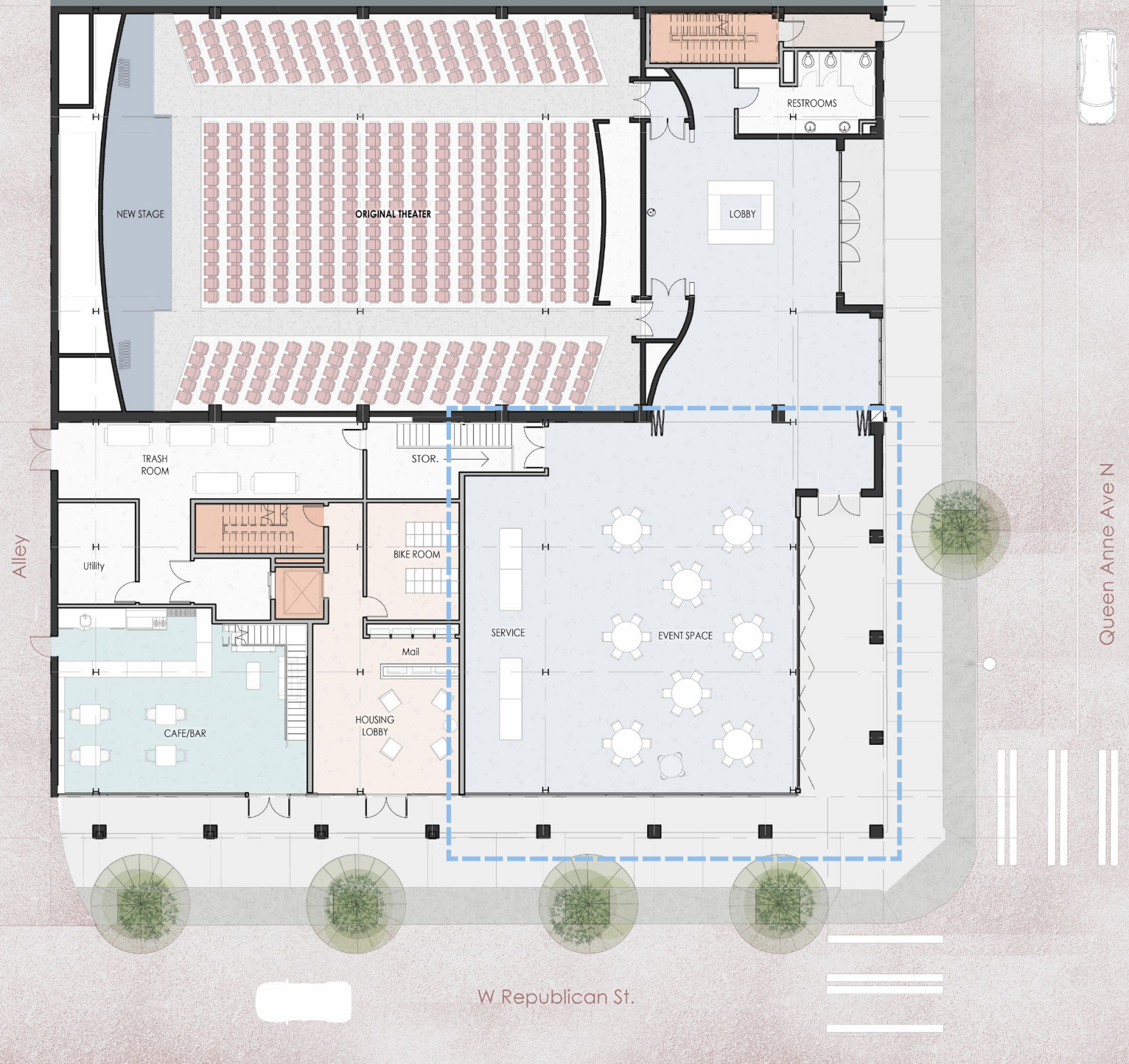
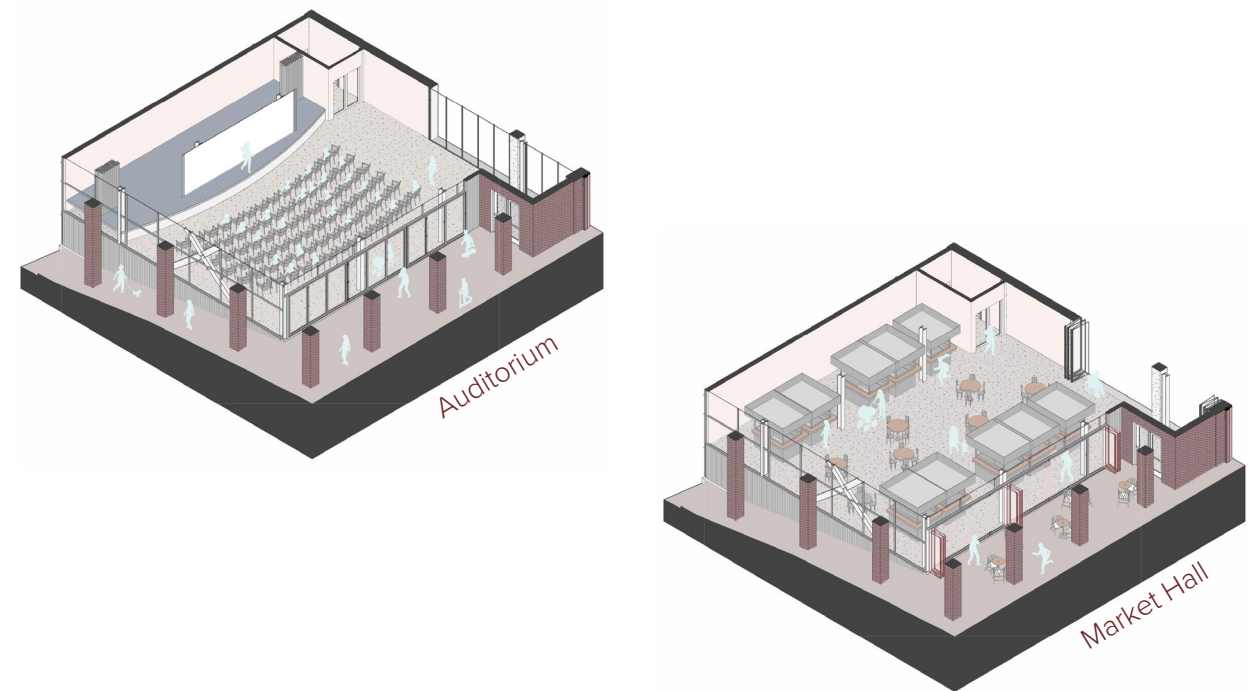


Figure 6.1: Ground Floor Plan. Community hub and auditorium, Residential lobby, Commercial café/bar, and Utilities.



6.1 ADAPTED THEATER

The adapted ground level preserves the original theater and central open lobby while also introducing a new flexible community space at the southeast corner. This space connects to the original theater while also providing transparency at the street level with a movable curtain system that connects to the outdoor covered arcade. This flexible corner space not only operates as an extension of the lobby but can be closed off for private uses as an additional meeting hall, event space, market hall, or other uses. The south end of the ground floor houses a new commercial space and the residential lobby with supporting trash room, utility room, bike room, and storage. This configuration activates W. Republican Street and expands the commercial area from Queen Anne Avenue west, while also creating separation between public and private programs within the redesigned building. Supporting spaces, such as the trash room, storage, and utility room are concentrated toward the alley in the center of the west portion of the plan to provide resources to the entire building.

The original building is an unreinforced masonry building. At the ground level, the original theater walls are reinforced and steel bracing is introduced on the southernmost wall for lateral support. In addition, the new structure above the theater is an open web steel joist system supported by a steel column grid that retains the openness of the original auditorium and flexible community space.

Figure 6.2: Axons of flexible community space as a market hall, auditorium space, etc.



Figure 6.3: Street Perspective of south elevation. The covered arcade provides an awning to both residential and commercial spaces as well as opportunities for programming to expand to the outdoors -- covered seating areas would be one possibility.

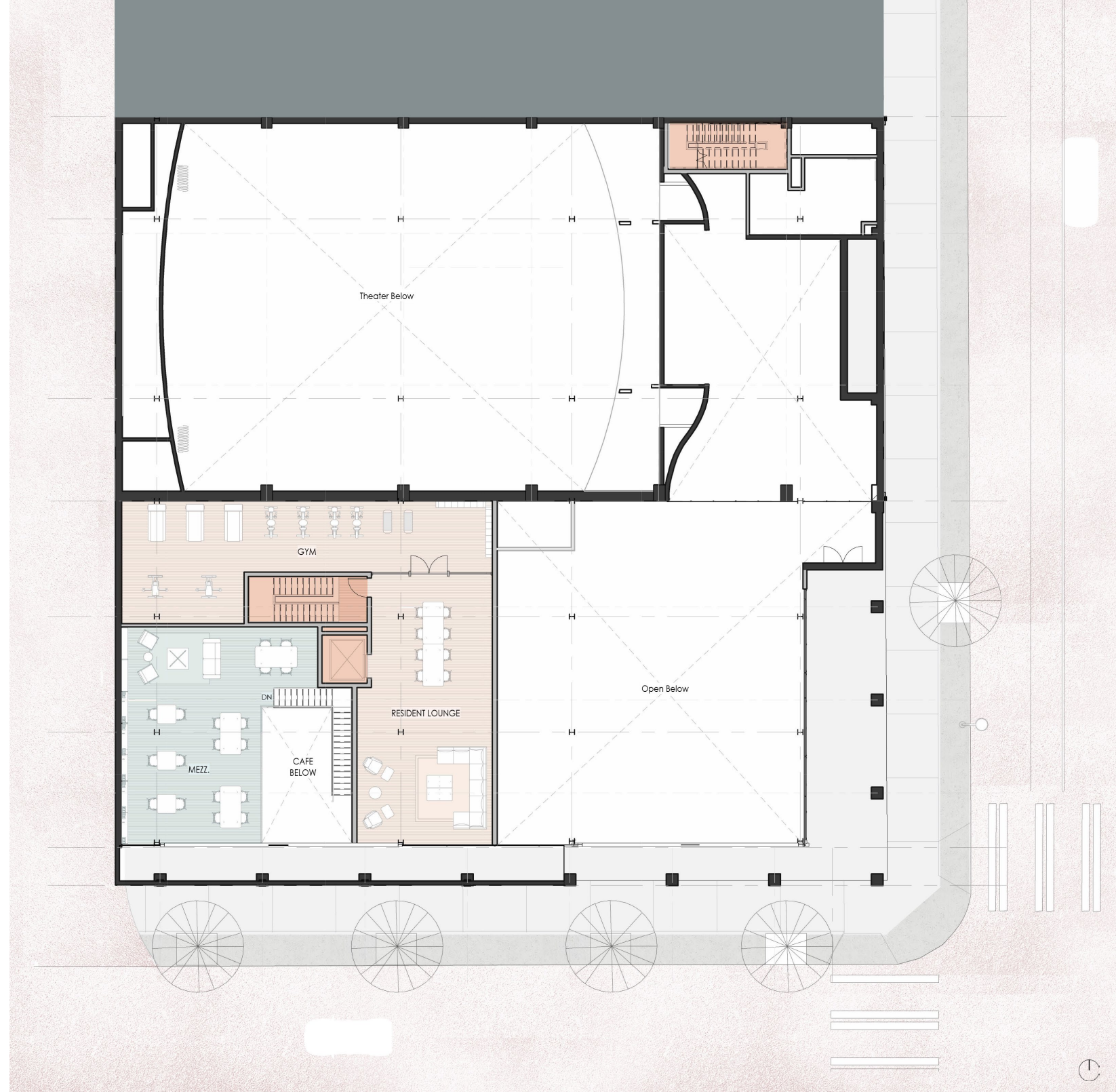


Figure 6.4: Mezzanine Level. This level replaces the original mezzanine that was used for projection rooms and storage to provide amenity space to the residents such as a lounge and gym. The commercial space expands vertically with a mezzanine level for larger occupancy.

6.2 HOUSING SOLUTION

The housing portion of the new building design accommodates 46 units, with a mixture of studio, 1 bedroom, and 2-bedroom apartments. The main corridor circles the central courtyard to allow light to penetrate and to provide dynamic circulation through this shared space. The housing will foster community among residents. It is intended to provide more than just temporary housing, with large unit options and high ceilings, as well as pocket balconies for expanded views.



Figure 6.5: Housing Level 1 (Left)

The first level of the residential portion of the new building provides a central courtyard with private patios for privacy and separation from shared spaces. This level provides a shared kitchen to the north and a shared garden at the south side, with a view to the street. The housing blocks themselves are pushed back from the perimeter of the existing buildings to allow for additional green space on the east, south and west sides. The first, third, and fifth level house the larger 1-to-2-bedroom units, creating a mixed layout fostering smaller community groups within the building.

Figure 6.6: Courtyard View (Above) Kitchen View (Right).

The open courtyard is a place for residents to interact, children to play, cookouts, outdoor movie nights, and gardening.





Figure 6.7: Housing Level 2.

The other levels are composed of smaller units including studios and one bedrooms to cater to individuals and couples. The suspended exterior corridor (walkway) serves as circulation and an additional gathering place with small balconies for residents to lounge, garden or mingle.

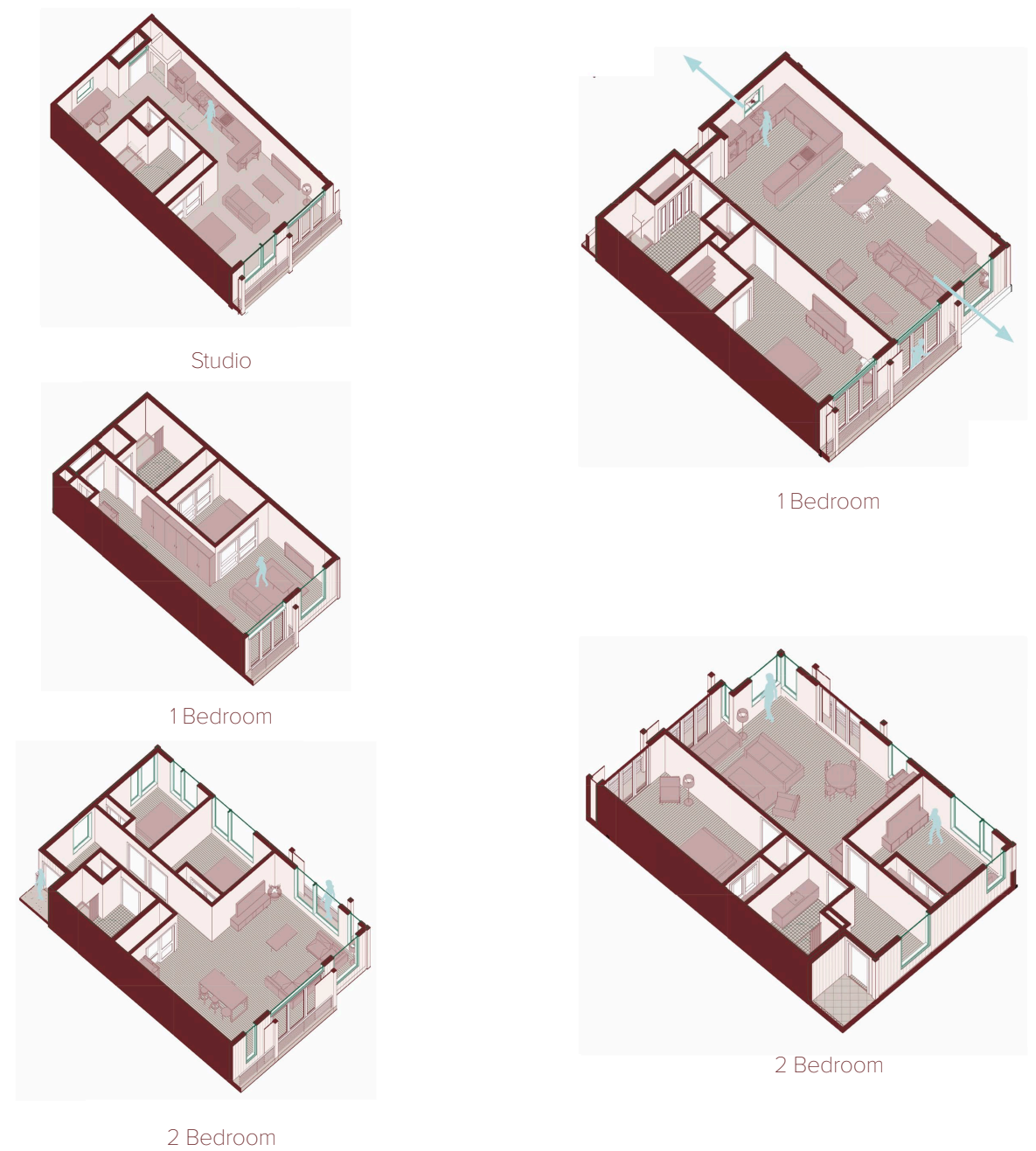


Figure 6.8: Unit Mix.

The units are designed to maximize access to natural light and air, featuring tall ceilings, openings at both ends, and pocket balconies. The kitchens are placed facing the courtyard, ensuring visibility of the outdoor space while keeping private areas away from the common corridor.



Figure 6.9: Roof Deck.
The roof deck provides a shared amenity space with views of downtown and covered and open patios/
garden spaces.



Figure 6.10: Roof Deck Perspective.
The roof deck provides a shared amenity space with views of downtown and covered and open patios/
garden spaces.

6.3 DESIGNING FOR A NEW ERA WHILE RESPONDING TO THE OLD

The adaptive reuse of heritage theaters builds a connection between past and present. Tracing the Uptown Theater's transformations across different time periods as evident in its materiality, provided a basis for designing for its future by embracing contemporary conditions while still respecting what has come before.



Figure 6.11: Materiality of the Uptown.

The Uptown Theater has experienced several distinct "eras" over its history. It began with a red-orange brick facade in the 1920s, followed painting and repainting, including a notable "pink" era in the 1980s. Today, the building has a painted grey exterior with cyan accents. As the Uptown enters into a new era, restoring the brick to its original state will help connect the building to its past while accommodating present-day additions.



Figure 6.12: East Elevation Materiality and Composition.

This new version of the Uptown combines the fabric of the historic theater with the contemporary housing addition. The combination of old and new reflects the "compatible but differentiated" approach commonly used in adaptive reuse and for expansion of historic buildings.⁵⁹ The materiality of the addition contrasts with the base through use of similar, but lighter vertical material types (vertical brick, corrugated metal) complemented by metal accents on balconies and trim, which acknowledge the theatrical details of the existing building. This new era of the historic Uptown Theater is also defined by a new teal accent for the marquee and canopy. This approach preserves the theater's historical character and defining visual features in the neighborhood while also clearly distinguishing the new from the old.



Figure 6.13: Section Perspective.

The redesigned and expanded Uptown demonstrates the potential for heritage movie theaters not only to be transformed into a vibrant community hub, but also to become places that residents can call home. This section perspective shows the spatial relationship between the original theater lobby and auditorium, and the new housing surrounding the shared courtyard, highlighting the elements that enhance cultural continuity and community.



CHAPTER 7. REFLECTIONS & CONCLUSIONS

This thesis has included both an exploration of the potential of four of Seattle’s historic theaters for expansion and the development of a possible transformation of the SIFF Uptown Cinema to become an active mixed-use community center. The adaptive reuse design of the SIFF Uptown Cinema shows one approach to creating a mixed-use building while preserving the original historic theater and its defining architectural and cultural elements. By incorporating housing, community space, and commercial space, along with the historic theater space, this design suggests an approach that might be applied to transform other similar buildings that may be threatened into vibrant spaces that can serve both present and future communities while retaining and revitalizing the historical architecture of the building and life of the community.

The full program proposed in this thesis design cannot be applied to every heritage theater. What will prove feasible will depend on the scale, zoning, site constraints, and neighborhood of each historic theater. The process of investigation and testing through a range of design alternatives for adaptive reuse, on the other hand, can be much more broadly applied. The same process of historical research, spatial analysis, conceptual and schematic studies, and community-centric design can preserve and revitalize other historic sites. Protecting and revitalizing historic theaters in neighborhood centers will also support and protect Seattle’s diverse communities. My hope is that, through this process, Seattle’s architectural and cultural heritage will be saved for generations to come.

Figure 7: Night view of adapted Uptown project.

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