

A THEATER IN THE 'ART' OF OUR TOWN

Just outside of our district, the Art Theatre of Long Beach is the last remaining neighborhood movie theatre in Long Beach. When it opened, the 636 seat theatre showed silent films and contained an orchestra pit and a pipe organ. Originally called "The Carter Theatre" when it opened in 1924, it later became "The Lee" in 1935 and then "The Art" in the 1940's.

The structure is a composite of architectural design revealing three successive eras of development. Plans indicate the first building was constructed in a modest vernacular style with "orientalizing" touches reminiscent of Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. Two storefronts flanked the theatre. The one on the east side survives with the original transom windows intact.

Schilling and Schilling extensively remodeled the building in an Art Deco style after the 1933 earthquake. The main architectural features dating from this era include the ticket booth, black ceramic tile, and colorful geometric terrazzo floor inscribed with then-owner's name, Lee. Zigzag elements include the stepped piers, vertical fluting, and the central-stepped vertical tower that unfolds as a fern. The horizontal string courses wrapped around curving corners of the central marquee project a more streamlined approach.

Another local architect, Hugh Gibbs, completed a renovation in 1947. Keeping in tradition with the earlier Art Deco style, the marquee was remodeled, the glass-block wall inserted, and new poster boxes were built.



Photo by Evan G.

The graceful art deco marquee (above.) The Art's Box Office (left.)



The Art Theatre exemplifies movie-theatre architecture, with its richly decorative facade and ornamental sidewalk, highly visible and designed to attract in the 1940's and early 1950's. Long Beach possessed dozens of downtown and neighborhood movie houses. In 2004 such theaters are a dying breed. The Art Theatre is only one of a few from this era remaining in the Los Angeles region. ♦