



**WESTMONT THEATRE**

*preservation plan &  
feasibility study*

*prepared for  
TOWNSHIP of HADDON, NEW JERSEY*

*April 2012*



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The Westmont Theater opened in 1927 and was built by Morris Handel and A.J. Rovner. It began showing silent films. Back then every Sunday a 120-piece orchestra would perform along with the film playing on the screen. The theater closed during World War II, but reopened in 1949 when it was renovated into a 1,200-seat first-run movie house.<sup>14</sup>

The Westmont Theatre closed in 1979 and reopened as a twin movie house later that year. It was later purchased by Raymond Posel, who owned/owns a number of theaters in the Philly area. Unfortunately, this Posel house only lasted until 1986. The Westmont Theatre was listed on the New Jersey Registry of Historic Places on July 8, 2010.<sup>14</sup>



On October 6, 2011 Haddon Township issue an RFP for the provision of professional services for the preparation of a Preservation Plan and Feasibility Study for the Westmont Theatre. The firm of DF Gibson Architects was selected by the Township via Resolution #2011-214.

The existing Neo-Classical Revival style theatre has been vacant for many years and it starting to show signs of accelerated deterioration.

## executive summary

The buildings overall dimensions are 80.13 ft. along the front and 150.38 ft. along the sides with a footprint of 12,050sf excluding the abandoned boiler room.

First Floor	<b>12,050</b>	sf
Second Floor	<b>4,460</b>	sf
Third Floor	<b>717</b>	sf
<b>TOTAL AREA</b>	<b>17,227</b>	<b>sf</b>

We have reviewed the existing conditions of the Westmont Theatre. The theatre is currently in a non-operational state and lacks the direction of a valid program to propel its reuse. The general configuration of the building, its elegant façade, and the ample opportunity for adjoining space will allow a very successful renovation.

In order to bring this structure back close to its original state, the following sums must be budgeted:

Architectural Elements	\$	<b>350,000</b>
Asbestos Abatement	\$	<b>50,000</b>
Structural	\$	<b>250,000</b>
Mechanical, Electrical and Plumbing	\$	<b>1,175,000</b>
Theatre Use	\$	<b>724,000</b>
User Requirements	\$	<b>590,600</b>
<b>TOTAL ESTIMATED COSTS</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>3,139,600</b>

The biggest challenge the Township will need to resolve for a successful future renovation and operation of the theatre is a progressive theatre operator, and a favorable financing and business plan.

## background history OF THE WESTMONT THEATRE

## Section 2

The Westmont Theatre opened in 1927 by Morris Handel and A.J. Rovner. It began showing silent films. Back then every Sunday a 120-piece orchestra would perform along with the film playing on the screen. The theatre closed during World War II, but reopened in 1949 when it was renovated into a 1,200-seat first-run movie house designed by architect David Supowitz. But ironically, according to the Courier-News, “Steven Spielberg, who lived in Haddonfield when his father worked at RCA in Camden, credits seeing “The Greatest Show on Earth’ at the Westmont in 1952 at age five as what inspired him to become a director.” Steven Spielberg, the movie icon who was destined for greatness because he saw a movie at the Westmont Theatre might actually be the cause of the theater’s demise. With the birth of the “Summer Blockbuster” thanks to a movie called “Jaws” the movie industry and movie theaters began to change. Theaters expanded from just 1 to 2 screens to massive complexes that could hold anywhere from 12 to 24 movie screens. As the times changed, The Westmont Theater however did not, and in 1986 the curtain fell and the doors closed on this New Jersey landmark.<sup>14</sup>



The theater was part of the Milgram chain and was then known as the Westmont Theatre. The Westmont closed in 1979 and reopened as a twin later that year. It was later purchased by Raymond Posel, who owned/owns a number of theatres in the Philly area. Unfortunately, this Posel house only lasted until 1986. The theatre was bought by the township in 2000 for \$250,000. Today, the theatre seats only 300 - the balcony, hidden by a false ceiling, is used to store costumes.<sup>14</sup>

## *background history*

### *OF THE WESTMONT Theatre*

The Westmont Theatre was listed on the New Jersey Registry of Historic Places on July 8, 2010. Shortly thereafter, the Township received a grant from the Garden State Historic Preservation Trust Fund. The money will help pay for the first comprehensive study of the physical condition and redevelopment potential of the vacant building, among the largest commercial structures on Haddon Avenue...”<sup>8</sup>

*Viewed from the West.*



*Viewed from the East.*



# the ritz theatre company

915 WHITE HORSE PIKE

## Section 3

*(The Ritz is included in this report as it represents a nearby competitive use.)*

The Ritz Theatre Company has been providing live, quality theatre performances to the South Jersey communities for over two decades. The Ritz Theatre building, located at 915 White Horse Pike in Camden County, has recently been placed on the National Register of Historic Places as a Colonial Revival style building.

The historic Ritz Theatre opened in September, 1927 as a vaudeville, movie house and quickly became the focal point of the community. Intimate and ornamental, the 472 seat Ritz is the only producing theatre in the area still resplendent in its original decor. The architecture is Colonial Revival with the auditorium walls featuring 25 foot high pilasters murals with gilt trimmed columns and velvet draped balconies enclosed by classic carved balustrades. In the 1950's and 1960's, the Ritz was known for its fine art and foreign film showings, drawing audiences from Philadelphia and beyond the immediate community. In the 1970's the Ritz became a porno movie house. In January of 1986, Puttin'-On-The-Ritz was formed and the Ritz reopened its doors, to once again, become the focal point of South Jersey entertainment. The Ritz Theatre Company, Inc. presents six main stage productions and eleven children's productions each season. Also offered are holiday shows, special events, summer theatre camp, dramatic workshops and outreach programs. The Theatre building also boasts "The Gallery at the Ritz," an in-house art gallery that offers professional monthly art exhibits.<sup>15</sup>



## RFP for preparation OF FEASIBILITY STUDY & PRESERVATION PLAN

On October 6, 2011 Haddon Township issued an RFP for the provision of professional services for the preparation of a Preservation Plan and Feasibility Study for the Westmont Theatre. The Preservation Plan and Feasibility Study is being funded through a \$50,000 Historic Sites Management Grant that the Township received from the Garden State Historic Preservation Trust Fund . The firm of DF Gibson Architects was selected by the Township via Resolution #2011-214.

DF Gibson is one of the leading historic preservation architectural firms in the region, having worked on many noteworthy projects including the restoration of Lambert Castle in Paterson, Eberhardt Hall at New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark, The historic townhouses at Thomas Edison State College in Trenton, and the Snug Harbor Cultural Center on Staten Island. The firm's current or recent work includes serving as the historic preservation architect to the architect-of-record on the restoration of an 1814 Federalist-style bank building in Mount Holly and its adaptive re-use into the Culinary Arts Center of Burlington County College, and being the architect on renovation of the 1905 Jacobean Revival style South Bronx Job Corps Center building for the United States Department of Labor.

DF Gibson's team includes Schuler Shook, a nationally renowned theatre planning consultant who has been involved with the restoration of many historic theatres nationally. Among these are the Colonial Theatre in Pittsfield, MA; Paramount Theater in Charlottesville, VA; TB Sheldon Auditorium in Red Wing, MN; Mississippi State University Riley Center in Starkville, MS; Majestic and Empire Theatres in San Antonio, TX; and numerous others.

Engineering services (structural, mechanical, electrical and plumbing) are provided by Birdsall Services Group of Sea Girt, NJ. Birdsall is among the leading full service engineering firms in New Jersey with a long history of public sector projects throughout the state.

The existing Neo-Classical Revival style theatre has been vacant for many years and is starting to show signs of accelerated deterioration. There are numerous leaks and a partially flooded basement. The upper floors are being invaded by pigeons and are starting to create a health concern. An attempt has been to seal the window openings with plywood thus allowing water penetration to occur. The interiors have evidence of some vandalism and neglect.

Exterior walls are showing signs of structural distress and stains from water leakage. Several cracks were noted. The roof over the front canopy has completely disintegrated. A complete survey has been documented with photographs and is used as part of this report.



## Section 6 | building statistics

The buildings overall dimensions are 80.13 ft along the front and 150.38 ft. along the sides with a footprint of 12,050sf excluding the abandoned boiler room.

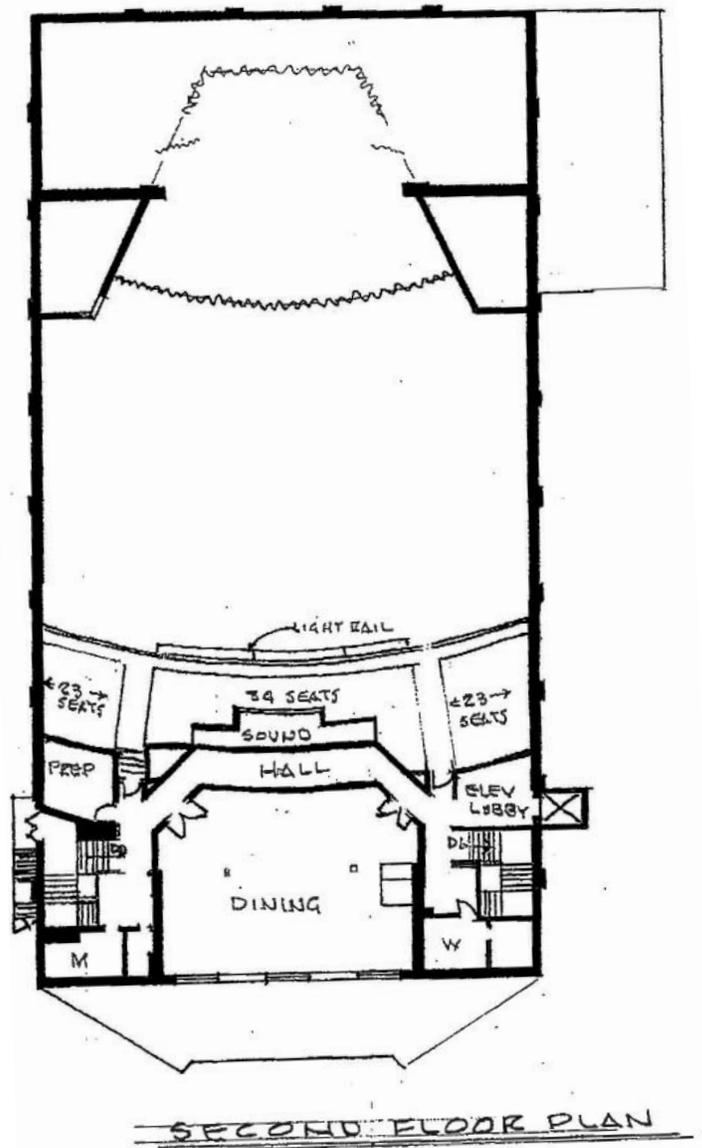
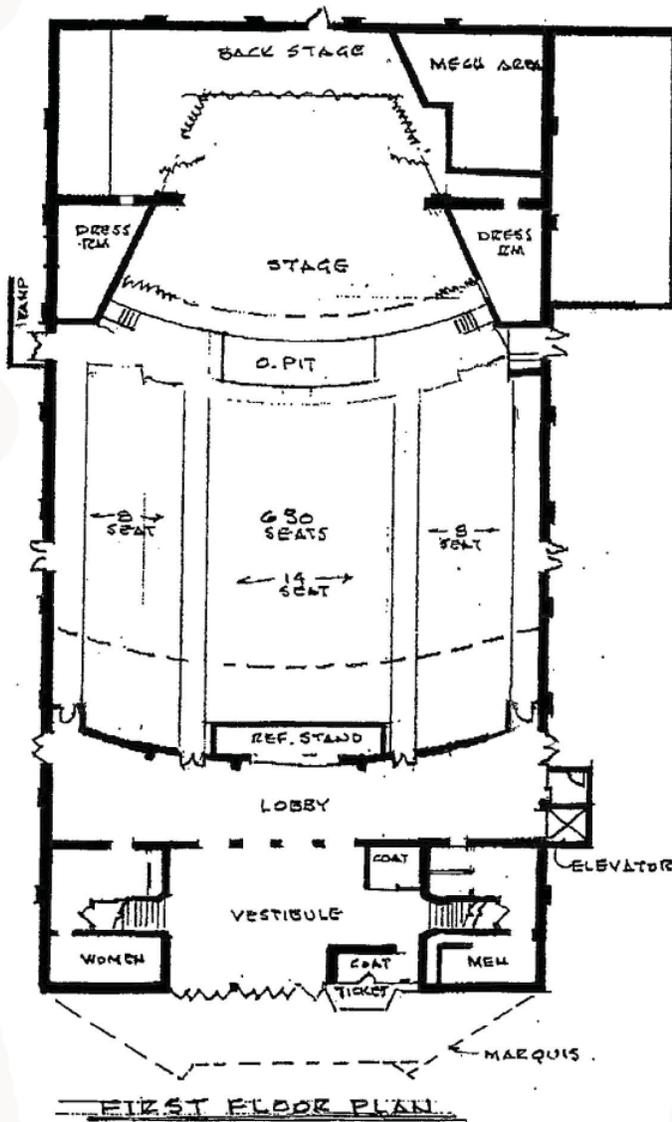
First Floor	12,050 sf
Second Floor	4,460 sf
Third Floor	717 sf
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>17,227 sf</b>

# existing floor plans | Section 7



# Section 8 | early floor plans

except elevator additions





The interior lobby area shows water damage over large portions of the ceiling areas.



We did find an interesting period painted scene wall that merits saving. Besides the above painted wall, there are no interior elements that warrant preservation.



The theatre space still contains half the original seating and a new insulated t-bar ceiling installed lowering the volume of the building for acoustical and thermal purposes.

## interior conditions

The other half has been remodeled to accommodate a dinner theatre together with new poured concrete platforms that allows for table seating.



The original plaster on the interior face of the exterior walls, which aid in the defense of moisture penetration, has been removed.



The balcony seating has been completely removed.



## interior conditions



There is evidence of water leakage in the main floor perimeter, probably related to the missing exterior downspout.



Lobby area shows signs of neglect and would need to be completely redone.



Control Room on the 3rd. level – asbestos in plaster walls

## interior conditions

Evidence of basement flooded area and malfunctioning pump.



Attic space with steel roof trusses.



interior conditions



Deformed diagonal truss.



Leakage from exterior walls.

## *interior conditions*

*Old electrical switching.*



*Balcony exit corridor.*



*Typical washroom finishes.*



As no destructive testing has been carried out, our comments are based on visual observations. The building's 45 feet high exterior is in fair condition with the exception of certain localized problem areas. These include masonry damaged by constant water flow; settlement cracks; rusted out emergency exits; missing downspouts; missing windows and missing canopy roof to name a few.

