



The City of Seattle

Landmarks Preservation Board

Mailing Address: PO Box 94649 Seattle WA 98124-4649
Street Address: 700 5th Ave Suite 1700

REPORT ON DESIGNATION

LPB 559/08

Name and Address of Property: **MGM Building**
2331 Second Avenue

Legal Description: Lot 7 of Supplemental Plat to Block 27 to Bell and Denny's First Addition to the City of Seattle, according to the plat thereof recorded in Volume 2 of Plats, Page 83, in King County, Washington;

Except the northeasterly 12 feet thereof condemned for widening 2nd Avenue.

At the public meeting held on October 1, 2008, the City of Seattle's Landmarks Preservation Board voted to approve designation of the MGM Building at 2331 Second Avenue, as a Seattle Landmark based upon satisfaction of the following standard for designation of SMC 25.12.350:

- 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; and*
- D. It embodies the distinctive visible characteristics of an architectural style, period, or of a method of construction.*

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

This building is notable both for its high degree of integrity and for its Art Deco style combining dramatic black terra cotta and yellowish brick. It is also one of the very few intact elements remaining on Seattle's Film Row, a significant part of the Northwest's economic and recreational life for nearly forty years.

Neighborhood Context: The Development of Belltown

Belltown may have seen more extensive changes than any other Seattle neighborhood, as most of its first incarnation was washed away in the early 20th century. The area now known as Belltown lies on the donation claim of William and Sarah Bell, who arrived with the Denny party at Alki Beach on November 13, 1851. The following year they established a claim north of the early settlement (Pioneer Square), on land largely covered with dense cedar and fir forests. A steep cliff rose from the beach, where a Duwamish winter village was located at the foot of the future Bell Street. The Bell claim extended from Elliott Bay east to today's Yale Avenue North, from Pine Street north to Denny Way.

Administered by The Historic Preservation Program
The Seattle Department of Neighborhoods

"Printed on Recycled Paper"

The Bells returned to California in 1856, after their cabin burned in the Battle of Seattle, a skirmish between the settlers and Native Americans. Bell returned in the 1860s to plat the property, but it was not until 1870 that he and his son Austin returned permanently. They then began to actively encourage commerce to spread northward, although the topography and poor roads made it a difficult task. Before his death in 1887, the elder Bell built a home and a hotel (both now gone) on 1st Avenue near Battery Street. In 1889 his son hired the architect, Elmer Fisher, to design a large residential building in the same block, just behind the site of the future M-G-M Building. Soon afterwards, Fisher designed an Odd Fellows Hall next door and a retail/hotel/office building (the Hull Building) across 1st Avenue. These substantial brick buildings, some distance from Pioneer Square, combined with the area's isolation to give Belltown a distinctive identity separate from that of downtown Seattle.

Also in 1889, the first streetcar service arrived in Belltown, extending from James Street to Denny Way along 2nd Avenue. The Front Street Cable Railway erected its elaborate powerhouse and car barn near Denny Way and 2nd Avenue in 1893. Within a few years, lines would run along Western and Elliott avenues to Ballard and on 1st, 2nd and 5th avenues to lower Queen Anne, with connections at Pike Street to Eastlake, Westlake and points north and east.

But significant development on the Bell property was slowed by its isolating topography. A steep bluff rose from Elliott Bay to 2nd Avenue, then Denny Hill, too steep for horses to climb, extended between 2nd and 5th avenues north of Pine Street. With the economic growth following the 1897 discovery of gold in the Klondike, the business district expanded to the north, and many saw Denny Hill as a significant barrier to progress. City Engineer Reginald H. Thomson envisioned leveling the hill, using hydraulic jets to sluice the earth into Elliott Bay. In 1898, the first of three regrades in the vicinity occurred, lowering 1st Avenue between Pike Street and Denny Way by 17 feet. The area west of 1st Avenue was not regraded, and its steep slope kept it largely industrial.¹

By 1910, Belltown was a thriving community of wood frame residences and small commercial buildings, with brick hotels for workers along 1st Avenue. The waterfront and the western slope bustled with wharves, the railroad, fish canneries, small manufacturers and livery stables. Small commercial buildings, brick workers' hotel and houses lined 1st and 2nd avenues. However, on June 10, 1910 a fire destroyed eight blocks on the western slope, from the waterfront to 2nd Avenue and Vine Street. The burned area was largely industrial, but with many small wooden cottages and workers' lodgings. Only one person died but hundreds lost their homes. The area was soon rebuilt with larger industries and new residences and apartments.²

The city's population continued to grow at a remarkable rate, nearly tripling to 237,194 by 1910. As the pressure for land increased, the city proceeded with regrading the remainder of Denny Hill. The second phase occurred between 1908 and 1911, when 27 blocks between 2nd and 5th avenues, from Pine to Cedar streets, were sluiced away. The greatest excavation was along Blanchard Street, which was lowered by 107 feet at 4th Avenue. This was the largest such operation in the world up to that time, moving six million cubic yards of dirt. The regrade opened up access to Belltown, Queen Anne and Lake Union, greatly enhancing property values. The city regraded only the streets, with owners of individual lots required to hire their own contractors to level their property. Thus many pinnacles

1 Myra L. Phelps, *Public Works in Seattle: A Narrative History, The Engineering Department 1875-1975*, Seattle Engineering Department, 1975

2 Clarence B. Bagley, *The History of Seattle from its Earliest Settlement to the Present Time*, Chicago: S.J. Clarke, 1916, pp. 514-515

of land remained even into the 1920s. The embankment created along 5th Avenue remained for more than twenty years, until the third regrading phase.³

Everyone waited expectantly for the city to expand into the newly-cleared Regrade, but it remained filled with small commercial buildings and apartments. Perhaps the best known development in Belltown during this period was one that did not occur. In 1910 the Municipal Plans Commission hired Virgil Bogue to develop a comprehensive plan for the city. His plan, released in 1911, proposed a new civic center plaza and building complex at 4th Avenue and Blanchard Street, with broad boulevards radiating outwards. Voters rejected the ambitious plan, consolidating the city center downtown and forestalling any significant movement into Belltown for the next sixty years.

Belltown, like the rest of the city, evolved significantly during the 1920s. Its location close to downtown made it an ideal location for apartment buildings to house downtown and waterfront workers, with an accompanying array of cafes, taverns and small grocery stores. Belltown also became the center of the film industry in the Pacific Northwest. The numerous film exchanges and related suppliers made the vicinity of 2nd Avenue and Battery Street a Mecca for theater owners and managers from Montana to Alaska. The automobile had become a significant feature of the city, and Belltown's close-in, low-density location encouraged auto-oriented businesses such as service garages. It also attracted light-industrial uses such as printers and small-scale suppliers and assemblers servicing downtown businesses.

The third and final regrading phase began in 1928 and was completed in December 1930. This phase extended from Fifth Avenue to Westlake Avenue, between Virginia and Harrison streets. In volume it was about two-thirds the size of the second phase, removing 4,233,000 cubic yards of dirt on a conveyor belt to barges on Elliott Bay.⁴ However, the project was completed just as the country was entering a major depression. Population growth virtually came to a standstill and manufacturing stalled. The expected development in the newly-regraded area did not occur. For decades the area east of 5th Avenue contained primarily car dealerships, parking lots, motels and other low-density uses. Only recently has development come to this area.

Seattle was transformed perhaps more than any other large city by World War II. Its North Pacific location made it a strategic military location for the war against Japan. Its airplane factories, shipyards and steel mills made it a crucial part of the war effort. Boeing alone increased employment from 4,000 to 50,000 between 1939 and 1945. Belltown's apartments, workers' hotels and taverns boomed. The district's proximity to downtown and waterfront industry also made it a center for union activity, with the Seattle Labor Temple relocating to 1st Avenue in 1942. This trend continued through the 1950s, with numerous other union halls being constructed.

However, growth was generally slow in the 1950s-60s, as the economy took some time to recover after the war. In 1953 the Battery Street Tunnel was completed from Aurora Avenue North to the foot of Battery Street, connecting the SR 99 highway through downtown. This new infrastructure, and the 1962 World's Fair just north of Belltown, led to the construction of several modern motels in the eastern part of Belltown. Otherwise, construction was primarily one- and two-story buildings at the eastern and northern edges.

Neighborhood Context: The Film Industry in Seattle

³ Phelps, pp. 18-20

⁴ Phelps, pp. 32-33.

This building was one of the cornerstones of Seattle's "Film Row" from its construction in 1936 until the 1960s. During this period Belltown was the center of the film industry in the Pacific Northwest. The city had a long theater history, beginning in the mid-19th century and encouraged by the growth and activity of the years following the 1897 Klondike gold rush. Road shows, stock theater and box-houses all thrived to meet the demand for entertainment. John Cort, John Considine and, especially, Alexander Pantages managed significant entertainment circuits that toured large areas of the country. However, as early as 1902 the public became fascinated with film, and small movie houses (later known as nickelodeons) opened. Downtown streets were lined with storefront theaters. Vaudeville houses added film shorts to their programs and gradually the film portion became longer than the live production. The Coliseum Theater (now Banana Republic), which opened in 1916, was said to be the finest motion picture house west of the Mississippi.⁵

The industry grew quickly to meet the public demand for entertainment. The first identified local film exchange was in 1909, when the Morton Film Exchange advertised the "Latest and Best Selection of All the Well-Known Producers of Licensed Motion Pictures." They covered the old technology too—offering magic lantern slides as well. By 1915 city directories listed 25 companies under "Moving Picture Machines and Supplies." About twenty of these companies were "exchanges" or brokers who purchased films and then rented them on a weekly basis to those who showed them. This allowed theater owners to meet the public's craving for variety with new pictures every week without the prohibitive cost of buying the films. These early companies were scattered in several downtown buildings, with the largest number in the Joshua Green Building at 1425 4th Avenue and in the 1200 block of 3rd Avenue.

By the late 1920s Seattle not only had more than fifty theaters, but all the major studios and many smaller ones had film exchanges here. Films were shipped by rail from Los Angeles, and were shipped from here to more than 400 local theaters in Washington, Alaska, Idaho and Montana by truck, ship, rail or auto. Each distributor had salesmen who would preview the films and go on the road to describe the new releases to theater owners. Many theater owners and managers came to Belltown themselves to view the films and select the ones they wanted to feature.

During the 1920s-30s about thirty cities across the country had film exchanges. They were usually concentrated in a specific neighborhood both for convenience and for safety reasons. Early film was made of nitrocellulose, a highly flammable product that required special storage and handling. The film exchange buildings were of fireproof construction and had special vaults to store the film safely. They often had small theaters to screen the films, as well as office, storage and other support areas.

By 1920, Seattle directories had 27 film listings, with 21 distributors and six supply companies. By this time they had become concentrated, with 22 of the 27 located in the vicinity of 3rd Avenue and Lenora Street. The 2000 block of 3rd Avenue was the heart of the city's first "Film Row," with many famous names including Fox, Goldwyn, Pathé and United Artists. The Pathé Exchange building, built in 1923, remains today at 2025 3rd Avenue and is the oldest local film exchange building. Film Row moved northward in 1928 when two large film exchange buildings were constructed, encompassing the entire block between First and Second avenues and Battery and Wall streets (now the location of Belltown Court condominium). These buildings housed Columbia, Warner Brothers, 20th Century Fox, Paramount, United Artists and many others. Other distributors, including M-G-M and Paramount, subsequently had their own buildings in the immediate vicinity, as did numerous support businesses such as theater equipment dealers, concessions representatives and poster companies. This extreme concentration allowed out-of-town managers to take care of all their theater-related business conveniently.

⁵ Eric Flom, "Seattle's Early Movie Theaters—A Snapshot History," 2001

By this time, Seattle had become a major film center. In 1932 the city was reported to have the third highest number of movie theater admissions in the country (after Washington, D. C. and Baltimore).⁶ In 1952 the payroll on Film Row alone was estimated at more than \$1,000,000, not including profits from theaters, equipment or advertising. However, societal and technological changes brought the end of the Film Row era. Film and transportation improvements rendered film exchanges obsolete by the 1960s. Modern film did not require special handling and transportation and distribution systems were much more efficient. Theater construction virtually halted with the Depression, although attendance was very strong through World War II. The 1950s-60s brought the competition of television, attendance declined, and many local theaters were demolished or converted to other uses.⁷ Universal Studios was the last film business in the large Film Exchange Building, leaving in 1980; the buildings were demolished in 1992.

Film Context: M-G-M/Loew's

During the period that M-G-M/Loew's occupied this building, the company contributed significantly to the entertainment and culture of people throughout the world as well as in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. The company distributed such notable films as *Gone with the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *An American in Paris*, *Singin' in the Rain* and *Ben-Hur* as well as the *Tom and Jerry* cartoons and *Tarzan* films.

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was formed in 1924 when the theater chain Loew's Inc., owner of Metro Pictures, acquired Goldwyn Pictures Corporation and Louis B. Mayer Pictures and merged the companies. It soon became one of the strongest and most prestigious of the major motion picture production companies. M-G-M dominated the industry throughout the 1930s, producing fifty films a year. Under the studio system in effect at that time, stars were under contract to a specific company for a period of years, and the studio's reputation was built on its "stable" of talent. M-G-M's early contract players were among the most famous in the business--Clark Gable, Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Jean Harlow, Buster Keaton and many others. The company thrived during the Depression and was the only major studio to not lose money during the 1930s. For that reason it was able to construct buildings such as this one and other exchanges during this period.

The company struggled during the 1940s-50s, although it did produce such classic musicals as *An American in Paris* and *Singin' in the Rain* with contract stars Judy Garland, Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra. An anti-trust decision in 1954 severely damaged M-G-M economically by forcing it to sell the Loews theater chain, which had guaranteed distribution for the pictures the studio produced. In the late 1950s M-G-M lost money for the first time in its history. By this time, the studio system was in decline and by 1960 the company had released all of its contract players.⁸ After several complex transactions, the company assets, including the film library and the famous Culver City back lot (now the home of Sony Pictures), were sold. The company continues to exist as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc., a small production and distribution company owned by a consortium.⁹

Architectural Context: Terra Cotta

⁶ Seattle Times., "Seattle is Rated Third as Film City," March 21, 1932

⁷ Flom 2001

⁸ www.oscars.org/mhl/hn/MGM_hn.html

⁹ www.mgm.com

The M-G-M Building is one of a number of Belltown/Denny Regrade buildings noted in Seattle's terra cotta survey conducted in the 1980s. It is particularly notable for its black terra cotta in a stripped-down Art deco style.

Terra cotta is molded clay block that can be used either as cladding or as ornament. The plasticity of the clay and the manufacturing method allow it to be formed into extravagant shapes, which add variety and richness to the streetscape. Terra cotta ornament became very popular in the late 19th-early 20th centuries as the cost of cut stone grew prohibitive. This popularity coincided with Seattle's early commercial development, and the city has a particularly rich collection of terra cotta-clad buildings. The Seattle area had several prominent terra cotta manufacturers, including the Northern Clay Company and the Denny-Renton Clay & Coal Company. Both were acquired in 1925 by a California firm, the Gladding-McBean Company, making it one of the largest producers of terra cotta in the country.¹⁰

Seattle's best known examples of terra cotta are its early structural steel skyscrapers, beginning with the 1904 Alaska Building. Terra cotta lent itself to this use because it was much lighter in weight than stone or brick. However, the material was more widely used to clad or ornament smaller commercial buildings and apartment houses. In Seattle, terra cotta was typically glazed in cream or tan, sometimes with a mottled finish. However, any color was possible and some buildings featured colorful accents or terra cotta colored to look like granite (Granitex). The bold black seen here is very rare in Seattle.

Early 20th century terra cotta ornament typically used Classical, Gothic, Tudor or Mediterranean elements and motifs, but by the late 1920s Art Deco and Art Moderne terra cotta elements were more common. After World War II terra cotta use almost ceased, both because it was more costly than newer materials and because the modern architectural styles moved away from ornamentation of any kind. However, brightly colored terra cotta veneer was used on several Modernistic buildings, including the Seattle Labor Temple and the Sailors Union of the Pacific hall in Belltown.

Architectural Context: The Art Deco Style

The Art Deco style was particularly appropriate for the movie industry, and was often used in its various buildings. The "modern" style symbolized all that was new and exciting, especially during the bleak times of the Depression. Numerous film exchanges throughout the country were Art Deco in style, and M-G-M's own headquarters building on the Culver City lot, the Irving Thalberg Building, is an outstanding example of Art Deco. Characteristics of this building that particularly evoke the Art Deco era are the bold black color, the arrow-shaped pilasters and the medallions along the parapet and the curving terra cotta framing the tops of the main windows.

"Art Deco" is a term applied retroactively to a style that came to the world's attention at the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* held in Paris in 1925. The exposition was a celebration of modernity, of things that were new, exciting and unorthodox for the jazz age—a reaction to both the excesses of the Victorian Age and the handmade simplicity of the Craftsman. It fused new design concepts with the latest industrial materials and techniques to form its distinctive but eclectic style. Geometric forms, as seen here, were common, but the new design vocabulary drew from both nature and diverse historical sources. Influences included Art Nouveau, the Vienna Secession movement, the new Cubist artists, the Bauhaus architecture of Germany, American

¹⁰ Lydia Aldredge, *Impressions of Imagination: Terra Cotta Seattle*, Seattle: Allied Arts of Seattle, Inc., 1986

industrial design, and ancient forms such as American Indian, Celtic, Egyptian, African, Assyrian and Mayan patterns. Stylized flowers, plants, animals, sea creatures, sunbursts and waves, and geometric forms such as chevrons and zigzags, were frequently seen.

Building History

This Art Deco building was constructed in the 1936 (permit #321339) for the Alexander Myers Company, an insurance agency. It was designed by Edmund W. Denle, who had offices at 1617 Hyde street in San Francisco. No information has been found on Denle, although he may have been involved in the design of other film-related buildings.

From 1936 until 1960 the building served as the regional film distribution center for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, one of the most prominent motion picture studios. It was clearly built for this purpose, as the original plans show the film vaults and film handling spaces required for a film exchange. Unknown interior alterations (permit # 344121) were made in 1941 by Bjorne Moe, a prominent local theater designer. The building was purchased by George A. Hickey in 1957; he apparently bought it as an investment and continued to rent it to M-G-M.

In about 1960 M-G-M moved its distribution operation across the street to the Film Exchange Building. This building was later occupied by an insurance company, McGraw Kittenger Case, whose name replaced the words Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer above the entry; they remain there today. Interior alterations (permit #484748) to convert it to office use were made by Otis Hancock and Associates. The building has been in retail use for some time and housed a stationery store, the Blu Canary, until recently. The south side had a small restaurant, Marjorie. The main retail space is currently vacant.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Setting

The M-G-M building sits on a 6,480 square foot lot at the southwest corner of Second Avenue and Battery Street. This stretch of Second Avenue has been improved with numerous evergreen and deciduous street trees, curb bulbs with shrubs and various art works scattered along the sidewalk. Adjacent to M-G-M is the William Tell Hotel, a 3-story building that was reportedly heavily used by those in the film industry. Across the alley to the west is the Catholic Seaman's Club, originally constructed as the Paramount Studios film exchange. Across Battery Street to the north is the full-block Belltown Court condominium, occupying the former site of the Film Exchange Building. The eastern side of Second Avenue has several more small-scale buildings, including the former RKO film exchange (now Roq la Rue Gallery) and the B. F. Shearer Company, a former theater equipment company that is now the Rendezvous nightclub.

Exterior description

This one-story building is of reinforced concrete construction, which was typically used for film exchange buildings for safety reasons. The nearly-rectangular building has a 50-foot frontage on Second Avenue and extends 108 feet down Battery Street.

The main façade is highly decorative, in keeping with the glamour of the motion picture industry. The building is faced with buff colored brick accented with extensive terra cotta ornament. The principal (east) façade has a center entry door flanked by two large display windows. Both the doorway and the

windows have one-foot wide black terra cotta surrounds. The terra cotta extends across the top and halfway down the sides, curving at the bottom to give a draped effect. The entry itself has double doors of glass and wood with a large plain glass transom. The windows have wood sash with three large lights on the bottom and three transom windows above. The façade below the windows is entirely clad with terra cotta. A third window of similar design and ornament is on the northeast corner, facing Battery Street. The parapet steps up above the entry and is flanked by terra cotta pieces that extend down to the top of the entry. Arrow-shaped medallions project above the parapet at regular intervals, four on each side of the entry. Arrow-shaped pilasters mark the building corners, extending above the parapet, which is capped with black terra cotta. The parapet and terra cotta extend about one-third of the way around the north elevation. Much of the façade is currently covered with vines, obscuring the terra cotta.

The southern half of the building houses a restaurant, which has an enclosed courtyard along the entire south elevation. The restaurant is entered through the main center entry, with a doorway to the courtyard. Although it is not clear on the plans, this side door appears to be original.

The south elevation within the courtyard has two steel industrial sash windows similar to those on the north elevation, with obscure glass. The courtyard has a wooden fence along its southern edge to separate it from the light well next to the adjacent building. The entry to the courtyard is clearly original, as it is flanked by brick and terra cotta that marches the building. It has a decorative metal gate that may have been added. The west end of the courtyard is enclosed by a concrete block wall.

In contrast to the decorative front facade, the rear two-thirds of the building are essentially industrial in character, reflecting the warehouse and storage function of the building. The north façade along Battery Street has four large windows with industrial steel sash; they are double windows with a 3-by-4 configuration in each half. They have brick sills and no ornament. The bottom lights have obscure glass. Two secondary entries provided direct access to the film handling area. They have a solid wood door with an adjacent plate glass window and a covered transom. One has a metal gate and an awning.

The roofline on the rear third of the building is approximately five feet lower than the front section. The rear (west) elevation on the alley is distinctly industrial. It is clad with concrete and has two doors each flanked by large 16-light industrial steel sash windows.

Interior Description (Original)

According to the original plans submitted to the Seattle Building Department in 1936, the interior had three main spaces with smaller storage vaults. The front third of the building was a general office and sales area. The center third was the “poster room” for storing and handling advertising materials; it had several small rooms on the south wall, including a vault, restrooms and coat rooms. The rear section was for shipping and film handling. At the northwest corner of the building was the examination room, where film was inspected before being shipped to customers. The southwest corner had six film vaults, each 6 feet wide and 18 feet deep. They opened onto the central shipping room, which had exits both to the alley and to Battery Street.

Building Alterations

The exterior of the building appears to be highly intact. However, the interior configuration was altered in 1960 when the building was converted to an insurance office by the Alexander Myers Company. Seven smaller offices were built around the central office area in the front two-thirds of the building. The rear third was opened up by the removal of the walls that formed the film examination room. The film

vaults and restroom areas were apparently left intact. More recently, the interior of the south half of the building has been altered to accommodate a restaurant and bar, but the extent of alterations are not clear.

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The features of the Landmark to be preserved include:
The exterior of the building.

Issued: October 10, 2008

Karen Gordon
City Historic Preservation Officer

cc: Lyle Snyder
Stephen Lee, LPB
Stella Chao, DON
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