

An Assessment of Historical Features  
Plaza Theatre, Laredo, Texas

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## Introduction

In early 2021, Briscoe Architectural Conservation (BAC) was asked by Able City Architects to perform a room-by-room analysis of existing conditions and historical features at the 1946 Plaza Theatre, in Laredo, Texas. The report was done as part of a rehabilitation plan for the theater, with work intended to begin in the near future. Frank Rotnofsky and others at Able City had already done significant preconstruction work, including archival research, scanning the building with LiDAR, and producing plan, elevation and section drawings. All of these materials have been very helpful in the production of this report.

The following observations are based on two site visits to the building, in April and July of 2021; on archival materials and photographs shared with us by Able City; on limited internet research by BAC; the structural report by Synergy Structural Engineering, dated June 17, 2021; and on conversations with other architects and historians that helped add context to the study.

BAC is a company engaged in preserving historic resources through assessment, documentation, structural intervention based on engineered plans, and conservation. BAC is not an engineering or architectural firm, and no observations made in this report should be taken as design or engineering guidance.

## Location and Setting

The Plaza Theatre is located at 1012-½ Hidalgo Street, in Laredo, Texas. The building is on the north side of the street at the center of the block, and faces south to El Mercado Plaza across the street. The rear of the building opens onto Farragut Street. It is the dominant structure of the block, both in size and visual complexity, flanked by a one-story commercial building on the east and the block's only other multi-story building on the west. The theater is about 56 feet wide, 207' deep, and 42' high at the parapet.



Figure 1. Plaza Theatre from SE. (ACA)



Figure 2. Plaza Theatre from SW. (ACA)

### Structural composition

The building structure is interesting in itself, especially for the economy with which powerful, memorable spaces are constructed. It is a steel-reinforced concrete frame, with structural steel elements – some of them massive – providing lateral support at key places. The reinforced concrete piers, approximately 24" x 24", especially visible in the Under-seating Storage, are usually let into the east and west brick walls of the previous building at this location, and poured against the wall of the neighboring building. The piers are visible in the Seating Area as round-shouldered bump-outs and in the Storage areas at either side of the Stage.

A variety of steel shapes supports articulated, diverse spaces through the back third of the building, while lighter steel members support the soaring ceiling and steel panel roof over the seating area and stage. Tied to the structural frames, in finished spaces, are light-gauge steel channels. Onto these, rebar and expanded metal lath are affixed. This is the construction used to great effect in building out curving, overlapping surfaces containing light coves along the front of the seating area, and the layered ferro-cement light coves of the ceiling.

Aside from the carpeted floor areas and the upholstery of the seating, the entire structure is made of non-combustible materials. Although “fireproof” buildings were common by the mid-1920s, the Plaza represents a particularly developed example of an Assembly designed with fire safety in mind. From the ventilation system to the containment of a potential fire in the Projection Booth, fire safety was a driving concept in its design.

## Façade

The façade is an interplay of projections and recessed areas, expressed in bold, geometric shapes associated with Art Moderne. Overall dimensions of the façade are approximately 56’ wide by 42’ high. The street level Entrance is surmounted by a marquee – triangular in plan – the width of the façade and projecting slightly over the sidewalk. The marquee is about five feet high and includes a modern, rectangular digital display on the east and west sides, separated by the clipped corner of the triangle that includes the name “Plaza Theatre” in stainless steel-outlined letters. The letters are more than a foot high and illuminated with neon tubing.

Above the marquee are a recessed, horizontally-oriented rectangular area on the eastern portion, and a narrower, vertically-oriented block on the west. The cladding is jade-colored ceramic tile except for the recessed area and a tall rectangle of obscure glass inset into the western portion.

The recess includes four pairs of curved, vertically-oriented aluminum light baffles, with the east end of the recess curving toward the street to meet the building plane. The curved area includes seven narrow, vertical light channels and is surmounted by a large disk, half of which projects from the building plane. The west interior side and soffit of the recessed rectangular area include three attached bands, about 24” wide and square-

sided. These rise from the intersection with the marquee to the underside of the recess, terminating at a washer-shaped feature beneath the disk. The entire contour of the recess is lined with a double row of neon.

The western, vertically-oriented block, several feet taller than the horizontal recess, is dominated by a wedge-shaped sign triangular in section about 25' tall that bears the theater's name. "PLAZA" is spelled out in large letters, vertically, in a font suited to the building. Each letter is illuminated by a double line of neon tubing. This sign is surmounted by a cylindrical feature about eight feet tall and four feet in diameter covered with vertically-arranged neon tubes. A shaft rises several feet from the center of the drum bearing a spherical feature about 3 feet in diameter, covered with more neon and crowning the façade.

The massing of the façade is closely related to the developed interior spatial uses, but from the exterior it reads more like a billboard for a completely new kind of building. As architectural historian Stephen Fox described it:

*"The "Plaza" blade sign, capped by a fluted light pinnacle and globe, the scale of the frame that spans from the pylon to which the sign is attached to the east edge of the façade and terminates in the flying saucer circle, and the deeply recessed central panel with its columnar verticals and linear incisions replace conventional "architecture" with bold graphic devices."*



Figure 3. Façade detail. (BAC)

## Features and Condition

The façade of the Plaza Theatre is an advertisement for Post-World War II American exuberance, strength, and aspiration. The composition of masses is effective and the whole is strongly interconnected and indicative of its era. Virtually every part of the façade would be considered “character defining”.

With the exception of some lighting fixtures, the façade seems to be in good condition. The clipped apex of the triangular marquee and modern digital screens appear to be the only substantial modifications; otherwise the façade appears original and intact.