

# Midland Theater

1228-1234 Main Street  
completed 1927

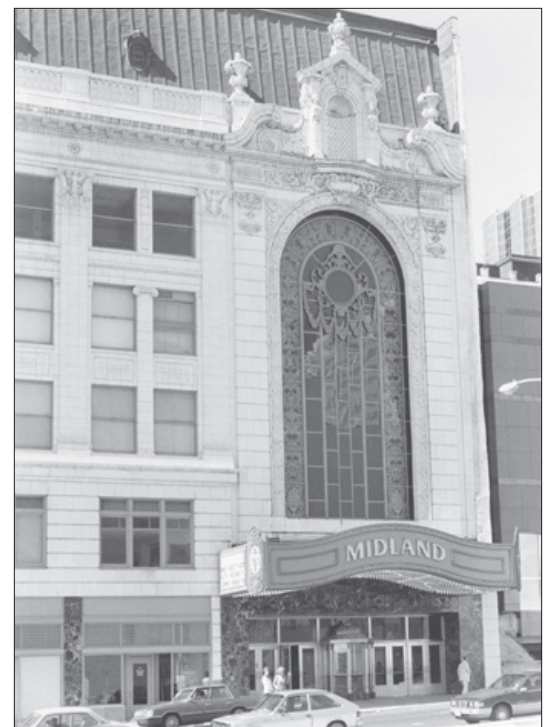
by Susan Jezak Ford

By 1927, Kansas City had seen its share of extravagantly decorated theaters; effervescent praises overflowed the newspapers of the day upon construction of the Coates Opera House, the Willis Wood Theater, and the Shubert Theater. But the completion of the Midland Theater in the fall of 1927 topped anything that Kansas City—or the Midwest—had ever seen.

Conception of the Midland Theater began in 1924 when businessman and department store owner Herbert M. Woolf wanted Kansas City to have an extraordinary, first class movie theater. He envisioned a movie and playhouse similar to the Capitol Theater in New York City or the Chicago Theater in Chicago. He traveled to New York, hoping to attract the interest of a major theater corporation. No one was interested in Woolf's proposal to build a movie house in Kansas City until he met Samuel Goldwyn, who introduced him to Marcus Loew, president of the Loew's chain of theaters. Loew was impressed with Woolf's plan to build a movie palace and office building in downtown Kansas City and signed on as a very willing sponsor.

Construction of Loew's Midland theater and adjoining office building took only one year and attracted a stream of spectators throughout the process. When the scaffolding was taken away and the murals unveiled, once again, Kansas City newspapers were enthusiastic in their approval of the city's newest motion picture and vaudeville theater. *The Kansas City Star* wrote that patrons experienced an "immediate and overwhelming feeling of unrestrained luxury." *The Kansas City Times* declared the movie house "not so much a house as a palace."

Indeed, the \$4 million theater contained a myriad of structural and decorative innovations. The six-story Renaissance Revival exterior was designed in cream glazed terra cotta brick and was adorned with engaged pilasters, winged figures, leaves, flowers, swags,



volutes, urns, and arches. A soaring arched window rose above a copper and gold marquee containing 3600 electric light bulbs. The 12-story Midland Office Building was attached to the west side of the theater with an entrance at 1221 Baltimore Avenue.

The three-story lobby boasted walnut wainscoting and the most extensive application of gold-leafed, ornamental plasterwork of any theater in the country, applied by 15 sculptors and over 100 workmen. Mirrors and murals rose to the domed ceiling and a bronze and crystal chandelier illuminated the grand marble staircase, red and gold damask curtains, and matching carpet. In all, more than 5000 yards of carpet and 4000 yards of drapery fabric were used in the theater.

Inside the auditorium, a chandelier 28 feet high and 14 feet wide glowed with 300 amber light bulbs under the ceiling painted in tones of café au lait, ivory, polished gold, turquoise, and rose. The 4000 seats made the theater the third largest in the country, exceeded only by the Roxy and Capitol Theaters in New York City. The Midland was the first theater in the country to feature a cantilevered loge, or mezzanine of seats supported without any pillars to obstruct the view from lower seats. It was also the first theater to have its own complete cooling, heating and ventilation system, powered by a transformer that would have been sufficient for a city of 25,000. This system was unusual because it was integrated with the decorative scheme, incorporating air vents into the trim on the walls and ceilings.

The Midland Theater was one of several theaters designed in the "high class" style by New York architect Thomas Lamb. Lamb was born in Scotland in 1871 and arrived in the United States around 1883. He was well known for his theater commissions, designing more than 300 theaters around the world. The Midland was representative of Lamb's ornate work in the 1920s that was based on French and Italian Baroque designs. It was constructed by the Boller Brothers of Kansas City and the Boaz-Kiel Construction Company based in St. Louis.

Every seat was filled for opening night on October 28, 1927. *The Kansas City Times* wrote the next morning that "Kansas City investigated every walnut panel and every marble recess last night and decided the owners got their money's worth." Patrons were immediately welcomed into the grandeur of the only theater in the country where one stepped on carpet upon entering the house. The theater exceeded all expectations and the crowd drew "a breath of astonishment" as the Midland Concert Orchestra rose from

the pit on an elevated platform to play Tchaikowsky's "Marche Slav." The entertainment continued with a film telling the story of the building's construction, newsreels, and a musical rendition of the history of Kansas City. Speeches by mayor Albert Beach, city manager H. F. McElroy, and Loew's vice-president Edward Schiller continued the dedication of the structure. Cinematic heartthrob Ramon Navarro appeared with actors Aileen Pringle and Buddy Rogers to greet the audience and introduce the premier of his newest silent movie, "The Road to Romance." The spectacular evening in the magnificent new theater was undoubtedly the most memorable event of the year.

Loew's Midland Theater served as a venue for vaudeville acts and motion pictures during its early years, attracting major motion pictures, as well as performers John Philip Sousa, Edgar Bergen, Maria Callas, and the duo of Burns and Allen. It ended its role as a movie palace in January 1961 when it closed. Its doors reopened briefly (following a thorough cleaning and partial remodeling) as an arena for Kansas City's professional bowling team, the Kansas City Stars. The Stars were financially unsuccessful and left the theater in December of 1961. The Durwood Theaters corporation began acquiring portions of the theater to reopen as the Midland Theater and two smaller theaters, The Midland II and the Midland III. The Midland Theater and Midland Office Building were placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977.

As Durwood Theaters evolved into American Multi-Cinema Inc., the Midland Theater went through a lengthy and extensive restoration. As the exterior and interior were returned to their original splendor, it was discovered that the four-story window above the marquee was never executed as planned. Original blueprints called for an elaborate cast-iron design to be placed behind the window's arched glass and illuminated from behind. In 1987, local glass artist Kathy Barnard and other artists were commissioned to recreate the intended effect. The towering window was filled with a floral design of carved glass based on Thomas Lamb's blueprints. The completion of the work served as a crowning touch to the rebirth of one of Kansas City's grandest movie palaces.

**Sources:**

*Kansas City*. Kansas City: Kansas City Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, 1979.

*The Kansas City Star*, September 4, 1927; October 23, 1927; July 24, 1984;  
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*The Kansas City Times*, October 29, 1927; October 21, 1961.

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National Register of Historic Places Inventory -Nomination Form. Loew's Midland Theater.

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