

June 20, 2017

Mr. John Di Mario  
Development Services Director  
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**Re: Star Theater, 145 N. First Street, La Puente**

Dear Mr. Di Mario:

On behalf of the Los Angeles Conservancy, we submit these comments on the historical significance of the Star Theater at 145 N. First Street and the need for a full environmental impact report (EIR) prior to the approval of any project or demolition that would adversely impact the historic building. The proposed project of 22 townhomes will demolish this structure and thus result in significant impacts, whereby the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) calls for the need to identify and consider preservation alternatives.

**I. Significance of the Star Theater and S. Charles Lee**

Located at 145 N. First Street, the Star Theater is notable as the only surviving lamella roof theater designed by master architect S. Charles Lee in Los Angeles County. Lee, whose architecture office was located in Los Angeles, is recognized for his influential international career spanning three decades that produced some of Southern California's most innovative movie theatres including both the Tower Theater (1927) and Los Angeles Theater (1931) in downtown LA and the Academy Theater (1939) in Inglewood.

The Star Theater, constructed between 1947-48 and opened as the Puente Theater, is a rare and significant example of Lee's postwar theater designs, constructed during the final years of his career and showcasing his continued experimentation with new forms and technology to respond to changing needs.

Utilizing wood lamella construction for its roof and featuring monumentally scaled, freestanding signage that rises twice the height of the theater building, Lee's design for the Star Theater is directly influenced by two important postwar-era trends: lingering wartime restrictions on building materials and the growing prominence of the automobile.

Lee designed a total of five lamella roof theaters in California during the late 1940s, two each in Los Angeles and San Diego Counties and one in Tulare



County. Two have been demolished, with one remaining in each of the three counties. Lamella construction, introduced to the United States in 1925 and used primarily for industrial structures and building types such as auto showrooms and grocery markets, is comprised of diamond-shaped bracing formed of short lengths of lumber that can span great distances without view-obstructing columns or trusses. Lee embraced another benefit afforded by lamella construction, as it required no steel and wood was an unrestricted material. While the lower curved walls of the auditorium's interior are plastered, the distinctive diamond-shaped bracing of the lamella roof is left exposed to form the ceiling.

The Star Theater is unique among Lee's five lamella roof theaters as the only one in which the half-cylinder shape of the roof also forms the design of the façade. The other four were designed with rectangular facades that concealed the shape of the auditorium from the street. As such, only the Star Theater conveys its iconic form from the exterior.

Another unusual feature of the Star Theater is the monumentally scaled signage, situated directly adjacent to the front right corner of the theater. While Lee was a major innovator of integrated signage for his theater designs, several examples of which reached lofty heights aimed at attracting patrons traveling in their automobiles, the signage he designed for the Star Theater is unique among theater buildings for its size and scale as a freestanding sign and its dual function as a giant flagpole, rising twice the height of the theater building. The sign structure is comprised of five alternating pairs of slim metal poles evenly braced by horizontal members, which lends a striking grid-like appearance. A large, neon-illuminated star is perched atop the structure, next to a flagpole rising above the outermost pole.

The Star Theater is profiled in the 1994 S. Charles Lee monograph *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theater* by Maggie Valentine, Ph.D, architecture professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio. The University of California, Los Angeles holds the S. Charles Lee Collection, which contains numerous historic photographs of the Star Theater under construction and following completion.

The Conservancy believes the Star Theater qualifies as a historical resource for purposes of project review under CEQA as a rare and unusual example of postwar theater design and as a rare and notable example of the work of master architect S. Charles Lee. It is also a rare resource type utilizing a lamella roof and monumentally scaled, freestanding signage that rises twice the height of the theater building—both unusual among theaters as a building type and which together make the Star Theater a singular example of early postwar theater design.

## **II. Project cannot be subdivided into small subprojects to eliminate potentially feasible alternatives from consideration**

The Star Theater was the subject of a May 8, 2017 article in the San Gabriel Valley Tribune "[La Puente's Star Theatre could be headed for demolition. Here's why activists are trying to save it](#)," in which a statement was made that suggests demolition of the Star Theater can be considered separately from the proposed project. This is inaccurate, as CEQA mandates that a lead agency cannot piecemeal projects, especially in this case where demolition is a requirement for the proposed project and results in a significant impact. CEQA case law is also clear on this point, whereby CEQA requirements "cannot be avoided by chopping up proposed projects into bite-size pieces which,



individually considered, might be found to have no significant effect on the environment or to be only ministerial.”<sup>1</sup>

Under CEQA Guidelines Section 15378, “project” is defined as “the whole of an action, which has a potential for resulting in either a direct physical change in the environment, or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment...” An accurate and complete project description is essential to a legally sufficient EIR:

A curtailed or distorted project description may stultify the objectives of the [CEQA] reporting process. Only through an accurate view of the project may affected outsiders and public decision-makers balance the proposal’s benefit against its environmental cost, consider mitigation measures, assess the advantage of terminating the proposal (i.e., the ‘no project’ alternative) and weigh other alternatives in the balance.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, a public agency cannot subdivide a single project into smaller individual subprojects in order to avoid reviewing the impacts of the project as a whole, or to eliminate potentially feasible alternatives from consideration.<sup>3</sup>

### **III. Conclusion**

A key policy under CEQA is the lead agency’s duty to “take all action necessary to provide the people of this state with...historic environmental qualities...and preserve for future generations...examples of major periods of California history.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, CEQA review has proven to be one of the most effective tools that we have to address the erosion of our cultural heritage. It can prevent irreversible losses through careful consideration of alternatives that achieve most of the project objectives while avoiding significant impacts on the environment.

CEQA establishes a low threshold for the consideration and evaluation of potential historic resources as part of the environmental review process—a clear benefit for communities by ensuring that potential adverse impacts are properly evaluated and mitigated. Therefore, the city must refrain from issuing a demolition permit prior to any environmental review for the submitted project and require the preparation of an EIR.

#### **About the Los Angeles Conservancy:**

The Los Angeles Conservancy is the largest local historic preservation organization in the United States, with over 6,000 members throughout the Los Angeles area. Established in 1978, the Conservancy works to preserve and revitalize the significant architectural and cultural heritage of Los Angeles County through advocacy and education.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed project. We hope the City of La Puente will fully assess the potential impacts and loss of a historic resource, and require the preparation of

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<sup>1</sup> *Orinda Assn. v. Board of Supervisors* (1986) 182 Cal.App.3d 1145, 1171.

<sup>2</sup> *County of Inyo v. City of Los Angeles* (1977) 71 Cal.App.3d 185, 192-193.

<sup>3</sup> *Orinda Assn. v. Board of Supervisors* (1986) 182 Cal.App.3d 1145, 1171.

<sup>4</sup> PRC §21001 (b), (c).



an EIR. Please do not hesitate to contact me at (213) 430-4203 or [afine@laconservancy.org](mailto:afine@laconservancy.org) should you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Adrian Scott Fine". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

Adrian Scott Fine  
Director of Advocacy

Enclosure

cc: Escott Norton, Los Angeles Historic Theater Foundation






Maggie Valentine

# The Show Starts on the Sidewalk

An Architectural  
History of the  
Movie Theatre,  
Starring S. Charles Lee

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ninety-six pages of sketches and plans, since there were still no photographs of completed buildings to show. Typically, the sketches showed dramatic facades of bold lines, whereas the plans stressed economy and flexibility. Gone were the flamboyant curves and excessive ornament that spoke of conspicuous consumption and exorbitant expenditures. Vertical signs were disappearing, having been integrated into the marquee sign. The facade, featuring structural glass and light, hosted Moderne curves and squares, often angled or skewed.

The *Theatre Catalog* of 1945 devoted three pages to postwar sketches Lee had done for theatres on the West Coast. The mild climate of the region permitted the use of lightweight structural materials, including porcelain, glass, and plastics. Other materials Lee chose were plaster, terra cotta, and concrete. A proposed newsreel theatre was designed to be built in plastic (fig. 104). In another proposal, a glass facade revealed an interior lobby in the fashion of an enormous billboard (fig. 112). The sketches displayed huge sweeping curves with towers, marquees, and signs that grew organically out of the facade (figs. 113–115). Oversized lettering spelling out the theatre name emphasized the building's visibility and presence on the street. Glass also kept construction costs down and exploited light to give the theatre a dramatic appearance at night. Lighting effects in combination with the glass and plastic facades were designed to make the theatre its own advertisement in "a blaze of color." As the writer observed, "Certainly no passer-by could observe any of these spectacular fronts without being conscious of the theatre."<sup>35</sup>

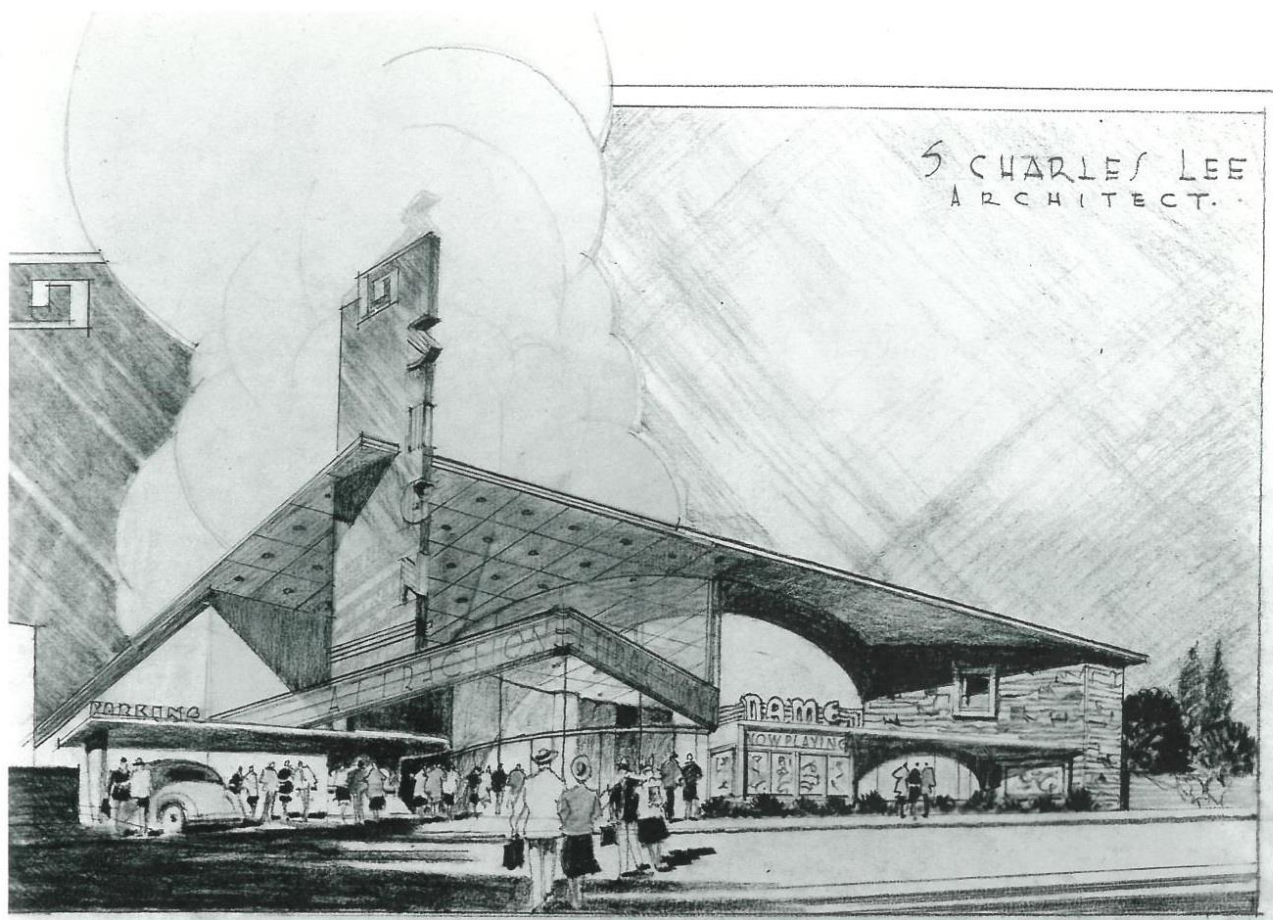
As built, Lee's theatres were somewhat tamer than his proposals: the sketch for the Bay Theatre, for example, is far less reserved than the final incarnation in Pacific Palisades (1948–49; figs. 116, 117). Economic and social factors tempered the flamboyance, but his buildings were still theatrical, even if set in sedate suburban commercial districts. Postwar theatres were serviced primarily by automobile traffic, with very little foot traffic. Although Lee continued to experiment with new forms and technology and to respond to new developments and changing needs, he retained the uniqueness as well as the sense of place and identity associated with his work.

One of these experiments was the Quonset hut, developed during the war, when speed of construction was paramount. The Quonset hut was a prefabricated shelter made of corrugated metal, shaped like a half-cylinder. Not only was it inexpensive to build and operate (it could be heated and cooled easily), but the acoustics were excellent.

Similar to the Quonset hut in form, but predating it, was the lamella roof, which Lee utilized in several postwar theatres. This was a trussless roof made up of a series of short wooden sections arranged in a diamond pattern (fig. 118). Short timbers, beveled and bored at the ends, were bolted together at an angle in a network of mutually braced and self-supporting pieces that formed a continuous arch, eliminating or minimizing side walls.

The idea originated in Europe in 1908 and was introduced to the United States in 1923, but it was not commonly used until the 1940s and 1950s. Most were built on the West Coast, where building codes were more flexible owing to the accommodating climate. The waffled ceiling was particularly popular because it required no steel and relatively short segments of wood, which was an unrestricted material. Yet it provided a





wide, unobstructed span with no supporting columns. Other advantages included its strength, acoustics, and resistance to wind and earthquakes. The Helix (La Mesa, 1947–48), Avo (Vista, 1948), Puente (Puente, 1947–48), Visalia (Visalia, 1946–49), and Garmar (Montebello, 1949–50), all in California, used lamella roof construction, leaving the structural system exposed on the interior (figs. 119, 120). A flat facade containing signs, a marquee, and the exterior and interior lobbies fronted one end of the barrel-vault-shaped building, creating a Western “false front” effect.

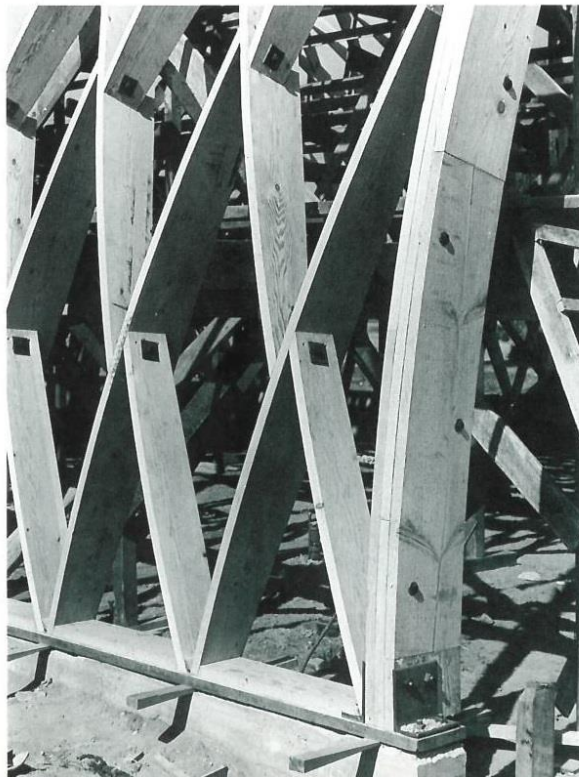
The typical Lee theatre of the 1940s postwar era had a distinctive look that had evolved from his signature of the 1930s yet reflected changing times. The buildings were squarer, sparer, and less streamlined in appearance, but not without glamour. Bold replaced sleek. The scale and proportions were larger and designed more with the highway and automobile in mind, as witnessed by the parking facilities and the drive-through marquee (fig. 113). The entire building, not just the marquee, was now readable from a car. The pedestrian ground level was less assertive and more discreet, with a quieter box office. The space above the marquee featured a huge decorative motif; above that, at the top, the name of the theatre was often spelled out in enormous letters, which now grew out of the building rather than being attached to it (fig. 116).

Even the graphics were designed for motorists. Theatre names were generally short

113 La Tijera Theatre, Los Angeles, 1947 (S. Charles Lee, 1948–49). After World War II, Lee's sketches show an exaggerated perspective; curved lines have given way to angles, and the drive-through marquee appears in almost every drawing.



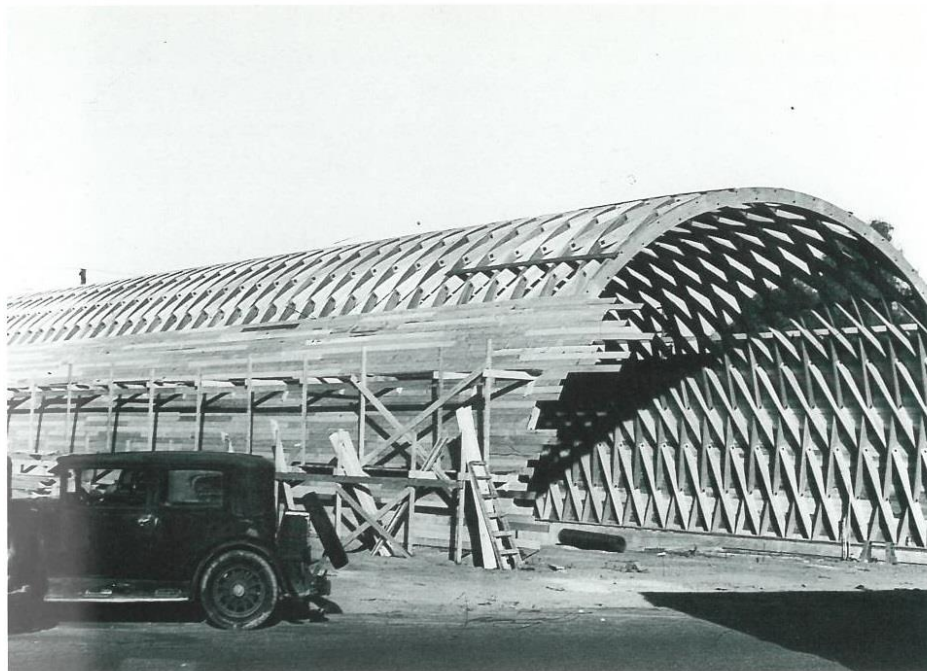
117 Bay Theatre, 1949 (S. Charles Lee, 1948-49). As built.



118 Example of lamella construction.



119 Puente Theatre, Puente, California,  
1947 (S. Charles Lee, 1947-48).  
Under construction.



120 Puente Theatre, 1948. Auditorium with  
exposed lamella roof.