

Historic Resources Inventory – Essential Properties

Arlington Draft House

Address:

2901-2911 Columbia Pike
922-930 S. Walter Reed Drive

RPC #:

25013002

Current Owner(s):

Elise G. Lefkowitz, Elaine G. Miller,
Frances K. Berka, John G. Kossow, and
Eileen K. Samuels
2120 L St., NW, #800
Washington, DC 20037

Building Date: 1939

Current Zoning: C-2

Existing Protections: None

Current Development Pressure: None

Historic Designations: None

Significance Highlights:

1. Only operating theater in the County that remains from the cinema boom of the 1930s-1940s;
2. Example of Art Deco style;
3. Representative of Columbia Pike's shift from a rural thoroughfare to a commercial district.

Significance Statement:

The Arlington Theater, now known as the Arlington Draft House, was constructed in 1939 for property owner Dr. Charles P. Munson with A.H. Brooks as the builder. The building, a modest interpretation of the fashionable Art Deco style, was designed by Fred Bishop of Richmond, Virginia. At the time of its construction, the theater marked the transition of Columbia Pike from rural farmland to a commercial district that led to the nation's capital. Residential development,

predominately in the form of garden-apartment complexes and duplexes, surrounded the commercial district in which the Arlington Theater was the anchor, visually, physically, and socially. Today, the building serves as a noted local example of commercial Art Deco design and is the only remaining theater in Arlington County from the cinema boom period of the 1930s and 1940s that still operates as a movie theater.

Owner Charles Munson was responsible for platting and subdividing part of the surrounding area to the north that is now known as Arlington Heights. The theater is located within a commercial core at the intersection of Columbia Pike and South Walter Reed Drive, an area that began to develop after the introduction of streetcar service. Construction of the theater required the demolition of a general store known as C.F. Burner's Emporium (established 1904), which was owned by Munson. The Arlington Theater opened on August 15, 1940, and was operated for many years by Neighborhood Theaters. The theater was originally known as the Arlington Recreation Center and included a movie theater, commercial stores, and a 24-lane bowling alley, which was located on the second and third floors above the theater. The opening announcement in *The Sun* of August 16, 1940, emphasized the air conditioning system of the new theater and bowling alleys:

The new theater is modern in every respect, housed in a fireproof building equipped with the famous Carrier air conditioning system, which also cools and refreshes the bowling alleys and the pharmacy. Large, spring-bottom seats, ample spaced, assure comfort for theater patrons, while the lobby, lounges and rest rooms are furnished and decorated in modern and attractive styles. W.T. Wallace, long a resident of Arlington County and widely-known throughout bowling circles, is manager of the Arlington Bowling Alleys.... The Arlington Bowling Alleys consist of 24 of the most modern, high-speed regulation Twentieth-Century Brunswick Balke alleys. Noise has been reduced to an absolute minimum by acoustical soundproofing of the walls and ceiling, and luxurious seats have been installed for spectators and players alike. The bowling alleys, which are located on the second and third floors of the theatre building, also include a soda fountain and sandwich bar, and orders will be delivered to the spectators and players at the alleys.

As Dr. Robert K. Headley documents in *Motion Picture Exhibitions in Washington, D.C.: An Illustrated History of Parlors, Palaces and Multiplexes in the Metropolitan Area, 1894-1997*, Neighborhood Theaters returned the theater to its owner, Tom Saris, in October 1975. The building was then converted to a cinema and draft house in 1985. Headley closes with "The exterior of the Arlington is still in beautiful condition and provides a welcome contrast to many of the other buildings on Columbia Pike."

Of the ten theaters built in Arlington County and the town of Falls Church between 1920 and 1950, several remain, including the Arlington Theater. Of those buildings, the Arlington is the only one that still operates as a movie theater, and is one of four movie theaters currently operating in Arlington County. [One other extant building, the State Theater in Falls Church,

underwent a multi-million dollar restoration in the late-1990s and now operates as a live music venue.]

Summary Description:

The exterior design is consistent with the Art Deco style with the façade entirely of brick painted white and light mauve. This is consistent with early photos showing a white or light-colored building. It is a simple design, with little architectural embellishment. Emphasis can be seen on several vertical elements, with subtle stepped forms, above the main entrance on Columbia Pike and the side entrance on South Walter Reed Drive. The corner of the building at the intersection is rounded, with vertical strips extending up the second and third stories. The left side of the South Walter Reed Drive entrance is also rounded at the first floor only. The main entrance is about 20 feet across with a vertical projection above the entrance area extending slightly past the third story height. The layers of the façade projection are fairly shallow, but distinguished with light mauve paint. The center of the main projection features a vertical blue sign above the entrance and marquee reading “Arlington” in Deco-style neon lighting. On either side of the vertical sign are flat black panels about 1 foot wide and 20 feet high. At the top of the central projection, the brick façade has 6 notches on either side of the center line. At street level, the entrance is recessed about 10 feet with two pairs of glass doors under a marquee sign with traditional hand-placed black lettering. The main theater entrance is flanked by entrances for two retail establishments – a Chinese restaurant on the left and a stereo & electronics shop on the right, occupying the primary corner retail space. Above these two retail entrances are small blue shop signs with white Deco lettering, not original to the building. The brick façade overhead has 5 vertical strips on either side extending up the second and third stories.

On the east side, the curved corner at the intersection is set off by a large curved window on the first floor and five vertical zigzag notches extending up the second and third stories, painted in mauve. There are five narrow horizontal glass block windows on the first story that appear to be original. An original architect’s rendering appears to show fourteen large and seven small windows on the east side in glass block, appropriate to the Art Deco style. The second and third stories now have just six modern replacement windows on each story, the seventh window in each row (closest to the side entrance) used as a vent screen. The corner retail shop at the street level has five large windows, including the curved corner window, two on the east side and two on the south side. The entire east side of the building, with the exception of the minor side entrance vertical projection, is painted off-white. There are three mauve diamond-shaped flat decorative elements on the east façade between the second and third story row of windows. It is unclear if these are original. The lower half of each diamond appears to have been removed, leaving the outline of the complete element.

The minor side entrance on South Walter Reed Drive is at the end of the building immediately before it steps down to a one-story height for three retail shops. This entrance provides access

to the artists' studios on the second floor and the tae kwon do studio on the third floor, both housed in the former bowling alley space. The side entrance is similar in appearance to the major entrance projection, with similar proportions and elements but on a narrower scale. The vertical projection extends up the façade through the second and third stories. The center strip and two flanking strips are painted in rose, with intermediate white strips. There is no vertical sign for this entrance, only a modern horizontal sign over the doorway with two pairs of glass doors. The vertical flanking strips have two narrow vertical modern replacement windows on both sides, in a similar orientation as the flat black panels on the main entrance façade.

Robert K. Headley, *Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington, D.C.: An Illustrated History of Parlors, Palaces and Multiplexes in the Metropolitan Area, 1894-1997* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1999) 231. Also: "For some years the presence of a movie house had been an important measure of status among outlying business districts." Longstreth, "The Neighborhood Shopping Center," 21.

Headley, 231.

Jennifer Sale, "Arlington Recreational Center/Arlington Theatre," Goucher College, HP611, 23 February 2004, 6.

Excerpted from Sale, 2.

"Bowling Alleys," *Arlington Daily Sun*, 16 August 1940, Special Section.