

Attachment 2  
*Statement of Significance*

## Statement of Significance

Source: Heritage Planning Files, City of New Westminster - 2001

\* The highlighted text represents proposed revisions to remove and add based on new understanding and documented changes to the historic place.

### DESCRIPTION OF HISTORIC PLACE

The Columbia Theatre is a rare surviving example of an atmospheric-style movie theatre. The front facade features eclectic period revival elements partially rendered in terra cotta, and small decorative balconies at the upper level. The auditorium retains its cast plaster decorative features and ceiling, with the original murals now partly restored. The theatre is located on the south side of Columbia Street, the main commercial street in New Westminster's historic downtown core.

### HERITAGE VALUE

The Columbia Theatre is valued as one of the only surviving atmospheric theatres in British Columbia and one of only a few remaining in Canada. It was built during the heyday of the North American theatre chains, when the design of the building was considered a key part of the total movie-going experience. The eclectic ornamentation of the exterior reflects the exoticism of the popular Period Revival styles, promoted by Hollywood as appropriate for neighbourhood movie palaces. These romantic themes were carried into the interior. Murals of romantic Mediterranean scenery, lanterns, plaster screens, wrought iron trellis work covered with climbing roses and twinkling stars in a **midnight twilight** sky gave the patrons the illusion of being seated in an exotic walled garden.

In the 1920s movies were becoming the premier form of popular entertainment; the Columbia Theatre is valued as a local representation of the growth of this Hollywood phenomenon. In 1912, Adolph Zukor established the Famous Players Film Company, which merged four years later with the Jesse L. Lasky Company to form the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation; their film distribution company was named Paramount Pictures. The Columbia was operated as part of this chain for the duration of its life as a movie theatre **(1927-1987)**.

Additionally, the Columbia Theatre is valued for its architecture. Its architects, Fred Laughton Townley (1887-1966) and Robert Michael Matheson (1887-1935) were best known for their design of Vancouver City Hall. In the inter-war period this firm flourished as one of the leaders in the use of traditional period revival styles as well as in their exploration of modernism, particularly in their sophisticated institutional work. After the construction of the Columbia Theatre, Townley and Matheson became the local architects for Famous Players. The interior decoration was undertaken by Girvan Studios of Vancouver, led by John Girvan (1876-1957), who throughout his career displayed considerable stylistic versatility. The Columbia Theatre was one of the first in the province, and Girvan drew his inspiration from the work of American theatre designer John Ebersson (1875-1964), who pioneered the use of these exotic interior motifs. The year after the Columbia Theatre was completed, Girvan Studios were commissioned for the decoration of the Patricia Theatre in Powell River, which also survives and has been restored.

The Columbia Theatre is significant for its contribution to the consistent and distinctive built form of

Columbia and Front Streets, which dates from when New Westminster was the major centre of commerce and industry for the booming Fraser Valley area. ~~Now~~ Owned by the City of New Westminster and operated as the Raymond Burr Performing Arts Centre from 2000-2006 and later as the Lafflines Comedy Club and House of Comedy, it continues to be a place of community entertainment. Of additional significance is the ongoing commitment to the restoration of the Columbia Theatre, which will ultimately result in the uncovering of the remainder of the original atmospheric murals. In the last several years both the Townley and Matheson and the Girvan Studio collections were donated to the City of Vancouver Archives, providing a complete documentary profile of the theatre's original design.

## CHARACTER-DEFINING ELEMENTS

Key elements that define the heritage character of the Columbia Theatre include its:

- location with frontages on Columbia and Front Streets, part of a grouping of commercial buildings in historic downtown New Westminster
- siting on the property lines, with no setbacks
- commercial form and scale as expressed in its two storey height on Columbia Street, larger bulk on Front Street for the theatre fly tower, and general cubic massing
- elements of original construction, including: concrete shell construction, as expressed on the exterior by the board-formed concrete side walls; heavy-timber truss roof; and raked auditorium floor
- front facade decorative elements such as: terra cotta Moorish columns with finials; flower motif tiles; Juliet balconies with wrought iron railings and small plank doors; and decorative exterior panels with plaster lattice motif
- decorative elements of the auditorium, such as plaster grillwork; cast plaster ceiling beams; proscenium arch; corbels and other cast plaster details; and atmospheric murals and associated decorative painting including gold leaf and applied silver leaf stars
- commercial storefront on the Front Street facade
- early painted signs on the rear and side walls