

MAR 25 1982

**United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form**

For HCRS use only

received SEP 29 1982

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*

Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic RKO Keith's Theatre

and/or common RKO Keith's Theatre

2. Location

street & number ¹²⁹⁻¹⁴³ 135-29 to 135-43 Northern Boulevard Blvd. not for publicationcity, town ~~Flushing~~ New York vicinity of congressional district 8th

state New York code 036 county Queens code 081

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
☒ district	☒ public	☒ occupied	☐ agriculture	☐ museum
☒ building(s)	☒ private	☐ unoccupied	☒ commercial	☐ park
☐ structure	☐ both	☐ work in progress	☐ educational	☐ private residence
☐ site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	☒ entertainment	☐ religious
☐ object	☐ in process	☒ yes: restricted	☐ government	☐ scientific
	☐ being considered	☐ yes: unrestricted	☐ industrial	☐ transportation
	N/A	☐ no	☐ military	☐ other:

4. Owner of Property

name US-Kino Betriebs GmbH, Ltd. c/o RKO Century

street & number 1585 Broadway

city, town New York vicinity of state New York

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Queens Building Department

street & number 126-06 Queens Boulevard

city, town Kew Gardens, Queens state New York

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission

title Urban Cultural Resources Survey has this property been determined eligible? yes ☒ nodate 1981 federal state county ☒ local

depository for survey records 20 Vesey Street

city, town New York state New York 10007

7. Description

Condition

☐ excellent
☒ good
☐ fair

☐ deteriorated
☐ ruins
☐ unexposed

Check one

☐ unaltered
☒ altered

Check one

☒ original site
☐ moved date N/A

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The RKO Keith's is situated at the northern end of Main Street, at its intersection with Northern Boulevard in downtown Flushing, Queens. Typical of theatres designed for central business districts, the RKO Keith's is the central component of the commercial block fronting on Northern Boulevard. Retail businesses and offices flank the theatre on either side.

Despite minor alterations, the fenestration, texture and rhythm of the front facade remains the same. The ornamental cresting above the third story windows has been removed and the area has been stuccoed to match the exterior; the marbleized veneer in the spandrel panels has been replaced with an opaque, brown veneer. Large commercial signs obscure the original configuration of the first story shopfronts. An early, curved and heavily ornamented marquee has been removed and a horizontal advertisement of a more contemporary nature installed. The massive but plain exterior of the theatre and the adjacent commercial businesses belie the grandeur that is found upon entry. The theme of the RKO Keith's is Spanish Baroque Revival—expressed in the auditorium through a series of outdoor Spanish facades set in a garden.

The gilded plaster and wooden facades are, in the atmospheric manner, built up against the walls and run around the three sides of the auditorium, meeting up with the organ screens at the sides of the proscenium arch. The arcades and broken pediments end at the ceiling, where their tops form a romantic outline set against an evening sky. The ceiling was lit, like a planetarium, with projected images of stars and moving clouds. The elaborate organ screens are covered with spiral columns, niches, volutes, and other baroque ornament. The proscenium arch is a complicated twisting form, with molded plaster ornament of similar fantasy.

The theme of the Spanish Baroque style is carried throughout the theatre—to the semi-oval grand foyer, mezzanine promenade, lounges and lower auditoriums. The women's and men's lounges retain elaborate wrought-iron work, polychromatic terra-cotta drinking fountains, and gilded plaster moldings. The ticket-booth hall is a square, two-story-high room, the upper story of which is a series of columns and gilded plaster carvings rising to a flat blue-sky ceiling.

The RKO Keith's is exceptional in that there has been only a minimal amount of alteration to the original Lamb design. Careful renovation carried out in the mid-1970's divided the interior into three theatres—one upstairs and two downstairs—leaving the lower lobby, the four lounges and the balcony level remarkably intact. Elaborately gilded plaster work and wood ornamentation are visible throughout these spaces, and the original color scheme is evident. The balcony, in particular, retains the aura of a courtyard in Spain. The full effect of Lamb's design is apparent in the ornamental facades that surround the three sides of the auditorium. These facades are silhouetted against a ceiling which remains painted a deep blue to simulate the evening sky. In addition, original tapestries and murals decorate the wall space on the small three-dimensional balconies located on both sides of the auditorium.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
☐ prehistoric	☐ archeology-prehistoric	☐ community planning	☐ landscape architecture	☐ religion
☐ 1400-1499	☐ archeology-historic	☐ conservation	☐ law	☐ science
☐ 1500-1599	☐ agriculture	☐ economics	☐ literature	☐ sculpture
☐ 1600-1699	☒ architecture	☐ education	☐ military	☐ social/
☐ 1700-1799	☐ art	☐ engineering	☐ music	☐ humanitarian
☐ 1800-1899	☐ commerce	☐ exploration/settlement	☐ philosophy	☒ theater
☒ 1900-	☐ communications	☐ industry	☐ politics/government	☐ transportation
		☐ invention		☐ other (specify)

Specific dates	1928	Builder/Architect	Thomas Lamb
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Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The RKO Keith's Theatre in Flushing, Queens is one of the few extant atmospheric movie theatres in the Northeast. Located at the juncture of Main Street and Northern Boulevard, the RKO Keith's is the focal point of Main Street in the central business district of downtown Flushing. The RKO Keith's was designed by Thomas Lamb, one of the country's most prominent theatre architects, and opened in 1928 as a vaudeville house for subscription holders. The theatre was part of the original Keith-Albee circuit, the largest vaudeville chain in the country. By the mid 1920s, however, vaudeville was in direct competition with a then novel form of entertainment, the motion picture. In 1927-28, the years of the RKO Keith's construction, the corporations with a controlling interest in the Keith-Albee circuit were consolidated under the name Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO). Soon thereafter, in order to compete with the rapidly growing motion picture industry, facilities and equipment for movie showings were incorporated within the traditional vaudeville theatre form.

The major period of movie theatre construction in the United States peaked between WWI and the Depression. The number of theatres built in urban areas increased twofold and the concept of the small neighborhood house evolved in outlying areas. These theatres had a capacity for large audiences averaging 2500-3000 seats. The RKO Keith's is representative of the neighborhood house of this era. In its heyday, it was the leading entertainment center serving Flushing.

Thomas Lamb was one of several architects who gained recognition through the numerous theatre commissions he executed. Among other noteworthy theatre architects of this period were John Eberson, B. Marcus Priteca, C. Howard Crane, Walter Ahlschlayer, G. Albert Lansburgh, and Rapp and Rapp. Lamb was undoubtedly the most prolific. He began designing theatres as early as 1909, and by the time of his death in 1942, had completed over 300 theatres. Lamb's early theatre designs were influenced by the 18th-century Scottish architect, Robert Adam. Using classical forms and motifs of the Adamesque style, Lamb created elegant interiors that were rich and restrained in ornamentation without the lavishness apparent in his later works. Notable New York City theatres of this period designed by Lamb include the Strand, Rialto and Rivoli.

The marked change in Lamb's style of the late 1920s and in his design of the RKO Keith's, in 1927-8, reflects a significant change in theatre design across the country. The classical design of the early 1920s was abandoned for a more elaborate architectural treatment of theatre interiors. Theatre designers became architects of fantasy, creating environments that transported the ordinary American theatre-goer to the environment of other lands. A wide variety of decorative motifs that included Spanish Baroque, Moorish, Peruvian, and Oriental were employed in this era throughout the theatre interiors.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Freeman, Robert. "Movie Theatres." Paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians, January 1977. Copy in files of New York Landmarks Conservancy.

Naylor, David. American Picture Palaces. New York, 1981.

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property less than 1

Quadrangle name Flushing

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UMT References

A

1	8	5	9	8	5	5	0	4	5	1	2	9	4	0
Zone				Easting				Northing						

B

Zone				Easting				Northing						

C

Zone				Easting				Northing						

D

Zone				Easting				Northing						

E

Zone				Easting				Northing						

F

Zone				Easting				Northing						

G

Zone				Easting				Northing						

H

Zone				Easting				Northing						

Verbal boundary description and justification

The nomination boundary is indicated on the attached site map.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

NA

state	code	county	code

state	code	county	code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Anne B. Covell, Program Analyst

organization Div. for Historic Preservation date 8/82

street & number Agency Bldg. #1, Empire State Plaza telephone 518-474-0479

city or town Albany state New York

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

☐ national ☐ state ☒ local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

Ann Webster Smith

title Deputy Commissioner for Historic Preservation

date

9/22/82

For HCERS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

Entered in the
National Register

date

10/29/82

for *Silvius Byer*
Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND RECREATION SERVICE

FOR HCRS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

RKO Keith's Theatre, Queens County, NY

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8

PAGE 2

Marcus Loew's declaration, "we sell tickets to theatres not movies," best reflects the attitude toward movie theatres--later coined movie palaces--that prevailed throughout the 1920s. Critical to the success and proliferation of movie palaces of this period was the intent of the theatre entrepreneur to appeal to and serve all Americans. The movie palace was not an exclusive form of entertainment and, unlike the nineteenth-century nickelodeons and vaudeville enterprises, was considered a respectable establishment that could be attended by women and children.

It was one of Thomas Lamb's contemporaries, John Eberson, who pioneered the most dramatic theatre design of the decade with his atmospheric theatre for Houston, Texas in 1922. The atmospheric theatre was intended to simulate an evening outdoors. The ceiling was painted a deep blue and studded with stars; most theatres featured a cloud machine that operated during movie showings. Lamb was commissioned by several of the principal theatre chains--RKO, Marcus Loew's, Stanley Fox--to design a series of theatres for them. The success of Eberson's atmospheric made it a popular theatre form for all the major chains. To some extent, Lamb's designs were dictated by the theatre entrepreneurs. Lamb, however, designed very few atmospheric theatres. Although the elaborate Spanish Baroque Revival treatment of the RKO Keith's interior is typical of Lamb's designs of the late 1920s, the atmospheric design of the auditorium and, particularly, Lamb's carrying it through to the outer lobby, is extraordinarily unusual. The RKO Keith's has survived with a minimal amount of alteration to the original Lamb design. Sensitive renovation has divided the RKO Keith's into three theatres without seriously altering its character, particularly on the balcony level. Here the full effect of the Spanish facades framing the three sides of the auditorium, and set against a ceiling that was painted a deep blue to simulate the evening sky, can be seen. The opulent interior remains intact and features gilded plaster work and wood with elaborate ornamentation.

In recent years a number of significant theatres dating from the 1920s have been demolished throughout the New York metropolitan area and few theatres with the once popular atmospheric design are extant. The RKO Keith's survives as an exceptionally intact example of a 1920s movie palace designed by one of the country's leading theatre architects.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND RECREATION SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR HCRS USE ONLY

RECEIVED

DATE ENTERED

RKO Keith's Theatre, Queens County, New York

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 11 PAGE 2

Research and assistance provided by:

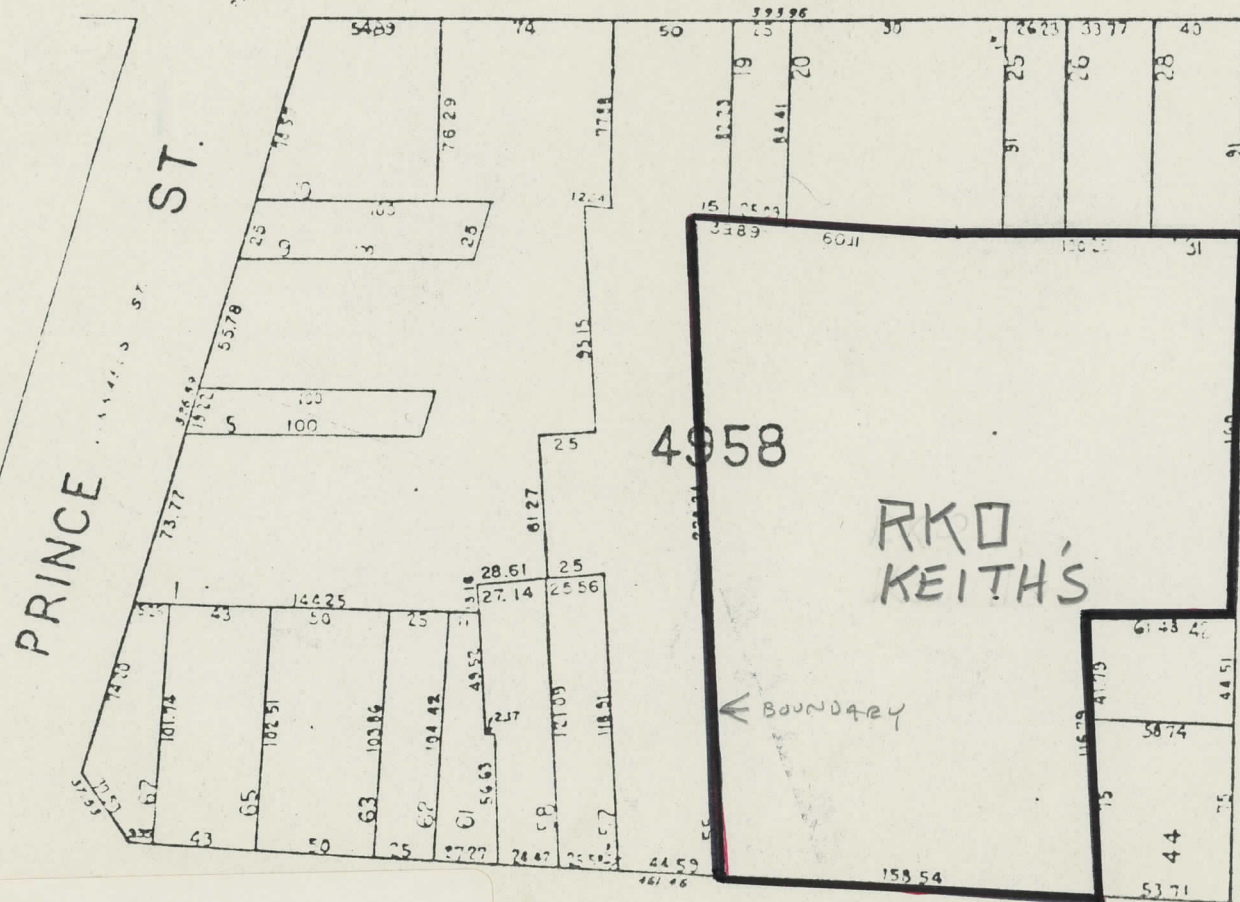
Diane Cohen, Graduate Research Assistant
Carol Clark, Associate Director
New York Landmarks Conservancy
330 West 42nd St.
New York, NY 10036

Sanborn
1981

RKO Keith's Theatre
Flushing, NY

N
↑

SEE PAGE 4



RKO Keith's Theatre
135-29 to 135-43 Northern Blvd.
Flushing, Queens Co.
Sanborn Map, 1981

NORTHERN

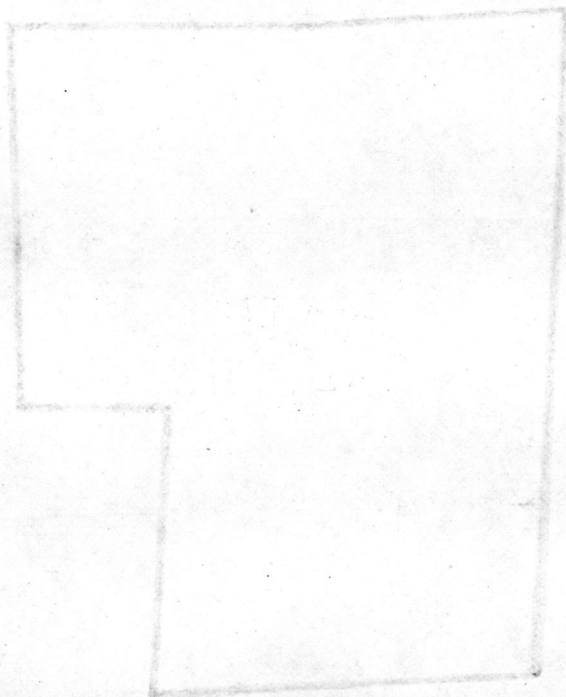
PUBLIC

PARK

BOU

MAIN ST.

APR - 8 1982



87001260

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

RKO Keith's Theatre
Queens County
NEW YORK

Working No. 9/29/82-2640Fed. Reg. Date: 2.1.83Date Due: 10/29/82 - 11/13/82Action: ACCEPT 10/29/82Entered in the National Register RETURNREJECT

Federal Agency: _____

- ☐ resubmission
☐ nomination by person or local government
☐ owner objection
☐ appeal

Substantive Review: ☐ sample ☐ request ☐ appeal ☐ NR decision

Reviewer's comments:

Recom./Criteria _____

Reviewer _____

Discipline _____

Date _____

☐ see continuation sheet

Nomination returned for: ☐ technical corrections cited below
☐ substantive reasons discussed below

1. Name2. Location3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
	Public Acquisition	Accessible	

4. Owner of Property5. Location of Legal Description6. Representation in Existing Surveyshas this property been determined eligible? ☐ yes ☐ no7. Description

Condition	Check one	Check one
☐ excellent	☐ deteriorated	☐ original site
☐ good	☐ ruins	☐ moved
☐ fair	☐ unexposed	☐ altered

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

- ☐ summary paragraph
☐ completeness
☐ clarity
☐ alterations/integrity
☐ dates
☐ boundary selection

8. Significance

Period _____ Areas of Significance—Check and justify below

Specific dates _____ Builder/Architect _____

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph) _____

- _____ summary paragraph
- _____ completeness
- _____ clarity
- _____ applicable criteria
- _____ justification of areas checked
- _____ relating significance to the resource
- _____ context
- _____ relationship of integrity to significance
- _____ justification of exception
- _____ other

9. Major Bibliographical References

10. Geographical Data

Address of nominated property _____

Quadrangle name _____

USMT References _____

Verbal boundary description and justification _____

11. Form Prepared By

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

_____ national _____ state _____ local

State Historic Preservation Officer signature _____

Title _____ date _____

13. Other

- _____ Maps
- _____ Photographs
- _____ Other

Questions concerning this nomination may be directed to _____

Signed _____ Date _____ Phone: 202 272-3504

Comments for any item may be continued on an attached sheet





①

RKO Keith's Theatre
135-29 to 135-43 Northern Boulevard
Flushing, Queens County, NY

Photographer: Diane Cohen

Date Taken: April 1982

Negative filed at: N.Y. Landmarks Conservancy
View looking north on Main Street to Northern
Boulevard

New York Landmarks Conservancy
330 West 42nd Street
New York, New York 10036
212-736-7575





2

RKO Keith's Theatre
135-29 to 135-43 Northern Boulevard
Flushing, Queens County, NY

Photographer: Diane Cohen

Date Taken: April 1982

Negative filed at: N.Y. Landmarks Conservancy

View looking east on Northern Boulevard

New York Landmarks Conservancy
330 West 42nd Street
New York, New York 10036
212-736-7575



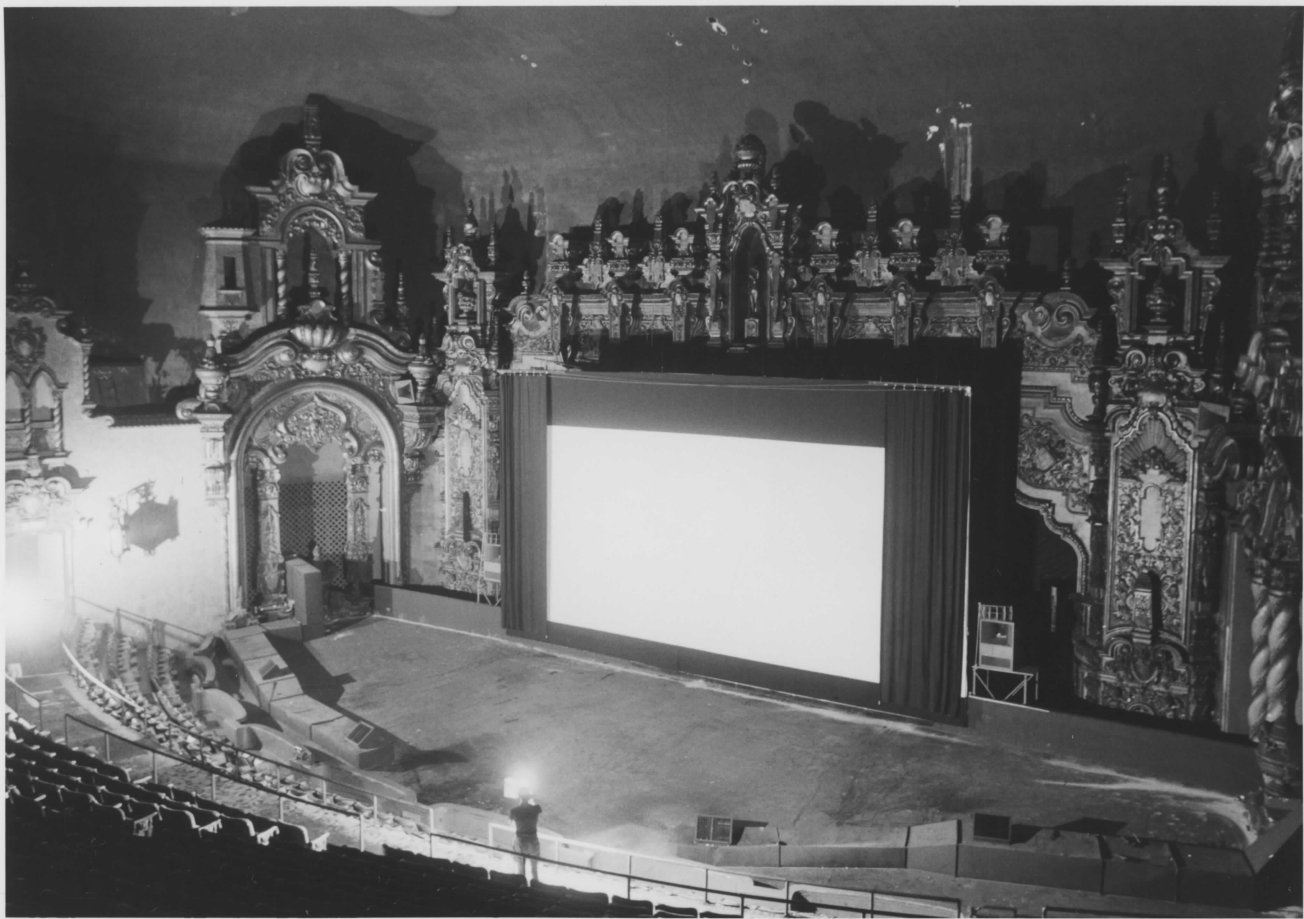


3

RKO Keith's Theatre
135-29 to 135-43 Northern Boulevard
Flushing, Queens County, NY

Photographer: Diane Cohen
Date Taken: April 1982
Negative filed at: N.Y. Landmarks Conservancy
View looking west on Northern Boulevard

New York Landmarks Conservancy
330 West 42nd Street
New York, New York 10036
212-736-7575



4.
RKO Keith's Theatre
135-29 to 135-43 Northern Blvd.
Queens County, NY
photo & neg.: New York Land-
marks Conservancy, 1982
330 W. 42nd St., NY, NY 10036
view: upper level theatre
showing top of original stage

behind movie screen



RKO Keith's Theatre 5.
135-29 to 135-43 Northern Blvd.
Queens County, NY
photo & neg.: New York Land-
marks Conservancy, 1982
330 W. 42nd St., NY, NY 10036
view: lower level theatre show-
ing original ceiling under
balcony and new wall dividing
theatres



RKO Keith's Theatre
135-29 to 135-43 Northern Blvd.
Queens County, NY
photo & neg.: New York Land-
marks Conservancy, 1982
330 W. 42nd St., NY, NY 10036
view: lower level theatre
showing original wall and
ceiling decoration and new
dividing walls at top center
and rear



RKO Keith's Theatre 7.
135-29 to 135-43 Northern Blvd.
Queens County, NY
photo & neg.: New York Land-
marks Conservancy, 1982
330 W. 42nd St., NY, NY 10036
view: lower level theatre,
wall detail



RKO Keith's Theatre 8.
135-29 to 135-43 Northern Blvd.
Queens County, NY
photo & neg.: New York Landmarks
Conservany, 1982
330 W. 42nd St., NY, NY 10036
view: lower level theatre,
detail of exit





photo 9

RKO Keith's Theatre
135-29 to 135-43 Northern Boulevard
Flushing, Queens County, NY

Photographer: Carol Clark

Date: January 1982

Negative filed at: N.Y. Landmarks Conservancy
Detail - 1st floor theatre

New York Landmarks Conservancy
330 West 42nd Street
New York, New York 10036
212-736-7575





photo 10

4

RKO Keith's Theatre
135-29 to 135-43 Northern Boulevard
Flushing, Queens County, NY

Photographer: Carol Clark

Date: January 1982

Negative filed at: N.Y. Landmarks Conservancy

Ticket Booth

New York Landmarks Conservancy
330 West 42nd Street
New York, New York 10036
212-736-7575





photo 11

5

RKO Keith's Theatre
135-29 to 135-43 Northern Boulevard
Flushing, Queens County, NY

Photographer: Carol Clark

Date: January 1982

Negative filed at: N.Y. Landmarks Conservancy
Fountain in 1st floor lobby

New York Landmarks Conservancy
330 West 42nd Street
New York, New York 10036
212-736-7575

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

FLUSHING QUADRANGLE
NEW YORK
7.5 MINUTE SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC)
SE/4 HARLEM 15' QUADRANGLE



RKO Keith's Theatre
Flushing, Queens Co.
UTM References
Zone 18
A. E/598550 N/4512940
Flushing Quadrangle

Mapped, edited, and published by the Geological Survey
Revised in cooperation with New York Department
of Transportation
Control by USGS, USC&GS, and Nassau County
Planimetry compiled from USC&GS Charts T-5089, T-5090,
T-5264, and T-5778. Topography by photogrammetric methods
from aerial photographs taken 1954. Field checked 1955.
Revised 1966
Selected hydrographic data compiled from USC&GS Charts
223 (1967) and 226 (1967). This information is not intended
for navigational purposes
Polyconic projection. 1927 North American datum
10,000-foot grid based on New York coordinate system,
Long Island zone
1000-meter Universal Transverse Mercator grid ticks,
zone 18, shown in blue
Red tint indicates areas in which only landmark buildings are shown

There may be private inholdings within the boundaries of
the National or State reservations shown on this map

SCALE 1:24,000
CONTOUR INTERVAL 10 FEET
NATIONAL GEODETIC VERTICAL DATUM OF 1929
DEPTH CURVES AND SOUNDINGS IN FEET—DATUM IS MEAN LOW WATER
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO DATUMS IS VARIABLE
SHORELINE SHOWN REPRESENTS THE APPROXIMATE LINE OF MEAN HIGH WATER
THE MEAN RANGE OF TIDE IS APPROXIMATELY 7 FEET
THIS MAP COMPLIES WITH NATIONAL MAP ACCURACY STANDARDS
FOR SALE BY U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY, RESTON, VIRGINIA 22092
A FOLDER DESCRIBING TOPOGRAPHIC MAPS AND SYMBOLS IS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

ROAD CLASSIFICATION
Heavy-duty ——— Light-duty ———
Unimproved dirt ———
Interstate Route ——— U.S. Route ——— State Route ———
QUADRANGLE LOCATION
FLUSHING, N. Y.
SE/4 HARLEM 15' QUADRANGLE
N4045—W7345/7.5
1966
PHOTOREVISED 1979
AMS 6265 IV SE—SERIES V821