

Landmarks Preservation Commission
July 11, 1989; Designation List 218
LP-1615

MIDTOWN THEATER (now METRO THEATER), 2624-2626 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1932-1933, architects Boak & Paris.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1871, Lot 22.

On May 16, 1989, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Midtown Theater (now Metro Theater) and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 7). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission has received several letters supporting this designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Midtown Theater (now Metro Theater), a rare surviving small Art Deco style neighborhood movie theater, has one of the finest facades of its type in New York City. Among the Art Deco buildings in New York City many of the most notable are skyscrapers and tall apartment buildings, but small buildings including banks, stores, and some theaters were also constructed in this style. The Midtown was designed and built in 1932-33 by Boak & Paris, an architectural firm involved mainly with the construction of apartment houses in the 1920s and 30s. The theater is distinguished by a glazed terra-cotta facade, executed in various colors, predominantly beige and black. A central medallion features bas-relief stylized figures holding theatrical masks representing comedy and tragedy, symbolic of the use of the building as a theater. Constructed during the Depression, when small neighborhood theaters were built instead of the popular large movie palaces of the 1920s, the Midtown is one of the few functioning Pre-World War II movie theaters of the many which once lined Broadway on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

The American Movie Theater¹

During World War I America emerged as the dominant force in the motion picture industry, witnessing the formation of the giant Hollywood studios. The spectacular growth of silent movies was temporarily threatened by radio in the early 1920s, but was reinvigorated with such film extravaganzas as "Ben Hur" in 1925. The real break-throughs, however, came first in 1927 with "The

Jazz Singer," the first sound track movie to be released, and the later introduction of Technicolor, which catapulted motion pictures into their golden age. Sumptuous movie palaces and countless more modest neighborhood movie theaters were built, while numerous legitimate theaters were converted for viewing of the more than 500 films produced annually in America. Flourishing throughout the Depression and war years, the reign of the motion picture industry faltered only in the early 1950s when it was undermined by increasingly popular television.

In those decades the movie palace provided Americans with their major form of entertainment, and families returned every week to their neighborhood movie house to see the latest show. Almost every town in the country had at least one movie theater; larger cities had large theaters downtown and smaller neighborhood houses scattered around the city. In New York City all the boroughs had major theaters as well as smaller neighborhood houses.

The American movie theater developed as an architectural type over the first four decades of this century. From the nickelodeons of the turn of the century, the theaters grew in size and lavishness during the 1910s, and emerged during the 1920s as movie palaces. Designed to look exotic, the theaters often seated several thousand people and offered live entertainment as well as movies. The grand eclectic designs of the 1920s movie theaters and palaces gradually gave way in the 1930s to the modernistic motifs of the Art Deco and Art Moderne. Many of these theaters were located on the West Coast, though the grandest of them all was built in 1932 in New York: Radio City Music Hall (a designated New York City Landmark).

As the 1930s progressed, however, and the Depression deepened, large theater projects became impractical. The huge palaces continued in operation, but new theaters tended to be small, generally between 500 and 1000 seats (as compared to the palaces with from 2000 to 6000 seats). The Midtown Theater, designed and constructed in 1932-33 by architects Boak & Paris, had a seating capacity of 550.² In the case of the Art Deco and Art Moderne style movie theaters, the economy of design was particularly appropriate to the modest budget and scale of Depression-era building projects. What these theaters had in common, besides a modernistic design, was a simplicity of material and ornament. Theaters of this kind were built in neighborhoods in cities across the country. What sets the Midtown apart from many movie theaters of this type is the handsomely articulated facade with its terra-cotta detail - a departure from the more typical marquee above a simple storefront. Such neighborhood theaters marked the end of the forty-year history of movie theater building preceding the out-

break of World War II. When theater building began again after the War's end, architects turned to simple, utilitarian designs and the era of the great movie palace was over.

Manhattan's Upper West Side is a primarily residential area, with supporting institutions and neighborhood services. Broadway has historically been one of the major commercial arteries of the community, lined with small businesses as well as movie theaters. If one were to have strolled this section of Broadway, between 59th and 110th Streets in 1934, one would have had a choice of eighteen theaters in which to see movies, including The Circle Theater between 59th and 60th (demolished), The Colonial between 62nd and 63rd (demolished), The Yorktown (later New Yorker) at 89th (demolished), The Stoddard at 90th (demolished), The Alden at 97th (demolished), and The Midtown (Metro) Theater, to name just a few. Only four of the eighteen are still standing and open to the public as movie theaters.³

The Architects: Boak & Paris

The architects who collaborated on the design of the Midtown Theater were Russell M. Boak and Hyman Paris. The original plans for the theater bear the stamp of Hyman Paris, who was registered in 1922 as an architect through The University of the State of New York, although he is known to have practiced as an architect as early as 1913.⁴ Together with Boak, who was working with Paris by the late 1920s, numerous buildings are known to have been constructed in Manhattan from their designs. The firm appeared to have been most active in the design of apartment buildings in the 1930s, including several in what are now the Greenwich Village, Upper East Side, and West End-Collegiate Historic Districts. Their structures exhibited a variety of Art Deco, Romanesque, Gothic and Elizabethan Revival elements.⁵ Their one other known theater commission were the alterations to the Yorktown Theater in 1934.⁶

Later in his career, circa 1940, Boak formed the architectural firm of Boak & Raad with Thomas O. Raad; the firm remained active during the 1940s and 50s. Boak & Raad designed two structures which are now part of the Upper East Side Historic District, an apartment building and a retail store.⁷ In 1957 Boak became a Corporate member of the AIA, New York Chapter.⁸

The Design and Construction of the Theater

A seven-story tenement on the site of the Midtown Theater was demolished in November 1931. Boak & Paris completed the theater plans in December 1932. In January 1933 A.C. & H.M. (Arlington and Harvey) Hall Realty Co. received a new building permit for a small movie theater. J.J. Secoles Inc. was hired

as contractor. The Midtown was completed on June 2, 1933,⁹ a Certificate of Occupancy was issued on June 7, 1933, and the Midtown, with its distinguished Art Deco facade, was ready for business. (see original 1933 photograph attached.)

The Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris (1925), an exhibition celebrating "modern" design, had great influence on decorative arts and interior design. In New York City, Art Deco style ornament influenced by the exposition became popular in the 1920s and was readily applied to skyscrapers, apartment buildings, and commercial and industrial structures, often relying on vertical emphasis, multi-colored materials, patterned brick, and terra-cotta ornament based on abstract forms. The Art Moderne was a variation on the modern style sometimes generally grouped under the heading of "Art Deco," but while the Art Deco of the 1920s relied on the above mentioned elements, the Moderne of the 1930s was inspired more by a "machine aesthetic," and incorporated horizontal lines, streamlined curves, metals, less ornament, simple geometry and flat, monochromatic surfaces.

Although the Art Deco style is most closely associated with skyscrapers and apartment buildings in New York City, many small commercial structures, such as banks, restaurants, Horn and Hardart Automats, chain stores, and movie theaters were also designed with deco embellishments and stylizations. The Midtown Theater is an excellent example of this, displaying aspects of both the Art Deco and Moderne styles: Deco is seen in its vertical accents, use of polychromatic terra cotta, the simple geometric pattern of the upper facade, and central terra-cotta medallion featuring stylized forms, while Moderne elements are evident in the Midtown's application of horizontal lines, as seen in the chrome-stripped, elongated marquee, the use of streamlined curves in the terra-cotta pilasters which extend above the facade, and the flat patterned surface of the upper facade. The theater facade as a flat, geometrically patterned wall had previously been employed in the Earl Carroll Theater remodeling of 1931 on West Fiftieth at Broadway, done by Joseph J. Babolnay in conjunction with George Keister and Thomas Lamb, and it was also seen as late as 1942 in the Elgin (now Joyce) on Eighth Avenue at West 19th Street done by Simon Zelnik. The Midtown's striking polychromatic terra-cotta facade, with its stylized central medallion, makes this movie theater's presence immediately felt in the context of the commercial structures of the Upper West Side along Broadway. During the 1920s and 30s, there was an increasing interest in the use of bolder shades of polychromatic terra cotta. The era of the Deco and Moderne styles, as represented by the Midtown Theater, also saw the end of the significant usage of terra cotta for facade embellishments, as other materials were employed for "modern" architecture and terra cotta came to be seen as outmoded.

Description

The fifty-foot wide main facade of the Midtown (Metro) Theater, located on the east side of Broadway between 99th and 100th Streets, is all that is visible of the building from the street. The building extends back into the block 100 feet. Approximately the height of three and one half stories, the facade consists of a ground floor with entrances and shopfront, a projecting horizontal marquee and unfenestrated glazed terra-cotta-clad wall above.

At the street level, the central three pairs of glass doors are 1954 replacements of the originals, set within the original opening with black terra-cotta surround. Their plain glass design and chrome handles are in keeping with the style of the building. In 1954 the ticket window was moved from inside to outside, replacing a pair of glass doors which existed to the left of the entrances.¹⁰ To the right of the entrances one finds a glass and aluminum door and storefront window which replaced the originals but retain the original configuration. To the far left and right at the street level are two exit doors of vertically striated aluminum. All of the openings are flanked by the original red glazed terra-cotta blocks banded horizontally by black and silver glazed terra-cotta stripes.

Overhanging the street level is the horizontal metal marquee, supported by eye-bars attached to the facade. Although the marquee is original, it has had some alterations. It has always featured four bands of chrome running along the three sides, but now also has rows of small exposed light bulbs edging the top and bottom, and twenty-two recessed lights underneath (as compared with its original 200). Full-relief Deco style "Metro" letters in red neon surmount the marquee, above each of the three sides; these were also added in 1982, along with the light changes mentioned above, when the theater's name was changed from Midtown to Metro.¹¹ To either side of the marquee, against the facade, are black terra-cotta blocks.

The most notable feature of the theater's facade is the tripartite decorative terra-cotta wall above the marquee. The central section is composed of rectangular panels of black terra cotta, flanked by slightly projecting black terra-cotta pilasters outlined in maroon terra cotta, which curve at the top, extending above the wall. At the base of this section, the tops of two windows with fluted lintels are partially seen (the rest obscured by the marquee's placement), while the uppermost edge of this section has maroon terra-cotta coping in a wave pattern. In the center of the black terra-cotta section is a vertical accent consisting of banded aluminum bars, which also extend above the wall in a triangular pattern. This is interrupted by a large, circular, glazed terra-cotta medallion, set within an aluminum frame, which contains off-white and beige bas-relief stylized

figures holding gray and blue theatrical-mask disks which represent comedy and tragedy, symbolic of the building's function; the background is two-toned lavender, with the lower portion a checkered pattern, separated by a yellow floral pattern band. Flanking the central black terra-cotta section are sections of rosy-beige terra cotta, set on each side in six "L-shaped" rows which are outlined in maroon and recede gradually from top to bottom, and center to side. A stylized cornice is created by a frieze of recessed vertical stripes of blue and yellow terra-cotta and maroon terra-cotta coping.

Subsequent Building History¹²

The Midtown Theater has been a movie theater since its completion in 1933. Originally owned by Arlington C. & Harvey M. Hall Realty Co., the Midtown changed hands numerous times from the 1940s through the 1980s. Until the 1970s the theater had shown only first-run feature films, then for a time adult films were shown. The Midtown was taken over in 1982 by Daniel Talbot of New Yorker Films, and was renovated at a cost of \$300,000 and changed to a revival movie theater which he renamed the "Metro." It was the "largest repertory site in Manhattan" at this point, with 535 seats. After three years of revival films the Metro reverted back to first-run pictures in 1985. By August 1986, the Metro was "twinned" (or divided into two distinct theaters); one with 325 seats on the lower level and the upstairs with 200. Since 1987 the Metro has been operated by the Cineplex Odeon Corporation and continues to show first-run films. For fifty-six years it has remained a small neighborhood movie theater on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

Report prepared by
Lynne D. Marthey
Research Department

Report Edited by Jay Shockley,
Deputy Director of Research

Notes

1. The section was adapted from LPC, Lane Theater Designation Report, report prepared by Anthony W. Robins (New York, 1988).
2. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, Block and Lot Folder, Block 1871, Lot 22, NB 138-32.
3. The four remaining movie theaters which are open to the public, are the Alden (now Regency) at 67th Street, the Midtown (now Metro) at 99th Street, the Essex (now Columbia) at 103rd Street and the Olympia at 107th Street.
4. Phone conversation with William Martin, Executive Secretary State Board for Architecture, Albany, New York, March 13, 1989.
5. West-End Collegiate Historic Designation Report (New York, 1984), p. 254, Upper East Side Historic District Report (New York, 1981), p. 1190. and Greenwich Village Historic District Designation Report (New York, 1969), pp. 116 & 117.
6. NYC, Department of Buildings, Block and Lot Folder, Block 1236, Lot 52. These alterations included some minor exterior alterations and interior plumbing alterations etc.
7. Upper East Side Historic District Report, vol. II, p. 1190.
8. American Architects Directory, ed. George S. Koyl, (New York, 1962), 63.
9. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, New Building Dockets, Block 1871, Lot 22, NB 138-32, (Municipal Archives and Records Center).
10. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, Block and Lot Folder, Block 1871, Lot 22, BN 1048-48.
11. Myra Forsberg, "Revival Houses: Curling Up With a Good Double Bill," New York Times, Mar. 14, 1986.
12. Information in this section was compiled from the following: "Goodbye, Midtown, Hello, Metro," New York Times, Oct. 1, 1982, C 10; Ziva Feiman, "An Uptown Theater," The Westsider, Dec. 20, 1984, 9. The marquee reconstruction was done by Redroof Design, architects; Lawrence Cohn, "Talbot Buys Rep-Bound N.Y. Site; 'Midtown' To Emerge As 'Metro'," Variety, Aug. 18, 1982, 5; "Metro N.Y. Going Firstrun In June," Variety, May 29, 1985, 4; "Talbot Switches Metro To Firstrun Twin Theater," Variety, July 23, 1986, 6.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Midtown Theater (now Metro Theater) has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as a part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

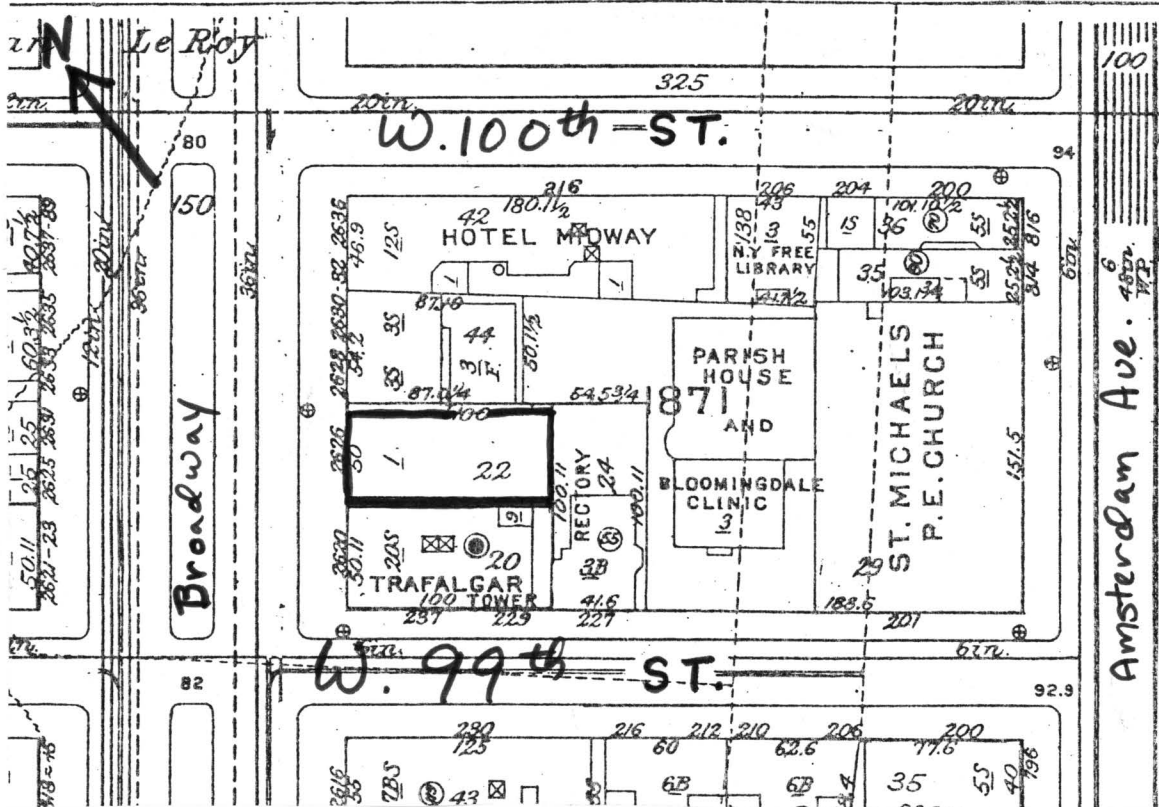
The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Midtown Theater, a rare surviving small Art Deco style neighborhood movie theater, has one of the finest facades of its type in New York City; that the Midtown is a prime example of a small commercial building constructed in the Art Deco style; that the theater is distinguished by a glazed terra-cotta facade, executed in various colors, predominantly beige and black, with a central medallion containing bas-relief stylized figures holding theatrical masks representing comedy and tragedy, symbolic of the use of the building as a theater; that, constructed during the Depression, the Midtown represents the culmination of the distinctively-designed Pre-World War II small neighborhood theater type in New York City; and that the Midtown is one of the few functioning pre-World War II movie theaters of the many which once lined Broadway on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534 of the Chapter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administration Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Midtown Theater (now Metro Theater), 2624-2626 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1871, Lot 22, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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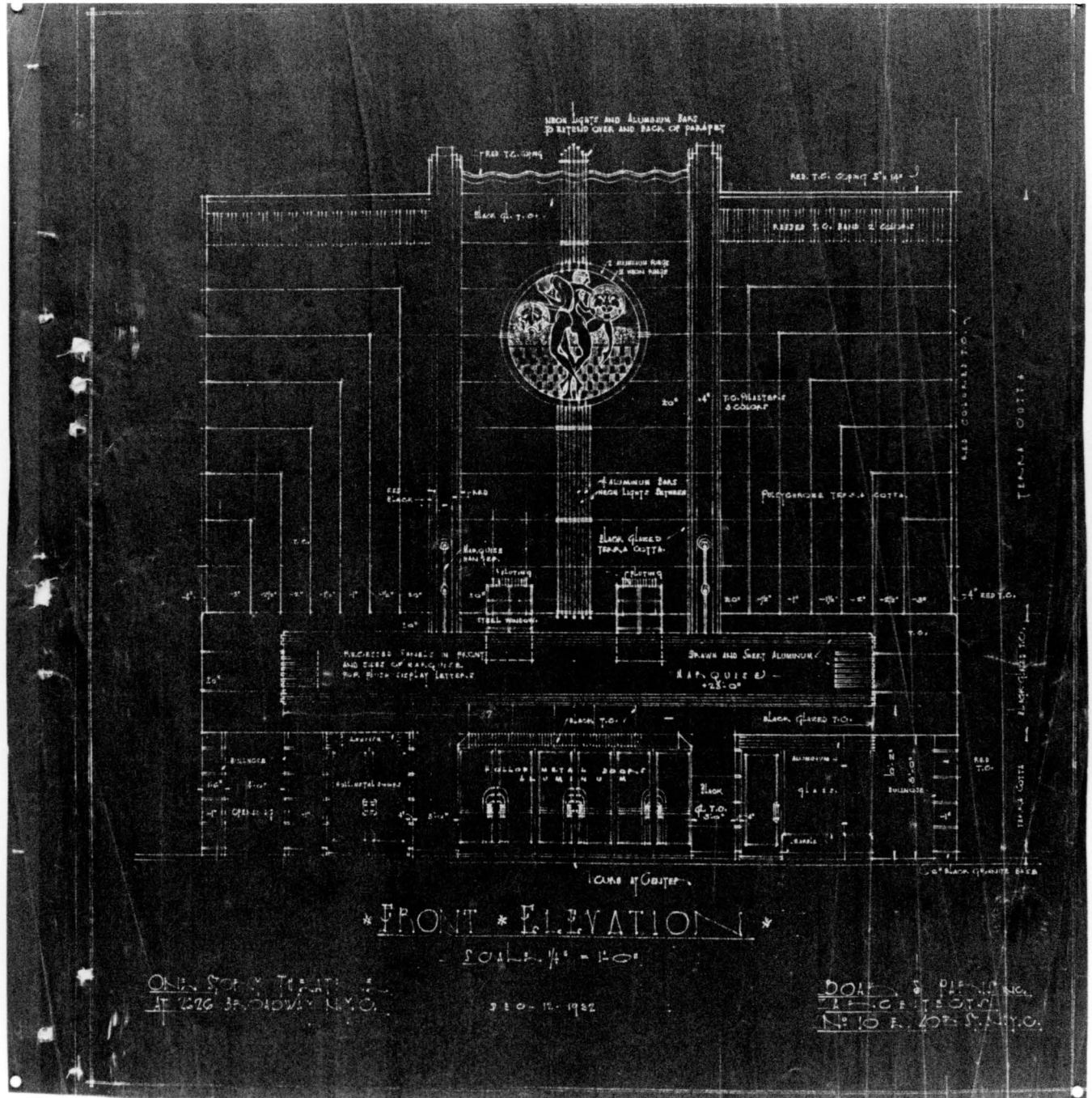
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Midtown Theater (now Metro Theater)
Landmark Site

Graphic Source: Sanborn Manhattan
Land Book, 1988-89



Midtown Theater (now Metro Theater), Photo Credit: Carl Forster
 Original Front Elevation, 1932



Midtown Theater (now Metro Theater), 1932-33
2624-2626 Broadway
Historical Photograph 1933, View of facade

Architects: Boak & Paris
Photo Credit: Museum of the
City of New York



Midtown Theater (now Metro Theater)
Historical Photograph 1938, view of facade

Photo Credit: Municipal Archives
City of New York, Dept. of Taxe
Collection



Midtown Theater (now Metro Theater)
Full view of facade

Photo Credit: Carl Forster



Midtown Theater (now Metro Theater)
Facade Medallion

Photo Credit: Carl Forster