



MEMORANDUM

Clarke Caton Hintz
Architecture
Planning
Landscape Architecture

To
Borough of Madison
Historic Preservation Commission

From
John D. S. Hatch; FAIA, LEED AP

Date
March 5, 2019

Project
Lyon's Movie Theater; Madison, NJ

Attention
Vincent Loughlin; Counsel to the HPC

Project No.
CCH #2079

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Regarding

HPC Application re. the Lyon's Madison Theatre at 14 Lincoln Place: The applicant proposes to demolish the existing, contributing structure and replace it with a four-story, mixed use building.

Owner/ Applicant: Mr. Kieran Flanagan; Madison Move Development LLC/ Saxum Real Estate Group

Site: 14 Lincoln Place; Lot 24, Block 2702

Designation: Contributing, Madison Civic Commercial District

Proposal:

Philip Caton, FAICP
John Hatch, FAIA
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John Clarke, FAIA

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The applicant has submitted a two-part proposal. The first is to demolish in its entirety the existing building (Lyon's Madison Theatre) at 14 Lincoln Place. This is a contributing structure in the Madison Civic Commercial District.



Figure 1: Photo of the front of the Theatre prior to closure.



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Description:

Built in 1925, it is described as a “Vernacular commercial” building in the Madison Civic Commercial District’s Nomination to the National Register of Historic Places: “The center portion of this brick, rectangular building includes a shaped parapet with central peak and battlements above a wooden marquee with coffered barrel vault. Behind the marquee is the original semi-octagonal box office flanked by French doors. Some alterations have been made to the ground floor fenestration. At the rear is a gabled stagehouse.”

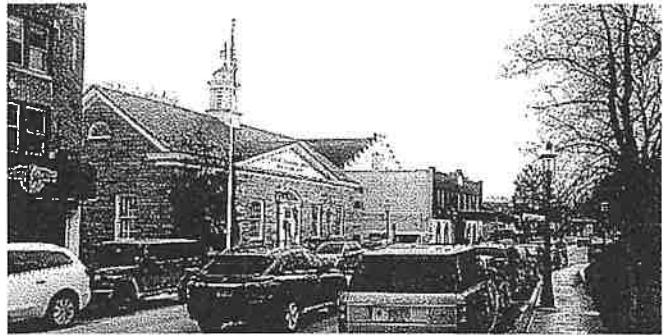


Figure 2: Existing streetscape.

The front portion of the building, which contains the lobby, is two stories tall, made of dark brick with cast stone detailing, now painted white on the first level and on the sides.

The ground floor has a prominent main entrance surmounted by a marquee (as described above) that has been altered from its original configuration (see figures 1 and 3). The coffering is likely original, but the exterior has been simplified and covered by painted wood boards. The ground floor now has four (two on each side of the main entry) arched, infilled windows. This is also a departure from the original design. The upper floor has six pairs of wood, one-over-one, double-hung windows. An inset cast stone plaque which reads, “Lyon’s Madison Theatre 1925” is located over the main entry at the decorative peak.

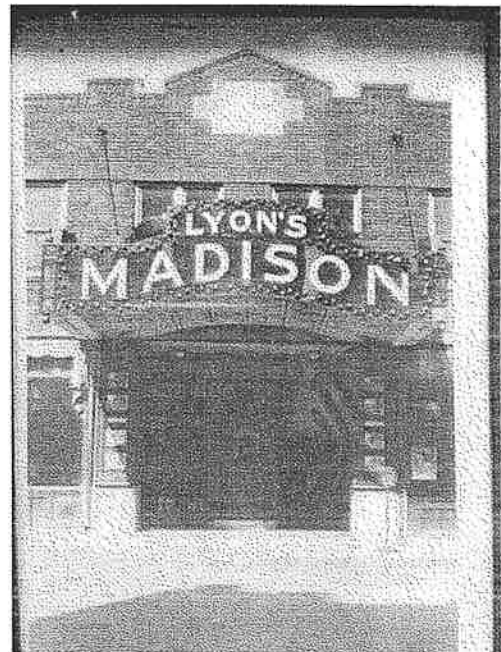


Figure 3: Historic photo of the front entry. Note: The current front facade, entry and marquee have been extensively altered.

The sides of the two story part of the building are constructed of painted brick, spalled and cracked in some locations. There are several double hung windows as well as downspouts, etc.



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The original, gabled stage-house begins at the rear of the lobby. The visible sides and rear of this part of the building are also constructed of painted brick with exterior piers at regular intervals. There are a number of utilitarian doors and openings relating to egress and loading requirements. This part of the building is significantly taller than the front lobby, although its apparent mass is reduced because the high point of the building is the central ridge. That being said, the sides and particularly the rear of the building feel quite massive because the site grade drops so dramatically, exposing more of the exterior walls.

Existing Building Condition:

The applicant arranged for a number of consultants to prepare reports regarding the condition of the Lyon's Madison Movie Theatre, including reports by Thornton Tomasetti regarding the condition of the structure and an Historic Preservation Review; and Persimmon Engineering, who provided an assessment of the structure last May. The McManus Design Group provided a structural condition report for the Borough.

I'm not going to repeat the issues identified in the three reports, which are largely in agreement with one another about the issues facing the building. Those issues, ranging from separation of the brick face from the structural backing, structural cracks, and spalled brick, are serious and will need to be addressed if the building were once again to be occupied. That being said, the building is in fair overall condition, considering that it has been vacant for several years. There is some minor water damage on the interior, and the building is not in imminent danger of collapse. Its rehabilitation or restoration would be expensive, but not impossible.

Existing Building Configuration:

In addition to the condition of the building, there are several aspects of the building's configuration that have an impact on its future use.

First, the building was designed for a specialized function: Showing movies to a single, large audience on a large screen at one end of the main space. The front portion of the building is the lobby, with long-vacant offices on the second floor; the majority of the building has a very tall ceiling with sloped floor that culminated in a single, large movie screen. The sloped floor remains in place, but the original theater was divided into several smaller ones.

Since the building has such a particular design, reconfiguring it for other uses is difficult. Almost any other use would require the construction of a new floor over the existing sloped floor (in order to provide a level surface), the addition of internal walls and structure, the reinforcing of the exterior walls and the cutting of new window openings in the exterior walls. Unlike other types of buildings (e.g. the more typical retail and commercial buildings in the rest of the Historic District), this is not an easy conversion. In order to keep the building, one



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of the only options that makes any sense would be to re-use it as a movie theater or some other performance venue. However, many performance venues require fly space and significant backstage area, thus requiring extensive reconfiguration of the building and cost, even for these more compatible uses.

Historic Preservation Assessment:

As described in the Nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, the Lyon's Madison Theatre is considered to be "Vernacular Commercial." Particularly in comparison to some of the other high-style and more elaborate buildings in the Civic Commercial District, its exterior has a relatively simple and utilitarian design, with only a few design flourishes, including the much-altered and simplified marquee, some cast-stone detailing, the inset plaque, the pilasters and the central gable. In addition, the front façade was significantly altered at some point, replacing the more elaborate storefront openings with infilled arched openings. The sides and rear of the building are completely utilitarian with few windows and no design intention other than to provide the necessary openings for egress and loading.

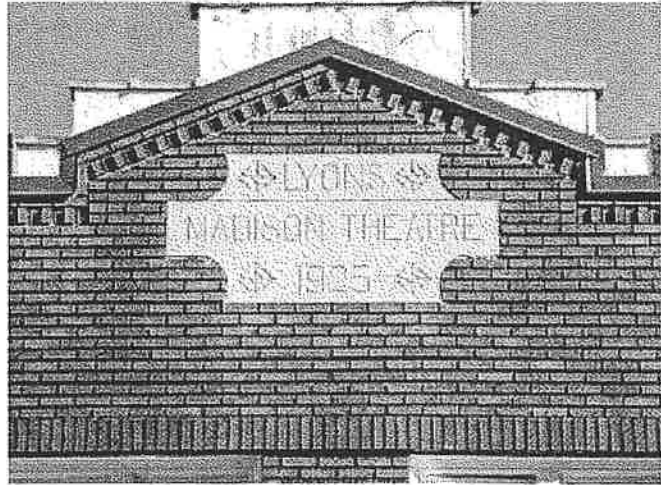


Figure 4: A detail of the "plaque" over the front entry.

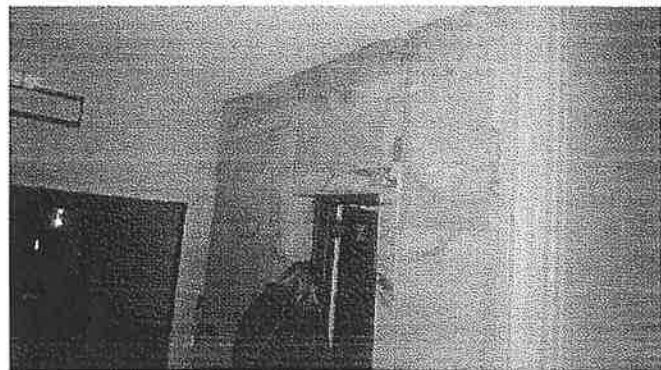


Figure 5: Some of the original finishes still apparent in the front lobby. Most of these features have been obscured or removed.

The interior has also been significantly altered. The original, large theater has been reconfigured into several smaller theaters, each taking advantage of the sloped floor. The original finishes have almost all been removed or obscured. Some of the original marble and pilasters are still evident in the lobby, although even there most of the original finishes have also been removed or obscured.



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The location of the Theatre is also worth discussing from an historic preservation and redevelopment point of view. Somewhat paradoxically, the site is both important (across from the main entry to the train station), and relatively obscure, on a side street at the edge of the Historic District. The buildings to the right of the Theatre are not in the District.

Summary of Issues Regarding Demolition:

The Historic Preservation Commission is charged with “achieving preservation of historic resources in the designated historic district”, and “promot[ing] the use of [the] historic district” and “foster[ing] private reinvestment in the historic district and balance[ing] the purposes of historic preservation with current needs”.

The Lyon's Madison Theatre is a contributing structure in the Madison Civic Commercial District. The demolition of a contributing or significant structure is typically the most drastic and most damaging action that can be contemplated in any Historic District. By definition, it will have a negative impact on the character of the District. That being said, there are a number of perhaps mitigating factors, including its location at the edge of the District, its relatively utilitarian design, the fact that both the interior and the exterior have been extensively altered, and the fact that the building has been vacant for several years.

The Borough's Historic Preservation Ordinance requires consideration of nine factors when an application for the demolition of a structure within the Historic District is presented. Below is my preliminary assessment of each of these factors, provided as a starting point for the HPC's discussion:

1. **The historic, architectural, cultural and aesthetic significance...:** The Lyon's Madison Theatre is not one of the architecturally significant structures in the Madison Commercial District (in contrast to the Webb Chapel, the Hartley Dodge Memorial, etc.), but is considered to be a “contributing” structure. It was constructed during the District's period of significance, and its individual character is in keeping with the overall character of the District. Its construction in 1925 reflects historic trends in the construction of movie theatres in small towns across New Jersey, although, at least on the exterior, it is a relatively utilitarian example that has been altered to a certain extent from its original design. Since the interior has been drastically altered and since interior photos are apparently not available, it is difficult to say how significant the original interior design was. In its current state, it is not architecturally or historically significant. That being said, over the course of its long life, the Theatre has become a cultural touchpoint for the community. Clearly, many people have fond memories of seeing movies here; it has long played an important part in the cultural, civic and commercial life of Madison.



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2. **Its current and potential use for the uses permitted by zoning:** There are a number of uses permitted by current zoning in this location, including commercial, retail and residential uses. The constraint facing the building in its current form is that it is not easy to rehabilitate/ reconfigure for uses other than the original one. Its two story front portion, large open space with sloped floor, small stage, lack of windows, tall interior volume, etc., were well-suited for a large, 1920's movie house, but are not practical, without complete reconfiguration, for other uses. In fact, the building required significant reconfiguration to make it economically viable, at least for a number of decades, as several smaller movie theatres. Apparently, its closure several years ago reflects additional economic constraints.

I am familiar with a number of downtowns that currently have viable movie theatres. In my experience, these tend to be niche theatres showing carefully curated selections in smaller venues. Examples include the Princeton Garden Theatre (subsidized by Princeton University); the County Theatre in Doylestown, PA; the Showroom Cinema in Asbury Park; and the Screening Room in Newburyport, MA. Each of these venues is smaller (some significantly smaller) than the Lyon's Madison Theatre. To make this type of downtown, specialized theatre work, the current building would require significant reconfiguration and investment.

Re-use as a different type of performing arts venue also seems like it would make sense, at least initially. However, these types of venues would also require significant reconfiguration in order to provide the necessary back-of-house spaces, including dressing rooms, set and prop storage, fly-space, etc.

3. **Its importance to the municipality and the extent to which its historical or architectural value is such that its removal would be detrimental to the public interest:** The Lyon's Madison Theatre is not an architecturally significant building in the Historic District. However, it is a contributing building, and it has provided an important cultural, commercial and civic function for many years. Removing the building and leaving a vacant lot would be a clear detriment to the public interest. This is an important site that deserves to have an attractive building that contributes to the life of the downtown. Unfortunately, its most important benefit for the Commercial District, its function as a movie theatre, is already gone. The goal should be to bring a viable use or uses back to this important site.
4. **The extent to which it is of such old, unusual or uncommon design...that it could not be reproduced...:** As already stated, the Lyon's Madison Theater is a relatively utilitarian example of a 1920's commercial theater, significantly less decorative than the larger movie palaces of the era (Loews Jersey City, for instance). The interior has



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been greatly altered, with most of the original detail removed and the original floor plan completely reconfigured. The character of the exterior of the building is relatively easy to reproduce, given the straightforward nature of the design. The original use of the building (a large movie theatre) is not so easy to reproduce as the nature and economics of watching movies has changed dramatically.

5. **The extent to which its retention would increase property values, promote business,,,attract visitors...attract new residents...:** A working movie theatre brings visitors to a downtown, and, because it is an attractive and relatively rare feature, may even attract new residents. However, this is only the case if the movie theatre is operational and well-maintained. An empty, deteriorating building, particularly at a prominent location near the train station, will diminish value and interest in the Borough of Madison.
6. **The probable impact of removal upon ambiance of the District:** In terms of its architecture, the Lyon's Madison Theatre is, at least in its current form, a somewhat background building. It isn't highly detailed, its storefront windows have been altered and filled-in, its marquee has been altered, the second floor of the lobby has been vacant for decades, etc. The building came to life when it was opened for business, the lights were turned on and crowds of people entered and exited.

In some ways, this building is at a key location, across from the train station, with tunnel access to Borough Hall. On the other hand, it's on a side street at the edge of the Historic District. As this is an "edge" of the district, its loss would have less of an impact than the loss of a structure on the main commercial streets, or a building that is part of a row of historic structures. If the Theatre were demolished and left as a vacant lot, other, less architecturally interesting buildings along Lincoln Place and behind it would become more prominent or would be newly exposed to view and the street edge would be compromised. It is important that this site have an attractive building with viable uses. A new building does have the possibility, if well designed, of bringing further redevelopment to the section of town southeast of the district, which could benefit the entire downtown historic district financially and aesthetically.

7. **Structural soundness and integrity of the building and the economic feasibility of restoring or rehabilitating the structure:** The reports from three different structure engineers argue that the building is significantly deteriorated, and/ or that it has some significant structural issues that need to be addressed. As stated above, these issues appear to be costly but not impossible to address. That being said, the building was designed with a very specialized use in mind: A single, large movie theatre. There is a lobby area with a completely different design and structure



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abutted to a large space with a sloped floor and no windows. Some type of theatre, movie or live performance, is likely the most compatible new use, given the building's design. Even a retail or storage use would require a new, level floor structure to be inserted, greatly adding to the cost of rehabilitation. New residential uses in the existing building are also not feasible given the extensive new structure that would be required, as well as the addition of new window and door openings on the sides and rear of the building.

8. **Move the building?** Moving a masonry building this size is not economically feasible and does not make sense in this case.

9. **Whether the applicant will remove and reuse certain important features:** From the drawings submitted by the applicant, the Lyon's Theater Plaque will be preserved and reinstalled. The HPC may place other conditions upon a new structure that could maintain a memory of the old building. See the next section for some suggestions in line with mitigations typically required by the NJ Historic Preservation Office, etc.

While never desirable, the loss of this particular resource in Madison Borough is perhaps not as disastrous as the loss of other, more significant structures in the midst of the Historic District might be. Here are some of the mitigating factors to consider:

1. This is a contributing structure in the Historic District, not a "significant" structure. Its design is not elaborate or unusual and its character is not difficult to recreate.
2. It is located on the edge of the Historic District, not in the midst of or connected to other historic buildings.
3. It is a building type that has become economically difficult to maintain.
4. It is a building type that is difficult to convert to other uses.
5. What is the likelihood of the rehabilitation of the building in its current form?

Possible Mitigations:

If the Lyon's Madison Movie Theatre were to be demolished, which would have a negative effect on the character of the District, there are a number of possible mitigations that the Historic Preservation Commission could consider. Some typical mitigations that are sometimes imposed by the NJ Historic Preservation Office and other government entities in cases where there are "encroachments" include:

1. Allowing demolition once certain conditions are met: Consider approving demolition after full Land Use approvals have been granted, all building permits have been issued and the owner can provide adequate assurance to the Borough that financing



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is in place and the construction of the new building will proceed in a timely fashion. The worst outcome would be demolition without replacement.

2. Documenting the existing building through detailed measured drawings and photographs.
3. Preserving and re-use some of the important historic features of the building. This could include the stone plaque in the central gable with the name of the building; the marquee (if the current marquee is the original one and if its original features are intact); the ticket booth (if the current booth is the original one and has original features intact), etc.
4. Installing permanent interpretive material in the front lobby of the new building that includes historic photos and a summary of the building's history, etc.
5. Including a movie theatre in the design of the new building (this is already contemplated).

Façade-ectomy: Sometimes, a suggestion is made to preserve and re-use some portion of an exterior façade as a “last resort”. This type of treatment is sometimes called a “façade-ectomy”, referring to the demolition of a building behind the main façade, and then the construction of a new building, attaching it to the original façade. This treatment is not considered a valid historic preservation treatment because no meaningful character-defining features are preserved. Typically, the historic façade and the new building bear little relationship to one another, thus creating a jarring and dissatisfying relationship between the two.

Preserve the Front Lobby: A more meaningful option to consider might be the preservation and re-use of the two-story front portion of the building (the entry, lobby and second floor offices). Preserving this part of the building might be sufficient to keep some sense of the original character of the structure and its relationship to the street. The new building design could then connect to and incorporate this original piece of the Theatre. However, preserving one part of a building while removing another can be a complex and difficult proposition. The consulting structural engineers (both the applicant's and the Borough's) should provide opinions about the feasibility of preserving the front portion of the Lyon's Madison Theatre and connecting it the new building.

The Proposed New Building:

If the demolition of the Lyon's Madison Theatre proceeds, the design of the new building will be extremely important. As stated above, while located on a side street, this is an important site, particularly since it is located directly across from one of the main entrances to the train station.

The applicant has provided Site Plans, prepared by Bowman Consulting, and architectural plans and renderings, prepared by Gertler and Wentz Architects, LLP. The Historic



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Preservation Review, prepared by Thornton Tomasetti, also addresses some of the architectural issues.

In terms of the proposed mix of uses, the combination of residential, retail, structured parking and a small movie theatre would, in most cases, be considered an exciting and vibrant addition to a downtown commercial district. From the 1950's through the 1990's, most downtown areas lost this mix of uses, thus losing vitality and economic viability. More recently, towns and cities have been seeking this kind of mixed-use development, especially encouraging new residential uses to help bring more activity to downtown streets.

When considering the design of a new building in an Historic District, the Secretary of the Interior provides limited assistance, based on the Guidelines for the Treatment of Historic Properties. These include:

As with new additions, the massing, size, scale, and architectural features of new construction on the site of a historic building must be compatible with those of the historic building(s)... New construction should also be distinct from the old and must not attempt to replicate historic buildings elsewhere on site and to avoid creating a false sense of historic development.

This language is not particularly clear, so some additional clarifications would be useful. In 2011, the State of Oregon published the "Restore Oregon Special Report: Compatible Infill Design". Several points are particularly relevant when new construction is contemplated:

- 1. The District Is the Resource, Not Its Individual Parts: Designated historic districts are significant as a collective whole...*
- 2. New Construction Will Reinforce the Historic Significance of the District: Infill buildings should relate to and strengthen the core characteristics of the district, as identified in the National Register Nomination Statement of Significance. New construction should build upon (this) story...*
- 3. New Construction Will Complement and Support the District: ...Infill buildings should not deviate in a detracting manner (from the character of the District), but appear as complementary members...*
- 4. Infill Should Be Compatible Yet Distinct.*
- 5. The Exterior Envelope and Patterning of New Buildings Will Reflect District Characteristics.*

Given these principles, the proposed design of the new building raises two overall issues: Its scale and mass, and its architectural detailing.



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Scale and mass: The scale and mass of the proposed building is greater than the original building, and it is taller than what is permitted by zoning. The front portion of the Theatre currently has two stories, while this design proposes three. The proposed fourth floor is set back from the front of the building, helping to reduce the apparent mass of the building from the street. However, the apparent mass on the sides and rear of the building is greater than the original (even if nominally only 4+ feet taller), since the Theatre had a sloped roof to a central ridge.

The existing buildings on Lincoln Place have a mix of one, two and three stories. To the right of the site, the existing commercial buildings are one story and not part of the Historic District. To the immediate left, the post office is a one story, carefully detailed colonial revival building. The next building (8 Lincoln Place) is a three-story 1920's commercial structure made of brick. The applicant makes the point that the three-story front portion of the proposed building is somewhat shorter than this existing building on the block. It should also be noted that the train station entry on Lincoln place is two stories but relatively tall, and that there are several 3 ½ or 4 story buildings in the District.

Rendering 1 on Sheet T-001.00 shows the relationship of the proposed building to the Post Office, to 8 Lincoln Place and to the Train Station. While larger than the Post Office, the new building is in keeping with the scale of the other buildings (particularly the train station) and the width of the street.

There are other aspects of the proposed design that also help to reduce its apparent scale, especially when compared to the existing building. The design of the existing Theatre is, essentially, a front façade attached to a blank box. The sides and rear of the Theatre are, for the most part, large, blank walls, without design detail. While the front of the building has a relatively simple design for a 1925 movie theatre, the sides and rear are completely utilitarian, and do not add to the character of the building or the Historic District. Their appearance has been tolerated because of the beneficial use of the building.

In contrast, the proposed building has four sides: All of the elevations have been carefully designed with windows, doors, setbacks, different materials, etc. These proposed elevations are an improvement over the existing sides and rear in the sense that they add design interest and scale where there were only blank walls.

To address concerns about the mass and scale of the building, the applicant should provide specific height comparisons for all facades, showing how the height of the new building compares with the existing.



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Architectural Detailing: The design of the new building, while attractive and appropriate for some contexts, appears to be too tough and industrial for the Madison Commercial District. Madison's history and development do not include any significant industrial buildings or developments. The downtown was and is commercial, with a mix of relatively small-scale stores, offices and residences serving the surrounding area. Architectural references to industrial styles or detailing on the new building seem out of place. More specifically, the following design forms and details add to the dissonance of the proposed design and the existing character of the Historic District:

1. Overall size and organization of the front façade: This site and building are wider than most other buildings in the District. Although the proposed design is divided into three parts and de-emphasizes the front corners to reduce the apparent width, other aspects of the design, including the marked horizontals carrying through all three parts, and the massive, continuous storefronts on the ground floor, emphasize the width and make the building appear quite different from most other buildings in the District.
2. Façade organization: Many of the buildings in the District have a distinct tri-partite organization: base, middle and top. The proposed design of the front façade de-emphasizes, in some ways, this organization. In particular, the materials carry through all three floors, and the cornice seems small and out of scale with the overall building design. Consider changing materials at the base (the storefront) and adding detail at the top to create more of a tri-partite feel to the overall design.
3. Ratio of openings to masonry wall: Part of what makes this building feel industrial is the relative proportion of openings to solid wall. Most of the buildings in the District have "punched" openings, with a much lower percentage of window to wall. Adjusting this ration, particularly on the front of the building, should be considered.
4. Storefronts: The large, blank glass storefronts are particularly out of character. These are very wide, with few mullions, and very tall (taller even than the awnings). Adding smaller scale detailing and materials, inspired by the original design of the Theatre storefront, would help improve the scale and character.



Figure 6: Typical buildings in the Commercial District.



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5. Awnings: The awning design is both quite industrial in character (steel sections with steel rods) and apparently non-functional (it appears from one of the renderings in the Historic Preservation report that the awnings don't actually provide cover). This design should be reconsidered to provide additional interest and detail, while also providing a useful function for people waiting for the train or for pick-up in the rain.
6. Building corners: The corners, particularly the front corners, are emphasized (and "dematerialized") with large, triple windows that separate the front façade from the side elevations, emphasizing the thinness of the front façade, and introducing a Modernist design element to the prominent front corners. This is particularly apparent in the 1st rendering on Sheet T-001.00, "View from Lincoln Place Looking West." Since this building has such prominent side views, it would be preferable for the front façade design aesthetic to continue more clearly along the East and West elevations, without such a dramatic break. Consider continuing the brick facades around the corners and for some distance on each side.
7. Parapet: The height of the parapet at the front of the building helps to obscure the height and mass of the fourth floor. Once the building turns the corner, the parapet drops, increasing the apparent height and mass of the fourth floor. It appears to "loom" over the building, particularly in the rendering "View from Lincoln Place Looking West." Consider increasing the height of the parapet along the sides of the building to help reduce the apparent mass of the fourth floor.
8. Fourth Floor Windows: The floor to ceiling, uniform design of the fourth floor windows also may be adding to the apparent mass of the fourth floor. Explore alternative window designs and materials to help alleviate this perception.
9. Side Entry to the Proposed Movie Theatre: One of the beneficial aspects of the proposed design is the activation of the side elevations, especially the addition of a side entrance between the Post Office and the proposed building. This entry marks access to the lobby of the proposed, small movie theatre, and creates the opportunity for a small-scale, outdoor, civic space. Integrated signage, paving, outdoor seating, and planting areas could make this a wonderful asset for the community. Provide additional details of what is proposed in this area and how the signage for the proposed theatre will be both appropriate and obvious enough to attract customers.

As stated previously, if the Lyon's Madison Theatre is demolished, some or all of the mitigations described above should be implemented.