

# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

**ALGER THEATER**, Wayne County, Michigan

## **Section 7.**

### **Narrative Description**

The simply detailed Art Moderne Alger Theater has been a landmark at the northwest corner of East Warren Avenue and Outer Drive since its construction as a neighborhood movie house in 1935. A blocky two-story square-plan “tower” with instepping parapet dominates the building’s corner at the Warren/Outer Drive intersection; an angled projecting element facing the intersection supports a vertical sign bearing the theater’s name, “ALGER.” Four one-story stores front the building along the Warren side west of the tower containing the box office and entrances, and the two-story high façade of the theater proper on that side is set back behind them. The two-story high outer lobby and one-story inner lobby and the balcony-less auditorium display much of their historic finishes, the auditorium concrete block walls with decorative horizontal banding in smaller molded concrete brick and stepped metal sconces with rounded ends. The theater stands in deteriorated condition but is owned by the Friends of the Alger Theater and will be restored.

Located at the intersection of East Warren Avenue and East Outer Drive in Detroit, the Alger Theater is prominently sited. East Warren Avenue is a commercial street lined with one and two story retail buildings mainly from the late 1920’s and 1930’s. Some are designed in the Art Deco style with geometric brick work and others utilized revival styles such as Spanish Colonial Revival to differentiate and draw attention to the retailers. In the 1990’s, the streetscape was redone by the East Warren Business Association, and the sidewalks were replaced, and new pedestrian level globe street lighting, and banners as well as planters were added. These improvements were made to both the East Warren Avenue and East Outer Drive sidewalks on each side of the Alger Theater.

The Alger was designed in the Art Moderne style. The Art Moderne style incorporates smooth wall surfaces, flat roofs and sleek streamline curving lines that give a sense of motion to a static building. By the early 1940’s the Art Moderne style looked toward geometric cubism. It wasn’t until the mid-1960’s that the style was tagged Art Moderne. The geometric forms applied to the parapet and Outer Drive facade of the Alger Theater classify its design as being in the Art Moderne style.

The Alger Theater is intact and retains most of its original building materials. The theater is constructed with a structural steel support system and faced with brick. The building fills its lot from the sidewalks of both East Warren and East Outer Drive to the alley. At the corner of the two front facades at East Warren and East Outer Drive is the box office, sheathed in metal panels on the lower half and plexiglass on the upper half; both are held together by aluminum frames. Extending from each side of the box office on each façade are aluminum framed entrance doors. The doors were originally glass, but have since been boarded for protection. On the East Outer Drive façade, three poster cases promoted feature films. Each of the façades of the Alger has had the siding material removed from the bays closest to the entrance doors. The structural masonry is exposed next to the door frames on each side of the entrance. The East Warren

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façade has eight aluminum/glass doors running west from the box office. West of the doors is a brick bay that has a poster case affixed to the wall.

The East Warren façade of the Alger Theater is faced with yellow brick that has since been painted. The East Warren facade continues past the entrance doors and lobby of the theater structure, dropping in height for four one-story storefronts. The two-story auditorium of the theater is set back behind the storefronts, sharing a party wall at the rear of the stores. The Outer Drive façade of the Alger Theater is faced with yellow brick set in varying horizontal patterns with two large insets which were originally cement covered spaces. There are two doorways used as emergency exits on the East Outer Drive façade that have an Art Deco cast stone recessed relief above each.

The interior of the Alger Theater features an entrance lobby, and an inner lobby which runs behind (east of) the auditorium. The entrance lobby is two stories in height and rectangular in plan. Its floor has black granite trim surrounding beige linoleum tiles. There is a small door to the box office for the ticket seller located between the sets of entrance doors. The entrance doors have aluminum frames and plate glass and are topped by transom windows. The plaster walls have been painted various colors over the years, and many of the colors are visible today. Most dominant is the red paint used to outline the wall sections and ceiling. The plaster ceiling contains a decorative recess in an elongated cut-corner rectangle shape. Faint remains of original geometric stencilwork patterns can be seen in a few areas of the inner and entrance lobbies. Three sets of double doors lead to the rear inner lobby and auditorium.

The inner lobby ceiling drops to a low one-story height. The walls are faced with alternating double courses of concrete block and a course of decorative molded concrete brick. This decorative concrete block system creates the appearance of a frieze on alternating levels. The frieze level at the ceiling is a decorative brick course. The walls have been painted white with glitter mixed in the paint. There is a single staircase that splits into a double stair at the east wall of the inner lobby. In the lobby on either side of the restroom staircase are decorative vertical beveled glass mirrors in a stepped Art Deco style. There are also emergency exit doors on each side of the staircase. These two emergency exit doors lead to East Outer Drive.

The auditorium rear wall allows for entrance to four aisles aligned with the aisles flanking the three seating sections. There is a large open window in the back auditorium wall that allows the patron in the inner lobby to see the screen and available seats before entering the auditorium. There are four original Art Moderne sconces on each of the auditorium side walls, and the stage-house remains. The stage was extended into the seating area, and remains a large theatrical size stage. There are emergency exits on both sides of the proscenium and an additional emergency exit at the center of the south wall of the auditorium. This exit leads to a staircase and short hallway to a doorway located between two of the East Warren storefronts.

The Alger does not have a balcony, and all the seats are on the main level of the auditorium. The auditorium ceiling is plastered, and again various color schemes are visible due to water

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damage. The auditorium side walls are constructed of the same alternating double courses of concrete block and decorative concrete brick that were used in the inner lobby walls. Currently a cream colored paint is on the lower half of the side walls, and a deep red paint covers the upper half.

The four storefronts on the East Warren façade contained various tenants over the years. The final tenants remained until the mid 1980's. They included: a stained glass studio, shoe shine shop, used clothing shop, and Hank's Shoe Repair. The storefronts have various types of siding covering the windows and doors since they are no longer in use. There is a partial basement under a portion of the storefronts. The alley façade is finished in common brick, and the western façade, which is adjacent to the commercial building to the west, cannot be seen.

The property was altered in 1968 when the Alger was purchased by the Suburban Detroit Theaters chain. They remodeled the theater's interior and exterior, and added red metal covering over the brick coping at the roofline. The brick exterior of the theater was painted gray. The owners removed the original vertical and horizontal marquees, and installed new smaller vertical and horizontal marquees on each street facade. The number of seats has changed over the years as new, larger seats were installed, and when several rows were removed from the front when the stage was expanded. Originally seating 1,182 patrons<sup>1</sup>, the Alger Theater was re-seated in 1977 and now has a capacity of 825 seats. The Friends of the Alger Theater has repainted the exterior brick a combination of cream and brown. Otherwise, the theater remains intact.

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<sup>1</sup> Morrison, Andrew Craig, "Opera House, Nickel Show and Palace," Greenfield Village & Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Michigan, 1974.

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## **8. Statement of Significance**

### **Narrative Statement of Significance**

The 1935 Alger remains as a representative example of a whole generation of Detroit neighborhood movie theaters now mostly gone. Originally operated by Detroit movie theater and radio magnate George W. Trendle, the Alger was one of 117 neighborhood movie theaters that existed in the city in the 1940s. Only about a dozen still remain, and most of them have been renovated beyond recognition. The Alger is Art Moderne in style and retains much of its historic finishes.

The Alger Theater was presumably named for General and Michigan Governor Russell A. Alger (1836-1907). Alger served during the Civil War where he was commissioned Lieutenant Colonel of the Sixth Michigan Cavalry and the Colonel of the Fifth in 1863. He served under General Sheridan in the Shenandoah Valley until his resignation in September, 1864. After the war, Alger amassed a fortune in the lumber industry and became politically influential. Entering into public political life, he was elected Governor of Michigan for a two year term (1885-1886). Alger was a Michigan delegate to the Republican National Convention and was named Secretary of War in 1897 under President McKinley and served as a Cabinet member until 1899. Governor Alger served as United States Senator from 1902 until he died in office in 1907. He was memorialized by the Russell A. Alger Memorial Fountain in Grand Circus Park and the naming of Alger Avenue in Detroit and Alger County in Michigan. The home of his son, Russell A. Alger, Junior, is located in the city of Grosse Pointe Farms, a few miles from the Alger Theater.

In 1896 the first movie was shown in Michigan when the Detroit Opera House screened a short film depicting a bullfight. It was not until 1906 that the first permanent theater, the Casino, was constructed in downtown Detroit on Monroe Avenue. As movies exploded in popularity, the larger movie and vaudeville theaters in Grand Circus Park in Detroit were built beginning in 1917. These movie palaces could seat over 1,000 people, and were designed with opulent plasterwork, elaborate stencil work and terrazzo floors. The downtown palaces borrowed styling from such diverse sources as European palaces, Spanish castles and even Aztec buildings and often combined them into exaggerated and exotic motifs. The neighborhood movie theaters in Detroit were constructed from about 1910 until the early 1940's. The neighborhood theaters were often handsomely appointed, and only a few were designed in the elaborate styles of the downtown palaces.

### **Context Development**

In the days before television, many Detroit area residents could claim as many as three or more movie houses within walking distance of home. Typically, people went to their neighborhood theater at least once a week. For less than fifty cents, a patron could sit through several hours of entertainment consisting of a two-reel comedy, a cartoon, and a newsreel in addition to the feature attraction. Increased attendance after World War II led to the highest national attendance figures ever recorded in 1946. That year ninety million Americans attended movies every week.

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In the late 1930's, large neighborhood theater construction began again with the new movie houses designed in the Art Moderne style. This was the era of the Alger Theater's construction, and other large neighborhood theaters were built in Detroit in the Art Moderne style. Two of Detroit's largest neighborhood theaters, the Harper Theater and the Mercury Theater were in the Art Moderne style. The Harper Theater, by Charles Agree, had two thousand seats and was built in 1939. Now called Harpos, it has been converted into a nightclub. The Mercury Theater on the west side of Detroit also had two thousand seats, and was built in 1941 by architect Ted Rogvoy. The Mercury was demolished in 1991. The Mercury and the Harper Theaters featured elaborate interior detailing including murals, neon cove lighting and large lobbies – to a much greater extent than the Alger Theater.

A number of smaller neighborhood theaters were designed in the Art Moderne style in Detroit and the suburbs. Closest to the Alger was the Vogue Theater designed in 1937 by Periera & Periera on Harper near Cadieux. The Vogue had 1,460 seats and was demolished in 1980. On the city of Detroit's Westside, the very streamline Westtown Theater was designed by Charles Agree in 1936 and had 1,700 seats. The Norwest (1936), also on the west side at Grand River and Southfield, sat 1,366 and was designed by architect Hector Payne. The Beverly Theater (1937) also by Agree had 1,475 seats and was located on Detroit's west side. Out in the suburbs, numerous Art Moderne style theaters were built such as the Park Theater in Lincoln Park, the Berkley in Berkley, the Penn in Plymouth, and the State Wayne in Wayne Michigan.

Research reveals that in 1943 there were 117 neighborhood movie theaters in the city of Detroit – what is most likely the peak number. This does not include the dozen “downtown” movie theaters that featured premieres and first-run movies. At that time, Detroit's population was near its peak of almost two million people and in 1943, the market erosion due to television had yet to begin. Today, only about a dozen neighborhood movie theaters remain in the city of Detroit, and one of them, the Norwest, was demolished in August of 2004. The Norwest was replaced by a fast food restaurant – a fate which has befallen several of the other neighborhood movie theaters of Detroit. The neighborhood movie theater is certainly one of the most endangered building types in the city of Detroit.

The Alger Theater stands as one of the two intact and unchanged neighborhood movie theaters left in Detroit. The other intact theater is the Redford Theater (1928) at Lasher and Grand River, which has been restored by a nonprofit organization, and shows vintage movies. The remaining theater buildings include:

1. Civic – Kelly Road – gutted and is currently a used furniture/junk shop.
2. Eastown – Van Dyke – intact but deteriorating and currently for sale.
3. Fine Arts – Woodward – renovated extensively, and occasionally used as a theater.
4. Guild/Franklin – Gratiot – has been renovated and is vacant.
5. Harper – now called Harpos, it was converted into a heavy metal night club and all murals and detailing have been removed, and the floor was leveled.

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6. Irving – Fenkell – converted into a church.
7. Lasky – Jos. Campau – converted to a furniture store and is now vacant and for sale.
8. Majestic – Woodward – converted to a nightclub/music venue and the balcony removed.
9. Midtown – West Canfield – extensive renovations converted it into a church.
10. Rio – West Vernor – converted into a furniture store.
11. Senate – Michigan – owned by a non-profit called the “Detroit Theater Organ Society” who holds occasional organ concerts.
12. Stratford – West Vernor – remodeled into a church.

Several factors led to the decline of the neighborhood movie theater. First were changes in the movie studio system when anti-trust lawsuits reconfigured the studios’ control over film distribution. Next, World War II veterans started families and moved out to the booming suburbs surrounding Detroit. And finally, television - the cheapest of all entertainments - began drawing business away in droves. Motion picture theater attendance dropped to fifty million weekly by the early 1950’s.

### Alger Theater History

The Alger movie theater was built in 1935 by Detroit theater developer Saul Sloan and his wife Hattie. This is according to City of Detroit construction permit #20944 taken out on April 4, 1935. The Sloan family leased the theater to Detroit entertainment magnate George Washington Trendle (1884–1972). Trendle was an attorney who became partner with Detroit theater pioneer John H. Kunsky (who later changed his last name to King). John Kunsky and George Trendle built many of the early movie palaces in Detroit including the Madison, Adams and Capitol Theaters in the Grand Circus Park theater district in downtown Detroit, and in 1925 were the largest purveyors of film entertainment in the state of Michigan. Their company became well known as the independent United Detroit (UD) Theaters Corp. chain of theaters. In 1929 Trendle and Kunsky sold the UD Theaters to Publix Theaters, a subsidiary of Paramount film producing corporation. The deal marked the sale of the last large independent theater group in the country to Publix, whose theater holdings at the time numbered close to a thousand and covered every section of the United States. The 1929 sale left Trundle and Kunsky with \$6,000,000, seventy two percent of which was in Paramount stock. An unusual part of the contract stated that Kunsky and Trendle agreed never to offer theatrical opposition to the Publix-Detroit unit. The contract also stipulated a fifty year agreement for both Kunsky and Trendle to remain out of show business within a radius of fifty miles of Detroit. Kunsky and Trendle changed careers and bought the faltering radio station WXYZ, and this later proved to be a very sound investment.

The stock market crash of 1929 put Paramount’s Publix into bankruptcy receivership just four years after they bought out United Detroit. So in 1933, a “decentralization plan” was put in place by Publix to sell the theaters back to their old independent owners. George Trendle signed an agreement for eventual ownership of the Michigan, United Artists, State, Fisher, Riviera, Annex, Ramona, Eastown and Birmingham Theaters for just \$1,500,000. The returning owner Trendle

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stated, "My policy will prohibit smoking in the theaters." Another article announcing the return to Trendle's ownership headlined, "Good, Clean Films are Aim of Old-Time Theater Owner." The article went on to state that Mr. Trendle led a nationwide campaign against material for adults and children being shown on stage together. His production managers sat in on each initial performance and marked down every smutty line or gesture in a notebook. Trendle's lobbying efforts succeeded in promoting national movie censorship by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, known as the "Will Hays office."

In 1935 when the Alger Theater opened, it was billed in the newspaper with the line: "Direction George W. Trendle." According to George Trendle's son, George W. Trendle Jr., his father sold his interest in the theater before World War II. This follows because, in 1939, Trendle retired as president and executive head of the United Detroit Theaters Corp. in order to devote his future to his radio interests. At the end of his movie theater career, Trendle and Kunsky owned sixteen theaters in Metro Detroit including the Alger. Mr. Trendle co-owned WXYZ radio station in 1929 -1943 and he was the original creator and produced the original Lone Ranger and Green Hornet radio programs.<sup>2</sup> The shows were both phenomenally successful and eventually were picked up by the American Broadcasting Co. and broadcast over 224 stations nationwide to over twenty million listeners. The Lone Ranger aired as a radio show from January 30, 1933 until 1954. Trendle continued to work in his office until he was past the age of eighty five.

The Alger Theater was built as a neighborhood movie theater, and served that purpose for fifty years, showing movies until 1985. Opening night was August 22, 1935, and newspaper reports stated that 1,200 enthusiastic east side Detroiters came for a double feature showing "The Girl from Tenth Avenue," starring Bette Davis, and "Oil for the Lamps of China" with Pat O'Brien, Jean Muir, and Josephine Hutchinson. The Alger Theater's newspaper advertisements tell of the state-of-the-art amenities which included premium sound and projection equipment, comfort seating and air conditioning.<sup>3</sup> Sometime after 1939, the Alger Theater became part of the Wisper & Wetsman circuit.<sup>4</sup>

The Wisper & Wetsman theater chain was a Detroit-based organization owned by Lew Wisper and Frank Wetsman. Wisper's career began in 1919, and he built a small chain of theaters on his own. He went out of business in 1929, but in 1932 went back into the theater business and joined forces with another neighborhood theater exhibitor, Frank Wetsman. Their chain grew to operate twenty theaters in Detroit and the suburbs.

In 1968, the Alger Theater was sold to Suburban Detroit Theaters, another chain, and it reopened on September 20, 1968 with the movie "The Fox" starring Sandy Dennis. The same group remodeled the theater's interior, and on the exterior, added red metal covering over the brick coping and a new vertical and horizontal marquee. The brick exterior of the theater was painted gray.

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<sup>2</sup> Zink, Charlie, "The Alger Theater, A Brief History." 1994.

<sup>3</sup> "Alger Is to Open With 2 Features," The Detroit News, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1935.

<sup>4</sup> Galbraith IV, Stuart, "Motor City Marquees," McFarland & Company, Jefferson, North Carolina, 1994, pp. 43.

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By the mid-1970's, socioeconomic changes occurred in Detroit, and neighborhood movie theaters were diminishing in number. The Alger was purchased by Eric and Ervin Steiner Jr. in mid 1977, and they added a full stage by projecting the stage into the auditorium space. This reduced the seating to the current 825. The Alger reopened as a live events theater on October 25, 1978 with appearances by film and television stars Kitty Carlisle-Hart and Peter Lind Hayes. The Alger hosted "Big Bands Live" in 1979 with the Tommy Dorsey, Stan Kenton, Dave Brubek, Glenn Miller, and Duke Ellington orchestras. The promoters showed occasional family films. Even rock groups such as Blood Sweat & Tears played at the Alger. The stage was also used for community theater performances of plays and musicals such as "Anything Goes" and "Bye Bye Birdie." Within a few years, the Alger went back to running movies full-time. The theater closed as a performing arts venue in 1981 and the Steiners sold the Alger.

In 1984 the theater reopened under new ownership and programming was limited to second run "B" movies. The movies, coupled with a low admission price, began to draw a young, unruly crowd. The Alger closed in 1985 after a near riot when the projector broke during a double feature showing of "Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part IV" and "Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> Part V: A New Beginning."<sup>5</sup>

The non-profit group, Friends of the Alger Theater, was formed in 1983 to save the theater from possible demolition. The group's hope was to restore and renovate the theater to provide family films, community concerts and plays. In December of 1986 the Friends negotiated with the owners and purchased the theater. The Friends were also obligated to pay overdue property taxes of \$33,000 to the City of Detroit, and an over due water bill of nearly \$7,000. With a membership of just 200, the nonprofit fundraised and held events and jazz concerts at the theater to pay off the debts. Now that the debts have been paid, the Friends of the Alger Theater are looking at grants and fundraising for the theater's restoration.

Today in the city of Detroit, there are only a handful of neighborhood theaters that have not been altered beyond recognition. Only one, the Redford Theater, still shows movies. The Alger remains closed, but mostly intact as one of the last remaining neighborhood movie theaters in Detroit.

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<sup>5</sup> Walker, Monroe and Mike Martindale, "Disturbance in Theater on Detroit's East Side," The Detroit News, April 30, 1985.