



THE CAPITOL THEATRE
circa 1930 (RESTORED)

Date Designated: February 27, 1989 to By-Law No. 21/89, SCHEDULE B-4

Lot Description: SMITH PLAN PT 53 & 54

— ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION —

The Capitol Theatre occupies sixteen feet of frontage on Queen Street. This section contains a hall lobby and expands in the rear to a 500-seat theatre. Throughout the theatre adopts an atmospheric theme, namely the courtyard of a medieval Norman castle.

Facade: The castle theme is heralded by a number of exterior architectural elements, including diamond-paned windows, stucco finish (which bears the word "CAPITOL" along the cornice. The original marquee (since removed) was rectangular, and has been likened to a drawbridge. The sign seems to have little to do with the ancient theme, but is nonetheless an important original component

of the facade, as is the whimsically designed rain head.

Foyer/Lobby: The original front doors are long gone, and the lobby ceiling requires attention, but other components of the lobby still exist, including mirrored display panels. Excellent photos are available that show how this part of the theatre can be restored to its original decorating scheme. Offices and other non-public spaces need not be included in this designation. The concession stand at the end of the lobby is not original and is of little significance.

Theatre: The theatre is supposed to resemble the castle courtyard, and is a virtual fairyland of architectural effects. However, some are showing signs of decay. Foremost are the ceiling frescoes, depicting the sky and a host of foliage. The walls, topped by a coved cornice, are painted to resemble ashlar stone and medieval shields guard the walls. Two 'turrets' in 'stone' complete with lighted windows, flank the stage. The proscenium arch is painted in the same manner.

Inside and out, the Capitol Theatre is a shining example of cinematic architecture. Its 'Norman castle' themes and delightfully painted interior mark it as a classic of the 1929-30 period. As the first theatre in Canada built expressly for 'talkies', it is of significance not only to Port Hope but to the nation as well.

HISTORICAL ABSTRACT

Prior to construction of the Capitol Theatre, the Royal Theatre or Music Hall/Opera House at Walton and John (*85 Walton Street*) was used for movie display when the new form of entertainment was introduced. But with the advent of talking movies, Famous Players decided to construct a new theatre. In the late 1920's, Famous Players started designing and constructing atmospheric theatres with various themes. The atmospheric theatre created a new theatre experience and an escape from the ongoing Depression. The Capitol Theatre in Halifax was designed in 1929 to look like a medieval castle with an enormous baronial hall, a drawbridge and atmospheric lobby, while the Saskatoon Capitol built in 1929 had a Spanish themed interior.

The Capitol Theatre in Port Hope was designed and construction supervised by architect, Murray Brown for Famous Players. Brown was a former President of the Ontario Association of Architects. He had previously designed the theatres in Halifax and Saskatoon.

Charles Stevenson who owned the Stevenson Block on Queen Street sold one of the units that had formerly been a fish shop for the new location of the theatre. The livery at the rear of the Stevenson Block could accommodate the large auditorium required for a movie theatre. The contract for construction of the theatre was awarded to Thomas Garnett & Sons, who was responsible for constructing numerous local landmarks, such as St. Paul's Presbyterian Church on Walton Street (*131 Walton Street*) and Dr. Powers School at Hope and Ward Street. It was the first building in town to use steel girders in its construction. The theatre opened in the summer of 1930 and the cost of admittance was 37 cents for adults, and 15 cents for children

The Port Hope Capitol Theatre's design

ARCHITECTURAL DETAIL



incorporated a Castle theme with the front facade accentuated by a large marquee, held up by chains as in a drawbridge. The fantasy décor was a superb example of an atmospheric theatre where patrons felt they were in a medieval courtyard under a blue sky with clouds moving across the ceiling. The walls were painted ashlar scored plaster with mural trees above. The stage was flanked with gabled-lighted windows. The atmospheric effects were created by projecting images of stars and moving clouds on to the ceiling with the use of a brenograph, a special type of projector. The intended effect was to make patrons feel as if they were watching a movie outdoors under a summer sky.

The theatre closed in 1987. With the forming of the Capitol Theatre Foundation in 1993, it was fully restored and reopened as a multi-purpose arts centre in 1995. It is one of only two 'atmospheric' movie theatres that have survived in Canada, and the only one that has been restored.