

PARAMOUNT STUDIOS, BUILDING NO.1 (MAIN BUILDING), 35-11 35th Avenue, Astoria, Borough of Queens. Built 1920-1921; Designed by the Fleischman Construction Company.

Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 643, Lot 1 in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On November 15, 1977, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Paramount Studios, Building No. 1 (Main Building), and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 5). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. There were seven speakers in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Paramount Studios, Building No. 1 (Main Building) at 35-11 35th Avenue in Astoria, Queens, is one of the few active studios in New York dating from the early 1900s when the city was the motion picture capital of the nation. The studio was built in 1920-1921 as the eastern production headquarters for the renowned Famous Players Lasky Corporation, forerunner of Paramount Pictures. The studio building is a tangible reminder of the history and evolution of the motion picture and entertainment industry. During World War II, as the U.S. Army Signal Corps Pictorial Center, it served as the production headquarters for educational, indoctrination, training, entertainment, and propaganda films which played a significant role in the war effort. Paramount Studios is once again an integral part of the New York film industry, and the building retains one of the largest sound stages in the world.

The motion picture industry began at the turn of the century in New York with the founding of the Vitagraph studio in Manhattan, followed in turn by the old Biograph in the Bronx, the Vitagraph in Brooklyn, and a number of independent studios. Most of these early studio companies either did not survive, or they moved to California. The Famous Players Lasky Corporation evolved from several smaller companies into a major silent movie producer which then successfully entered the "talkies" to become the internationally recognized Paramount Pictures company. The early history of the company is closely linked to its Astoria studio, and it is one of the few such early studios to still be actively used.

The Famous Players Lasky Corporation was formed in 1916 when the Famous Players Film Co., and the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Co., merged. Each company was headed by some of the most enterprising entertainment entrepreneurs of the period.

The Famous Players Film Co., had been formed about 1912 by Adolph Zukor and Daniel Frohman. Daniel Frohman, an enterprising actor and playwright turned producer, had been successful in arranging, booking, and producing entertainment acts, thereby establishing extensive nationwide theatrical connections. Adolph Zukor was a successful merchant who had become involved in the entertainment field. Using the profits from his fur business, he invested in various amusement and theatrical enterprises including the nickelodean business. This led him into the new field of moving pictures. Frohman and Zukor joined forces after Zukor obtained the film rights for Sarah Bernhardt's "Queen Elizabeth." This film helped to establish movies as a socially acceptable form of entertainment with recognized legitimate actors. The Famous Players Film Co., was thus given a successful start and within four years had a commanding share of the moving picture business.

In 1913 the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Co., had been founded by Cecil Blount De Mille, Samuel Goldwyn, Jesse L. Lasky, and Arthur Friend. "Jesse L. Lasky Presents" was a popular poster slogan announcing his celebrated productions of vaudeville, operettas, and musical comedy acts. Lasky's brother-in-law Samuel Goldwyn, formerly Goldfish, persuaded Lasky to enter

the motion picture field. Cecil B. De Mille, an associate and co-author of J.L. Lasky, brought his experience as an actor, playwright, manager, and producer to the company. Arthur Friend had a background similar to De Mille and Lasky but specialized in laws concerning copyright and theatrical adaptations. Cecil B. De Mille's first film, "The Squaw Man," was followed by two other highly successful films, thus establishing the company as a producer of superior quality productions. Soon J.L. Lasky convinced David Belasco, the renowned theatrical producer and "wizard of the American stage," of the company's professional standards, thereby securing the film rights to the much sought after, notable Belasco productions. With Cecil B. De Mille as producer, known stars in leading roles, and quality films distributed both nationally and internationally, the company achieved great success.

For three years the Famous Players Film Co., and the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Co., competed for both big-name stars and the motion picture audience. In 1916 the two companies merged to form the Famous Players Lasky Corporation. About the same time the new corporation acquired several other movie companies and Paramount Pictures, a film distribution organization. This insured both the production and distribution of an endless supply of motion pictures.

The Famous Players Lasky Corporation established headquarters in both Hollywood and New York, taking advantage of California's excellent climatic conditions for production and New York's acting and literary talent. The New York branch sought to obtain the pictorial rights to successful plays and novels as well as new dramatic material from European authors. New York thus became the clearing house and literary center for the corporation. To serve as their eastern production headquarters the Famous Players Lasky Corporation built a motion picture studio in Astoria, Queens, in 1920-21, the present Building No. 1.

When the Astoria studio opened, it was described as "the largest motion picture plant under one roof in the world." Over 110 feature silent films were produced at this studio between 1921 and 1927, and during those years many famous film stars appeared on the studio's stages, among them Gloria Swanson, Rudolph Valentino, Bebe Daniel, W.C. Fields, Thomas Meighan, Harpo Marx, and Dorothy Gish. Producers such as David Wark Griffith, Sidney Olcott, and William LeBaron were associated with many of the corporation's early silent films. In 1926 the studio was described as being responsible for about forty percent of the corporation's productions as it turned out about thirty films a year worth close to twenty million dollars while employing 1,500 people. The studio was also used for rehearsals, short feature filming, and screen talent testing.

In 1927 the studio was temporarily closed until the advent of sound movies, called "movietone" productions, enabled it to reopen. Jesse L. Lasky announced on May 27, 1928, that the studio was "being equipped with movietone devices and sound proof stages, ... and will be ready for use soon." The first feature length sound picture produced at the Astoria studio was "The Letter," starring Jeanne Eagels, in 1929. Soon such actors as Claudette Colbert, Helen Morgan, Edward G. Robinson, Tallulah Bankhead, Burns and Allen, and literally hundreds of others were associated with production at the Astoria studio. Rouben Mamoulian, the well-known Broadway director, advanced the art of film making, through use of mobile cameras. Over thirty-five sound motion pictures were produced at the studio within a four year period.

Because of the long and close association of the Famous Players Lasky Corporation with Paramount Pictures, the film distribution company, the name was changed to Paramount Famous Lasky Corporation in 1928, shortly before the production of sound movies began at the Astoria studio. The name was changed again in 1930 to Paramount Publix Corporation. Paramount moved all studio operations to California in 1932, and turned the Astoria studio over to independent producers whose films were released through Paramount. Of these more than twenty independent productions none was more controversial than the Paul Robeson film of Eugene O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones." Robeson's portrayal of Emperor Jones, was critically acclaimed as "one of the great performances of the thirties cinema." A Works Project Administration film, "One Third of a Nation" was the last major motion picture produced at

the studio prior to World War II. Mayor Fiorello La Guardia advanced a proposal in 1939 to lure the film industry back to the city, but the studios considered the proposal too costly and the California climate too advantageous for them to return.

In January 1942, the Astoria studio was transferred to the War Department, and Army productions began within several months. Formal dedication ceremonies for the Pictorial Center of the Signal Corps were held in September and attended by many civic and public leaders including Mayor La Guardia. Films produced at the Astoria studio are given credit for the training and victory of our armed forces in World War II. After the war, the Chief of the German Staff, Field Marshal Von Keitel stated at Nuremberg in 1946: "We had everything calculated perfectly except the speed with which the Allies were able to train their people for war. Our major miscalculation was in under-estimating their quick and complete mastery of film education." This was the highest tribute paid to the Army Pictorial Center. The A.P.C.'s continuing operations led to the development of the multiple angle shooting technique which was later adopted by the film industry. The Army indoctrination series, "Why We Fight," a 1940s production of Col. Frank Capra, earned the A.P.C. an Academy Award.

The Astoria Studio was in continuous use until 1970 when Armed Forces productions ceased operations and the building was turned over to New York City. During the mid 1970s the Astoria studio was once again leased out for independent production aided by the Mayor's Office of Motion Pictures and Television. Among the films produced were "Thieves," starring Marlo Thomas in 1975, and "The Next Man" with Sean Connery in 1976, as well as WNET programs. The Astoria Motion Picture and Television Center Foundation, a not-for-profit corporation, has managed the Astoria studio since 1977 with the goal of revitalizing the studio's assets and preserving its memorable character. Most recently "The Wiz" was filmed here, supplemented by on-site location shooting in New York. The New York Times headline "Hollywood's Biggest New Star Is Little Old New York" is once again a dream come true. It is appropriate that the Astoria studio has been declared eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places as "one of the most significant movie complexes in the nation."

THE BUILDING

The construction of a "New Million Dollar Moving Picture Studio" in Astoria for the Famous Players Lasky Corporation was first announced in the New York Times on April 20, 1919. Records in the Queens Building Department indicate that the building itself was begun in August 1920. It was completed in February 1921. The Fleischman Construction Company of New York was responsible for the design and construction.

The building was constructed of reinforced and cast concrete with terra cotta and masonry block used for decorative and facing materials. Modified classical detail enhances the overall design.

The main facade on 35th Avenue is three stories high and monumentally scaled. The central portion is highlighted by a striking double-height porte-cochere which is five bays wide and flanked by end pylons. This was the main entrance for the stars working at the studio. The piers which compose the porte-cochere are clad with terra cotta and support a classically-inspired entablature at the second floor. The third story is also subdivided into five bays, each punctuated by three window openings. Each bay is flanked by pilasters which continue the vertical line of the piers below. Decorative pendentive forms adorn these pilasters. The parapet above the third story is enhanced by a geometrically-patterned bandcourse.

The central portion is flanked by narrower end sections set with window openings between two-story paneled pilasters. The first floor central window in each section is enhanced by a pediment. A bandcourse separates the second and third stories. Paneled pilasters flank the third story windows, and the third floor parapet is adorned with a geometrically-patterned bandcourse like that used on the central portion.

The elevations facing the side streets are also composed in three sections. End pavilions which are seven windows wide flank the central portion which is eight bays wide. The bandcourse separating the second and third stories continues from the main facade as does the geometrically-patterned bandcourse at the third floor parapet. An addition was constructed at the rear of the studio building about 1929. This addition of concrete and masonry is sympathetic to the original building in texture, massing, and color.

The building was designed around one large interior space known as the "Main Stage," which is spanned by a series of roof trusses. The Main Stage is approximately 120' wide x 127' long x 41' high to the suspended ceiling. Around this space are three floors of peripheral offices, rehearsal rooms, smaller stages, and studios, all of which help to buffer exterior noise. The main stage is further isolated from all exterior noise by an interior "fiber-glass" lining; it is reputedly "one of the four largest sound stages in the world" and the largest on the east coast.

The building is a unique example of its type-- in plan, in size, and for its early use of such technological features such as sound insulation and readily adaptable ceiling modules. The ceiling, suspended below the steel roof trusses, has a flexible system of removable panels permitting the suspension of various parts of the stage sets wherever required. Beneath this ceiling a series of catwalks also makes possible a flexible positioning of lighting downspots and other electronic devices. The prohibitive cost of erecting such a large specially designed structure makes it most unlikely that another studio like this would ever be built again.

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 Paramount Studios, Building No. 1 (Main Building), 35-11 35th Avenue, Astoria, has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Paramount Studios, Building No. 1 (Main Building), is an architecturally notable structure, that it occupies a prominent position in the history of motion picture production, that it was the major studio in the city when New York was the motion picture capital of the nation, that the studio is a tangible reminder of the history and evolution of the motion picture and entertainment industry, that it is one of the largest sound studios in the world, that from World War II to 1970 the studio served as the Army Pictorial Center for the production of educational, training, and propaganda films which contributed significantly to the U.S. war effort, and that Paramount Studios is once again an integral part of the New York film industry.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Paramount Studios, Building No. 1 (Main Building), 35-11 35th Avenue, Astoria, Borough of Queens and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 643, Lot 1 which contains the land on which the described building is situated.