

Jeffery Theater and the Spencer Arms Hotel

1952 E. 71st Street & 1950 E. 71st Street, Chicago



Jeffery Theater Building and Spencer Arms Hotel, 1924, William P. Doerr, 1952 E. 71st Street & 1950 E. 71st Street. Photo Credit: Serhii Chrukky

OVERVIEW

The Jeffery Theatre and Spencer Arms Hotel, located at the corner of East 71st Street and South Jeffery Boulevard in the South Shore neighborhood, was completed in 1924 and designed by architect William P. Doerr. Built as an anchor of a vibrant commercial district, these two structures still evoke the glory of the area in its heyday, despite alterations made to both buildings throughout decades of disinvestment. The Jeffery Theatre, in particular, has been subjected to considerable destruction since its

Jeffery Theater Building and Spencer Arms Hotel

Address: **1952 E. 71st Street & 1950 E. 71st Street**

Architect: **William P. Doerr**

Date: **1924**

Style: **Neighborhood Theater / Spanish Revival / Eclectic**

Neighborhood: **South Shore**



Jeffery Theater Building and Spencer Arms Hotel, 1924, William P. Doerr, 1952 E. 71st Street & 1950 E. 71st Street. Photo Credit: Serhii Chucky

closure in 1976, followed shortly by the demolition of its auditorium, leaving only its ornate terra cotta façade and lobby.

Today, both buildings face a serious threat of demolition. Plans were formally announced in 2017 to demolish the theater's remaining features along with the entirety of the Spencer Arms Hotel to create a new entertainment complex on the site. Without a viable preservation solution, it is possible that both buildings could be demolished by the end of summer 2023. Preservation Chicago strongly urges that the historic Jeffery Theatre and Spencer Arms Hotel be incorporated into this new, planned development.

HISTORY

In 1923, William P. Doerr was hired to design a new commercial and residential building on the north side of East 71st Street between Euclid and Jeffery. Drawings done during that time showed a four-story building containing the Jackson Park National Bank building at the corner of 71st and Jeffery, a drug store, and 12 additional retail spaces.



The Illinois Central Electric stop in front of the Jeffery Theater Building circa 1955. Jeffery Theater Building and Spencer Arms Hotel, 1924, William P. Doerr, 1952 E. 71st Street & 1950 E. 71st Street. Photo Credit: Keith Kemp / Cinema Treasures

The building was to boast “eight suites of offices and 115 apartments, some one room and kitchenette, some two rooms, and some three” with a planned interior of marble and bronze.

In 1924, William P. Doerr revised these designs, resulting in the complex in its current form. According to the Chicago Tribune, the four-story Jackson Park National Bank Building at the corner was started in May 1924 with an anticipated completion date of February 1, 1925, at a cost of \$1 million. This new bank design included the adjacent 1,850-seat auditorium Jeffery Theater, the 50-room Spencer Arms Hotel, and included stores, shops, and offices. The Jeffery Theatre opened in 1925 as a combination vaudeville theater and movie house. Its grand auditorium featured a mix of Neo-Classical and Spanish elements, as well a dramatic ceiling soffit centerpiece. Its lobby featured similarly European detailing. By 1926, the venue had been acquired by the Cooney Brothers, a theater management organization.

Doerr was largely a designer of residential hotels, with many buildings completed in the Hyde Park and South Shore neighborhood including the 22-unit Madison Park at 1364 E. Hyde Park Blvd., the Park Beach Hotel at 5325-27 S. Cornell Ave., the East End Park Apartments at 5236-5252 S. Hyde Park Blvd, and the South Shore View Hotel at 7100 S. South Shore Dr. Much of his work in this area was likely due to the fact that he was very active in the Hyde Park and South Shore communities. He lived at 5487 S. Hyde Park Boulevard, served as a Director for I-C



Jeffery Theater Building, 1924, William P. Doerr, 1952 E. 71st Street. Photo Credit: Hugh Celandier

Bank and Trust Company at the Illinois Central-53rd Street station, and held a director position at the Hyde Park Realty Board.

Doerr's work, however, was not limited to just Hyde Park and South Shore. For example, he is the credited architect for two apartment hotels at 18 E. Elm Street and 1447 E. 65th St. He was responsible for the design of a 14-room, seven-bath, red brick house at Buena and Clarendon that, in 1932, was the residence of Abram N. Pritzker, of the law firm of Pritzker & Pritzker. Doerr was also a developer, collaborating with his brothers Jacob F. and John P. Doerr. William Doerr also designed Loretto Academy of the Blessed Virgin Mary, located at 1447 E. 65th Street. Loretto Academy was a Preservation Chicago 2019 Chicago 7 Most Endangered Building.

One of their collaborations, 4511-4513 N. Dover St., is a contributing building in the Dover Street District, named a Chicago Landmark in 2007. From that Landmark report: "The Doerr brothers built substantial, roomy apartments in a period when much that was done was cheap and shoddy." The Doerrs' work can also be found in the elegant Surf-Pine Grove Chicago Landmark District at 523-525 and 527-529 W. Surf St.

By the 1930s, the theater had been acquired by the Warner Brothers and, in 1936, they invested \$40,000 for the installation of a General Electric air conditioning system. In 1938, a dramatic 4 x 37-foot neon blade sign was installed over the sidewalk which was visible down the length of E. 71st St.



Jeffery Theater Building Lobby, 1924, William P. Doerr, 1952 E. 71st Street. Photo Credit: Cinema Treasures

Once a thriving commercial corridor, the business climate in South Shore began to collapse as structural disinvestment targeted communities of color. The Jeffery Theatre tried a number of approaches to stay in business in its later years to counter this. A Daily Calumet advertisement from 1967 encouraged people to “See our Black Hawks home games on our Big Screen TV (no home TV).” Notably, Black-owned theaters were not given first-run movies during this era and often had to resort to Blaxploitation films. This contributed to growing complaints from the community during the theater’s final years about the types of films that were being shown. It eventually closed in 1976.

That same year, South Shore National Bank acquired the property, promising a theater restoration that would bring first-run movies and family films to the space. They also planned to lease the facility to the South Shore Art Center. However, these plans never came to fruition, as the theater’s auditorium was eventually demolished to make room for a drive-through banking facility, leaving only the theater’s façade and lobby standing.

THREAT

After South Shore Bank was closed by the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation in 2010, the Urban Partnership Bank took over the complex in 2012. In 2015, Urban Partnership Bank sold the former South Shore Bank properties to Monroe 2014, LLC which then sold the properties to South Shore Commercial Properties,



Spencer Arms Hotel, 1924, William P. Doerr, 1950 E. 71st Street. Photo Credit: Serhii Chrucky

LLC in 2017, an LLC managed by developer Alisa Starks. Shortly after this acquisition, Starks announced plans to demolish the Jeffery Theater and Spencer Arms Hotel for a movie theater and restaurant complex. The complex would be 50,000 square foot development with a theater, bowling alley, and restaurant. Demolition permits were applied for in early 2020 and in May of the same year, the City released its 90-day demolition hold on the orange-rated structure. Renderings from Inner City Entertainment, also run by Starks, show a contemporary building stretching the length of E. 71st St. from Euclid to Jeffery. Starks said she is in the final stages of construction drawings for the site, and she anticipates a late summer demolition of the existing structure.

Starks and her then-husband and partner Donzell launched their neighborhood theater multiplex model of building theaters on Chicago's South and West Sides in 1997, at one point owning 20% of Chicago's movie screens. Starks has said her goal with each development is to create jobs and thriving commercial spaces in communities where she builds.

Starks, while appreciative of the theater's history, has she said she cannot absorb the cost to either restore or relocate the Jeffery Theater's terra cotta. Per Starks, the option of moving the terra cotta detailing inside the new construction was explored, but estimates to do the work totaled \$400,000. Despite urging from the City of Chicago's Department of Planning and Development to restore or retain the terra cotta, Starks said, the City did not offer any financial support for that effort. With the rising cost of building materials, the price to cover any restoration of the terra cotta is not feasible within Starks' development budget. As well, while the building is stable, Starks says the interior has been damaged by break-ins and that the historic lobby is no longer intact.

Chicago 7: Jeffery Theater and the Spencer Arms Hotel



Jeffery Theater Building and Spencer Arms Hotel, 1924, William P. Doerr, 1952 E. 71st Street & 1950 E. 71st Street. Photo Credits: Serhii Chucky

Starks says she explored several options to promote preservation, including residential units to create more density, but she had no interested parties in higher-density housing. She also considered using the extant terra cotta for a new entryway, but found it cost prohibitive. Starks says she asked that preservation advocates help her find a hotel developer who would build a hotel on top of the structure, but these efforts were also fruitless.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preservation Chicago encourage Starks and Inner City Entertainment to explore the possibility of setting this new construction back 15 feet from 71st Street to allow for the preservation of the Jeffery Theater's and Spencer Arms Hotel's facades. Starks notes that, as of this moment, the project is well into the construction drawing stage, and her plans will take up most of the site's footprint. Starks has said she would like to reuse what remains of the theater's terra cotta façade on the western elevation of her new building, a concept Preservation Chicago supports. However, as noted, the cost of dismantling, cleaning, and reinstalling the terra cotta elements is cost prohibitive and would need to be addressed to make it a possibility.

The history of South Shore is deeply embedded in the commercial district around E. 71st St. and S. Jeffery Blvd. To protect its remaining historic and cultural assets, the 71st Street commercial corridor west of Jeffery should be considered as a Chicago Landmark District. This designation would bring additional resources to support more historic preservation options. As demonstrated by the difficulty of reuse presented by this development, it is clear that even more programs beyond Landmarking are needed in the City of Chicago to encourage efforts to restore and reuse extant buildings, especially when and where there are willing developers who support the retention of these historic materials.





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Proposed Replacement for Jeffery Theater Building and Spencer Arms Hotel. Rendering credit: Inner City Entertainment