Garden Theater Block: History

The intersection of West North Avenue and Federal Streets has been called “the single most important intersection on the North Side” due to its confluence of major thoroughfares, historic buildings, and the city of Pittsburgh’s oldest park. Framed by West North Avenue and Allegheny Commons Park to the south, Federal Street to the east, Reddour Street to the west, and Eloise Street to the north, the historic Garden Theater Block links the Central North Side’s richly-textured past to its future.

Over 200 years ago, this area was part of the rural “outlots” of the independent municipality of Allegheny. Allegheny was laid out in 1788 as a town of 36 square blocks of homes, businesses, and civic buildings, surrounded by common grazing land–the Allegheny Commons–and, beyond this, the outlots, reserved for farming. After the Civil War, the town grew into a city. Allegheny Commons was landscaped and transformed into a public park, and the outlots were subdivided for the construction of new residential blocks. Many of Allegheny’s most important homes, businesses, and institutions, such as churches and social halls, faced the elegant park.

The oldest building still standing on this block is the house at 6 West North Avenue. Built in around 1870, while the park across the street was still under development, the house has changed little since then. Its heavy wooden door surround, arched window hoods, and deep eaves, supported by paired brackets, are hallmarks of the Italianate style that was popular after the Civil War.

Around the corner at 1113-1115 Federal Street, a double house was constructed in about 1880. Its steeply-sloped, slate-covered mansard roof is evidence of the Second Empire Style, inspired by the architecture of the French imperial regime of Napoleon III, which had transformed Paris into a modern city. 1113-1115 Federal Street operated as a boarding house with commercial storefronts on the first floor. These accommodated a drug store, a milk vendor, and other small businesses over the years.

A four-story commercial building stood at 8 West North Avenue by 1884. The construction of this larger building is indicative of the more intensive development of West North Avenue during the last quarter of the 19th century. Eight West North Avenue housed educational institutions, including a theological seminary and a business school, from the time of its construction through the mid-20th century. After this, the ground floor was remodeled to become a tavern.

The cornerstone of the Masonic Hall at 18 West North Avenue was laid in 1893 and the building was completed the following year. Designed by the local firm of Bartberger and East for the Allegheny Chapter of the Royal Arch Masons, this is a formal, Romanesque Revival Style fraternal hall with a ballroom overlooked by an ornate mezzanine. It is reflective of the social life of the period, which centered on societies, clubs, and service organizations that brought together people of similar backgrounds, skills, and interests.

In the early 20th century, American architects experimented with a new residential building type: the apartment building. Multi-unit living had previously been associated with tenements, so builders of new apartment houses for the middle class took care to design them with fine materials and sometimes lavish ornamentation. The Bradberry at 1112 Reddour Street, built ca. 1905 of brick and stone with terra cotta detailing and a cast iron cornice, is a handsome apartment house from this era designed by the well-regarded local architect Frederick Osterling.

The Garden Theater itself was the last addition to its block in 1915, eight years after Allegheny was annexed to Pittsburgh. “Moving pictures” were first presented in converted stores, but quickly became so popular that a new building type proliferated to house movie screens and their audiences. The 1910s-1920s was the heyday of the movie palace, when architects of even small neighborhood theaters strove to bring elegance and fantasy into the lives of urban workers and their families. The Garden Theater was designed by Thomas H. Scott, the architect of the Benedum-Trees Building on Fourth Avenue downtown, and attracted crowds from nearby neighborhoods. Its distinctive neon sign was added in around 1930.