ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:	THE REVITALIZATION OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD
	MOVIE HOUSE AND ITS ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY:
	THE AVALON THEATER, CHEVY CHASE,
	WASHINGTON D.C.
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Degree and year:	Master of Architecture, 2003
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The movie has traditionally been an important part of American mass culture.
It has reflected the changes that have taken place in American life since the turn of
the century. Entertainment and the entertainment industry depended heavily not only
on the entertainment value of a movie, but also the architectural and social experience
of going to the movie theater. In the 1950's, television surpassed the movie as the top
choice of entertainment for the American public. By the 1960's grand movie palaces
as well as art deco neighborhood movie houses all across the United States began to
disappear. By the early 1970's, "mutli-plexes" with many screens were placed in
shopping malls and strip malls, and took on more of a regional rather than a
community role. I propose an addition and renovation to the Avalon Theater, a

neighborhood movie house in Chevy Chase, D.C., to reintegrate the movie-going experience with a community focus thus reinvigorating this important 'place' of American mass culture.

This thesis will incorporate a master plan for the block, and a program that will expand the services of the traditional movie theater by establishing exhibitions, and integrating retail and/or office space, along with community spaces in an attempt to enliven the area during the day, as well as at night. It will also involve looking at the Avalon Theater in a larger context as it relates to the stretch of commercial development along Connecticut Avenue south of Chevy Chase Circle.

THE REVITALIZATION OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD MOVIE HOUSE AND ITS

ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY

THE AVALON THEATER, CHEVY CHASE, WASHINGTON D.C.

by

Gretchen Elizabeth Wagner

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Architecture
2003

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Washington D.C was once graced with a variety of motion picture theaters. In 1922, Washington had as many as 50 movie theaters ranging from the 2,100 seat Rialto, a movie palace on Ninth St. NW to vest pocket picture shows like the Alamo, a 229 seat theater on Seventh St. NW. Today almost half of the theaters in Washington and the surrounding suburban areas have been demolished. Of the remaining, many are closed and decaying or being threatened.

In 2002 the National Trust issued its list of eleven most endangered places, which included movie theaters across the United States. In many communities there is a developing sense of awareness that realizes the importance of this disappearing typology. For example, the palatial 75-year old Warner Theater and the 77-year old Lincoln Theater, both in Washington D.C., have been saved and restored and now host stage shows rather than motion pictures in Washington. The Silver Theater in Silver Spring, Maryland has been restored by the American Film Institute for use as its main venue and its headquarters. There are still other historic theaters, such as the Uptown Theater in Cleveland Park, that have somehow managed to keep showing movies despite the invasion of the first the multiplex and now the megaplex.

The Avalon Theater in Chevy Chase, D.C. was a landmark in the community for eighty years before it was abruptly closed in March 2001. It was not only a venue for entertainment, but also a social and communal link. Its closure had an economic and social impact on the community and its businesses. It was through the hard work and devotion of the citizens of Chevy Chase, that the theater was restored and reopened in April of 2003.Although the Avalon is experiencing community success it

will always struggle financially without further enhancements as a multi-use destination.

This thesis will explore a new master plan for the west side of the 5600 block of Connecticut Avenue that will activate the site. The master plan will use the Avalon Theater as a centerpiece to increase its role in the community during the day and night by adding new community and commercial functions. Specifically the master plan will help to aid the development of the Avalon complex. The complex will attempt to integrate the historic with the contemporary, not only architecturally, but also through different entertainment and commercial venues.

CHAPTER II: HISTORY OF THE MOVIE THEATER TYPOLOGY

"The movie theater is a separate architectural type, distinguished by program, emphasis, imagery, and history; one must read the building as such, as an architectural type, rooted in popular culture with its own symbolic program."[1]
–Maggie Valentine, The Show Starts on the Sidewalk

Since the introduction of movies at the turn of the 19th century there have been

a variety of architectural forms by which they have been showcased to the American

public. This began with the peep show and evolved into the Nickelodeon. Perhaps the

most persuasive of these architectural forms was the Movie Palace, which reigned

from 1914-1930. During the depression these Movie Palaces were seen as overly

ornate and wasteful. New movie houses were scaled down and built in the art deco

streamlined modern style. This trend coincided with the beginning of the mass exodus

out of the city and into suburban life. As a result many of the original suburban and

neighborhood movie houses are art deco. In the 1960's, the 'multiplex' began to

emerge and gave the American public more movie choices. Today, "megaplexes"

with as many as thirty screens in a single location are giants in cinematic

entertainment, quickly erasing a unique typology that was truly a product of the

twentieth century.

From Peep Show to Nickelodeon:
"The first nickelodeons were built by a few visionary entrepreneurs. Here patrons watched flickering black-and-white images. Although choppy and incomplete, these brief moving pictures were often magical in effect, featuring stunts and tricks that were awe-inspiring to early theater patrons."[2] –David Naylor, *Great American Movie Theaters*

The "movie" was born at the turn of the 19th century with the introduction of

the Kinetiscope by Thomas Edison. This invention showed 50 feet of moving picture

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[1] Valentine,12.
[2] Naylor, 5.

to the viewer. His invention gave way to "peep show parlors" which spread across the United States and Europe. Movies became a phenomenon so quickly that there wasn't time to construct buildings exclusively for showing them.[3] Many commercial shops changed overnight into small theaters, known as storefront theaters, utilizing a sheet for the screen and wooden chairs for the seating. The public was more mystified by the novelty of this new invention and was less concerned about comfort.

The nickelodeon had its debut in 1905 in a small Pennsylvania town and quickly spread throughout the United States. It was still a makeshift establishment, but its sole purpose was to show movies. "The nickelodeon was the first to experiment with electric lights to highlight the building and advertise the product."[4] They also utilized banners and signs, in the tradition of the circus. "This created a nebulous lobby space, part indoors and part outdoors, which psychologically drew people into the theater, making them a part of the experience before they even entered the auditorium."[5] In the center of this vestibule stood a ticket box that was a combination of a theater ticket window, and the ticket booth of the circus. This was known as the "box office"

Figure 1 The Empire Theatre, Providence, Rhode Island, 1908. A storefront, which became a nickelodeon when the shop windows were removed. Source: <u>The Show Starts on the Sidewalk.</u>

and became part of the architectural expression of the movie theater. Although the

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[3] Pildas. 9.
[4] Valentine. 186.
[5] Valentine. 186.

popularity of the movie was increasing rapidly, it was still a working class diversion.

The upper class still preferred the high culture of the "legitimate theater." It was not

until the birth of the Movie Palace that the movie gained popularity with all classes

and attained respectability.

The Movie Palace:
> "Here we find ourselves today creating super-cinemas of enormous capacities, excelling in splendor, in luxury and in furnishings the most palatial homes of princes and crowned kings for and on behalf of His Excellency – the American Citizen."
> –John Eberson (explaining the architecture of the grand palace)

The Movie Palace came into existence in 1914 with the opening of the Strand

Theater on Broadway. "Audiences who came to see the movie also saw crystal

chandeliers, gold leaf, and art work. Escorted to their seats by uniformed ushers, they

sank their toes into plush carpeting with every step they took. A ticket cost twenty-

five cents, but in addition to a movie, the price included a chance to hear a thirty

piece orchestra and a mighty Wurlitzer organ."[6]

It was with the help of entrepreneurs like Samuel L. "Roxy" Rothapfel that the

Movie Palace came to reign over the entertainment empire. Roxy's secret to pleasing

the American public was the idea that, "Giving the people what they want is

fundamentally and disastrously wrong. The people don't know what they want. They

want to be entertained, that's all. Don't give the people what they want—give them

something better."[7] The movie palace became the newest, most fashionable

expression of civilized living. Palaces seated between 2500 and 6000 people, and

boasted stage shows, permanent orchestras, organs, first run films, and an array of

customer services.

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[6] Pildas. 11.
[7] Hall. 63.

The styles that were derived were on the cutting edge of popular architecture. "Style sold tickets and gave a theater identity. This meant interpretations of the Paris Opera, Versailles, Spanish Colonial villas, or other forms that could be advertised as unique or exotic, and above all, cultural."[8] The architectural variations that appeared in cities across the nation were often criticized as extravagant curiosities, but not legitimate art forms. The architects of movie palaces "turned this disapproval to their advantage and reveled in the artistic freedom allowed to renegades."[9] These designers aimed to create showplaces with all the trappings of the rich – but accessible to all. George Rapp of Rapp & Rapp called theaters, "a shrine to democracy where the wealthy rub elbows with the poor."[10]

Figure 2 The Capitol Theater (1328 F St. N.W.)in 1927 was the grandest Movie Palace in Washington. Source: Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington D.C.

Figure 3 The interior of the Capitol Theater, no expense was spared. Source: Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington D.C.

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[8] Valentine. 10.
[9] Pildas. 17.
[10] Naylor. 23.

The year 1929, marked a change for the United States. The prosperity and extravagance of the 1920's dissipated, and the depression that followed left no room for the ornate pretension of the movie palace. The theater building rush that occurred from 1927 to 1929 left theater owners with too many seats to fill. "From 1930 to 1932, theater attendance dropped from 90 million to 60 million per week, and the number of operating theaters fell from 22,000 to 14,000.[11] During this time, people worked more and had less time and money for entertainment. Owners tried elaborate promotions to encourage patrons to come to the movies, such as giving away china and money as door prizes.[12] Owners reduced customer amenities such as free concessions, military ushers, and restroom attendants. Lesser-paid women replaced ushers. These efforts were successful, and in 1934 movie attendance once again began to climb.[13]

Neighborhood Art Deco Movie Houses and WWII:
    "In a decade when the country doubted the present, streamlined styling provided an optimistic expression of faith in the future. Flashy, jazzy, and full of confidence, Streamline Moderne 'moved' forward in sleek, aerodynamic lines." – Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*.

Theater owners came to realize that the movie palace era had ended. "The architectural treatments of movie palaces were now considered exuberant, if not downright wasteful."[14] In order to once again seduce the American public, the architectural form of the movie theater would have to evolve. Art Deco theaters began to appear and according to Maggie Valentine, "reflected the hard times in which they

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[11] Valentine. 90.
[12] Naylor. 26.
[13] Valentine. 91.
[14] Naylor. 174.

were built showing an optimistic rejection of the pre-Depression boom that had culminated in a bust."[15]

The emphasis became function rather than fantasy. This was reflected through the theaters of time, which were "streamlined moderne" following the smooth lines of the machine aesthetic. The movie theater no longer needed extravagant architecture and services to prove that the movie was a legitimate form of entertainment. "Moviegoing was a socially acceptable form of behavior and no longer needed an architectural defense."[16] The design focused now on the functional and technological requirements, all encased in a modern aesthetic.

This was also the time of the automobile and the beginning of the growth of suburbs. People began to move away from the city. The downtown gave birth to the neighborhood movie house, which in the 1930's became simple and utilized more-modern architectural imagery. The neighborhood movie house recognized the importance of the automobile. Marquee designs became larger so that they could easily be seen from blocks away. They often projected from the movie house allowing traffic in both directions to read what the weekly feature was. Although the marquees were less detailed, they relied on bold and bright moving lights to attract attention.[17]

Neighborhood movie houses generally were limited to one floor, often sloping forward to maximize the view for the patron. Comfort and luxury were still issues and great attention was paid to sight lines and leg room. "The psychology of entertainment during the 1930's translated into comfort, security and optimism. In a

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[15] Valentine. 78.
[16] Valentine. 91.
[17] Valentine. 97.

decade when the country doubted the present, streamlined styling provided an optimistic expression of faith in the future."[18]

Figure 4 The art deco Uptown Theater located in the neighborhood of Cleveland Park in Washington in 1936. Source: Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington D.C.
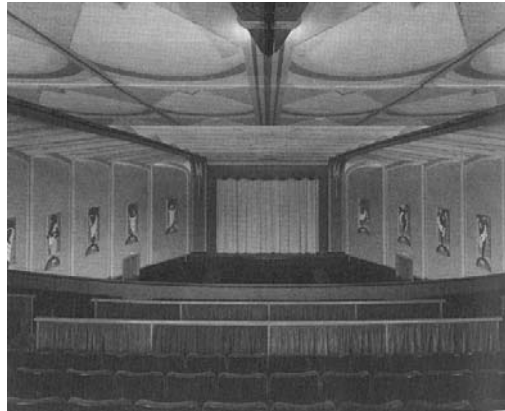
Figure 5 The original art deco interior in the auditorium of the Uptown. Source: Motion Picture Exhibition in Washington D.C..

In the 1940's, theater construction came to a halt due to WWII. Eighty-five million Americans per week packed into theaters to see newsreels and hear news of the war. In 1943, a study commissioned by the Navy concluded, "a lack of movie theaters stateside contributed to delinquency and high labor turn over."[19] The Navy urged the construction of new theaters. Builders at this time relied heavily on concrete and glass, which were the most abundant non-restricted materials available. Theaters were simpler and cleaner in line and form.

After WWII, more people left the city in pursuit of the American dream in the suburbs. This left downtown movie palaces struggling once again. Then in 1948, two events occurred that changed the movie industry forever. First, the Supreme Court ruled that five major movie studios had constituted an illegal trust. "Vertical integration gave them control of production, distribution, and exhibition causing the

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[18] Valentine. 127.
[19] Valentine. 129.

restriction of competition."[20] The "Big Five" were required to divest themselves of

their theater holdings. This spelled disaster for many theaters throughout the United

States, without the support of the movie studios ticket prices rose and small theaters

could not absorb costs. This ultimately resulted in a decline in theater attendance.

The other event that occurred in 1948 was the commercial expansion of

television. Between 1947 and 1957 ninety percent of Americans acquired a television.

During this time, movie attendance fell by one half. Americans no longer needed to

come to the theater see newsreels because they could see it daily on the television.

People were less likely to go to the movies when they could be entertained at home.

The Contemporary Movie Theater:
"The multiplexes and megaplexes that emerged in the 1970's and which
dominated the new cinema building boom of the 1980's reduced the architectural
element to the design of a garish, stick-on façade and lobby. The purpose of these
lurid lobbies was to sell as much food as possible to cinema-goers, rather than to
impress with any sense of grandeur or atmosphere." - Edwin Heathcote, *Cinema
Builders*

Most movie theaters that were built during the following decades were

stripped down boxes attached to suburban malls. They bragged multiple screens and

features. "The façade was reduced to a

backlit plastic sign – one could hardly call

it a marquee listing the names of the dozen

movies inside, along with their ratings.

The box office was no longer an island,

having been moved against the façade,

where it dispensed computer generated

Figure 6 A 12-screen multiplex in a strip
mall in Arlington, VA. Source: Motion
Picture Exhibition in Washington D.C.

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[20] Valentine. 163.

tickets for several auditoriums." [21]

Movie Theaters today are fitted with top of the line sound systems, plush reclining seats, and better sight lines; boasting the integration of comfort and technology. Theater owners want to provide a "total movie-going experience" which often includes iced cappuccino, frozen yogurt, and bottled water. Despite these modern conveniences, movie theaters today lack two important qualities provided by historic movie theaters of the past: a sense of community and an architectural experience.

Many questions linger about the uncertain fate of so many historic movie theaters across the United States: What measures can be taken to adapt historic movie theaters so that they can once again achieve economic viability? How will this affect their historic characteristics? Can people once again be lured to single screen venues, choosing a movie-going experience that provides an architectural and communal experience that contributes to the health and vitality of its neighborhood?

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[21] Valentine. 182.

CHAPTER III: THE SITE

Site History:
Chevy Chase, D.C.

In the mid 19th century the suburban ideal began to penetrate the minds of Americans. This was a time when the horse drawn streetcar and commuter railroads made the suburb a viable option for the American people. "Two pioneering railroad suburbs launched the romantic model based on English tradition onto the American scene: Llewellyn Park, New Jersey (1857) and Riverside, Illinois (1868-69)."[22] These suburbs led the way for the "exclusive planned suburban community," which included Chevy Chase.

Chevy Chase was originally started in the farm fields of Montgomery County, Maryland in 1890. The founder was Francis Griffith Newlands whose goal was to "create a 'home suburb' to showcase the fine aspects of suburban living."[23] It was a risky endeavor; building so far removed from the city, but Newlands persisted. This began the start of development in northwest Washington.

The success of Chevy Chase depended on the determination of the Chevy Chase Land Co., established by Newlands, Rock Creek Railway, Thos. J. Fisher & Co. and Union Trust Company.

> "They resolved complex civil, sanitary, and structural engineering problems to develop a complete suburban infrastructure and an astonishingly ambitious transportation network. No other Washington suburb had standards for architecture and landscape of such high quality, or better highlighted the latest trends in domestic architecture and street planning. The development of building restrictions that banned commerce within the boundaries of the original suburb maintained the ideal of country living unblemished by 'trade.'"[24]

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[22] Lampl. xiv.
[23] Lampl. xiv.
[24] Lampl. xv.

The Chevy Chase Land Co. also enacted strict regulations concerning commerce. Commercial development was specifically banned from its original sections, claiming that "other portions of the subdivision would be set aside for commercial purposes."[25] The land company wanted to locate and specifically control commercial growth. In 1907, residents of Chevy Chase had only one store in which to buy supplies. Everything else had to be ordered from downtown.

It was also in 1907 that Chevy Chase Land Co. decided to expand across the Maryland border into Washington D.C. They opened two new subdivisions "Chevy Chase D.C.", on the east side of Connecticut Avenue just south of Chevy Chase circle; and "Chevy Chase Heights", north of Keokuk Street and south of Military Road.[26]

Although the Chevy Chase Land Co. owned much of the land on Connecticut Avenue, some tracts of land were owned independently. In 1907 and 1909, a developer named Fulton Gordon obtained two plots of land just south of Chevy Chase Circle on the west side of Connecticut Avenue. He initiated many of the same
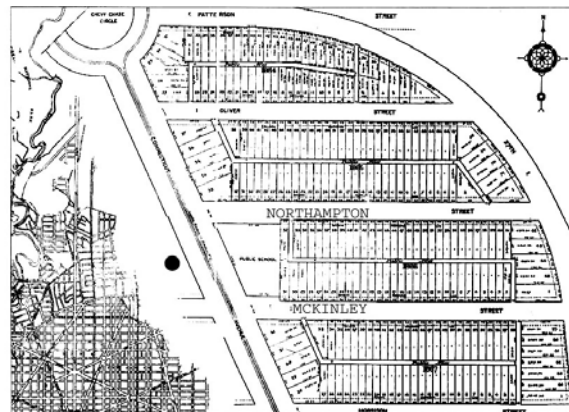

Figure 7 Chevy Chase, D.C. as platted in 1907, showing holdings on the east side of Connecticut Avenue. Northampton and McKinley St. are visible. The current location of the Avalon is represented by the black dot. Source: Chevy Chase: A Home Suburb for the Nation's Capital.

'zoning' regulations as the Chevy Chase Land Co., but two regulations were

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[25] Lampl. 128.
[26] Lampl. 122.

omitted. Commercial development as well as multifamily housing were not prohibited. With no commercial restraints, local businesses began to appear and ultimately brought about the 1920's commercial corridor that formed along the west side of Connecticut Avenue.

Soon there were banks, retail stores, and in 1922 the Chevy Chase Theatre. During this time, the land owned by the Chevy Chase Land Co. on the east side Connecticut Avenue remained residential. The Land Co. first attempted commercial development in 1916, but residents insisted that the Land Co. obey the covenants they had made about commercial development. A court battle was waged, but ultimately an injunction was put in place against commercial development.[27]

Figure 8 Map showing the Fulton Gordon developments on the west side of Connecticut Avenue. The Avalon is represented by a black rectangle in the top right corner of the map. Source: Chevy Chase: A Home Suburb for the Nation's Capital.

It was not until 1958 that commercial development along the east side of Connecticut Avenue was allowed. Permission was granted for the National Bank of Washington to build along the east side. There were no resident objections. This founded a precedent for Exxon and Safeway, who had been trying to build in the neighborhood. The injunction was lifted, which allowed for a more even distribution of commerce on both sides of Connecticut Avenue.

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[27] Lampl. 129.

Avalon Theater:

The Chevy Chase Theatre was built in 1922 by architects Frank Upman and Percy C. Adams, and was one of the first neighborhood movie houses in Washington. The two story façade was designed in the beaux arts classical style with a projecting decorative marquee. The first floor originally consisted of two storefronts that flanked the lobby of the theater. The lobby was relatively small and led into an auditorium that seated 1000 and was decorated with a pastoral mural frieze. The auditorium also featured a central dome, although it is not known how it was originally decorated. The second floor, although initially intended to have a balcony, contained the projection room and a large room that was often used for community functions, such as dances, and community meetings.[28]

Figure 9 The Chevy Chase Theatre in 1926. Source: The Avalon Theater Project.

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[28] Headley. 246.

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In 1929, the Chevy Chase Theatre became know as the Avalon Theatre. In 1937, the Avalon closed for its first renovation. This was at the height of the art deco neighborhood theater boom and Warner, who owned the Avalon at the time, decided to update the décor. The marquee was

Figure 10 The Avalon in 1936 after the addition of the art deco marquee. Source: The Avalon Theater Project.

changed to art deco and "vitrolite panels of red black, and tan were added to the façade."[29] The interior was also remodeled to reflect the changing times.

Figure 11 The interior of the auditorium in 1936. Source: The Avalon Theater Project.

Figure 12 The newly remodeled art deco lobby of the Avalon in 1936. Source: The Avalon Theater Project.

The Avalon was remodeled again in 1960 cutting the seating capacity to 790 from 1200, but it was the 1970 addition that incurred major changes. The seating capacity in the auditorium was reduced to 660 and a second auditorium was added upstairs. The storefront to the south of the main entrance was converted to serve as the box office and lobby for the second theater which seated 200.[30]

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[29] Headley. 247.
[30] Headley. 247.

Yet another renovation was done in 1985, which included the addition of a state of the art sound system, and a large mural painted in the dome of the auditorium. In 1995, it was clear to some of the residents of the community that the Avalon had begun to deteriorate. A group of concerned citizens petitioned to have the Avalon designated on the National Register of Historic Places and succeeded.

The Avalon was closed and gutted in March of 2001 when the owner, Loews Cineplex, went out of business. Until that time, the Avalon was the longest running theater in Washington D.C. It was a community landmark, a first run theater, and had hosted several Washington premieres.

Today, the Avalon is in the process of being restored. There was a public outcry when it was discovered that the Avalon was to be turned into a retail space. The residents of Chevy Chase formed a non-profit entity called the Avalon Theater Project to raise the funds to have the Avalon restored as a theater.
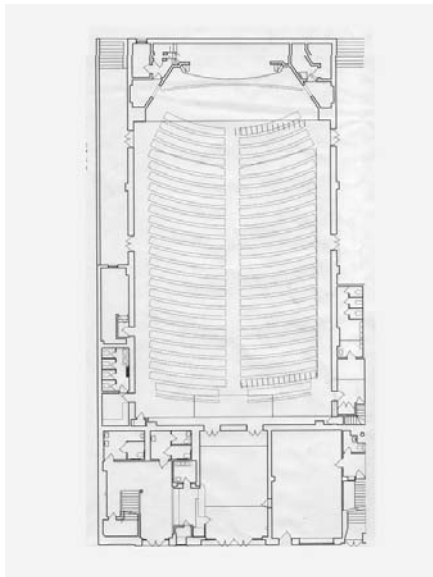

Figure 13 Current floor plan of the main level of the Avalon Theater showing the main auditorium. Source: GTM Architects.
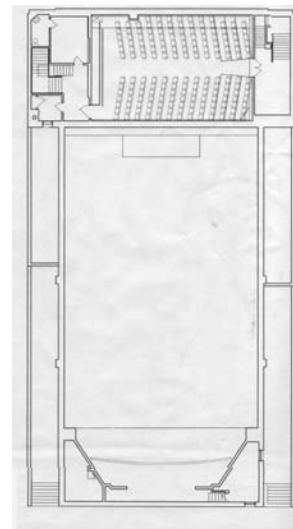
Figure 14 Second floor plan showing the Avalon 2, added in 1970. Source: GTM Architects.

Site Description:

Chevy Chase D.C. is a quiet residential community centered around a pocket of commercial development that borders Connecticut Avenue. In the larger context of Connecticut Avenue, it is the last pocket of commercial development before the Maryland border. Connecticut Avenue is composed of several of these commercial pockets that support residential neighborhoods most of which are anchored with a metro stop.
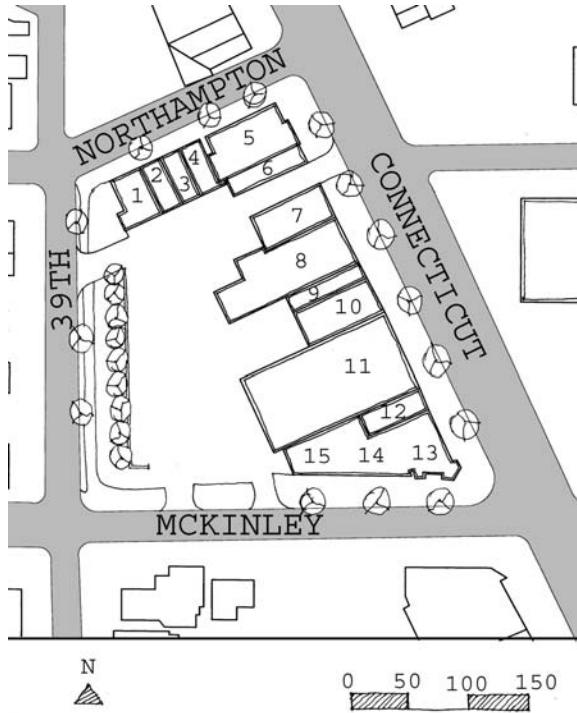
The west side of the 5600 block of Connecticut Avenue, NW is composed primarily of commercial space with some office space above the retail storefronts, and anchored by the Avalon Theater. It is bounded by McKinley St. to the south, Connecticut Avenue to the east, Northampton St. to the north, and 39th St. to the west.

Figure 15 Site diagram showing the west side of the 5600 block of Connecticut Avenue. Source: Author's files.

Figure 16 Aerial photo highlighting the site. Source: DC Office of Planning.

Figure 17 Block diagram of the 5600 block of Connecticut Avenue. Source: Author's files.

The Existing Buildings:

1. Northampton Building:

The Northampton Building is located at the northwest corner of the 5600 block of Connecticut Avenue. It is a three-story brick apartment building that has been converted into offices. It now houses a yoga studio, Chevy Chase Computer Store, and ONP – Web Design.

Figure 18 View of Northampton Building. Source: Author's files.

Figure 19 View of Northampton Building from 39th St. Source: Author's files.
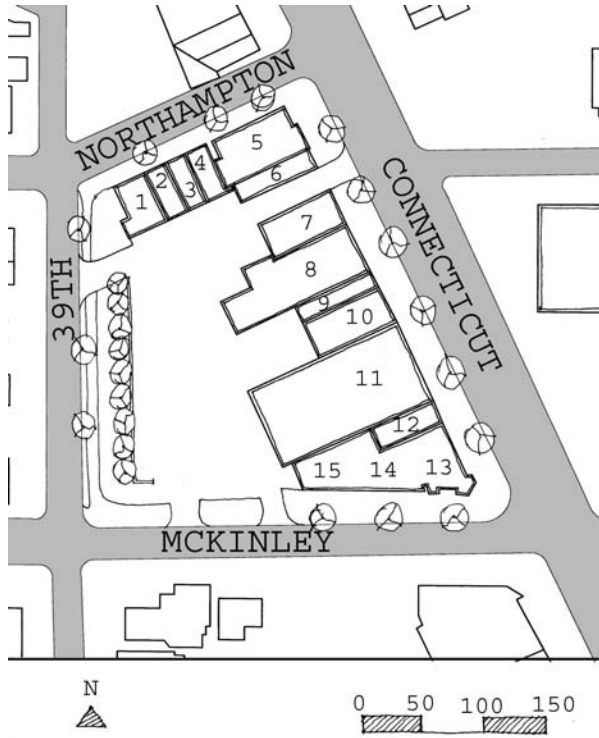
19

Figure 20 Block diagram of the 5600 block of Connecticut Avenue. Source: Author's files.

2. Chevy Chase Pharmacy:

   The Chevy Chase Pharmacy has been a business in Chevy Chase since 1928. It is located in a one-story brick storefront on Northampton St. on the north side of the site.

3. Shoe Store:

   The Shoe Store is the second of the three connected one-story storefronts on Northampton St

4. Shoe and Luggage Repair Store:

   The Shoe and Luggage Repair Store is the third of the storefronts on Northampton St. The façade is almost identical to that of Chevy Chase Pharmacy.

Figure 21 Panoramic of the north side of the site showing from left to right: the Chevy Chase Post Office, the Shoe and Luggage Repair Store, the Shoe Store, the Chevy Chase Pharmacy, and the Northampton Building. Source: Author's Files.
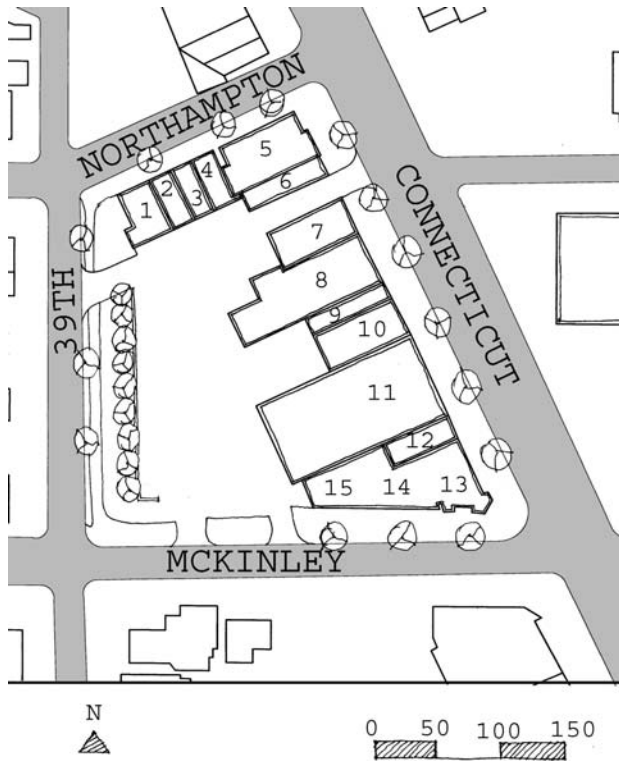
5. Chevy Chase Post Office:

The Chevy Chase Post Office is located at the corner of Connecticut Avenue and Northampton St. It is a one-story brick building that has a similar architectural character to the three stores adjacent to it on Northampton St. The Connecticut Ave. façade has been modified and divided to suit its commercial purposes.

Figure 22   Block diagram of the 5600 block of Connecticut Avenue. Source: Author's files.

6. Moto Photo:

The Moto Photo is located in the post office building in the subdivided section with an added glass storefront window.

Figure 23   View of the post office and Moto Photo showing its Connecticut Ave. and Northampton St. facades. Source: Author's files.
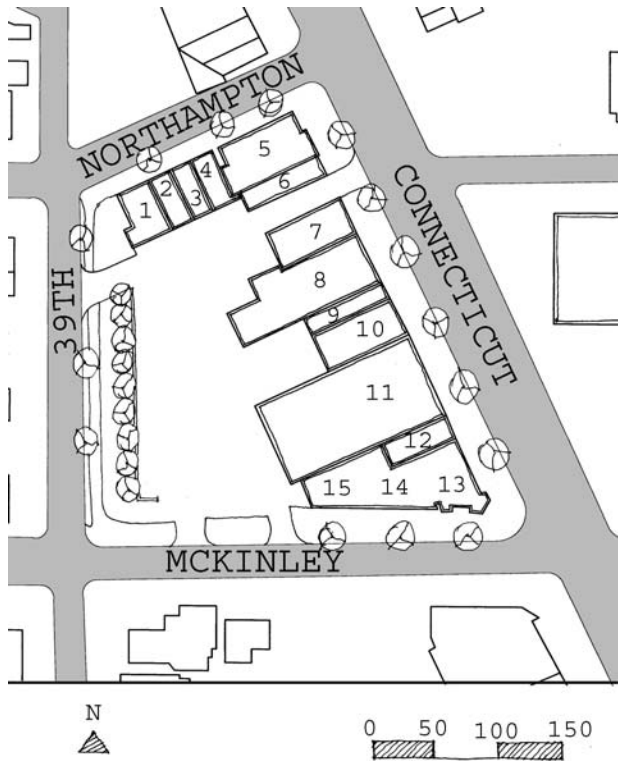
Figure 24 Block diagram of the 5600 block of Connecticut Avenue. Source: Author's files.

7. Allfirst Bank/ Muse Architects:

The three-story brick building that houses Allfirst Bank and Muse Architects is the newest on the site. The bank occupies the first floor, while Muse occupies the second and third. The building is separated from the adjacent post office by a service alley that cuts through the site.

Figure 26 View of the Allfirst building looking south down Connecticut Ave. Source: Author's files.

Figure 25 View of the façade of the Allfirst bldg. Source: Author's files.

Figure 27 Block diagram of the 5600 block of Connecticut Avenue. Source: Author's files.
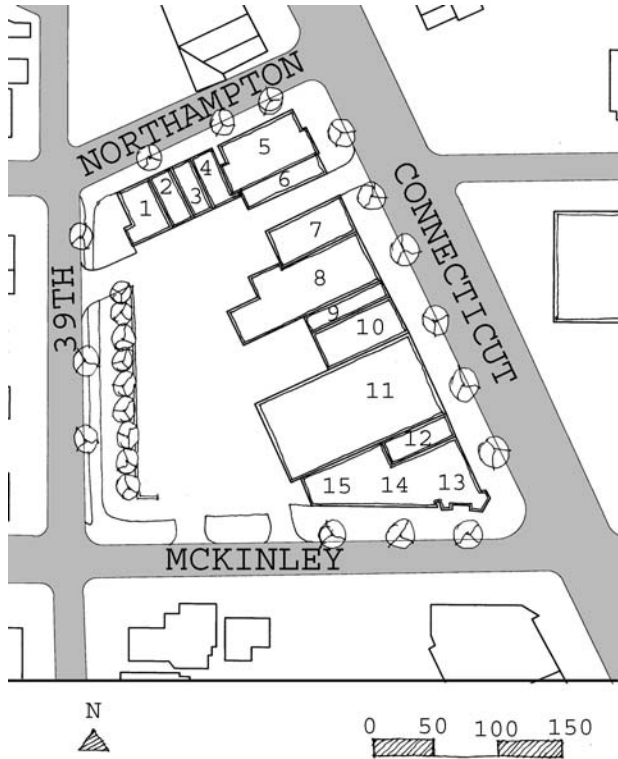
8. Magruder's Grocery Store:

Magruder's Grocery Store has been in existence in Chevy Chase since 1875. It is located in a one-story building and has an entrance off of Connecticut Ave. and the 39th St. parking lot on the west side of the site. It is a popular neighborhood destination, and may seek expansion, renovation or relocation.
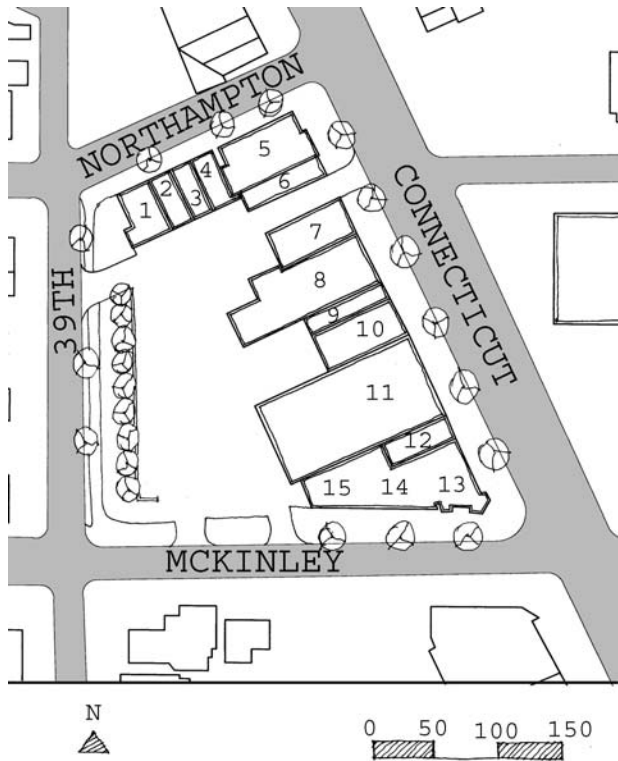

Figure 28 View of the Connecticut Ave. façade of Magruder's. Author's files.

Figure 29 View of the façade of the west entrance of Magruder's from the parking lot. Source: Author's files.

9. Subway Restaurant:

The Subway Restaurant is housed in a nondescript one-story building that is shared with a flower shop.

10. Acacia Flower Shop:

Acacia Flower Shop shares a building with Subway and is bordered on the south by the Avalon Theater.

Figure 30 Block diagram of the 5600 block of Connecticut Avenue. Source: Author's files.

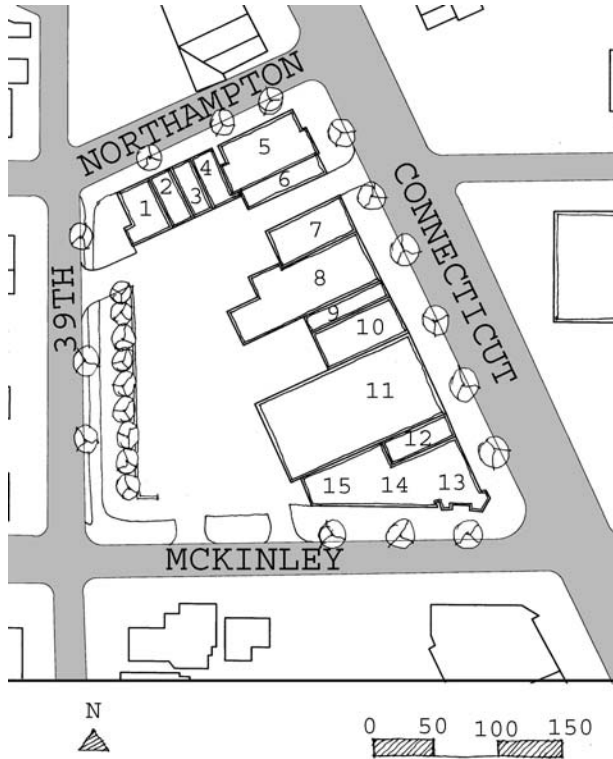**Figure 31** View of Acacia Flowers and Subway. Source: Author's files.

Figure 32 Block diagram of the5600 block of Connecticut Avenue. Source: Author's files.

11. Avalon Theater:

The Avalon Theater is the centerpiece of the site and of the surrounding community. The building is two stories tall and houses two auditoriums and originally two storefronts. One storefront now provides access to the second auditorium, and the other storefront will soon be occupied by a Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream Shop.
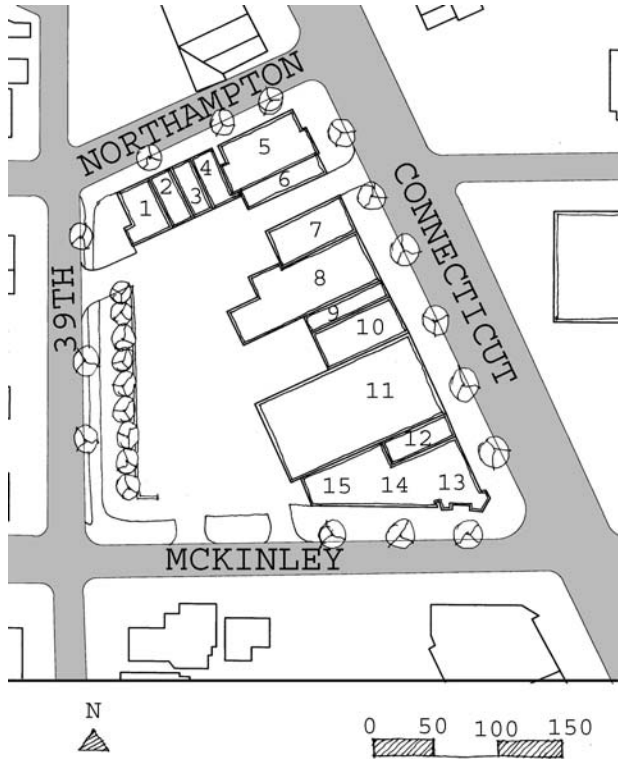

Figure 33 View looking west towards the 5600 block with the Avalon Theater in the center. Source: Author's files.

Figure 34 The newly restored Avalon Theater. Source: Author's files.

Figure 35 View of the Avalon looking north. Source: Author's files.

25

12. Monarch Paint Store:

Monarch Paint Store is a two-story brick building. It looks as if it was not originally a commercial building and a storefront was added later.

Figure 36   Block diagram of the5600 block of Connecticut Avenue. Source: Author's files.

Figure 37   View looking north of Monarch Paint Store. Source: Author's files.
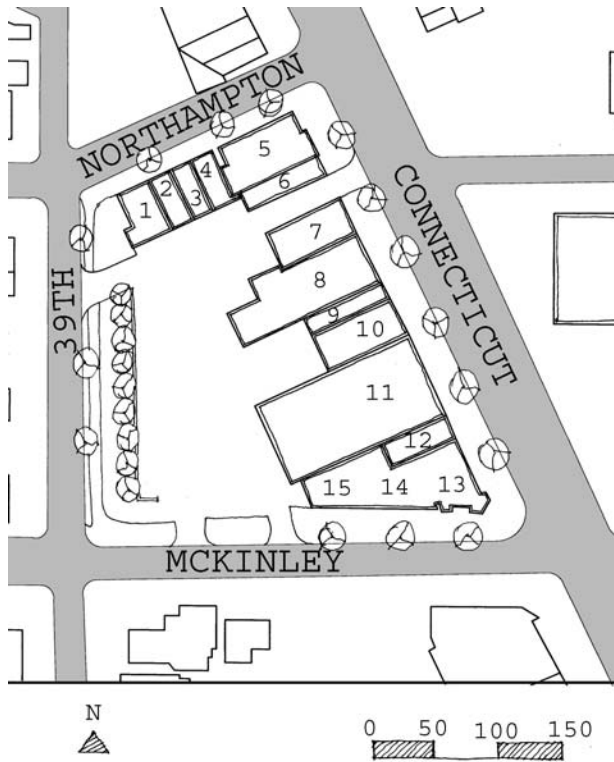
Figure 38 Block diagram of the5600 block of Connecticut Avenue. Source: Author's files.

13, 14, 15. Building at the corner of McKinley and Connecticut.

The building at the corner of McKinley and Connecticut Ave. houses several commercial businesses as well as office space on the second floor. Nail Spa Salon faces Connecticut Ave. and is next to Monarch Paints. Next to the Nail Spa is American Bank, which is entered at the corner of McKinley and Connecticut. The businesses facing McKinley are a Card and Gift Shop and Parkland Cleaners. The second story is occupied by State Farm Insurance.

Figure 39 View looking east up McKinley. Source: Author's files.

Figure 40 View from the corner of Connecticut and McKinley. Source: Author's files.
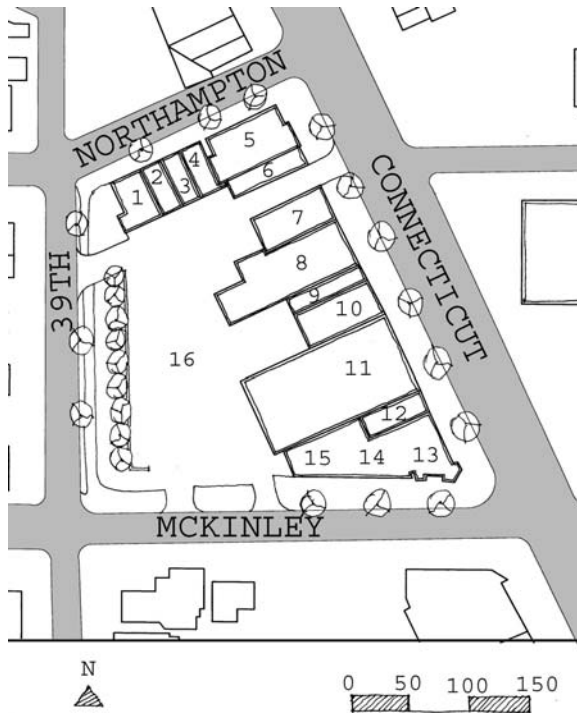
Figure 41 Block diagram of the 5600 block of Connecticut Avenue. Source: Author's files.

16. The Parking Lot:

The parking lot which can be accessed on McKinley or 39th and serves Magruder's customers. It is hidden from the residences across the street by a buffer of trees. It accommodates service deliveries and space for approximately 40 cars.
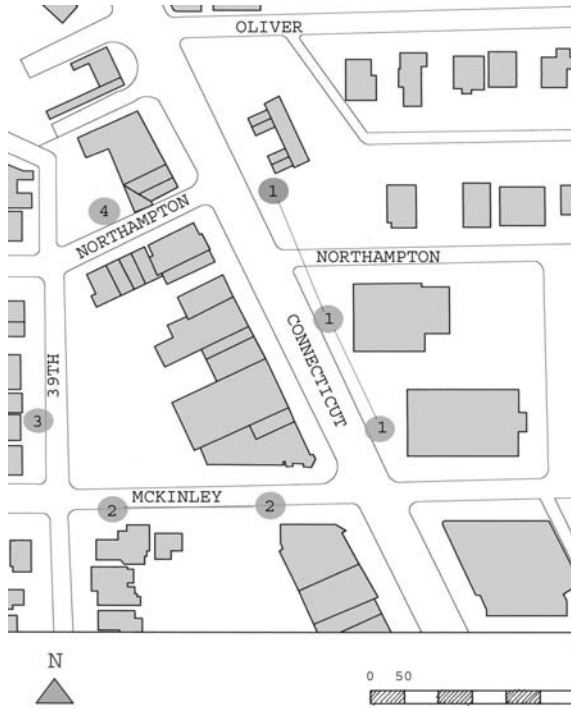

Figure 42 The corner of Northampton and 39th Ave looking toward the parking lot. Source: Author's files.

Figure 43 View of the parking lot and the back of the Avalon Theater. Source: Author's Files.

Figure 44 Entrance off of McKinley St. to the parking lot. Source: Author's files.

Figure 45 Diagram showing the location of the context in the photos. Source: Author's files.

The Surrounding Context:

1. The East Side of Connecticut Ave.:

The east side of Connecticut Ave., which faces the site is composed of a bank, the Chevy Chase Library, and the Chevy Chase Community Center. The two-story brick bank is surrounded by parking lots and has a residential feel. The two-story brick community center and library are in the same architectural style and were built around 1960. The buildings run parallel to the residential streets, and do not align with Connecticut Ave.

Figure 46 View looking east across Connecticut Avenue toward the Chevy Chase Library. Source: Author's files.
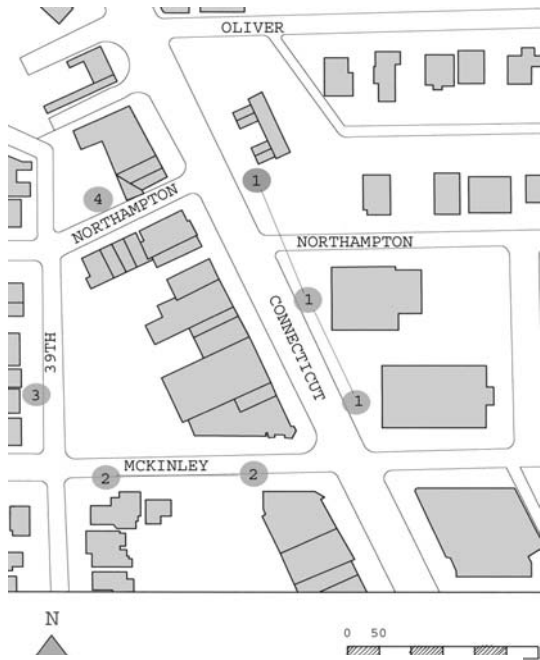
29

Figure 47   Diagram showing the location of the context in the photos. Source: Author's files.

2. South side of McKinley St.:

The south side of McKinley is composed of residential, the entrance to a parking lot, and the CVS which fronts Connecticut Ave.

3. West side of 39th St.:

The west side of 39th St. is primarily two-story single-family residential houses. It has a buffer of trees to block the view of the parking lot across the street.

4. North side of Northampton St.:

The north side of Northampton St. is composed of a parking lot and a two-story brick building, which is occupied by two banks, a cleaners and a dentist's office.

Figure 48   View of the south side of McKinley St. Source: Author's files.

**Figure 49**   View of the residential side of 39th St. Source: Author's files.

Figure 50   View of the parking lot and multi-use commercial building on the north side of Northampton St. Source: Authors's files.

Site Analysis

Traffic Conditions:

The stretch of Connecticut Avenue that runs through Chevy Chase D.C. is a highly trafficked primary road and supports four lanes of traffic in off peak hours. During rush hour in the morning and evening, the lanes that allow metered parking in the day are opened to allow a fifth and sixth lane of traffic. The secondary roads that cross Connecticut such as McKinley, Northampton and Livingston are two-lane residential streets supporting mostly local traffic.
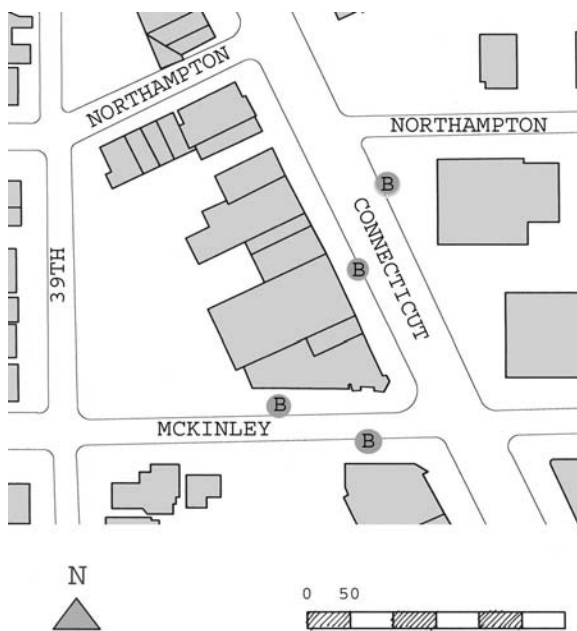
Public Transportation:

Chevy Chase D.C. does not have its own metro stop. The closest metro is in Friendship Heights on Wisconsin Ave., approximately a 10 minute walk from the Avalon Theater. The site is most easily accessed by bus. There are 4 bus stops within one block of the Avalon.

Figure 51 Diagram showing the location of bus stops in close proximity to the site. Source: Author's files.

Parking Conditions:

There are approximately 25 metered parking spaces available during the day on Connecticut Avenue and on weekends. The secondary streets provide 15 on street parking spaces. There is also a substantial amount of surface parking lots, which are only available to patrons of various local businesses during the day, but restrictions are lifted at night.

Figure 52 Aerial photograph showing surface parking in the blocks that border Connecticut Ave. Source: DC Office of Planning.

Proximity to Other Theaters:

The theater closest to the Avalon is in Friendship Heights near the metro on Wisconsin Avenue. The AMC Mazza Gallerie is a seven screen multiplex showing first-run films. The CO Cinema and the CO Outer Circle are located further south on Wisconsin Avenue, but are relatively close to the Avalon. The Uptown Theater is located on Connecticut Avenue in Cleveland Park, it is also a single screen historic theater about 3 miles from the Avalon.

Defining Site Possibilities:

In order to pursue a master plan for the site, it is necessary to investigate which buildings on the site will be maintained, and which are not necessary to the character of the community and the ultimate goal of the Avalon theater complex. The following diagrams will show possible boundaries for new construction.
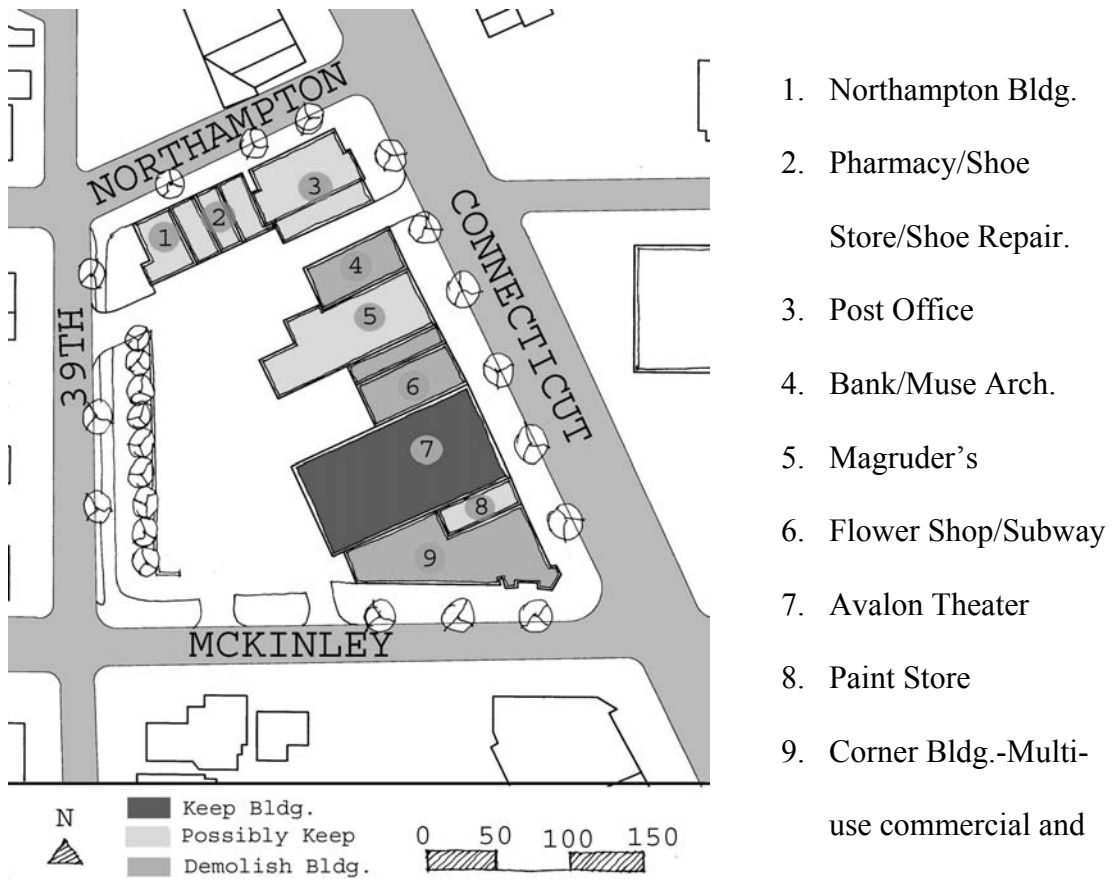

1. Northampton Bldg.
2. Pharmacy/Shoe Store/Shoe Repair.
3. Post Office
4. Bank/Muse Arch.
5. Magruder's
6. Flower Shop/Subway
7. Avalon Theater
8. Paint Store
9. Corner Bldg.-Multi-use commercial and office space.

Figure 53 Diagram showing which buildings on the site must be kept, which can be demolished, and which buildings that are in an uncertain state. Source: Author's files.
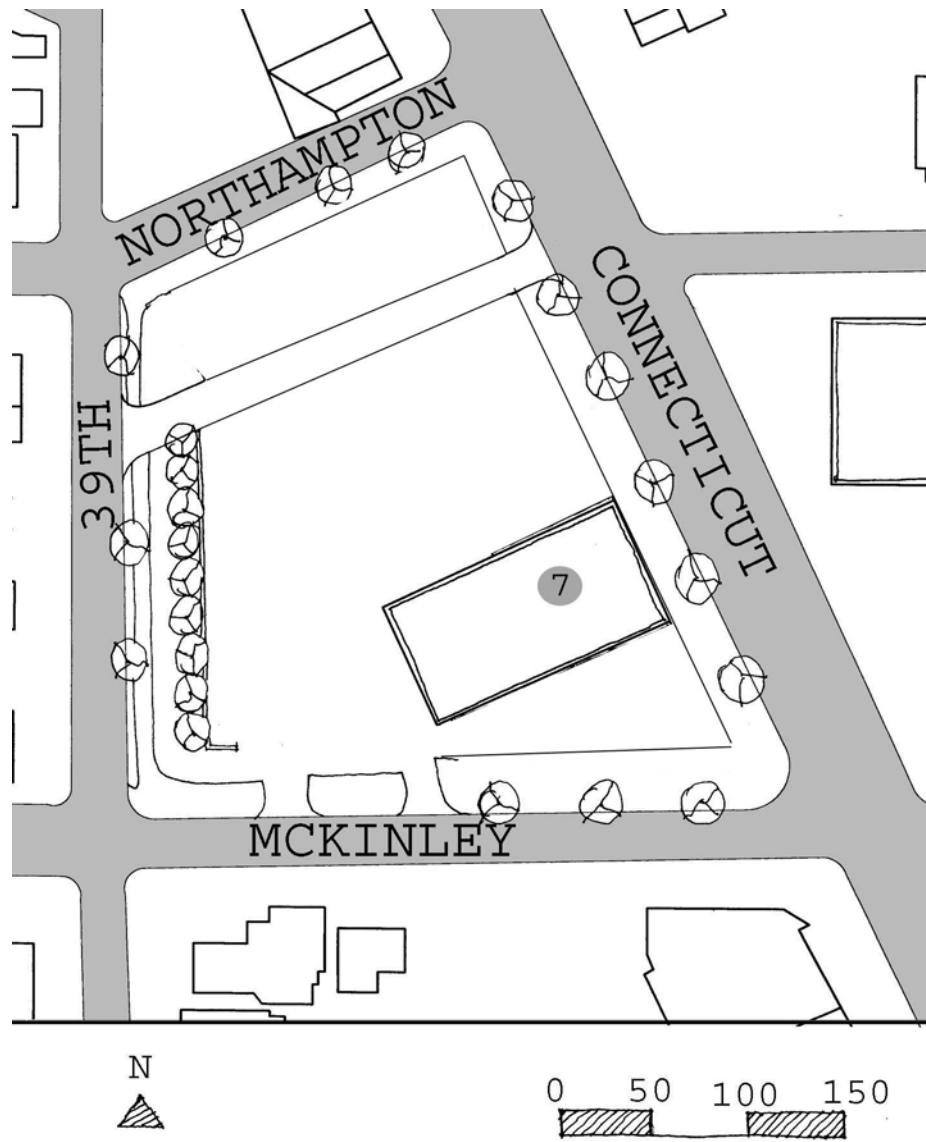
Figure 54 Site Possibility #1: The only building which has to remain on the site is the Avalon Theater. The other buildings on the site are demolished, and the rest of the site is open to new development in conjunction with the Avalon Theater. This is the most drastic possibility for the site. Source: Author's files.
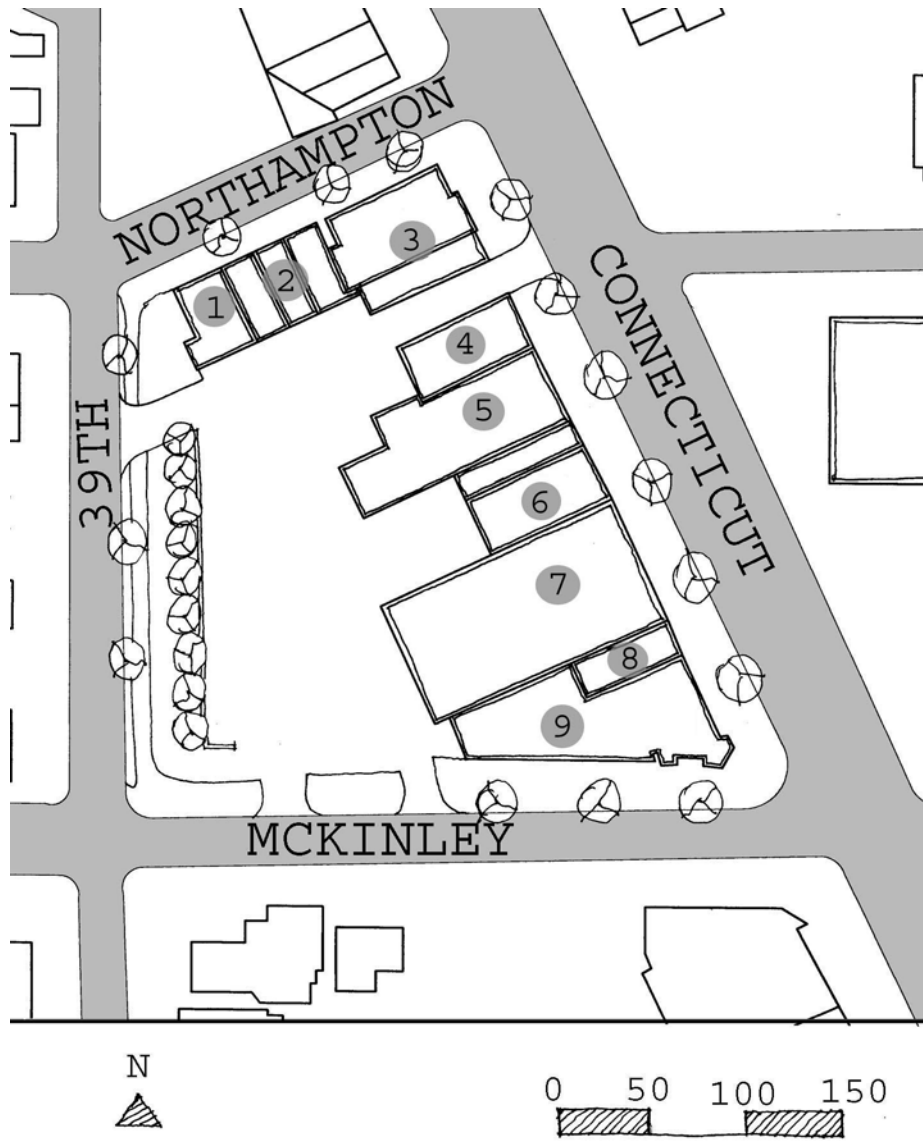
Figure 55 Site Possibility #2: All of the existing structures are kept. No demolition occurs, limiting new construction to the parking lot behind the Avalon Theater. This then displaces the parking for the businesses that remain on the site.
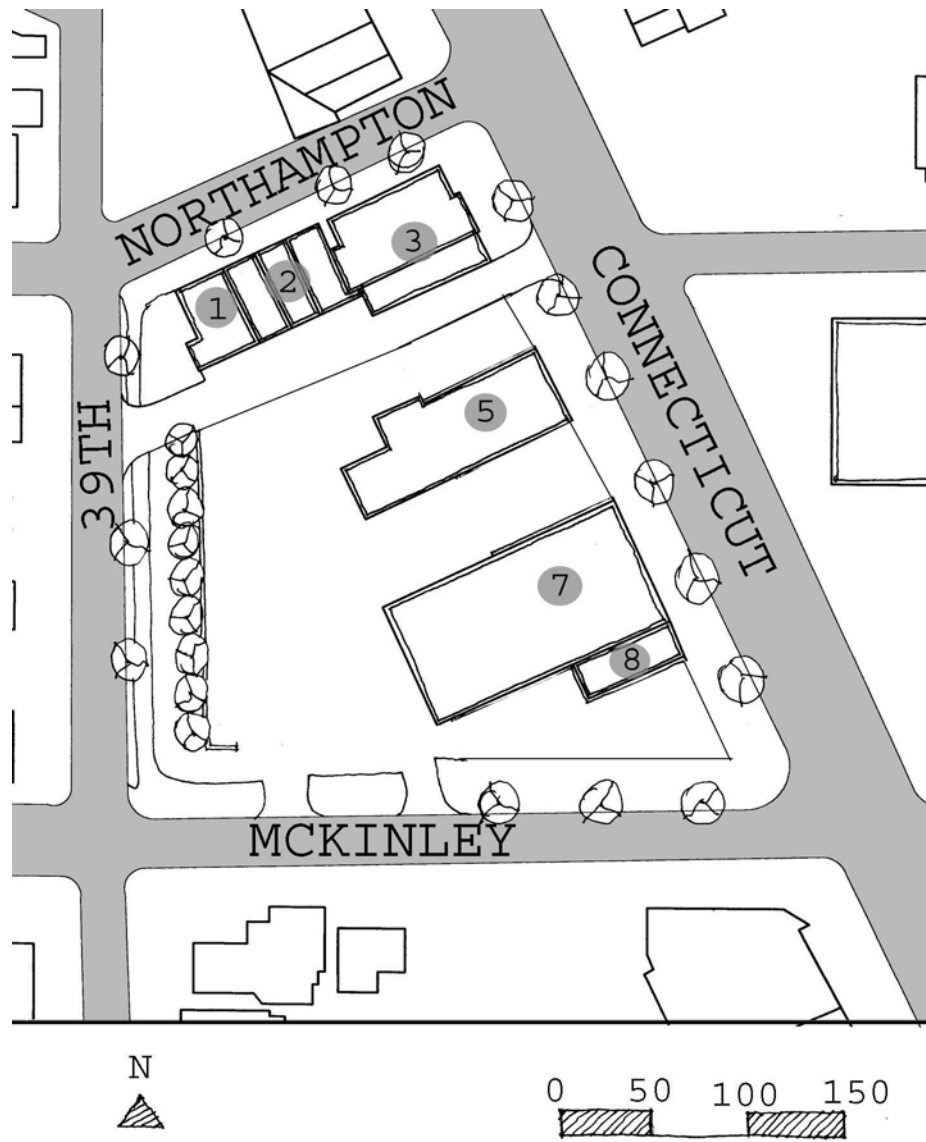
Figure 56 Site Possibility #3: The flower shop, Subway and corner building are demolished, leaving openings in the Connecticut Ave. street façade. This leaves interesting and challenging spaces in which to incorporate and integrate new construction.
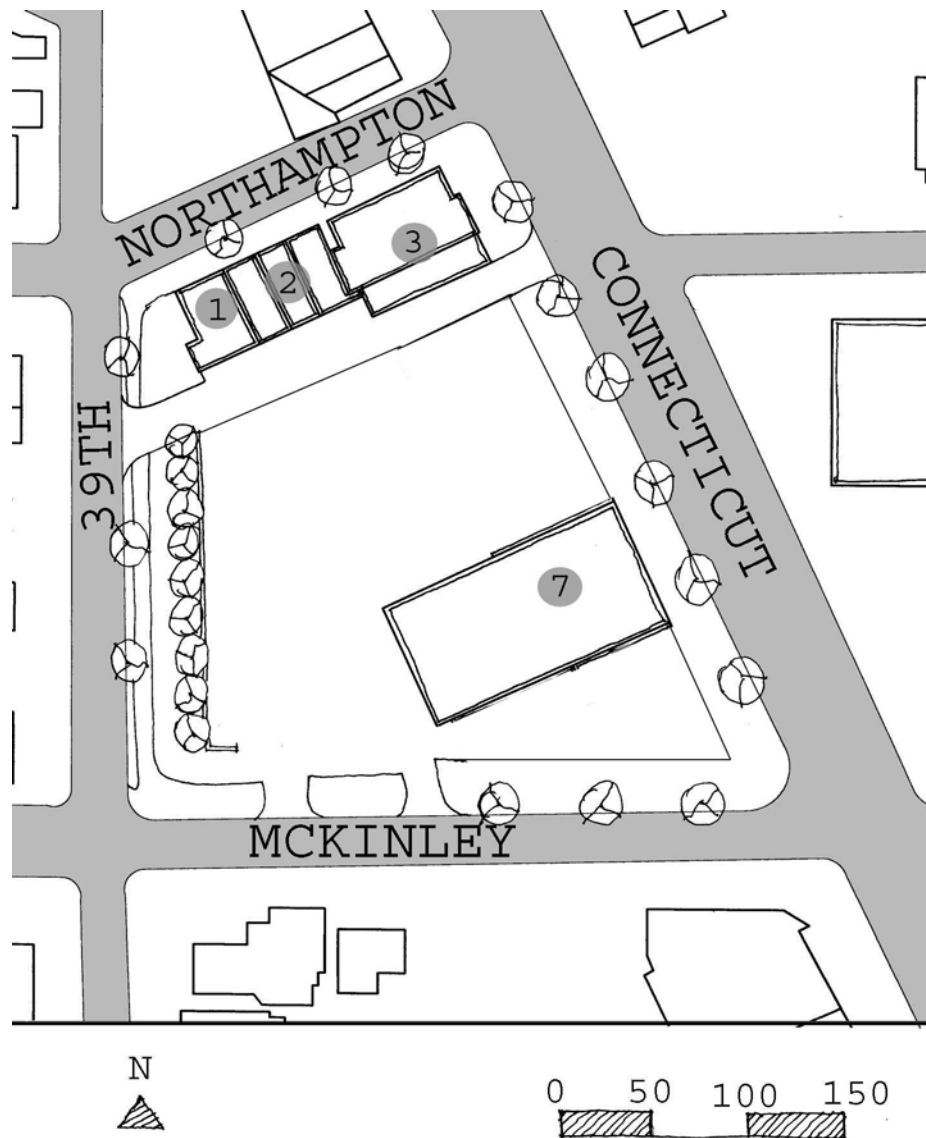
Figure 57 Site Possibility #4: This scheme eliminates the buildings that can be demolished and also some of the buildings that were only possibilities like Magruder's and the paint store. The commercial along Northampton is kept, but this allows the entire south side of the block open for new construction with the Avalon Theater as the centerpiece.

CHAPTER IV: PRECEDENTS

The Silver Theater

The Silver Theater was designed in 1938 by renowned theater architect John Eberson. The art deco theater was designed as a centerpiece to a 29-store shopping center in the heart of Silver Spring. The New Deal inspired commercial center gave rise to an entire commercial district that stretched for several blocks around the Silver in the next two decades.[31]

Figure 58   The Silver in 1940, soon after it was built. Source: www.adsw.org

Figure 59   The original décor of the auditorium in 1940. Source: www.adsw.org

Figure 60   The Silver in the 1950's surrounded by booming commercial development. Source: www.adsw.org

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[31] Headley. 320.

In the decades following the 1950's, the thriving modern shopping center and the golden age Silver began to deteriorate. Attendance rates began to drop and by the 1980's it was apparent that the Silver was in serious trouble. In 1984, the Art Deco Society of Washington launched a campaign for the preservation of the Silver and the shopping complex. The result was the addition of the Silver to the National Register of Historic Places, but not before a dispute occurred with the theater's owner. The result of the dispute was the demolition of the art deco front of the theater, the marquee, and colored tile mosaics at the theater's threshold.[32] In 1985, the Silver was closed and remained that way for over a decade.

Figure 61 The Silver Theater as it looked before construction began on the AFI addition. Source: www.adsw.org

In the late 1990's the American Film Institute (AFI) in conjunction with Montgomery County began construction on a 32,000 square foot addition to the Silver. The mission was not only to reopen the Silver, but to combine it with a cultural and educational experience for the residents of Montgomery County. The

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[32] Headley. 321.

solution was an elaborate restoration of the Silver, including an addition and partial reconstruction of the elements that were demolished in 1985.

The new addition comes in the form of a glass-like box that divides the main mass of the AFI from the Silver. The addition is not invasive and helps the Silver to retain its original character and procession. The Silver will not stand exactly as it once did, as the auditorium will seat only half of the original seating capacity. It will be supplemented by two additional small theaters in the addition that will seat 200 and 75. In addition Silver will have office and meeting space, reception and exhibit areas as well as classrooms for educational purposes.

Figure 62 Completed AFI addition to the Silver Theater. Source: Author's files.

Figure 63 The newly restored Silver Theater. Source: Author's file.

The Silver has been saved by adding to its function in the community of Silver Spring. It is a unique project as far as the adaptive reuse of theaters is concerned, but there have been many factors in this accomplishment. The collaboration of Montgomery County and AFI is one example, and the redevelopment plan that Silver Spring is undergoing will help to restore the Silver as the centerpiece of the commercial district.

Application and Analysis – The Silver Theater:

- Clear division between addition and historic theater.

- Program allows for full integration of community, educational, and cultural events through classrooms and meeting rooms.

- Additional theaters added while still keeping the focus on the Silver as the main venue – allows for more variety in programming.

The Charles Theater

The Charles Theater in Baltimore, MD has a complex history of adaptive reuse. The structure that now houses the Charles Theater was originally a cable car barn and power house. The beaux-arts façade was designed by architect Jackson C. Gott in 1892. Eventually the cable car became extinct in Baltimore and the remaining structure became a library for the blind and then later became the Famous Ballroom. (www.thecharles.com)

Figure 64 The original street car barn that eventually became the Charles Theater. Source: www.thecharles.com

Figure 65 The Times Theater in 1953 before it became The Charles. Source: www.thecharles.com

Figure 66 The Charles Theater as it looked in 1970, many of its
beaux arts details have been covered. Source: www.thecharles.com

It was in 1939 that 1717 North Charles St. was transformed once again, this

time into the Times Theater. The Times Theater was an exclusively newsreel theater.

In 1959 it was renamed the Charles and the theater existed in this incantation until

1999. It was at this time that it was realized that the Charles could no longer exist as a

single screen theater. This is when the latest adaptive reuse plan came into sight. The

Charles would be restored, and with the addition of four new theaters, would once

again become economically viable.

The original Charles Theater was located in the area of the existing structure

that had once been the power house. The new plan took over the rest of the cable car

barn to build a new lobby and four new theaters. The addition was designed by Alex

Castro of Castro/Arts and architect Joe Adamczyk. The beaux arts façade was

restored with some modifications, and later there was a decision to add a restaurant,

which now exists in place of the lobby of the original Charles.

The Charles Theater, once threatened with extinction, has been revived. The original auditorium exists much as it did 50 years ago, although the experience and procession have been changed drastically. The exterior provides charm and excitement to the experience with its historic façade, but the new lobby and theaters speak of contemporary times.

Overall, the Charles now presents a modern movie going experience with touches of nostalgia that reach back to a time when single screen movie houses dominated many neighborhood blocks.

Application and Analysis – The Charles Theater:

- Contrast of historic exterior and a more trendy lobby and movie-going experience.

- Addition of restaurant adds more variety – people come for dinner and stay for a movie.

Figure 67 The Charles after its expansion. Source: www.thecharles.com

Figure 68 The Charles at night. Source: www.thecharles.com

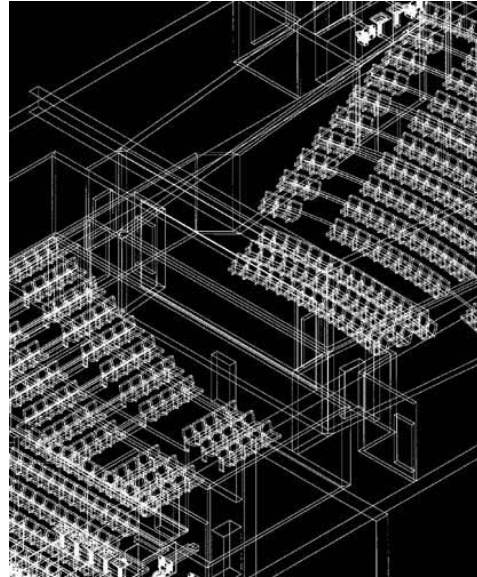**Figure 69** The new lobby of the Charles. Source: Castro/Arts.

Figure 70 Axon of the Charles showing the relationship of the new theater with the original auditorium. Source: www.thecharles.com
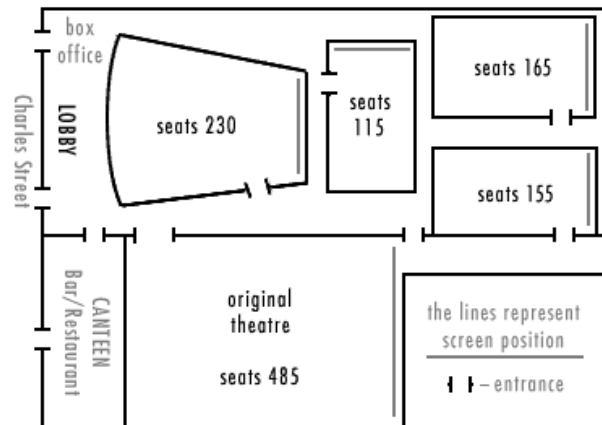

Figure 71 Diagrammatic plan of the Charles Theater showing the arrangement of the existing theater, four new theaters, the lobby and restaurant. Source: www.thecharles.com

Irish Film Center

Temple Bar was a run down quarter of Dublin, Ireland in the 1970's when property began to be amassed to build a bus station. The project ran into some trouble, and the property was leased out in the short-term. This attracted many different alternative and cultural based organizations. The buildings were run down, but the rents were low. The new tenants brought back life to the district. Art studios, clothes shops, record stores, and rehearsal studios attracted many young people. In 1991, a group successfully lobbied for the conversion of Temple Bar into a center of culture and tourism.

This movement gave birth to the Irish Film Centre. Cinema is an urban distraction and it uses the synthesis of culture and commerce as a means of stimulating interest and activity in the area. The Irish Film Centre is located on the interior of the block and has converted a former Quaker Meeting house. It has incorporated two cinemas, archive film storage, restaurant, bar, and bookshop clustered around a double height glazed atrium.
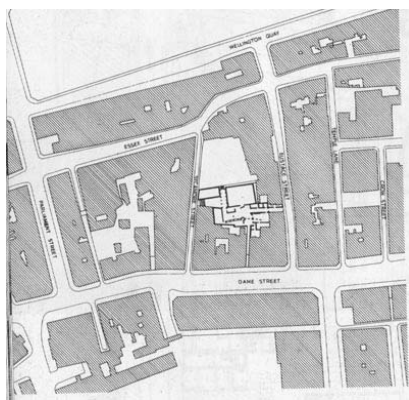

Figure 72   Site plan showing the location of the IFC in the interior of the block. Source: Catherine Slessor.
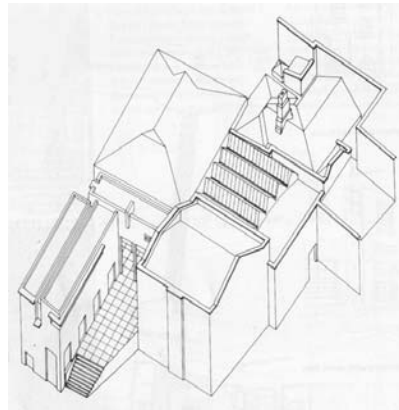
Figure 73   Axon showing the relationship of volumes centered around the courtyard. Source: Catherine Slessor.
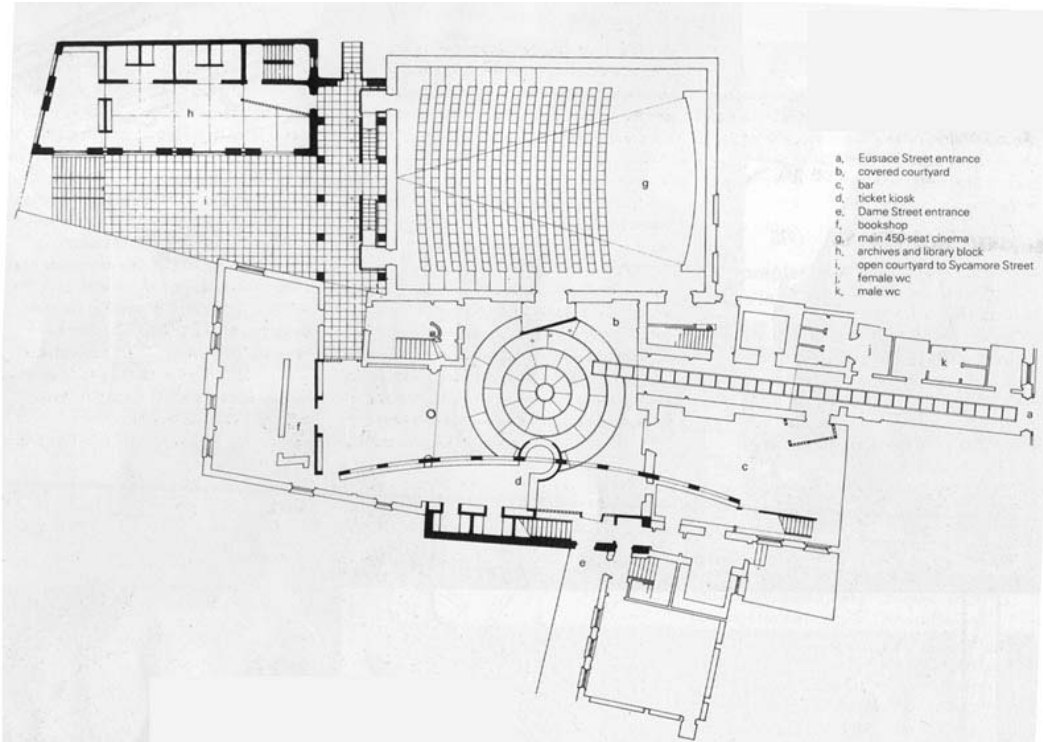
Figure 74 Plan of the IFC, showing archives, courtyard, restaurant/bar, theater, and offices.
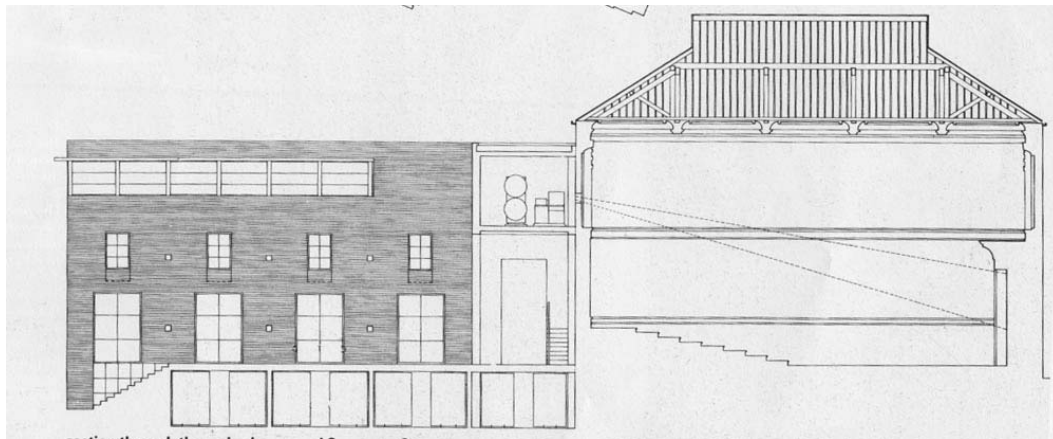Source: Catherine Slessor.

Figure 75 Section through the theater which was converted from a Quaker meeting house.
Source: Catherine Slessor.

Figure 76 View of bar, looking through to the courtyard. Source: Catherine Slessor.

Figure 77 Courtyard with glazed roof. Source: Catherine Slessor.

Figure 78 View of the courtyard illuminated at night. Source: Catherine Slessor.

Figure 79 View of the façade of the archives, the only street frontage the IFC has. Source:Catherine Slessor.

Figure 80 The screen in the auditorium, showing the original arched window behind. Source: Catherine Slessor

Application and Analysis – IFC:

- Uses awkward site boundaries to its advantage.

- Not a lot of street frontage, but still forms a unique procession to the building.

- The conglomeration of masses could be awkward, but the design uses a central courtyard as an organizing feature.

- The restaurant/bar and office space in addition to the auditorium help to keep the area active even though it appears to be buried at the center of an urban block.

Contemporary Movie Theater Precedents

There are some examples of contemporary movie theaters which showcase architecture and its integration with the modern technologies of the movie. These theaters contrast the lifeless non-architecture of the multiplex.

Figure 81   Cinema using wood and glass and containing a café/restaurant with outdoor seating. Source: Edwin Heathcote.
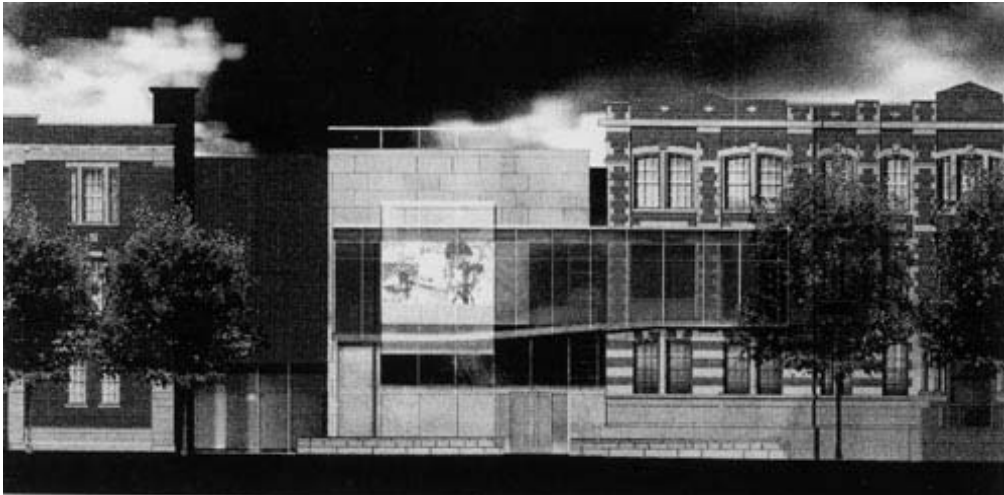
Figure 82   Cinema in the context of existing fabric. The central element of the cinema façade carries across the historic façade next door. Source: Edwin Heathcote.

Figure 83   Entrance to the Tricycle Cinema in Manchester, England, showing the transparency of the façade, blurring the inside and outside. Source: Edwin Heathcote.

Figure 84   The lobby of the Tricycle does not contain the traditional concession stand, instead it houses a café/bar. Source: Edwin Heathcote.

CHAPTER V: PROGRAM

Program Description and Analysis:

In developing the program for the Avalon Theater complex it was important to consider the best way to augment an historic theater that is the cornerstone of a thriving community. The master plan will examine the current functions of the site and how they will be modified and integrated into the program of the Avalon Theater complex. Major determinates are economic viability and community interaction as well as preserving the traditional movie-going experience provided by the historic Avalon Theater.

The Avalon Theater as it exists now, is approximately 15,800 square feet with the main auditorium occupying 10,500 square feet. The addition will consist of approximately 28,000 square feet and include the following spaces.

Community Space:

This is a vital part of program. The community must use and embrace the space in order for the complex to be successful. The classrooms would ideally be used for classes in acting, cinema history, etc…. for children and adults. The community black box theater can be used for class performances or possibly even plays or lectures from local experts. The exhibition space is for the display of work from the students in the classes or art from local artists.

(3) Classrooms – 900 square feet each

Community Black Box Theater – 2, 500 square feet

Exhibition Space – 1,000 square feet

Commercial:

The commercial aspect to the Avalon addition is also crucial to its success. The integration of office space into the program is one way to keep the site activated during the day. The retail space also draws people to the site during the day when the theater my not be showing movies. It may involve the integration of some of the existing retail on the site. For example, if the building that houses Magruder's grocery store is eliminated due to the master plan for the block, it is likely it will be reincorporated into the site.

The theater/café is a function added to contrast and compliment the traditional movie-going experience provided by the Avalon. By providing variety and a unique experience, patrons will be more likely to come to the Avalon complex rather than the many multiplexes on Wisconsin Ave. The restaurant/bar is another way to attract residents as well as visitors to Chevy Chase to go to dinner and a movie. The close proximity and more culinary selection may encourage the community to stay in Chevy Chase, rather than going to Cleveland Park to the Uptown Theater, which has a plethora of bars and restaurants.

Office – 4,000 square feet (subject to change)

Retail – 4,000 square feet (subject to change)

Theater/café – 6,000 square feet

Restaurant/bar – 4,000 square feet

Parking will also be a major concern due to the fact that the surface parking

currently on the site will be disrupted by the addition, and the added program will

require more spaces. A multi-level parking garage will be planned as an integral part

of the site.

USES	POSSIBLE SQ. FOOTAGE	PARKING REQUIREMENTS
COMMERCIAL:	18,000 sq. ft. = total	220 spaces = approximate total
Office:	4,000 sq. ft.	20 spaces
Retail:	4,000 sq. ft.	20 spaces
Theater/Café:	6,000 sq. ft.	35 spaces
Restaurant/Bar:	4,000 sq.ft.	30 spaces
Existing Avalon:	15,800 sq. ft. (not included in commercial sq. ft.)	115 spaces
COMMUNITY:	6,200 sq. ft.=total	25 spaces = total
Classrooms:	3 @ 900 sq. ft. each	??
Black Box Theater:	2,500 sq. ft.	25 spaces
Exhibition Space:	1,000 sq. ft.	??

Figure 85 Chart showing relationship of different programmatic uses to square footage and parking
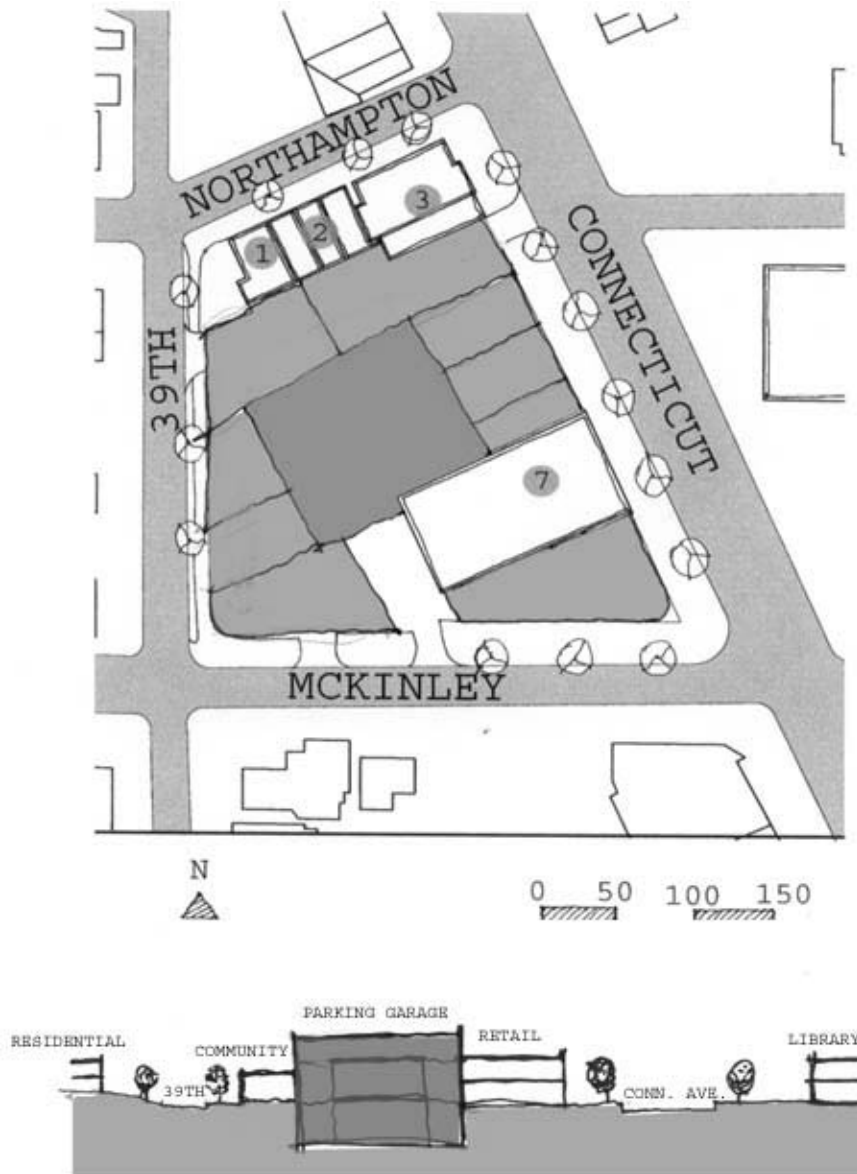requirements. Source: Author's files.

Preliminary Site Parti Diagrams:

Figure 86   Scheme #1 - using site master plan possibility # 4. The Avalon complex would be a high-density addition to the block. The parking garage would be enclosed within the block and surrounded by commercial and community functions. The massing of the perimeter buildings could mask the size of the parking garage, which could be partially buried. Source: Author's files.
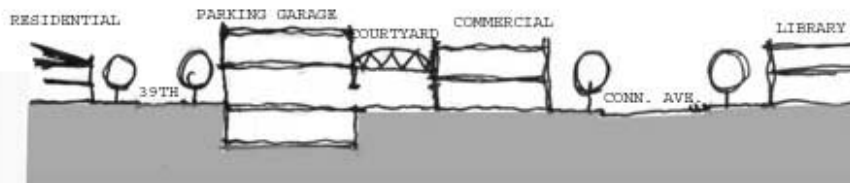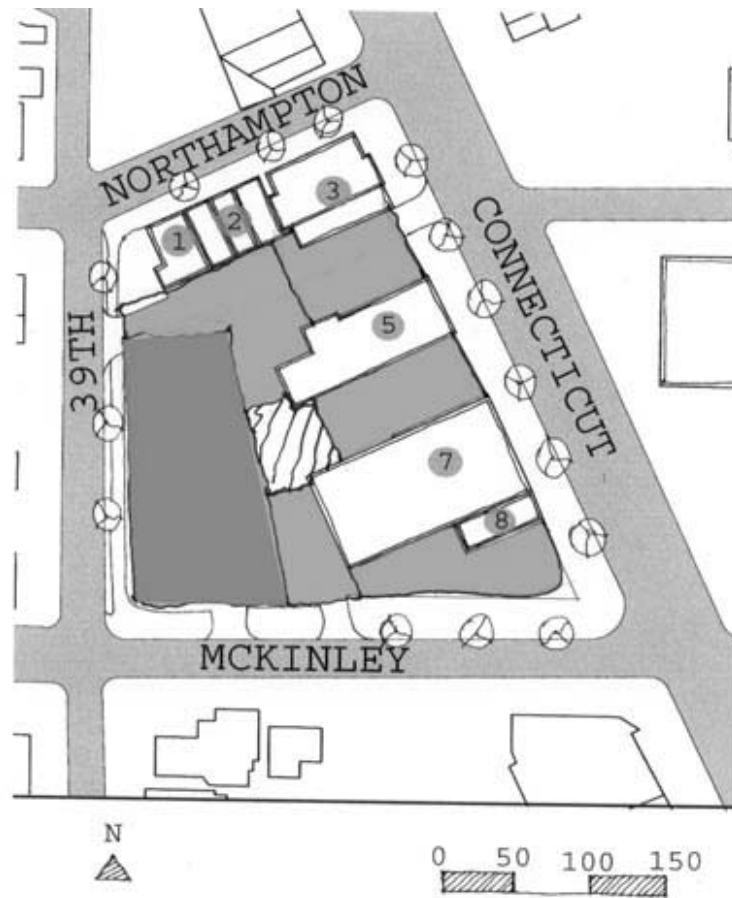
Map labels: NORTHAMPTON, CONNECTICUT, 39TH, MCKINLEY

Scale: 0   50   100   150

N

Section labels: RESIDENTIAL, PARKING GARAGE, COURTYARD, COMMERCIAL, LIBRARY, 39TH, CONN. AVE.

Figure 87   Scheme #2 – using site master plan possibility #3. This scheme is centered around an interior courtyard which would connect the different programmatic elements in the Avalon complex. The problem becomes the parking garage, which now faces the residential. Some possible solutions would be to introduce some commercial storefronts into the ground level and/or reduce the mass of the garage. Source: Author's files.

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CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

This thesis process began with the examination of the evolution of the movie

theater typology. It was found that historic theaters that were once the vital center of

neighborhoods are now disappearing, leaving voids in these communities.

This was the case with the Avalon Theater in Chevy Chase, D.C. The Avalon

was a landmark in this vital and affluent community. This did not stop its closure in

2001. This inspired the question: If an important landmark like the Avalon could

close in a neighborhood like Chevy Chase, then what can be done to ensure its

longevity? My thesis is an exploration in how to invigorate and ensure continuous life

for the Avalon Theater, historic movie house and cornerstone of the community.

In beginning the design process I first considered an addition to the Avalon,

but after studying the block and other successful theaters, I couldn't confine my

intentions to the theater itself. The idea evolved into a master plan for the block,

creating a multi-use destination for the community including: retail, office, housing,

parking, and additional program to augment the traditional movie-going experience
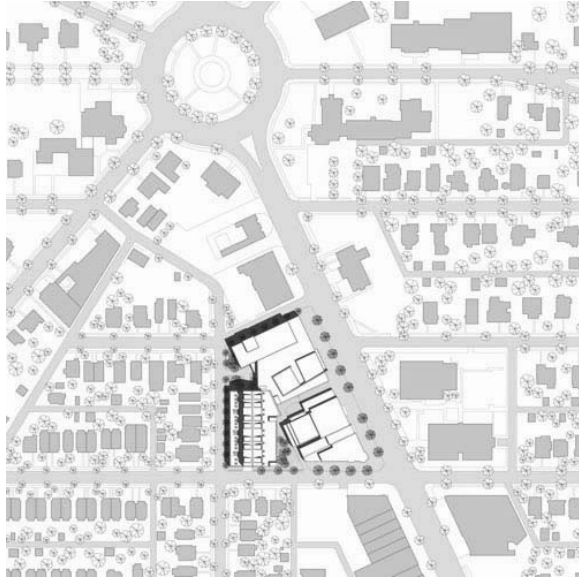
that the Avalon provides.
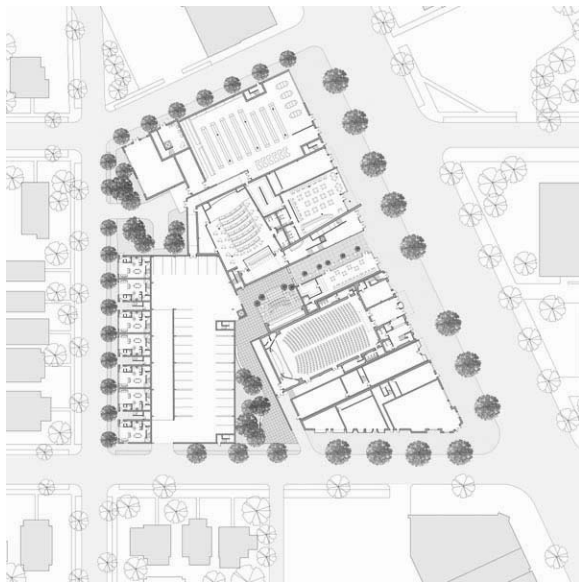
Figure 88 Site plan. Source: Author's Files.
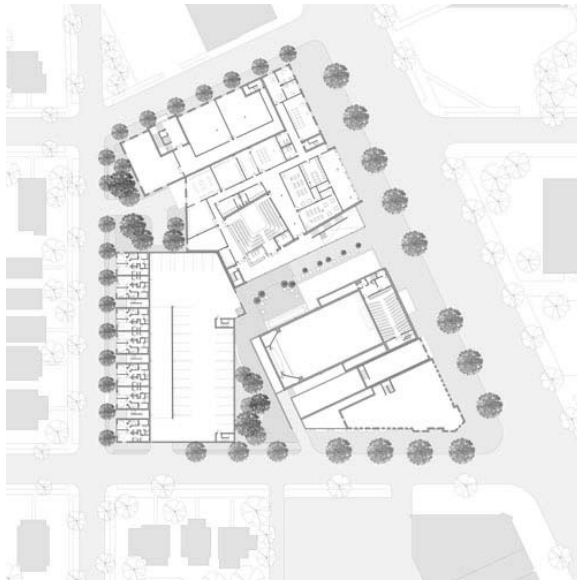

Figure 89 First floor block plan. Source: Author's Files.

Figure 90 Second Floor Block Plan. Source:
Author's files.

Figure 91 East elevation. Source: Author's files.

Figure 92 North Elevation. Source: Author's files.

Figure 93 West Elevation. Source: Author's files.

Figure 94 South Elevation. Source: Author's files.

Figure 95 East – west building section. Source:
Author's files.

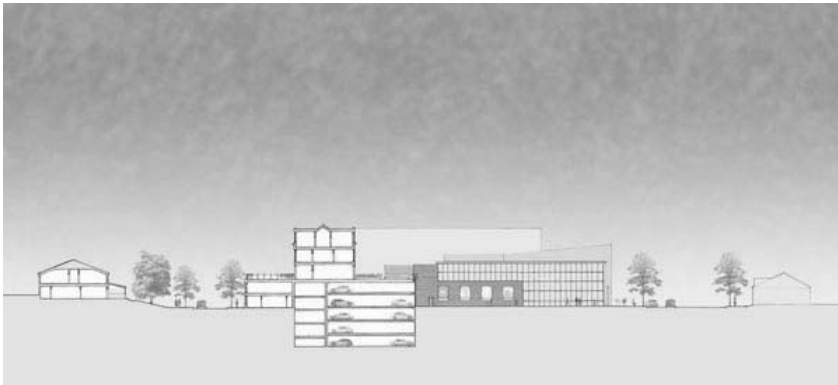**Figure 96** North – south building section. Source: Author's files.

Figure 97 West –east site section. Source: Author's files.

Figure 98 South-north site section. Author's files.

Figure 99 Perspective through mews, looking towards Connecticut. Source: Author's files.

Figure 100 Perspective of outdoor theater. Source: Author's files.

Figure 101 Lobby perspective. Source: Author's files.

Figure 102 Theater Café perspective. Source: Author's files.

Figure 103 Perspective of Connecticut Ave. at night. Source: Author's files.

Figure 104 Aerial view of model. Source: Author's files.

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