

The Royal Theater
1011 22nd Street South
HPC #-00-03, Designated October 2001



The Royal Theater is significant for its association with development of the African-American community along 22nd Street South in St. Petersburg. The Royal Theater operated for eighteen years from 1948 to 1966. During these nearly two decades it was one of only two movie theaters serving solely African-Americans in St. Petersburg during the era of segregation; the other being the Harlem Theater, located at 1019 Third Avenue South which has been demolished. Meanwhile, of the remaining ten to twelve theaters outside of the African-American community, all but LaPlaza Theater were segregated facilities.

With the passage of the Civil Rights Act 1964, African Americans and other minority groups were provided judicial relief from discrimination in places of public accommodation, including theaters. Ironically, the Act may have led to the demise of the Royal and Harlem Theaters since neither were in business by 1967, although movie theaters had expanded their number in St. Petersburg to seventeen. By 1975, the Royal Theater had been converted to a youth center. Integration in the sixties and seventies combined with the destruction of wide areas of the African-American community during the construction of Interstate 275 has dispersed the 22nd Street South community to other areas of the city. The change in population base and the competition from newer multiplex theaters also undermined the market for historically black theaters as it was to the older, formerly segregated white theaters. The only movie theater older than the 1970s still functioning (although as a concert venue) is the State Theater at 687 Central Avenue, but the State is itself a 1949 renovation of a 1920s bank building.

Built in circa 1948, the Royal Theater was designed by Philip F. Kennard for the Gulf Coast Entertainment Company. The Royal Theater is one of the few remaining "Quonset Huts" within St. Petersburg. As a lightweight, portable, and economic building type, these huts are inherently rare pieces of architecture. The huts were designed by the George A. Fuller construction company of New York which used a British prototype from the First World War called a "Nissan" hut. The Fuller company put designers Peter Dejongh and Otto Brandenberger to work. Within a month they had set up a production facility near Quonset Rhode Island, and started producing two basic models. The smaller model was 20 feet wide and 48 feet long. The larger was 40 feet by 100 feet. Using these basic modules, around 170,000 Quonset huts were produced during the war. These basic units were used singly and in combination to accommodate everything from barracks and M.A.S.H. units to warehouses and airstrip facilities.

After the war the surplus Quonset huts were sold to civilians for around a thousand dollars to become housing for returning veterans. The structural components of the basic Quonset could be adapted by designers for a variety of purposes. Many businesses found the Quonset was a perfect solution for storage and garage needs. Architects used the basic arched elements in the design of churches or theaters. The Royal Theater likely had its origins as just such an adaptation. Another example of Quonset hut construction on 22nd Street South is the Soft Water Laundry in the 500 block, the dimensions for which are nearly identical to the Royal.