

Bronx Opera House

436-442 East 149th Street, Bronx
Tax Map Block 2293 Lot 46

Built: 1912-1913 (NB-58-1912)

Architect: George Keister

Style: Italian Renaissance Revival

Proposed Action: Calendared, February 14, 2023

Public Hearing, May 2, 2023



Bronx Opera House, LPC, 2023

The Bronx Opera House, located at 436-442 East 149th Street in the South Bronx, was built as a theater and restaurant between 1912 and 1913 by the Bronx 149th Street Realty Company, where George M. Cohan served as President, and designed by George Keister. The building served as an entertainment center for nearly 50 years, from the early Broadway acts along the “Subway Circuit” to becoming a major center for the growing Latin music scene in the 1960s and 70s.

George Keister’s architectural practice was largely active from 1880s through the 1930s. He designed buildings throughout Manhattan and the Bronx, including two individually designated New York City Landmarks, Belasco’s Stuyvesant Theater (built in 1906-1907) and Hurtig & Seamon’s (Apollo) Theater (built 1913-1914). Constructed in the Italian Renaissance Revival style, the Bronx Opera House is a four-story building that features a tripartite designed façade with articulated fluted pilasters and carved tympanums.

George M. Cohan (1878-1942), the Bronx Opera House developer, is considered by many to be the first superstar of American show business. He worked as an actor, composer, playwright, producer, dancer, songwriter and theater-owner, and created many popular musical numbers such as “Yankee Doodle Dandy,” and “Give My Regards to Broadway.” Mr. Cohan opened several theaters in the first and second decade of the 20th century, including the Bronx Opera House, as part of the “Subway Circuit.” The “Subway Circuit” referred to Broadway productions that were tested in the city’s outer boroughs before going out on regional or nationwide tours. Many famous names passed through the theatre in its early days, including John, and Lionel Barrymore, Julian Eltinge and Richard Dix.

After World War II, economic changes in Puerto Rico and more accessible travel options to the United States led to a migration of tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans to New York City, first to East Harlem and soon after the South Bronx. In the late 1950s, as the Puerto Rican community grew in the borough, the Bronx Opera House became home to a series of nightclubs including the Club Caravana, the Bronx Casino, and El Cerromar. The nightclubs had performances by Tito Rodriguez, Charlie Palmieri and Johnny Pacheco as well as many others. Charlie Palmieri and his brother Eddie Palmieri, both widely popular musicians in the Latin music scene, recorded an album in the building entitled “Pachanga at Club Caravana” in 1961. The New York Times acknowledges the Bronx Opera House as a location that was “pivotal to the emergence of the Pachanga dance craze.” For several decades the Bronx Opera continued to serve the growing Latino community of the South Bronx with dances and concerts, and for many is remembered as an important place of social gathering and expression of Latino culture.

Today, although the rear auditorium is no longer extant, the historic building that has been public face of the building for over a century is remarkably intact and prominent in the busy “Hub” of the 149th Street. The building, which historically contained the lavish theater entry lobby, original restaurant space, and Latin music clubs still reflects Bronx Opera House’s storied history in the artistic culture of the South Bronx and New York City.

