

Athens Theatre
Architect Murry S. King

Building Name: The Athens Theatre
Address: 124 North Florida Avenue, DeLand, FL 32720

Year Built: 1921
Architect of Record: Murry S. King
Design Architect (if different): Same as above
General Contractor: Not known
Other Contributors: None

Noteworthy Architectural Features: The Athens Theatre is a fine example of a civic building conceived in an Italian Renaissance Revival Style with elements of the Prairie Style. The symmetrical façade of russet brick with limestone color decoration, as well as red brick decoration, offers a lively interpretation of these styles. Elements that set it apart include the repetition of arching forms in the entry doors, large windows, and roof parapet. The scale of the building is grand enough to be an important feature in the DeLand cityscape, yet is intimate enough to be warm and welcoming. Architectural terra cotta is used with great effect in the inset tiles punctuating the façade, in the four “eavesdroppers” along the cornice, the cornice itself, and the decorative insets in the parapet roof. The building underwent a major restoration in the early 2000’s assuring its preservation for the foreseeable future.

How to Visit: Exterior can be seen at any time.
Interior during a theatrical performance

Architectural Style: Italian Renaissance Revival, with
Prairie Style elements

Website: www.athensdeland.com

Related Links:

[Park Lake Presbyterian Church | OFA \(orlandoarchitecture.org\)](http://Park Lake Presbyterian Church | OFA (orlandoarchitecture.org))

Murry S. King Wikipedia:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murry_S._King

Description:

A 1921 Italian Renaissance Revival palazzo has graced North Florida Avenue in DeLand for more than a century. The Athens Theatre also stands as a tribute and memorial to its architect, Murry S King, who was considered in his lifetime The Dean of Orlando architects. The Athens Theatre continues to hold a place of highest esteem in the built environment of Central Florida.

A visit to the theatre, whether to simply enjoy its lovely exterior, or to attend a performance in its beautiful interior, is always worthwhile.

The theatre is constructed of russet color brick with limestone color detailing as well as red brick accents. The symmetrical façade is balanced and pleasing to the eye.

The visitor is welcomed to the theatre by a triple-arched entry in the central part of the facade. The middle arch holds the box office and the other two arches are the entrance doors. Above these is the marquee, with the curved sign that says "Theatre". This marquee partly obscures the triple square windows that balance with the triple entry arches

below. Above them is a rectangular inset dating to the building's creation that says: Athens.

On either side of the entry are large shallow rectangular niches, framed in a contrasting red brick with white accents; these are used to display posters of current or future productions. Above these, are very tall, rounded windows, shaped like the central portion of a Palladian window, which echo the arched curves of the main entrance.

Above these features is a continuous attic story, with rectangular windows using a combined cross and x design. This motif was popular in Beaux Arts architecture and also often employed in civic Prairie Style architecture. Above these is a large limestone color cornice, allowing the eye to visually pause as it looks upward. But the eye then continues upward to the red brick parapets with gently curved arches above each of three sections of the façade, so that the arch theme that began at the main entry doors and was continued by the large windows is concluded against the sky. This is a very pleasing and harmonious effect, in what is essentially a Beaux Arts style composition, that has elements both Italian Renaissance and Prairie style.

Prairie style? Yes, especially noticeable in the corner of the display windows. The horizontal sill, water table, and cornice, emphasizing the horizontal, which was a hallmark of the Prairie style. The vertical embellishments at the top center of each of the four brick pilasters. Which include four faces that look down on the passerby, and four caduceus.

Sprinkled attractively here and there are white tiles that enliven the brick. The cartouche in the central parapet arch is especially pleasing in this regard.

The DeLand community was especially proud of this exterior design for number of years, so that one would hardly guess that a very bizarre transformation took place in the middle of the 20th century, when the entire façade above the street level was sheathed in what was thought at that time and very modern and stylish design, with a gigantic sign, announcing the Athens as the central part of the facade, and very large display spaces on either side. All of the windows were obscured, and a new shallow angled marquee was created that spanned the entire building. Happily all of this has been cleared away, during major restoration, so that the original design can be seen, appreciated, and enjoyed for future generations.

Up near the cornice, there are four identical sculpted faces below each of which is a caduceus, that is, a staff entwined by two snakes with wings. It is not clear why the architect chose these. More expected for the decoration of a theater might have been mask of tragedy and comedy, perhaps. Or depictions of the muses of the lively arts from antiquity. The face seems to be that of the Greek god Pan, indicated by the curly horns on their head. Although Dionysus is another possibility.

Continuing our study of the decoration, our eyes go to the shield forming the central cartouche, upon which is a date number, 1921, the date the theatre construction began.

The limestone color decorations are most likely architectural terracotta ornament, created to resemble limestone. This was an exterior material of choice in the first quarter of the 20th century. It is highly probable that the ornamentation was made by the American Terra-Cotta Company owned by William Day Gates (also the makers of Teco Pottery). The skillful modeling of the four faces at the cornice look to be the work of their gifted artisans.

Not incidentally, the tallest building in the world at that time, the Woolworth Building, is entirely clad in architectural terra-cotta, as is the famous Flatiron Building, also in Manhattan.

The interior is in keeping with the exterior, with arched themes in the two large private box openings, the curve of the proscenium, and the curving forms of the balcony railing. Elegant multi-globed chandeliers are suspended from the coffered ceiling. There is a lovely bas relief above the proscenium in which six muses of Greek mythology are depicted in what resembles Wedgwood Jasperware. The simple and elegant design is finished in a rich color scheme of red and cream.

Murry S. King

Murry S. King (1870-1927) was a native of Western Pennsylvania who conducted his architectural career there, and more significantly in Central Florida. King is considered the Dean of Orlando Architects, and was the first person to receive a license from the Florida chapter of the American Institute of Architects. In addition to his influential and impressive body of work, King was the leader of a collection of significantly likeminded architects practicing in Central Florida during the boom decade of the 1920s. This Orlando Group of architects worked to create an architecture that was appropriate to the Florida environment. In "The Florida Circle" of May 1924, they described it (in part):

"Just as architects of old created styles to harmonize with their environment, so have the architects of Florida been creating, from native motifs, a style that is carefully adapted to the climatic conditions and surroundings of the state. This style has an individuality all its own..."

Murry S. King designed many other notable works in Central Florida, including the Angebilt Hotel (27 N. Orange Ave.), the Beardall Residence (700 Euclid Avenue), the Woodruff Residence (236 S. Lucerne Circle E.), and his last work, the Orange County Regional History Center (formerly the Orange County Courthouse].

King was adept at many different architectural effects, such as his Spanish Revival Park Lake Presbyterian Church, and his neoclassical Orange County Courthouse.