

# RITZIATA

A Ritz Park Art Proposal

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**Historic Research and Context** - Michael Allen and Dennis Northcott  
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Ritz Park and the Force of Time  
 Michael R. Allen

## 1909: The Juniata Theater Rises on Grand Boulevard

When the Juniata first opened its doors in 1910, South Grand Boulevard had hardly been an urban place for long. A picturesque neighborhood of tree-lined streets and brick dwellings set back on front lawns had emerged from prairie. Middle class professionals flocked to the area to live in a tranquil remove from downtown St. Louis; the streetcar provided the preferred commute.

February 13, 1909, Local chain operator O.T. Crawford obtained a building permit for a \$14,000 modern theater, a vaudeville house for the emerging district. Designed by William A. Lucas (designer of nearby St. John's Episcopal Church on Arsenal and homes in surrounding neighborhoods), the 950 seat Juniata Theater stood as testament to neighborhood economics, national entertainment trends and American architectural imagination in the Art Nouveau style.

## 1937: The Ritz, A New Era

The Juniata became the Ritz Theater in 1924, and joined the era of motion pictures. The biggest transformation arrived when the owners renewed the entire appearance of the building in 1937. The Art Nouveau façade was concealed and erased, in favor of an Art Moderne streamline façade of stucco brick and terra cotta.

South Grand's denizens, a few short years before the great depression, were no longer using the streetcar to move through the city. In fact, most lines were removed in the 1930s across the city, in favor of buses and walking to ever increasing local amenities. Residents also had the freedom of the automobile, and could see movies anywhere. Neighborhood movie theaters had to "jazz up" to catch the eyes of motorists, and many were remodeled or replaced. The lure of a nascent home entertainment industry was strong as well, with radios and phonographs found in the parlors around Tower Grove Park. Yet despite economic distress and competition movie theaters thrived as the public sought solace in the dreams of the silver screen at The Ritz.

## 1986: Demolition and Neighborhood Change

South Grand slumped after World War II, and the surrounding streets lost their fashionable nature. The stable neighborhood business district shifted to bargain shops. The Ritz could not hold on, nearly fifty years after its new look, the Ritz obtained another, more despoiled form: a parking lot. In 1986, with no apparent value, the Community Development Agency acquired the theater, demolished it and built a parking lot in its place.

## 2015: Ritz Park and a Rejuvenated South Grand

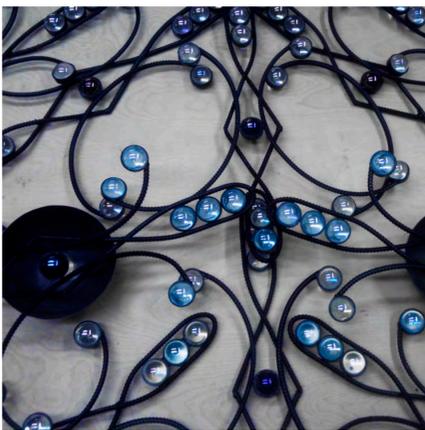
Yet South Grand rebounded through people's investment in place. Families rediscovered the beautiful tree-lined streets and historic housing stock, and rejuvenated the area. By the early 1990s, international cuisine and denizens were a big part of the district's life and a place where people again walked to get around. The area became a national historic district by 2004 and just over a decade later, 105 years after the Juniata opened its doors, the site, now Ritz Park, stands ready once again to represent the force of its time.



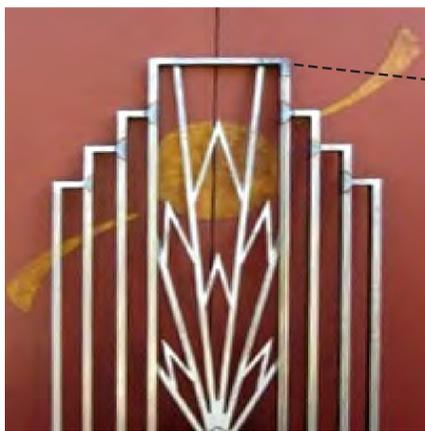
1909: THE ORIGINAL JUNIATA THEATER



1937: THE RITZ FACADE



METALWORK MARBLE PRECEDENT



METALWORK PENDANT SKETCH

The human impulse to create entryways to common spaces for ceremony, entertainment and inspiration both communal and personal remains strong in us. Here in our neighborhood, the Osage, who lived along what is now Grand Boulevard, used tall vertical lodge poles as façade and entrance to their common space. A thousand years later, on virtually the same ground, modern man used brick and mortar as a formal facade for virtually the same reasons. They named it the Juniata.

Though the name changed to the Ritz and the façade was altered, then torn down altogether, this small lot on South Grand has now been made a permanent common space for a society continuing to explore its humanity. We are proposing the people once again be given a façade to approach.

A successful urban streetscape is an ensemble act; a cast of facades who's architectural characters act out ambiance and image. They are the critical interface between inner and outer space. The vitality of a historic district, and its city, depends on its facades and like a missing tooth from a smile, a missing façade has a negative impact.

In essence, we envision a steel outline echoing architectural elements and gesture from the lodge poles of the Osage, the Art Nouveau Juniata and Art Moderne Ritz façades in a unified homage. We call it, RITZIATA. Like a pen and ink drawing suspended in air, its two-story height will fill in the streetscape to complement its neighbouring structures, create a formal entrance for the park, and using negative space, provide visual separation from the busy boulevard.

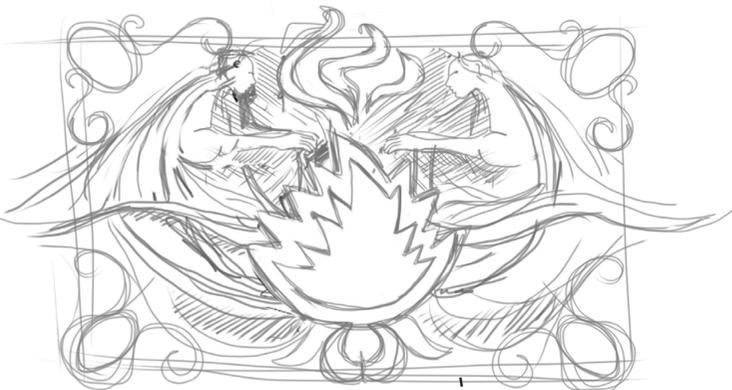
RITZIATA's sheer scale will add immeasurably to the excitement and texture of the Boulevard and Ritz Park. Its projecting marquee will be seen for many blocks in either direction. By day its illusions are of line and space, by night a lighted three-dimensional drawing, an ethereal entrance to the future and an architectural poem to the past.

Centrally located high in the façade we envision two sculptural figures facing each other. Between them, fire (campfire, stage light, projector). The scene symbolizes the story RITZIATA tells: past and future gazing at the flame of the present. Its story unites the history of the location, its future as park and venue, the organic verve of the Art Nouveau movement and the spirit of the Osage.

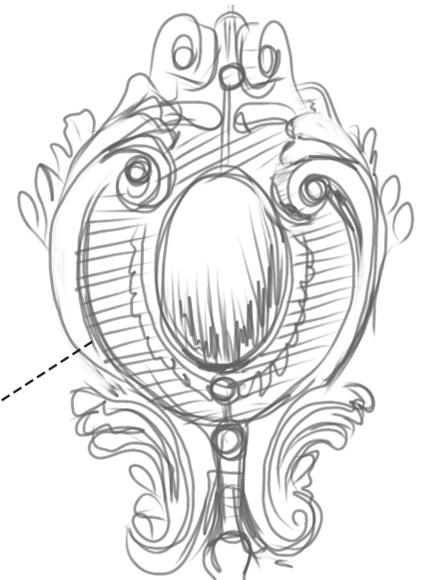
Large blue marbles will be used to accent decorative elements, to echo the Juniata's façade. The marbles also appear as finials for the park's arbor posts, south and west, to unify the space with color and texture reflecting all light night and day.

RITZIATA is our future through the framework of our heritage. It speaks of ownership and pride, confidence and memory, and most importantly, that something worthy is within. It is an exchange of community vitality at the edge of time, a ritzy entrance to imagination and a South Grand original.

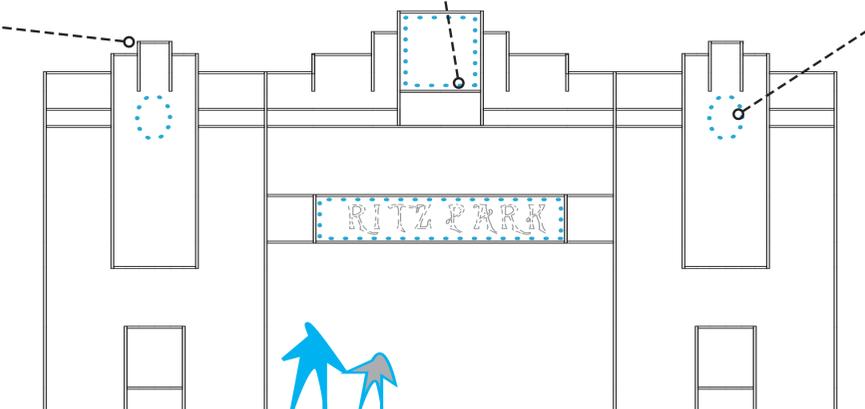
W. F. Gunn



METALWORK MURAL STUDY : PAST AND FUTURE



METALWORK PRECEDENT



## Features designed into RITZIATA:

- Allows for secure curtaining off for private and ticketed events
- Converts into a box office and or vendor stalls.
- Provides safe fly points for AV and tech needs.
- Allows for any number of artist proposals within.
- Ground level framing three sheet boards (poster space)
- Marquee provides for banners

