

Describe the present and original (it known) physical appearance

The Nicholas J. Schepis Building (c.1916) is a two story cast concrete commercial building in the Italian Renaissance style. It is located in the old downtown section of the small town of Columbia. Despite some deterioration on the interior, the building retains its National Register eligibility,

Local legend asserts that the builder was a patriotic Italian immigrant who wanted to exemplify both his Italian roots as well as his new-found Americanism. Judging by the design, this could well be true. The facade is very specifically Italian, resembling Renaissance style palazzos of the mid-fifteenth century. The building consists of a two story main block with a pair of single story side wings. The ground story features a more or less conventional period shopfront, but the piano nobile is elaborately articulated with Renaissance elements. At the base of the piano nobile is a balcony resting on a row of heavy consoles. The five bays are marked by Ionic pilasters supporting an ornamental entablature. The central bay has a molded doorway with an entablature of its own surmounted by a quatrefoil. The other bays contain Renaissance double arched windows also with inset quatrefoils.

The building is surmounted by a parapet with a central tablet flanked by statues of Christopher Columbus and George Washington. Washington is holding a draped American flag and Columbus is holding a draped Italian flag. The tablet is surmounted by an eagle with its wings spread. At each end of the parapet is an urn on a base. Each of the side wings is surmounted by a recumbent lion.

The facade is given added texture by the use of rock-faced concrete "stone" between the pilasters. Here again the effect is similar to early Renaissance palazzos. The rear and sides of the building are unornamented.

The interior features elaborate pressed metal ceilings in very poor repair. Most of the wall covering material has been lost and the ground floor boards are gone.

Assessment of Integrity

Despite the interior deterioration, the Schepis Building retains its facade intact, which is the source of its architectural significance. The only exterior change appears to be the boarding over of some of the shopfront windows, which of course is very minor.

Specific dates c.1916
Builder/Architect Builder: Nicholas John Schepis

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)
Criterion C

The Schepis Building is of statewide significance in the area of architecture because it is a very distinctive work of early twentieth century architecture within the context of Louisiana.

The Schepis Building does not fit easily within recognized architectural trends because in many ways it is a very personal statement. Nonetheless, because it involves the conscious choice of a particular historical style, it can be viewed within the general context of early twentieth century eclectic architecture. The very personal quality of the design contributes to the importance of the Schepis Building within this context. Perhaps because it was a more or less direct Italian import, it has an unusual purity. Its significance within Louisiana eclectic architecture stems from its very unusual and specific style. The early Italian Renaissance of Alberti and Brunelleschi is recognized as a distinct phase of the overall Renaissance, but it was very seldom the choice of architects and builders in Louisiana. In fact, the Schepis Building stands almost alone in this regard. In a larger sense, it is not merely that this particular phase of the Renaissance was chosen, but that any particular phase should have been chosen at all. In contrast to the Schepis Building, most attempts to evoke the Italian Renaissance in Louisiana involve a mixture of Renaissance, Mannerist, and Baroque elements in a more general sort of "Mediterranean look."

The Schepis Building resembles mid-fifteenth century Renaissance style palazzos in the

following respects:

- 1) Rather flat trabeated articulation superimposed on a rough or rusticated "stone" facade,
- 2) The use of Renaissance style double arch windows,
- 3) The squarish palazzo form,
- 4) The use of "stone" consoles,

Historical Note:

Conveyance records reveal that Schepis purchased a portion of the property in question in September 1914 and the remainder in September 1916. The building appears on the August 1919 Sanborn map and is labeled "To Be General Merchandise." At this point the State Historic Preservation Office knows very little about Schepis. He is said to have been an architect in Sicily before coming to America, but we do not know if this is true or not.

Major Bibliographical References

Conveyance Records, Caldwell Parish.

Sanborn Insurance Company Map, Columbia, 1919.

Woods, H. Ted. Caldwell Parish in Slices: Biographies. Baton Rouge, Claitor's Publishing, 1983.