MODERN THEATRE
ORIGINALLY DOBSON BUILDING

523-25 WASHINGTON STREET   EST. 1876   LEVI NEWCOMB & SON, ARCHITECTS

THEN

NOW

HISTORY

The original structure on the site of the Modern Theatre, known as the Dobson Building, was built in 1876 by Levi Newcomb & Son for the largest carpet manufacturers in the US. The seven story building included two cast iron storefront carpet and furniture showrooms along with considerable storage space. In 1913, however, Boston businessman George White commissioned the conversion of the Dobson Building into the Modern Theatre, Boston's first movie house. Clarence Blackall added the ornate marble and sandstone façade and designed the auditorium with famed Harvard acoustic physicist Wallace Sabine, who had consulted on the Boston Symphony Hall auditorium as well. As Boston's first movie theater, the Modern was built without a stage, and boasted a large, purpose-built Estey Organ. The Modern would host the Boston premier of the first "talkie," The Jazz Singer, in 1928. The Modern Theatre, renamed the Mayflower in 1949, would continue showing movies through the early 1970s, at which point it became a pornographic theater.

David Archer renovated the theater in the late 1970s (and restored the original name) as a performance space, and though that iteration only lasted a year, the theatre would host over 200 performances, including the opening engagement – a lightshow and music performance by psychedelic jazz outfit Sun Ra and his Arkestra.

Closing again in 1981, the Modern Theatre slowly deteriorated for over 20 years. Though added to the National Registry of Historic Places in 1979, and designated as a Boston Landmark in 1995, the building almost collapsed in 2003. Suffolk University purchased the building in 2007, beginning a $42 Million restoration that required the painstaking, brick-by-brick removal of the Theatre's distinctive façade. After the completion of a new, 12-story, 60,000 square foot student dormitory and a new, ground-floor theater, the historic façade was reassembled on site.