From Dream to Economy– Cinema Architecture in the Twentieth Century

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Movie theaters are typically reflections of their societies and the eras in which they were created, but even more so reflect an economic business model that is directly translated into built form. Throughout the preceding century they proved to be enormously flexible architecturally when meeting financial as well as technological challenges such as the Great Depression, TV, VCR's, DVD's and computers. There is still no other experience like the shared joy or suspense of viewing a film together.

Origins of the Movie Theater

In many respects things changed very little as far as the architecture of entertainment was concerned over the ensuing centuries following Andrea Palladio and Vincenzo Scamozzi's illusionist environment of the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, Italy, the first completely closed theater of its kind. Communal entertainment relied on the desire of the populace for societal interaction and evidenced a successful economic strategy. Over centuries the development of the dramatic arts led to the development of the theater as a specialized, separate building type. Increasingly today a "spectacle is the rule rather than the exception".

At the turn of the twentieth century, the first films were shown in spaces adapted ad hoc to the occasion, in nickelodeons, in halls, in the open air, or in storefront spaces that were L-shaped in plan. This configuration allowed for the audience to be seated in front and behind the screen, which was installed in an angle at the "knee" of the L-shape. The better seats saw the movie as filmed, the cheaper ones saw it from the back, mirrored. One could say there was a functional relationship between the screen and the building, but no indication that film was being shown, an activity that could be guessed only after the movie theater had become a specialized typology.

The first buildings designed to screen films were modeled on variety and vaudeville theaters, with a stage in front of the screen that also allowed for live entertainment. These were multi-functional buildings. There was also an orchestra pit for the musicians accompanying silent films and oftentimes an electric organ, which commented musically on what was happening on the screen. In the beginning the new medium did not project a distinct architectural expression. Theater typology provided the guiding design principle. Soon architects began to react to the challenge of making the theater into more than a variation of a traditional stage building or a shelter for a screen, they sought to make it into an environment that would speak to all the senses by designing movie theaters based on the prototype of lyric theater, the opera house. From these so-called "hardtop" or plaster-ceilinged movie theaters the Movie Palace of the 1920's was developed. By the 1920's there came to be an intimate relationship between the movie theater building and the films shown inside.

Many American architects dedicated their energy towards creating fantastic "houses" for the movies. Thomas Lamb, John Eberson, Joseph Urban, and Friedrich Kiesler, started out as opera and live theater architects who turned their expertise toward the new task of designing a movie theater typology. Films began to change cities and the way of life of their inhabitants. Movie houses became magnets of night-life. They attracted an audience hungry to experience the glamorous lives portrayed on the screen. In this respect they provided respectable entertainment for working class and middle class. Movies were affordable, and they appealed to a broad spectrum of the public, not just to the elite who frequented high art events such as opera. The movie theater became integrated into established social structures. By the 1920's each town's Main Street emulated the big cities, making their movie theaters centers of urban life. The cinema was starting to shape the city, and the movie palaces, especially the "atmospheric theaters" in the twenties, a theater type with a domed planetarium ceiling and exotic interior sets, tried not only to provide a sensory experience but to distract from the screen to guarantee that the audience did not become totally lost in the movie. Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel attribute the exuberant decoration of the early movie palaces to the idea of distraction. As Walter Benjamin stated in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", "...Architecture is the prototype for film. Both are received by a collectivity in a mode of distraction..." One problem though, was also projected through film. Film was an art of the metropolis and was also suspect to many, just as the big city raised fears of the unknown in many people at that time, opening windows to a world that many people were not yet prepared to look into.

Exotic movie palaces reached their zenith in Europe, as well as in the United States where they originated, in the twenties and the thirties. After World War II theaters became less opulent in accordance with changing demographics and tastes. The theaters became more streamlined and less decorated which also reduced costs. They projected the image of the new machine age with its requisite sleekness and speed. These post-war theaters were to serve a generation of moviegoers. In the fifties there was a surge of outdoor drive-in theaters for an increasingly affluent car culture in the U.S., but these venues were largely dependent on season and weather, yet they provided a backdrop for post-war American culture.

The Multiplex Concept

In the 1960s with the competition provided by color television sets, it became clear that existing approaches towards marketing films, as well as the buildings in which they were screened, would have to change. Film companies were able to produce significantly more products and a federal ban on film companies owning theaters provided the impetus for independent corporations to develop the multi-cinema concept for screening a variety of films from different studios simultaneously. These movie theaters were conceived entirely different from previous theater concepts and increasingly along corporate lines. The movie industry lost ground with its customers in the sixties with the advent of television in everyone's household. Cinema construction slowed down, and many theaters, especially the downtown movie palaces of the twenties, were closed.

With the development of the multiplex type during the nineteen-seventies, the movie industry sought to lure back their clientele. The promise of being able to choose between more than one movie shown at the same location was the guiding principle for reestablishing customer curiosity and loyalty. These principles are still in effect today, albeit strongly influenced by new technological innovations. Twin cinemas were another new strategy that fit more easily into the existing fabric of denser cities and often had auditoriums on multiple levels accessible by escalator. The Baronet and Coronet movie theaters located in midtown Manhattan appealed to a sophisticated urban audience during the 1960s and 1970s and gently introduced the idea of multiple screens to a city beginning to abandon the old movie palaces.

Suburban multiplexes began as quadroplexes in the 1970s. Such industry pioneers as AMC, American Multi Cinema, under owner Stan Durwood, housed six or eight auditoriums in a long "warehouse" configuration, tied to existing suburban shopping malls. Standard models were

entered transversely and were symmetrically balanced into equal numbers of auditoriums flanking the central concession and ticketing area with dual projection booth "bridges" serving two to four auditoriums.

Movie theaters began to be designed based on studies in traffic planning, with space for concession stands replacing the public gathering space at one time accorded for social activities. Instead of greeting friends in the lobby, one immediately lined up following the ticket purchase to buy drinks and snacks that would be taken into the auditorium. Since movie theaters returned as much as ninety percent of their opening week's film profits to the studios whose products they were showing, the theaters became largely dependent on the profits from their concession stands. Architectural planning in the 1980s began to shift away from an emphasis on the auditorium to a focus on their primary economic generators. The concession stand with its chromed popcorn poppers, glass cases of attractive candies, and soda dispensers began to take precedence in the lobby. In U.S. cities where downtown and suburban theaters of the 1930s and 1940s were still in operation, the practice of "splitting" began to appear in the eighties. In this scheme the balcony of an existing movie theater was isolated from the larger auditorium and then twinned or tripled, creating two or three smaller auditoriums for films which were longer running or whose audiences had shrunk from the opening, weeks before. In some urban schemes movie theaters were also split longitudinally, which was usually less than satisfactory acoustically. In all cases the requirements of projection booths, and adding or relocating rooms, created more complexity in the plan. Only a few inner city cinema palaces remained as first run theaters, fighting for their survival. The latest in mainstream cinema strategy is to develop whole entertainment areas around the multiplex that functions as the anchor, as architecture's effect is conjured mainly for the purpose of what Richard Ingersoll terms "scenography". The biggest remaining influence on the design of movie theater architecture today is the economics of the film industry and modern technology.

Megaplex Entertainment Complexes

At the turn of the twenty-first century multiplexes are no longer merely a series of movie theaters clustered around a shared lobby. They have evolved into entertainment complexes that encompass other facets of consumer related services such as restaurants and retail sales outlets. Emerging from a twenty-year practice of merchandising tie-ins to film, multiplexes now not only include concession stands but may incorporate cafes or boutiques based on the European model.

Multiplexes are now defined in film industry jargon as movie theaters that have up to sixteen screens. Theaters featuring over sixteen screens are now termed megaplexes. The megaplex concept follows the idea of suburban corporate retail developments, which create larger regional super-centers that respond to feeder neighborhoods, as opposed to more numerous local stores. Where formerly four-, six-, or eight-screen multiplexes were located in nearly every suburban neighborhood, patrons must now drive farther away to reach a megaplex of up to thirty screens. The movie industry in the United States seems to be more and more car-oriented in the sense that patrons must drive increasing distances to see a limited choice of films, mainstream box office hits, meant to recapture profit quickly. In an interview with the television talk show host Charlie Rose, the actor George Clooney complained that the American film industry is not interested in producing movies that might have lasting impact on viewers, "...something you would talk about even a week later...", but only in box office receipts during the first two or three weekends, which is the most defining factor when producing a movie: the immediate return on the investment.

Modern megaplex design can be most easily explained as a series of responses to specific program criteria. Economic factors as expressed through developmental square footage costs, corporate branding and identity issues, functional traffic diagrams, and the spatial needs of stadium seating, play a role in the process of creating new theater complexes. To this list of requirements may be added the "vision" of the architects for creating an imagery that

will be an additional draw for theater patrons.

Most modern multiplexes fall into one of two types, the **urban multi-cinema complex** located in the interior of existing multistory buildings, or the suburban freestanding **greenfield complex**. The "greenfield" megaplex, one that literally lands in the center of previously undeveloped real estate, is by far the most frequently developed type in the U.S. and the type most desired by multiplex corporations. Located near other suburban or ex-urban developments and alternately also acting as anchors for other retail development, the megaplex features first-run movies, the most profitable film industry product. To appeal to the projected fourteen-to-twenty-four-year-old audience, economic and spatial formulas have been created through corporate research that informs the architectural program.

The standard plan layout is based on functional traffic diagrams and work in a manner similar to other public amenities, such as shopping malls and airports. In the greenfield complex, where land is more plentiful and less expensive, theaters are laid out for horizontal efficiency, with vertical massing elements expressed externally proportionate to the interior volume necessary to accommodate larger stadium seating. Special spatial volumes for IMAX theaters, which frequently accompany thirty screen megaplexes, are also usually expressed in the external architecture. Suburban megaplex theaters tend to be planned symmetrically, with larger volumes flanking the central entry lobby, and decreasingly smaller arrays of theaters clustered around secondary gathering spaces near the ends of wings, as in airports. This allows for more efficient movement of personnel and centralization and reduction of concession stands. Such complexes are usually surrounded by a large parking apron and may have prominent entry plazas to direct patrons from greater distances, occupying acres of land, with an environmental impact that is often times extremely negative. Large heat sinks are generated due to the massive expanses of concrete, and with tree removal to provide maximum parking, the lack of water absorption frequently causes flooding.

In the United States the new megaplexes are mostly constructed of concrete tilt-wall or light steel-frame constructions covered with dry-vit exteriors as in shopping malls. These construction techniques and materials are relatively inexpensive and efficient due to standardization. They predispose the creation of box-like flat-roofed buildings.

Aside from massing elements, such architectural and graphic devices as brilliant color, neon lighting, and vivid signage enhance corporate "branding", the unmistakable symbols of recognition of each individual multiplex corporation. Once one enters the realm of the megaplex, the lobby has now taken the place of the theater auditorium in prominence. This is where the architectural magnetism must occur to engage and draw in prospective patrons. Tall interior volumes, dramatic color schemes, catwalk exits, murals, dramatic lighting and advertisements are all employed to provide an invitation, and present diversions while people stand in line for concessions, chat with friends, or wait to enter their respective auditoriums, guided by satellite concession stands that serve not only as dispensing stations but also provide visual cues. Paths to wings often feature videogame arcades, simulators, or graphics of upcoming films along with video monitors showing film clips and trailers.

In the screening rooms the focus has shifted away from the majesty, exoticism and seductiveness of the movie palace auditorium to the "black box" concept. In these minimalist auditoriums theater distractions are kept to a minimum not only to enhance the high-tech movie viewing experience but emphasize the commercials and advertising screened before the feature. As opposed to earlier audiences who resisted becoming "part" of the film, modern film patrons have come to expect a near virtual experience.

Rising technology costs are offset by a reduction in architectural finish costs. Self-automated 35 mm platter system projection on advanced light reflective screens combined with patented THX or other "sensurround" sound systems are the core of the new realism. Corporate identity in the auditoriums is achieved simply by the use of repetitive color schemes, logos, or carpet patterns. Sometimes it is only the stadium seat with its color and ubiquitous cup holder that provides a clue to differentiate between

one company's theater and its competitors. Coming full circle, viewers have returned to the concept of a "total entertainment compound", a concept that had been achieved already in the palaces of the twenties.

The urban megaplex provides a different set of design challenges for architects today. Due to the higher costs of urban infill or retrofit sites, they project more selective first-run film products towards a more mature over-twenty-five audience. They share audiences with film art houses, independent, and foreign film venues. Theater auditoriums are less numerous due to spatial restrictions, and may be vertically stacked leading to less efficient traffic and an increase in required personnel. Escalators and elevators add to the cost of construction, even if these costs are offset by increased volumetric drama through the architecture. In addition adjacent mid-rise parking garages are frequently necessary as an adjunct to mass transportation. To balance their higher ticket prices, urban megaplexes attempt to appeal to more affluent and sophisticated patrons who count the architectural experience as part of the entertainment. In the lobby dramatic architecture may prevail, combined with more expensive finishes and exotic lighting to conjure the ambience of luxury. Refreshments at the concessions may be organic or imported specialties, and a café or small restaurant may be an interior node within the lobby. Corridors sport framed art and lighting fixtures are conspicuously "designed" in the promenade to the screening rooms. Architecture firms may take differing stylistic approaches based on the locale of the cinema. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the trend is toward sentimentality, in which the past glories of lost movie palaces are yearned for with nostalgia.

Theater designers, acutely aware of the history of movie theaters, have become overtly referential. Whereas theater design from the 1930s until the 1980s tended to reflect a forward-directed approach, architects in the 1990s began to play to sentimentality through an iconography drawn from the history of film and the grand movie palaces. In New York City, Sony's Lincoln Square "Avalon" Theater by Gensler Architects draws from the iconography of film history as well. Exotic scenes flow from Moorish and Egyptian motifs to Chinese influences.

Concrete Examples

One U.S. specific city can serve as an example of how the cinema landscape presents itself currently: Houston, Texas.
In the early nineties, Houston was chosen to serve as a test case by major U.S. corporate film distributors in their perennial turf wars. The result is that the city is saturated with over 400 screens. Houston is also a prime example of suburban sprawl. The city's appetite for swallowing up land and communities in its path of expansion is legendary. Houston is the quintessential car city, built for and around the car, with its freeways being one of its principal monuments. With no zoning code, and its motto seemingly to be tear down rather than preserve, it is a difficult case for architects.

Enter the Edwards Marq*E 23 Megaplex, including an oversized IMAX screen. This megaplex anchors the Marq*E Entertainment Center. The theater shell sits on a vast parking lot with a few trees dispersed sparingly throughout the lot. Its greenfield site is actually a brownfield, a former industrial location demolished for redevelopment. The theater is the terminal building of a double row of other entertainment facilities including a skating park and a live theater. With the creation of the "megaplex mall", places to dine out, and perhaps even have a conversation in, have been relegated to the cinema's encircling entertainment facilities, which also include, pool halls, and other various gaming halls. The novelty of this center is that the shops and other attractions form an open-air mall offering dining, gaming and small shops, an anomaly in air-conditioned Houston. A plaza separates the theater from the mall row. The plaza features a band-stand and multiple kiosks for independent vendors. A splashing fountain and benches simulate the comfort of a city square. The surprise is that this plaza is actually used by many movie patrons and is very popular with teenagers who have made it their own.

The theater is composed of a series of monolithic boxes with bright façades. Here the neon tubing reaches around the top

corner of the building so it can be seen from the freeway. The entrance lobby features an interstellar space theme with patterned terrazzo flooring and vivid film graphics covering its double-height space, which is only accessible at ground level. The lobby contains a mega concession stand, with satellites in the wings inside the "*ueber*" box, and the ticket booths here are internal and flank the curvilinear entry zone. Adding to the space image are murals that eclectically depict scenes from movies featuring celebrated film stars. A few of the entrances to the individual theaters are "themed" such as "Cleopatra in Egypt". But inside the screening room, ornament is reduced to red upholstered stadium seating and a black ceiling. The sound equipment is visibly mounted on the walls. It appeals dually to nostalgic whimsy and Houston's image as "Space City", since NASA is located here.

Another greenfield megaplex is the AMC 30 Dunvale located off Westheimer, Houston's main east-west thoroughfare, which is over 20 miles in length. Here one finds a drive-up to the outer shell of the theater, the largest in the city. It seems to embrace the "fried-egg-scheme", a building amidst a sea of concrete paving, and the siting could easily be described as exurban on its enormous tract of land, but for Houston's Westheimer Strip this complex is merely suburban. The AMC Studio 30 is symmetrically organized externally with a circular entrance plaza, which reflects the AMC paradigm for megaplexes designed by Jon Jerde. The path from the parking lot is arranged in a linear fashion with repetitive outdoor light standards displaying posters of the featured films. The terminus of the approach is an electronic message board with the film names and show times. As patrons disperse to right or left, the "portal" is composed of triple semi-circular curved box offices with entrances between, which lead to the round plaza. Neon and colored lights frame the ramp leading to the theater. The plaza's central feature is a lighted fountain with jets spurting from holes in the stone tiles and glass block lit from below. A central axis leads to the main entry doors, above which the facade presents the full thrust of its activity.

Internally the AMC Studio 30 is symmetrically arranged, with a main concession stand and four flanking theaters,

and two wings containing theaters 1-13 and theaters 18-30 on the ends of the two aisles. Each wing is composed of thirteen auditoriums and a satellite concession. One problem of this type of multiplex in Houston is that it is so removed from urban activities that there is a tendency to leave as soon as the film ends.

The development of greenfield megaplexes has affected the fate of the downtown movie palaces and vintage theaters, yet one unique urban multiplex, with a different approach to cinema and entertainment is Houston's Angelika Film Center. In a similar manner to its New York City sister theater, it was opened in a publicly owned building in an effort to revive the downtown business district, which had become a virtual office monoculture void of street life. It is adjacent to theaters such as the Houston Grand Opera, the Houston Symphony, the Houston Ballet and the Alley Theater in the downtown Theater District. The Angelika shows an eclectic mix of films, and the architecture of the theater itself is more exciting than one might expect for a space incorporated in a revitalization project, reprogrammed to contain restaurants, cafes, space for live performances and a specialty multiplex. The liveliness of the Angelika is predicated on the fact that it derives it energy from the city's heart. The drama of the illuminated high rise office buildings glittering above its glazed entry atrium and restaurant and bar lends an air of glamour and sophistication to an evening out at the cinema. The twin obelisks of Philip Johnson's Pennzoil Place and the Niels Esperson Building of the 1920s form its visual backdrop. The Angelika Film Center's entrance lobby faces Jones Plaza, a public square outfitted for outdoor concerts, and beyond it Jones Hall, home to the Houston Symphony. The Angelika offers a restaurant and bar in its lobby as a "hook", where the purchase of a ticket is not tied to the café, which is operated independently. Its terrace connects to the other activities around Jones Plaza and there is a street life similar to the one portrayed in the grand days of the lost movie palaces. The auditoriums have smaller capacity, from 90 to 400 seats, but are equipped with the latest technology. The programming is similar to an art-house, with independent bookings, projecting itself toward inner city-dwellers. The architecture of the lobby designed by Gensler Architects represents a modern thematic treatment of

the existing rough shell. The materials of the original building are exposed and contrasted with new surface materials for the furniture and floors. The concession stand is of exposed stainless steel, vintage French graphics abound, and there is an atmosphere of contemporary architecture, a rarity in Houston.

Despite this trend a few innovative architects have rejected the yearning for the past by creating multiplexes reflecting the architectural era in which they were built in. Drawing from a palette of industrial materials appropriate to the freeway environment it adjoins, Richard Rauh's Venture 12 Cinema in Duluth, Georgia is plastic and dynamic, with its architecture being the main advertisement as commuters whiz by. One of its principal longitudinal facades acts as a giant billboard attracting attention through specialized lighting effects visible blocks away, as looking and reacting stretch distances when time passes at the maximum speed limit, not on pedestrian time.

The Paramount Famous Players Theaters in Toronto makes a conscious effort to use architecture as a "draw" for its patrons. Turning away from the nostalgia of many new multiplexes the Paramount exudes an air of futuristic glee with its space motif ripe with glitzy surface treatments, reflective surfaces, models of spaceships and mod lighting schemes, to match its dramatic spatial presentation. Gensler's Michael Darner believes that architecture can be the defining factor in the success of new multiplexes. With such a large degree of homogeneity, and only branding differentiating corporations, architecture can go a far way in making a success of a theater complex. Gensler's innovative approach to the ambiance of their Japanese audience makes the AMC in Nakama unique. Whereas in the United States the trend has been the construction of entertainment centers, multiplex malls, mainly in suburban settings, European corporations integrate these structures into the established city fabric. A good example for the European experience is the UFA Palace in Dresden, Germany designed by COOP HIMMELB(L)AU. Inner city European examples differ from American multiplexes in the lesser number of screens they feature, their insertion into existing urban sites, and in the case of the

UFA Palace, a highly stylized futuristic stacked multiplex where the plastic architecture takes visual precedence over mere functionality. The UFA palace's dramatic Deconstructivist architecture acts as a giant media wall to attract passers by to its environs.

Conclusion
A classic experience of the inner city, a trip to the movie theater, has been all but lost with the takeover of the suburban mall multiplex. Neon lights have been replaced by the ubiquitous blaze of orange sodium parking floodlights and the only glitter is provided by the blinking lights on the flat front of the theater box, with no aura of excitement or welcoming, and the sobering cheap effects of a fast-food mentality applied to the world of film is what remains. No one can deny the advanced technology of movie production and projection, or the comfort of almost recliner seats in the stadium arrangement. The sound and picture quality is superb, but where is the adventure and excitement of the night on the town? Unfortunately even the architecture reflects that attitude. The arrival of the IMAX Theater with its elongated vertical screen several stories high, an overwhelming viewing experience, has not affected the architecture. It was merely housed in a bigger box. This disconnection with architecture, while representing a void to those who came to enjoy movie theaters as a separate passion from the films being shown, could provide the blank slate upon which a new movie theater history might be written. The future of movie theaters may lie though not only in the pure architectural spaces they are composed of with their digital technologies, but more in the type of services that will increasingly be offered to niche markets. Already movie goers have been offered ticket purchases online to ease physical waiting lines, next there may be an increasing market for luxury cinema in the form of a "golden class" of tickets. Currently being tested in the Asian markets, ornately decorative fine movie theaters are featuring reserved reclining seats with lap blankets where patrons may be served drinks and concessions by wait staff similar to business class airline tickets. These theaters may also offer concierge services with five star restaurants and bars in their larger complex.

In the near future movies will be digital and interactive. What will these cinemas look like when we are viewing giant plasma screens from satellite accessed digital media, and don't need a projection booth, or when we are wearing a cyber bodysuit in a dark non-sensory space? What will happen to the collective experience of the cinema, an experience that is so much part of the idea of movie? Architects Tom Kovac and Geoff Malone with their design for French Generic Cinema have already begun to address this problem. Their design is still recognizable as an architectural expression of a concept, but will we even need that in the future? Is the cinema as a type and icon doomed once again, or will we always yearn for a darkened space where we can experience emotions together, and an architecture to serve as the backdrop for images of film life?