

John Ebersson and the Development of the Movie Theater: Fantasy and Escape

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Rarely has a building typology had such an accelerated development period as the cinemas in the twentieth century. Paralleling the rise of the film industry, the modern movie theater was transformed from a generalized space capable of featuring both theatrical productions and motion pictures, to technologically advanced environments for optimum entertainment consumption through the mating of the audio/visual medium. Along the way movie theaters went through a series of dramatic transformations, reflecting the influences of popular cultural trends, while incorporating innovations in technology. No architect was more instrumental in this transformation than John Ebersson. Ebersson's rationalization of movie theaters design standards, both in economic terms and through prefabrication, set a precedent that became the norm in the United States and internationally.

JOHN EBERSON ARCHITECT

John Ebersson was one of the most significant architects to contribute to cinema architecture. Born to an Austrian family in the Bukovina region of the Austro-Hungarian empire, he was educated in Dresden, Germany and then studied Electrical Engineering at the Technical University of Vienna. Due to a dispute during his military service, he decided to immigrate to the United States in 1901. At this time the movie industry was in its infancy and movie theaters reflected the duality of use of performing arts and film projection spaces. Auditoriums were long and rectilinear, with a stage at one end where the piano or organ was located. Most theaters were simple and L-shaped, with an entry lobby at right

angles to the auditorium, which was fitted with simple wooden seats or benches. Due to the volatility of the nitrocellulose film stock the projection booth was located at the street, providing an easy escape for the projectionist in case of fire.¹ This spatial format for film was soon to be challenged by John Ebersson with an entirely new movie theater concept originating in his European exposure to opera houses: the Atmospheric Theater.

John Ebersson, initially settled in 1909 in St. Louis and began his career by apprenticing himself to Johnston Realty and Construction Company where he soon gained the moniker "Opera House John" for his inspired small modern opera houses. Borrowing from such contemporary Austrian "opera house" architects as Helmer und Fellner, he quickly distinguished himself with his exotic "continental" theaters which were capable of staging live vaudeville entertainers as well as screening silent films, with the accompaniment of pipe organs complete with an array of sound effects. As his Austrian predecessors did in the Austro-Hungarian empire, traveling from city to city building variations on opera houses, Ebersson traveled throughout the United States creating ever more innovative movie theaters. Having branched out to the Midwest and the West from his office in Chicago, as well as the East Coast, Ebersson was involved in building a series of auditoriums for theater impresario Karl Hoblitzelle of Dallas, Texas. After completing the Austin Majestic (1916), (now the Paramount in Austin) and the Dallas Majestic (1917) Ebersson was poised to develop his signature theater for one of Hoblitzelle's clients in Houston, Niels Esperson, who dreamed of a movie palace to inspire the city.

THE ATMOSPHERIC THEATER

The Houston Majestic (1923) was the world's first atmospheric theater—the theater type Eberson pioneered to international acclaim. An atmospheric theater simulated the experience of being in an exotic outdoor environment, usually a Mediterranean courtyard or garden, above which an azure sky gleamed. New technology in the form of the Brenograph projector sent wispy clouds lazily drifting across cerulean heavens, in reality a domed plaster ceiling similar to a planetarium's. As the film was about to begin, the illusion of a sunset commenced, reddening to a deep, velvet mauve. As the ceiling was revealed twinkling lights in constellation patterns became visible. This feature especially made the atmospheric theater so attractive to owners, principally because of its economy when compared to "hard-top" auditoriums. Rich with plaster ornamentation, gilding, murals and crystal chandeliers, conventional hard-top movie places were based on the opera house. Although it is often hypothesized that Eberson may have been influenced by the painted ceilings of the 1918 renovation of Palladio and Scamozzi's Teatro Olimpico (1587), the introduction of a special effects ceiling perhaps came to Eberson as an inspiration through his intimate knowledge of lighting technology and theater equipment. It allowed a simple and inexpensive rounded plaster dome to be substituted for ornamental ceilings at exactly the time when wages for ornamental plasterers had reached an all time high with the escalation of construction costs after World War I. Automated effects controllable from a central switching panel able to be handled by a single operator were significantly less expensive, even when the new lighting equipment was taken into account. It is estimated that an Eberson atmospheric theater cost one quarter of a standard "hard-top". This economic model proved to be far superior to theater owners who readily clamored for more atmospheric to be built.

At the same time, Eberson aimed to fully integrate the experience of the film going public through a theater design, which would hark back to the equally exotic subject matter and locales of the films of the 1920's to produce a phenomenally synthetic experience. He desired to create:

*"...a magnificent theatre under a glorious moonlit sky...an Italian garden, a Persian court, a Spanish patio, or a mystic Egyptian temple-yard...where friendly stars twinkled and wisps of clouds drifted."*²

Presenting itself to the public behind a discreet neoclassical tapestry brick façade with a polychrome frieze of

dancers and musicians, the Majestic Theater exterior harmonized with the classical Roman garden interiors of its auditorium. Only the prominent vertically lighted marquees gave a hint as to what awaited one inside. The lobby was entered through glazed doors under an overhanging iron street canopy.



Fig. 1. Houston Majestic — Rusk Street Facade.

Once past the "carriage hall" lobby (with its integrated concession areas added later) one entered the auditorium portals from a second inner lobby providing an acoustical buffer. The floor plan of the Majestic auditorium exhibits an almost square plan as opposed to the long rectangle of conventional theaters, with a deep balcony or "family circle" as it was then known, extending over half the depth of the orchestra level seats. This plan maximized focal lines for each seat, based on Eberson's experience with opera houses. In Eberson theaters there are subsequent higher gallery balconies layered over the family circle's "grand tier". In the San Antonio Majestic (1929) this balcony is nearly invisible to the audience below when lights are dimmed, while from above it afforded surprisingly good views of events, the stage, and the theater auditorium décor for its patrons, as well as a spacious expanse of seating. As was legally required at the time in racially segregated Southern cities, it also had a separate elevator, restrooms, and box office for African American patrons which remain as vestiges embedded in the walls of the original theater and which provide a complex duality to the floor plan and circulation.

In the Houston Majestic, above the balcony to the right of the proscenium arch was the Italian Terrace level, which provided depth and dimension along the side walls of the auditorium.

Eberson's innovation was his asymmetrically balance of harmonic elements to the right and left of the stage.



Fig. 2. *Houston Majestic — Auditorium — Italian Terrace.*

Digressing from the norm of exactly balancing elements to control acoustics, Ebersson's enhanced the authenticity of the atmospheric experience by weighting the Roman Palace theater organ grilles on the proscenium left to balance the Italian Terrace and its statuary on the right.



Fig. 3. *Houston Majestic — Auditorium — Roman Palace.*

He discovered that there was no discernible change in acoustical integrity and opened the path for an instinctive approach to visual arrangement that broke with rigid symmetry. This method of arranging spatial groups, when combined with projecting tiered box seating, realistic transitional architectural elements between buildings and sky, and side and rear underbalcony (parterre) sculpture, provided the sensation of being surrounded by the theater—one felt as if one were part of the staging. The fantasy and exoticism the patrons saw in the films were reflected in the theater.

Like so many Ebersson theaters, the interior of the Majestic was encrusted with marble statuary of mythological entities. Tunnel entries under a caryatid porch allowing framed views of the Italian Terrace or Roman Palace made drifting through the theater an adventure. The scenographic production of theater interiors was pioneered by John Ebersson through his use of mass produced statuary pieces, molding details and architectural elements produced by his Michelangelo Studio staff. These plaster castings, based on classical European figural sculpture, were precast and shipped to the site according to precise planning, where they were uncrated and in the case of moldings and set fronts assembled on site. This way a large part of the quality control, which used to be in the hands of plasterers, never left Ebersson's oversight as his skilled teams traveled from theater to theater installing, rotating and reemploying similar sculptural elements in a new context to create the fountains, grottoes, temples and gardens he was known for. They were also responsible for installing the ubiquitous birds that were signature Ebersson décor pieces, and which functioned as focal points for the architecture.

Details were all important and a realistic ambiance of an exotic locale was tantamount. When the 1928 Loew's State opened in Louisville, Kentucky, Ebersson's staff surprised their boss by including his plaster portrait among those of the philosopher Socrates and the poet Dante on the coffered ceiling.

The Houston Majestic began this tradition of prefabrication.

Adjacent to the Majestic's auditorium, flanking the two vomitory to the family circle level, the Majestic were a luxurious ladies' lounge and a men's smoking room which acted as a anteroom to the men's washroom. On the women's side a furnished dressing room with vanities served the same purpose. With no amenity overlooked the Houston Majestic even provided a nursery for its patrons' children. The San Antonio Majestic, Ebersson's last fantastic movie palace with a Spanish villa theme, had a nursery with cobalt blue vitrolite tiled washroom and a playroom complete with Russian Fairy Tale murals, etched stained glass windows, and inlaid patterned linoleum tile floors with animal figural designs. No patron was too small to not be included in Ebersson's plan. This philosophy positively influenced customer satisfaction and produced repeat patronage, further supporting the economic well-being of the theater.³

Generous and egalitarian, John Ebersson's philosophy was to educate the masses of movie patrons to classical



Fig. 4. San Antonio Majestic — Auditorium — Detail.

environments while allowing all guests to be treated like royalty and experience grandeur for the minimal price of entry. This concept of combining refined culture with economy resulting from technological advances in equipment and an innovative approach to construction through prefabricated elements served Ebersson well and allowed him to produce ever larger and more complex movie palaces across the U.S. with ever increasing seating capacity.

Between his first atmospheric theater in 1923 and his last in 1929, Ebersson built close to a hundred theaters and his cinema palaces became the norm for architects planning movie theaters. His international influence was keenly felt as such architects as Leathart and Granger, under the influence of architectural journalist P. Morton Shand in England, closely modeled their cinemas on his work. In Paris the Rex Theater (1932), designed by P. Beuysen in collaboration with John Ebersson, was Paris' first atmospheric. Dennis Sharp writes:



Fig. 5. San Antonio Majestic — Auditorium — Polychrome Interior.



Fig. 6. Louisville Palace — Entry Lobby — Ebersson Detail.



Fig. 7. Houston Majestic — Interior.

"The Astoria Theaters, four cinemas designed by architects Edward Stone and T R Sumerford were English versions of the American "Palaces of Light" mimicking Eberson's work in Houston and Chicago."⁴

Eventually, "hard-top" theater architects Thomas Lamb, and Rapp and Rapp, also produced atmospherics by client request, but this style remained indelibly linked with John Eberson.

THE MODERNISTIC ERA

As the strain of the Depression and the public's yearning for a bright future caused their replacement by the streamlined modernistic movie theaters of the 1930's, Eberson adapted his movie theaters to the new demand. Marcus Loew, an Eberson client stated: "We sell tickets to theaters, not movies."⁵ In 1926 Eberson's son Drew Eberson joined the firm, although the slowdown due to the Depression caused him to leave the firm briefly for Hollywood before returning to assist with modernistic theater designs of the 1930's. Robert A. M. Stern when writing of Eberson's designs states:

"...Yet however theatrical or unorthodox the use of exotic architecture, or however witty the send up of high style, Eberson displayed an astonishing capacity to subsume the individual elements of the décor into a coherent ensemble. Comparable to the ideal of the Total theater of the Germans, Eberson's theater designs melded architecture and performance to create a theater for Everyman."⁶

It was this innate understanding of the components of a successful theater combined with a talent for unifying

diverse elements and scene staging that allowed a seamless transition to the modernistic style. Beginning with the theater marquee sign, which by the 1930's was illuminated with the glowing fluorescent spectrum of neon colors, emphasis was placed on verticality and height achieved by tiered massing to create a drama of scale. Following the disappointments and hardships of the Depression, Americans were eager to enter a new age of the future, a bright time where machines would increase production and ease the burden of the everyday worker. Production and the machine age, rail and air travel, and a focus on the car, projected sleek images of speed with straight lines and minimal detail. In architecture high-rise towers like the Chrysler and Empire State skyscrapers in New York represented the future, and Eberson was adept at harnessing these images for the new décor of his remade movie theaters.

In Eberson's "Main Street" Art Deco palaces:

"...one could really not just see, but feel the full kinetic impact, the physical and sensual three dimensions of modern design."⁷

This new modernistic style became the overwhelming choice of business, intent to focus on future prosperity through technological innovations. Factories often used modernistic architecture combining functionalism with the streamlined details that symbolized speed, efficiency and hygiene. Service stations, car dealerships and airports took on the new style, until businesses as mundane as dry cleaners and diners embraced it. In the movie theater business the extreme ornamentation of the twenties gave way to a revelry in new materials as developments in aluminum extrusion for railings, stainless steel hardware, glass block for translucent walls, cobalt glass, vitrolite and various bakelites and plastics were employed. While cove lighting had been employed for some time, the use of a pure geometry coupled with neon proved stunning. In this sense it embraced the modern, as materiality itself was introduced as a new interior concept. Even terracotta for exteriors took on all new forms of expression when molded and glazed a verde gris, cobalt or amber color.

John Eberson could see that architecture in America had made a paradigm shift in the period of a decade. Architectural historian Richard Wilson refers to Eberson's education in Vienna at the time of the Viennese Secession as an advantage when transforming his work into the new Moderne approach to theater architecture.⁸ His superior knowledge of lighting and acoustics began to come increasing into play as layers of ornament were stripped away from theaters. In the Art Deco interior of the Auburn Theater, Auburn, New York

(1938) he seemed to refer to his own architectural heritage with luminous star and comet motifs floating on geometric furr-downs with larger planar use of color. Plaster motifs are reduced to proscenium fluting and in these later-date theaters custom fabric was stretched over acoustical plaster to provide superior sound. This concept had already been employed by Eberson in consultation to architect Alfred C. Finn in Houston in 1926 when Eberson suggested the use of tapestries and upholstered seats to reduce the echoes produced by the hard surfaces of the Egyptian style Metropolitan Theater.⁹

Having relocated his Chicago office of 1910 to New York City in 1925 Eberson was in a good position to produce theaters through the Deco period (Washington, DC; Staten Island, New York; Silver Spring, Maryland). In 1930 he opened the Warner Madison in Mansfield, Ohio as a transitional theater following only a year after his elaborate Majestic San Antonio Theater. Although the chandeliers appear to be 1920's Art Deco, a telltale zig-zag stepped detail appeared in the lobby ceiling and portal. Murals with plant and animal references, so important to earlier Eberson theaters, became more stylized and geometric, a direction his nursery fairy tale murals had already taken.

In terms of floor plans, utility and functionality became primary concerns. The large multiple balcony levels were reduced and simplified allowing for better acoustics and sight lines. Air-conditioning, comfortable seats and lighting became important elements as the necessity for foyers was eliminated by the specialization of theaters on films alone. Audience safety through new building codes encouraged clear and easy exiting and corridors and reduced décor elements eliminated additional fire hazards. A final consideration of the 1930's was smaller theaters, with half the seating capacity and size of the original atmospherics of the 1920's. Eberson continued his commitment to standardization. In 1930 he created four standard floor plans based on variable seating capacities, cubic volume and elaboration of décor.¹⁰

Eberson, in his designs of the early 1930' showed a predilection for coordinating vertical geometric facades with the proscenium surround and sidewalls of his theaters. Although quite a few theaters were planned by Eberson during these years, few were built due to the continuing economic malaise. Eberson reduced his designs to his core components of economy and standardization, offering comfort through superior acoustics for films with sound, good lighting and a comfortable temperature and seats in place of ornament. Practicality reigned as theaters again reflected the Art

Deco ambiance of the sets, many designed by Cedric Gibbons or Norman Bel Geddes, which appeared in the films of the 1930's, a reflection of the novel style. Additionally, the waiting lobby was transformed through the introduction of concessions sold for profits necessary to stave off bankruptcy in the Depression years. This changed the lobby's design focus from the elegance of the opera house to the streamlined, hygienic, machine dispensed popcorn and glass candy case environment of the suburban movie theater. Lighting and new materials caused these snack products to take on the seductive focus they retain today, and they still remain a movie theater's main income earner, as the profit from ticket sales returns to the film studios.¹¹

Finally, accessibility was a key late growth factor. As movie theaters increasingly moved outward to suburbs to capture the affluent audience where they lived, integrated parking began to be critical. One of the earliest schemes of a theater in a suburban shopping center was in Silver Spring, Maryland by Eberson's firm. The movie palace was departing the city center.

The Penn Theater, the Beverly Theater and the Bethesda Theater in and around Washington, DC, show the sweeping flat streamlined canopies and vertical marquees so characteristic of late Eberson Art Deco design. These external architectural elements, often highlighted by neon were meant to capture a driver's attention from greater distances. Interiors focused on the large screen without proscenium arch and used color inventively to expand smaller capacity houses.

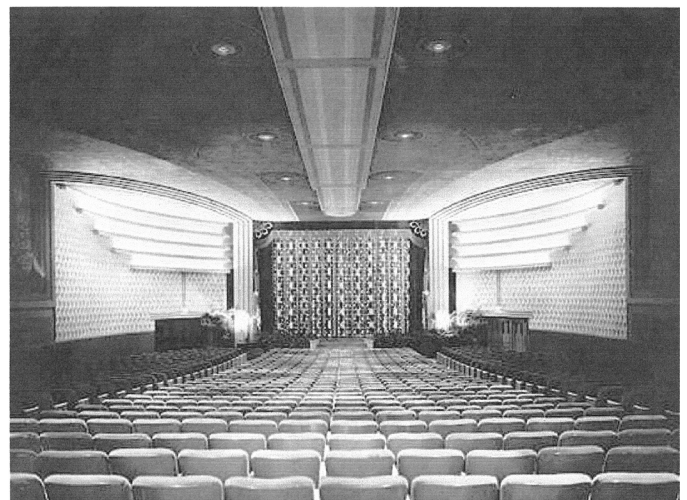


Fig. 8. Silver Theatre, Silver Spring, Md. — Auditorium.

Decorative details were replaced with hardware, mirrors, lobby areas and acoustical panels, which formed a dynamic presence for the theater. In the shortest possible time Eberson's theaters had made a diametrically opposed contrast through simplicity as compared

to his elaborate, cavernous, ornamented theaters of the twenties.

Although his firm also produced a significant number of commercial buildings such as the Central National Bank in Richmond, Virginia, and the Niels Esperson and Mellie Esperson buildings in Houston, Texas, John Ebersson will always be known as the “dean of American theater designs”. He continued to execute commissions in partnership with his son Drew Ebersson until shortly before his death in 1954. So respected was his opinion that he was frequently engaged for theater consultation, and served as a Chair of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers convention in 1947, moderating seminars on auditorium design.¹² After his father’s death, Drew Ebersson continued to develop theater designs, culminating in his eventual production of suburban multi-plexes as the later economic model required a choice of films to be available to patrons. Nevertheless, the architecture firm of John Ebersson retained its flexibility throughout the vast changes in theater design of the twentieth century, and continued to be respected in the field.

CONCLUSION

John Ebersson’s specialization and standardization of movie theaters in the U.S. set a precedent copied internationally. His use of prefabricated elements assembled onsite helped to create an economic model that was profitable for theater owners. His attention to contemporary developments in acoustical and lighting technology, as well as the streamlining of theater interiors, allowed movie theaters to become the predominant mode of American entertainment for nearly a half century. Some drawbacks to his theaters were that the changing market required theaters to be continually updated and novel. Theater profits were not depression-proof, therefore the movie theaters themselves suffered in periods of economic contraction. Movie palaces met a slow demise, due to the competition from television and later video rentals. This trend could only be countered by multiple theater complexes (multi-plexes), but these larger developments of the late

twentieth century do not detract from the significance of Ebersson’s developmental contribution to cinema architecture.

Without John Ebersson the heritage of the American “picture palace” movie theater would be far less innovative, experimental and seductively magic and for our memories far less colorful.

NOTES

⁰¹ Richard Schroeder, *Lone Star Pictures*(College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2001): p.47.

⁰² Ben M. Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats*, (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 1961): p.96.

⁰³ *San Antonio Majestic Interview*

⁰⁴ Dennis Sharp, *The Picture Palace and other Buildings for the Movies* (New York, NY: Frederick A Praeger Publishers, 1969): pp.108, 160..

⁰⁵ David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces* (New York, NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold Pub., 1981): rear jacket.

⁰⁶ Jane Preddy, *Glitz, Glamour & Sparkle: The Deco Theatres of John Ebersson* (Theater Historical Society, 1989): Intro, p.5.

⁰⁷ *Ibid.*: p.8.

⁰⁸ *Ibid.*: p.11.

⁰⁹ Houston Metropolitan Research Center — Finn Archive

¹⁰ Jane Preddy, *Glitz, Glamour & Sparkle: The Deco Theatres of John Ebersson* (Theater Historical Society, 1989): p.16.

¹¹ Interview: Steve Buck

¹² Helen M. Stote, ed., *The Motion Picture Theater* (New York, NY: The Society of Motion Picture Engineers, 1947): p.88.

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