

The re-use of modern cinema theatres: the relationship between theatre and cinema

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Abstract

The abandon of cinema theatres resulted on a number of public demonstrations for the maintenance of the function of these buildings as cultural venues and for their physical conservation. Far from the common nostalgic approach, an objective study of the processes of conversion of these buildings, lead to the identification of conversion patterns. A significant part of the buildings in study was demolished or gutted due to speculative financial operations, while the rest of the cases were reused.

This paper is part of a wider research project into cinema theatre design in Western Europe during the period 1910-1939. The research is based on articles on cinema design published in leading architectural periodicals using the information they contain to trace the history of the cinemas which had the greatest influence on the development of this building-type in Europe. The paper presents only part of the conclusions of the study, referring to the relationship between theatre and cinema in the twentieth century.

Keywords: architecture, modern Western European cinema theatres, re-use.

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Figure 1 Schaubühne Theater, ex-Universum cinema by Erich Mendelsohn (1928) © Joana G. Alves (JGA)

Introduction

This paper is part of a wider research project into cinema theatre design in Western Europe during the period 1910-1939. The research is based on articles on cinema design published in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, *La Construction Moderne*, *Casabella*, *The Architectural Review*, *The Builder* and *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, using the information they contain to trace the history of the cinemas which had the greatest influence on the development of this building type in Europe. The paper presents only part of the conclusions of the study, referring to the relationship between theatre and cinema in the twentieth century.

In the early years of cinematographic projection the success of the motion pictures at fairgrounds and the increasing length of films led some theatre managers to consider cinematographic projections as a more profitable alternative to live performances, since it was possible to offer more sessions per day and reduce staff costs. The first permanent cinemas in Europe opened in 1904 (Sharp 1969:50) and the first regulations for the exhibition of motion pictures were issued between 1908 and 1910 (Cinematograph Act 1910).

Cinema design evolved from occupying ordinary shops to adapting theatres. With the gradual recognition that classic theatres were not well-suited to screening motion pictures (Vergnes, 1925), one by one, the architectural features of the classic theatre, such as the proscenium, boxes or even the stage were discarded and a new building type was born: the cinema. There was some support for the flexibility to present plays and screenings in the same premises from those who claimed that different purposes could be accommodated with one single investment. However, the multi-purpose theatre was mainly adopted in small towns or neighbourhood cinemas.

In the 1920s a number of texts announced that the theatre was facing a crisis. The feeling that the theatre was under threat prompted Auguste Perret to write a text in which he argued that "cinema will not kill theatre any more than photography has killed painting" (Perret, 1931). However, it was understood that the theatre needed to modernise and that directors had to change their working methods by providing a new impetus for plays and enhancing the presence of actors. August Perret, Walter Gropius and other influential architects proposed new schemes for theatres (Gropius, 1950). The "open-stage", flexible arrangement of tiers and "triple-stage" were some of the features invented in order to make shows more dynamic (Sonrel 1933; Bragdon 1923). Thus, the requirements of the cinema not only led to the definition of a new building type but, in addition, its popularity forced the theatre to reinvent itself.

The cinema and the theatre functioned in quite different ways. It was generally accepted that people planned a visit to the theatre, whereas going to the cinema was more informal and did not require any special preparation. In the 1930s it was common for people to go to the cinema without planning in advance, simply because they had to wait for a train or because something had caught their attention. Newsreel cinemas offered non-stop screenings of short films, so that the audience could come and go at any time. Both in the USA and in Europe it was commonly accepted that most of the audience would go to the cinema because they were attracted by a poster, a film or the atmosphere. Therefore, "the show starts on the sidewalk" (Valentine, 1994) and this inevitably had consequences for the design of the façade and entrance porch.

Following the increasing demand for entertainment facilities, there was a boom in cinemas, music-halls and theatres, boosting the development of an "architecture of

pleasure” (Shand, 1930). Shops, workshops and other vacant spaces in city centres were converted into cinemas, becoming part of a flourishing industry. Some venues dedicated to live performances surrendered to the cinema’s success, including the following:

- Circuses – The *Schumann* theatre (R. Fränkel, Frankfurt, 1933)² is one example of a circus converted into a cinema. The seating capacity was expanded and the audience occupied part of the arena (Posener 1933; Anonymous 1933);
- Hippodromes (horse racing stadiums) – This was the case with the *Gaumont Palace*, Paris, 1931, for example, built over a hippodrome and catering for thousands of patrons (Meusy, 1995:173);
- Music halls – The *Empire* (Leicester Square, London) , a famous music hall where the Lumière apparatus was presented for the first time in the UK, was converted into a cinema in 1928 by Thomas Lamb and Frank Matcham (Gray, 1996:50).

Years later, with the development of television, video and home cinema technologies, the motion pictures lost their public and a number of cinemas closed down. In attempting to determine the current function of each of the cinema theatres featured in the leading architectural periodicals - *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, *Casabella*, *La Construction Moderne*, *The Architectural Review*, *The Builder* and *Deutsche Bauzeitung* – it was concluded that these cinemas were usually converted for a limited range of functions, as summarised below.

Conversion into multiplexes

In order to keep their public, some companies decided to divide their auditoriums so that they could increase their offer of films and schedules. The first multiplexes were limited to two auditoriums: the balcony was closed off to make one and the stalls formed the second (Gray, 1996:128). The development of the multiplex concept led to the complete demolition of auditorium interiors in order to build modern cinemas with a single foyer.

² The information in brackets corresponds to the architect’s name, the location/city and the cinema opening date.

Conversion into night clubs

Cinemas could easily be converted into night clubs since these were places which, like cinemas, did not require natural lighting but had to be spacious and provided with suitable emergency exits. The *Barceló* Cinema (Gutierrez-Soto, Madrid, 1932), which had a modern design for its time (Soto 1933; Monaco 1994; Durrer 1991; Anonymous 1996), was an entertainment complex that not only had a cinema but also a ballroom and other facilities. Probably taking advantage of these memories, it is now the *TClub*, a sophisticated night club in Madrid.³

Conversion into places of worship

Cinemas situated in city centres had auditoriums that could accommodate hundreds of people. New churches, such as the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, invested in cinemas to take advantage of their accessibility and good visibility. In addition, the *décor* in some of the old cinemas, such as the *Astoria* (E. A. Stone, Finsbury Park, London, 1930 in Anonymous 1930a), created a suitably solemn atmosphere.

³ More information can be found at the TClub website, consulted on 12/11/2013. http://www.tclub.es/TClub/El_local_files/TCLUB%20DOSSIER.pdf



Figure 2 UCKG Hepcentre, Ex-Astoria (Finsbury Park), London, E.A. Stone, 1930 © JGA

Conversion into stores

Corporate groups, such as the Inditex Group, bought up premises that offered substantial space without intermediary supports, in which they could organise the layout as they wished. This made it possible to design stores according to specific requirements without spending money on major structural interventions. Two examples include the *Métropole* (A. Blomme, Brussels, 1933 in Blomme, 1933), converted into a three-storey Zara in the centre of Brussels, and the *Titania Palast* (Jacobi, Schöfler and Schloenbach, Berlin, 1928), one of the most revolutionary cinemas (Anon, 1928) and a leading name in cinema design all over Europe, which nowadays houses clothes shops, although it still has a multiplex at the rear of the building.



Figure 3 Zara- Rue Neuve, ex-Métropole, Brussels, Andre Blomme, 1933 © JGA

Conversion into hotels

Some cinema façades and their monumental stairs and foyers proved attractive to hotel managers. Most of the conversions of this type affected freestanding buildings and involved the demolition of most of the building, since they were effectively *façadism* projects. The *Shepherd's Bush Pavilion*, the first cinema to win the RIBA Street Architecture Medal in 1924 (Anonymous 1923), is now being converted into a

hotel after many years of sporadic use.⁴ All that remains of the original pavilion is the façade overlooking the square: the rest has been demolished. The façade was probably kept because it is listed as a Grade II building.

Conversion into live performance venues

Cinemas that already had a stage and were equipped with stage lighting and sound systems were liable to be converted into theatres and concert halls.

In the thirties, with the development of the *super cinemas*⁵, plays and musical performances were presented between film screenings. It is well-known that such programmes were criticised because certain directors presented the same sketches on stage that the audience would later watch on the screen, often using less talented actors. These *super cinemas* were, of course, equipped with flies for stage productions, dressing rooms for the actors and musicians, an orchestra pit, etc. Acoustically, the solutions aimed to be flexible enough to accommodate the sound from loud-speakers, the live sound of an orchestra or speech. Naturally, *super cinemas* worked perfectly as theatres and when they closed down some of them were converted into theatres. However, the size of the auditorium made it difficult to stage plays, making this building typology more suitable for conversion into concert halls. Examples of this re-use are the *Astorias* (E. W. Stone, Brixton, 1929, and Finsbury, 1930) although the latter, known as the *Rainbow*, closed in 1982 and was converted into a church in 1995.

In *neighbourhood cinemas*,⁶ theatre, live performances or local events took place in the cinema. When television started broadcasting, the section of the audience who usually went to the cinema to keep up-to-date and watch the news simply vanished and the cinema became the place to go to for entertainment and the arts. The

⁴ More information about the new project can be found at the Ardmere Group website, consulted on 13/11/2013.

<http://www.ardmoregroup.co.uk/project/shepherds-bush-pavilion/?tax=client&term=279>

⁵*Super cinema* is a little-known term used to describe large capacity cinemas (over 1,500 seats) already equipped for talking films which offered a wide range of services and facilities (e.g. ballrooms, tearooms, a restaurant, babysitting, dog sitting, nursery, etc.). *Super cinemas* were mainly built during the inter-war period.

⁶*Neighbourhood* cinemas were cinemas located in the centre of small cities or in neighbourhoods with a strong local identity, built on a low budget with a large seating capacity. The films were screened later than in other more central cinemas and the programme featured a wide variety of films suitable for the whole family. Violent newsreels or films that might upset more conservative audiences were avoided.

neighbourhood cinemas gradually ceased to function as cinemas and instead concentrated on live performances and other local activities.

The difference between live performances and cinema is that every performance is unique. In television, video and cinema there are no surprises in the way in which the action develops. The script and the movement of the actors are identical each time the film is screened, unless there are any technical problems. Some of the cinemas are now exclusively dedicated to presenting live shows. Others are specialised theatres featuring cabaret shows (e.g. the Lido and old *Normandie* building, Paris, 1934 in



Figure 4 Apollo Victoria, ex-New Victoria, London, E. Trent and Wamsley Lewis, 1930

Montaut & Gorska 1937),⁷ black light theatre (e.g. the *Broadway*, Prague, 1938) musicals (e.g. the *Apollo Victoria*, London, 1930, in Anonymous 1930b).⁸ Theatres that were already equipped for live performances discovered that it was more profitable to present live shows than films. These enterprises attract large enough audiences to offer daily shows. Nevertheless, in the three abovementioned examples – the *Lido*, *Apollo Victoria* and *Broadway* – tourists are a significant part of their target public, since each city offers its own specific show.

⁷More information can be found at the Lido website, consulted on the 13/11/2013.
<http://www.lido.fr/>

⁸More information can be found at the Ambassador Theatre Group website, consulted on 13/11/2013. <http://www.atgtickets.com/venues/apollo-victoria-theatre/> and from the unofficial guide: <http://www.apollovictoriatheatre.org/>

The results of this research indicate that large audiences (over 1,000) do not gather to watch films anymore, but to attend live events such as concerts, plays or live shows. This might be interpreted as a tendency to value being in the presence of the artists at live events, arguably caused by the widespread use of personal devices for viewing films, which has led to motion images becoming commonplace and a consequent loss of interest in going to a specific place to watch a film. The new functions also reflect present-day free time activities: shopping, tourism, clubbing and religious worship.

(English Proofreading by Sheena Cornwell)

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