

**SMOKE AND MIRRORS:  
DESIGN ISSUES IN THE REHABILITATION  
OF HISTORIC THEATRES**

Prepared and Presented with slides

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for

"The Conservation of Public Assembly Spaces"

ICOMOS CANADA . Interiors Committee . Symposium 1993 . Halifax

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## 1. BACKGROUND

Over the past twenty years I have had the good fortune to visit a great variety of historic theatres in Canada and the United States. Most are so-called "restored" theatres and, specifically, movie palaces of the 1910-1930 period which are among the most popular candidates for rehabilitation and adaptive reuse as performing arts centres.

During my tours of restored theatres and discussions with their proprietors and consultants, I have been amazed at the range of interpretation for the word "restored". How often I have heard advance publicity that a theatre has been *meticulously restored to its historic splendour* or *authentically restored to its magnificent grandeur*. To me, with my trusty Oxford dictionary, these claims conjure up visions of palaces brought back to their original state of dignity; theatres which are **conserved** rather than renovated or redecorated.

### 1.1. Design Issue #1

When I am thus prepared to visit a meticulously or authentically restored theatre, it surprises me to arrive and find myself in an entry room with brand new, unadorned windows punched into the walls, or a lobby addition of glass curtain wall construction. For some reason, apparently, the lobby doesn't count as part of the "restored" theatre.

This "Let there be (day)light" intervention is rationalized on the basis that contemporary theatre lobbies have to be bigger, brighter and more inviting than their historic predecessors. The modern dogmatists insist that there has to be an animated, barrier-free relationship between people on the street and in the theatre, in order to generate **excitement**.

Apart from the expensive operating consequences of glass additions, the potential impact of the light on historic finishes exposed to it and the disruption to the character of the theatre, a theatre lobby on view to the outside world will be dark and empty 90% of the time. What kind of "exciting" message does this convey, I wonder?

The spectre of such design begs the question of whether curtain wall building concepts are even applicable to theatres, either historic or modern. Is there anything beguiling about a transparent nose added to an otherwise beautiful but mysterious face?

It is often true that some expansion of lobby space in historic theatres is required to meet contemporary theatre demands. The first design issue has to do with the way in which entry room expansion is most appropriately accomplished in a conservation project.

## 1.2. Design Issue #2

I have been told by self-proclaimed theatre restoration consultants that real gold highlights must be used when a theatre is restored in order to do justice to the three-dimensional sculptural effects of plaster ornament.

Furthermore, they claim that it was the *intention* of the original decorators to create a lasting effect of bright golden highlights and not muted tones, but in the 1920's they used inferior materials which have become dull with age. This implies that specialized, beaux arts schooled artisans of the early 20th century did not know the principles of the materials with which they worked.

There are also many historic theatre interiors freshly painted with flat latex paint, which are promoted as having a colour scheme exactly replicating the original. How do the owners know their new colour scheme matches the original? A computer told them. And, I think what a clever computer to interpret between base coat colours, layering techniques and differential effects of application, leeching and aging on various paints, dyes and pigments. Or, I think, I wonder how many theatres have been restored to their primer coats?

The second design issue has to do with interior finishes and intent of the original decorators, starting with the fact that "all that glitters is not gold".

## 1.3. In Search of Authenticity

These experiences suggest a need to document evidence of the original context, concepts and intent of the movie palace designers. If we are charged with maintaining the spirit, the integrity and the character defining elements of a heritage building, what are those qualities? What was the overall design concept of the movie palaces? What was the purpose of these buildings which are still being dismissed by modernists as bad historical revivalist architecture?

The answers lie in the following compilation of writings and interviews dating from 1915 to 1930 where the movie palace architects and decorators left less room for speculation than all the drawings, photographs and on-site evidence they left behind.

In all the general conclusions which follow, it is wise to remember that there are exceptions to every rule. Appreciation of an older building should start with research and end with an honest interpretation, always keeping in mind that historic movie palaces are much more than the sum of their design elements.

## **2. A DEFINITION OF THE MOVIE PALACE**

The historic North American movie palaces of 1915-1930 evolved directly from the vaudeville houses of 1900-1915. By 1916, in the United States alone, there were 25,000 picture houses.<sup>1</sup>

The historical context of the movie palace is well documented, together with their demise in favour of post Brechtian black boxes and post modern austerity. Simply put, they were commercial theatres clustered in prime downtown locations designed to launch new films. They featured vaudeville, live orchestras, over 1,000 seats, usually one balcony with boxes and a distinctive decorative personality which inspired Marcus Loew's famous motto, "We sell tickets to theatres, not movies."

### **2.1. Original Design Concepts**

#### **2.1.1. Let There Be Light?**

Architects Sexton and Betts, writing on American movie palaces in 1927, commented on the appropriate design of their interiors:

There is a marked distinction between the theatre and the stage. The entertainment takes place on the stage. The theatre affords the opportunity for its patrons to enjoy that entertainment to the utmost....Its design, therefore, must stimulate the imagination of those who enter so the spirit of romance in them may be immediately quickened.

In order to best serve its purpose, it must make them comfortable;...it must put the audience in a happy frame of mind and hold their interest....It is rather the spirit of the theatre, or what the theatre stands for, that the design of the interior of the theatre must suggest, in most cases, not the spirit of the play presented....In order to embody the spirit of the theatre, its design should be romantic, even fantastic.

The "movies" have democratized the theatre....Today, rich and poor alike attend the theatre regularly....The masses, revelling in luxury and costly beauty, go to the theatre, partly, at least, to be thrilled by the gorgeousness of their surroundings which they cannot afford in their home life....Their favorite "movie house" is the one which gives them the biggest thrill. <sup>2</sup>

When the prolific movie palace architect, Thomas Lamb, was interviewed in 1929 he saw movie palaces as educational tools to the study of architecture and the decorative arts. "The decorative scheme is the most essential part of the house after the architectural background has been set,...<sup>3</sup> He prescribed the following approach:

To make our audience receptive and interested, we must cut them off from the rest of the city life and take them into a rich and self-contained auditorium, where their minds are freed from their usual occupations and customary thoughts....

[However] it does not seem wise to bring the people directly into the full richness and intensity of the decorative scheme, so it is customary to work up to this intensity through various stages. The outer vestibules only give a faint indication of the richness of the interior, and as we pass through lobbies and foyers, the full tone of color and gold is gradually attained, the lighter colors in the vestibules and foyers; the darker and richer colors in the auditorium. It is one of the most quieting and soothing effects that can be striven for in a large interior. We all appreciate the almost narcotic effect of gazing at the waves at sea, or through the leaves of a forest, or at the stars at night. So with the large vaulted and coffered ceilings one is quite overawed by the immensity thereof, by its fineness of detail and by its endless repetition.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Lamb's favourite decorator, Harold Rambusch, echoed Lamb's convictions in 1927:

Our lobbies and entrance foyers are not meant to be quiet and restful places to linger. They should be bright and as prominent as possible. This is not exactly restful, but, after all, we must remember that the public passing through these rooms has just come off the street and is very much keyed up by reason of the traffic, the noises, shop windows and the like. Even a very elaborate entrance and foyer has a certain easing effect after the excitement of the street. Lobbies may well be full of gold, mirrors and posters....

The general tone of the auditorium must be what is technically called warm. The warm colours, as we understand them, are gold, orange, reds and tans when applied to materials or wall surfaces, and amber straw when applied to light. The metal gold has always spelled richness, not only because it is valuable but because it is pleasing to look at....and is the best means of attaining richness and warmth.

Gold has another charm when used in the theatre auditorium. In these dimly lighted interiors the metal will pick up such little light as there is and make the most of it. The light from the few lamps that burn is reflected here and there on the various gilded ornamental features and the light bounds and rebounds and gives *richness without glare*.<sup>5</sup>

### **2.1.2. Decorative Materials and Techniques - All That Glitters...?**

#### Gilding

In 1915, there were more than a dozen precious, common and alloy metal gilding materials available in leaf, foil or powders. Most popular for use in movie palaces were dutch metal, imitation gold and aluminum leaf, applied according to the following principles:

Interior or exterior decoration of houses and buildings presents many surfaces suitable for gilding, but the promiscuous application of metal should be avoided, as a meaningless display of gold or glittering metal is vulgar.

There may be lavish display under reasonable conditions, but it should be so arranged that every inch of surface gilded could reasonably form the face of real metallic parts in the construction of the building, either as supports, as in columns and frames; astragals or layers, as in horizontal moldings; slabs, as in solid panels, architraves and friezes; plugs, nails, and inlays, as in rosettes, dots, lines, and lettering; joists and trelliswork, as in structural moldings on ceilings, and lines or other detail suggestive of strength or support in ornamental features.

But the edging of ornamental enrichment in gold, such as the mere tips of leaves, is quite indefensible from the standpoint of the correct decoration or good judgment. Metalled backgrounds to panel decoration have been questioned in the same light but they are admissible, as panels of solid metal may be applied in structural work.<sup>6</sup>

Despite this prescription and archaeological evidence to substantiate its common application, edging is still practiced by some restoration firms.

### 2.1.3. Colour Schemes and Glazing

Renton describes thirteen different three-colour decorative schemes which were considered "tried and true" in 1915. <sup>7</sup> Colours were vibrant and gilding was brilliant to give ornament depth and texture which was then tempered by low amber lighting and patina glazes. In 1915, glazes were used to:

subdue and tone down the colours, to give rich antique effects to coloured lacquers over metals and are generally very simple compounds of water and dull browns, blues, greens, umbers, and siennas. For this purpose they are almost invariably added over lacquer decoration of relief materials to render the work less garish and assertive, at the same time enriching the effect. They are generally wiped off the prominent parts, leaving a dull subduing colour in all crevices and indented parts which adds richness and depth. <sup>8</sup>

Flat wall and ceiling surfaces between gilded relief ornament were usually scumbled or finished in a way to provide continuity of texture and patina. The aesthetic preference to restore movie palaces to look new is ironic since they were glazed to look old in the first place. It is an effect totally unobtainable today by the use of flat, opaque, modern paint.

## 2.2. Summary of Historic Design Criteria:

From the writings of the era and all other available evidence, it is clear that the intent of the original movie palace designers was to inspire fantasy. Furthermore, five distinct goals or design criteria support this purpose, together with decorative strategies employed:

- To offer an *escape* from daily life, they created an enclosure separate from the outside world.
- To create *comfort*, they provided warm colours, amber lighting and stained glass.
- To simulate *luxury*, they introduced gilding, scagliola, damask and plush furnishings.
- To create a *thrill*, they provided exotic ornamentation, mirrors, sculpture and murals.
- To *educate*, they offered historic styles, traditional materials and visual art.

A safe, comfortable, but stimulating environment of "richness without glare" and decorative continuity was created to ensure audience *receptivity* to the entertainment on stage.

### PRESCRIBED CONSERVATION APPROACHES

### **2.2.1. Front-of-House Building Additions - Let There Be Light?**

Historic theatre lobbies should not be subjected to increased exposure to daylight or the streetscape.

Theatre entry rooms are part of the continuity of the historical design which captures an audience at curbside and transports them through increasingly captivating phases to their seats in the auditorium. Today's theatre-goer should be able to relive this experience without interruption by contemporary elements or the outside world. At the same time, the theatre-goer should be able to segue into areas which meet their needs as a customer.

Additions of a modern nature should be distinguishable, and quite separate from the original building. They can be adjacent, above or below the historic entry rooms. Contemporary needs might also be satisfied by the renovation of found space within the building which has little significance, such as structural space, ceiling plenums, and former mixed use rental areas which may have been renovated over the years.

### **2.2.2. Interior Decorative Finishes - All That Glitters Is Not Gold**

The condition and circumstances of each historic theatre project will influence the choice of an approach to take. In order to achieve the coherency of the original decorative personality of the building, original materials and techniques of application should be maintained or reproduced.

Any deviation from historic materials and methods of application jeopardizes the decorative integrity of the interior. Avoid conjecture, choose a consistent approach and provide an honest interpretation of the choices made.

Where modern technology must intrude into the public spaces as a matter of functional necessity, carefully plan the integration, ensure the addition is reversible, grit your teeth and remember the first rule of theatre: the show must go on.

### 3. SMOKE AND MIRRORS

The title of this paper was "Smoke and Mirrors."

Two of the most popular devices to create special effects in the theatre are smoke and mirrors. They are the substance of magic. While smoke surprises and distracts the eye, mirrors can accomplish or enhance the illusion of the most extravagant images of our fantasy.

Fantasy is our image inventing faculty, our capacity to daydream and to imagine, our mechanism for creative inspiration in every endeavour. It is fantasy which is the essence of all theatre, whether it is conveyed through a mist of diversionary entertainment or a mirror reflecting a vision of truth.

The right balance of diversion and reflection, glazing and gilding, smoke and mirrors, can generate new perspectives, revelations and fantasies. And, so the cycle continues...literally and figuratively.

Smoke and mirrors abounded on and off the stages of our historic theatres. If art in architecture aspires to a perfect blend of form and content, then the great movie palaces of the past must be judged among the most wonderful treasures of the 20th century.

\*

To understand a place one must know its memories

Richard England

. . .spirit always adheres to forms. **That is why forms survive.** Because even when specifics are forgotten, a form can retain an aura of what originated it and so pass on not the doctrine but the sense of life.

Michael Ventura, "Hear That Long Snake Moan," Whole Earth Review, Spring 1987.

#### 4. FOOTNOTES

- 1 Meloy, Arthur S., Theatres and Picture Houses (1916), p.1.
- 2 Sexton, R.W. & Betts, B.F., American Theatres of Today (New York City: Architectural Book Publishing Company Co, 1927), pp. 13-18.
- 3 "Some Highlights in Motion Picture Theater Design", The Architect & Engineer, (December, 1929), p. 53.
- 4 "Some Highlights in Motion Picture Theater Design", The Architect & Engineer, (December, 1929), p.54.
- 5 Rambusch, Harold W., "The Decorations of the Theatre" American Theatres of Today (New York City: Architectural Book Publishing Co, 1927), vol II, p. 25 - 27
- 6 Scott Mitchell, Frederick, Practical Gilding, Bronzing, Lacquering and Glass Embossing (London: TradePapers, 1915), pp 53,54.
- 7 Renton, Edward, The Vaudeville Theatre: Building Management - Operation (New York City: Gotham Press Inc, 1918), p. 15.
- 8 Scott-Mitchell, Frederick, Practical Gilding, Bronzing, Lacquering and Glass Embossing, (London: TradePapers, 1915) p. 78.