

THE

Nick Zegarec's

Hollywood

ART

Paying homage
picture

to the great
palaces



Paralyzed in the Dark

A TRIBUTE TO THE MOVIE PALACE

by *Nick Zegarac*

"No palace of Prince or Princess, no mansion of millionaire could offer the same pleasure, delight, and relaxation to those who seek surcease from the work-a-day world, than this, where delicate dreams of youth are spun...Here in this Fox dream castle, dedicated to the entertainment of all California, is the Utopian Symphony of the Beautiful, attuned to the Cultural and Practical...No King...No Queen...had ever such luxury, such varied array of singing, dancing, talking magic, such complete fulfillment of joy. The power of this we give to you...for your entertainment. You are the monarch while the play is on!"

- June 1929 newspaper advertisement for San Francisco's 'fabulous Fox Theater

In 1960, fading movie queen Gloria Swanson posed majestically against the half-gutted backdrop of the soon to be demolished Roxy Theater in New York City. It was a fitting tribute to the old time movie palace once christened 'the Cathedral of the Motion Picture' by its founder Samuel L. Rothapfel. A Swanson movie had opened the Roxy to great pomp and fanfare some thirty years before.

But by 1960, Hollywood was already in a bad way – financially speaking - and the movie palace itself in even worse condition to weather the changing tide in audience tastes and dwindling theatrical attendance from the onslaught of television. A decade earlier the U.S. government had forced a split between theater chains and movie studios; seen as an antitrust move that would generate more free market enterprise for the independent distributor. Instead, it crippled both the theatrical and production apparatuses and sent an already fragile entertainment industry into a tailspin toward receivership en masse.

Movie palaces, with their four to six thousand plus seating and lavishly appointed lounges had suddenly become expendable behemoths of a bygone era that independent theater management simply could no longer afford. Even if the theater itself was part of a larger retail and/or hotel complex, it often failed to provide its own sustainable income.

Like the great dinosaurs of the ancient past, these majestic creatures of stark and surreal beauty from a not so distant age, and not to be found anywhere else in the architectural landscape, became the undeserving recipients of shoddy attempts at ‘conversion’ into more mainstream and commercially viable multiplexes during the mid-1960s; gutted to make way for bargain department stores, parking garages or, when no other usefulness for their vast cavernous spaces could be deduced, slated for the wrecking ball to make way for an ultimately far less artistic structure entirely void of such refined opulence.

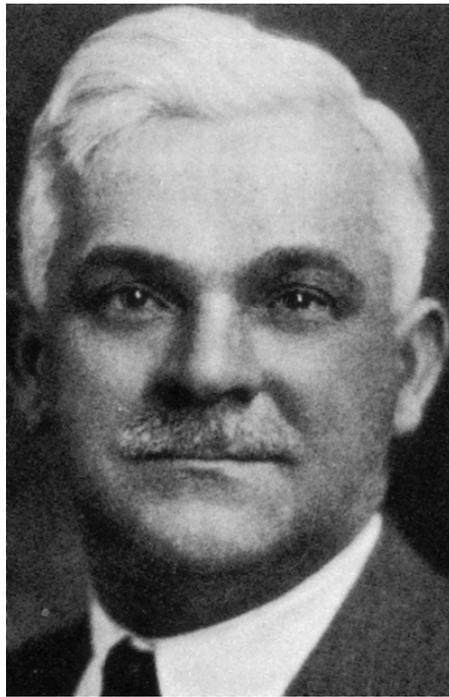
With so much confusion, careless mismanagement and blind ignorance in play, is it any wonder that so few of the grand picture palaces of yore have survived?

Not all is lost, though so much has been relegated to the dust bins of history. After the cavalier purge and demolition in the mid to late 60s, the early 1970s saw a sudden revival of interest in these crumbling paradises, most immediately from civic-minded cultural preservationist groups who aggressively campaigned to raise money and save their picture palaces that had fallen on hard times.

This move towards preservation came too late for the Roxy, as it did for New York’s Paramount, Chicago’s Paradise, Detroit’s Michigan Theater and San Francisco’s ‘fabulous’ Fox – the latter described as ‘irreplaceable’; all victims of the wrecking ball.

(Previous page: interior of the Ohio – formerly Loew’s Theatre in Columbus. Designed by Thomas Lamb, the theatre was saved from demolition in 1969, described by Lamb as “Mexican Baroque (with)...the sumptuousness of Spain and the intricacy of our modern art.” This page top: San Francisco’s ‘fabulous’ Fox, built in 1929, was described as “the last word” by Lamb; the largest of three almost identical theaters. The Fox’s two smaller siblings, Kansas’ Midland and The Jersey in Jersey City still stand. Middle: the lavishly appointed grand lobby. Bottom: succumbing to the wrecking ball in 1963 despite civic outcry that deemed the showplace ‘irreplaceable.’)





(Preparing to build a bit of magic. Top left: Samuel 'Roxy' Rothapfel. Middle: architect Thomas W. Lamb who began his career designing classical buildings in New York and New England. Right: Sid Grauman, the West's renown showman and film exhibitor whose most famous creation – Hollywood's Chinese Theatre, at right, remains a popular beacon of old time glamour with tourists. Bottom: arcs light up the night sky around the Carthay Circle Theatre, once Los Angeles' most glamorous and popular spot for world premieres. The Carthay's interior was altered in 1956 to accommodate Todd A-O screenings of *Around the World in 80 Days*. By 1969 it was a derelict leveled by the wrecking ball. A benign office structure occupies this site today.)



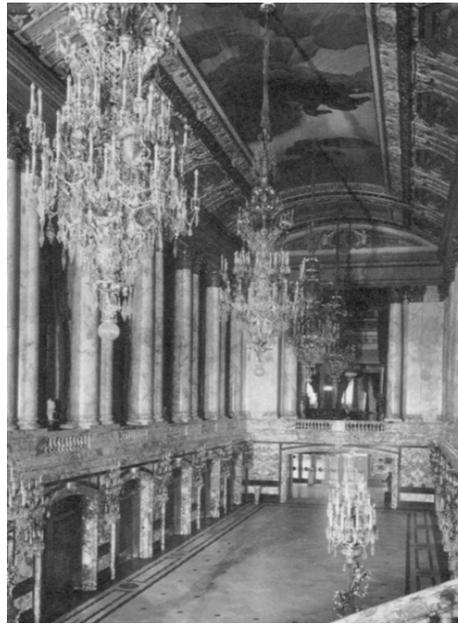
The tragedy of this shortsightedness is that a considerable loss of architectural greatness unique to the era roughly between 1929 and 1939 will likely never be repeated again. It is no longer feasible to build such epic monuments to entertainment. Arguably, the talent for design and construction no longer exists. Hence, the current relegation of our movie going experience sends audiences into nameless, faceless 'big box' multi-screen complexes; a trend likely to continue long into the future.

Today's multiplexes cannot compare to yesterday's movie palaces; either in scope, luxury of presentation or in their sheer ability to dazzle us with the houselights left on. As the ultimate place of worship for what entertainment used to be – an art form – in a way, the creation of today's multiplexes mirror popular entertainment; temporary, slickly marketed and disposable. Hence, the magic has gone out of going to the movies.

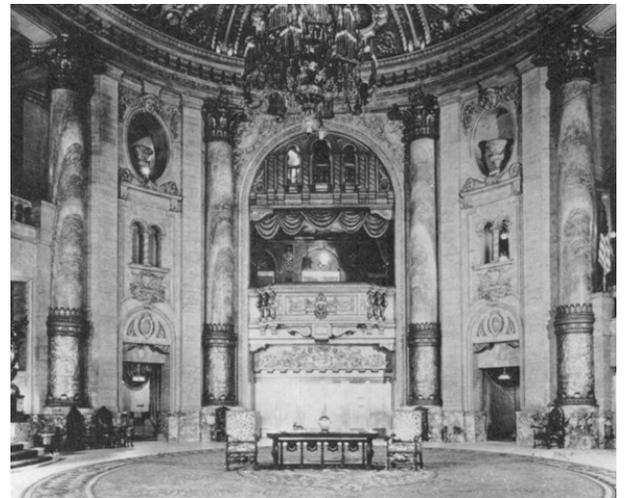
here are success stories too. New York's gargantuan picture palace – Radio City Music Hall – has managed to live through the age of instability to be regarded as a cultural icon for the performing arts; with live stage shows, limited movie engagements, classic movie revivals and its world famous Rockette Christmas show spectacular dazzling spectators. From coast to coast, preservation groups have taken up the challenge of raising badly needed monies to refurbish, restore or merely preserve and maintain the theatrical establishments.

The St. Louis Theater, as example, has been preserved as well as transformed into Powell Hall (the namesake derived from Walter S. Powell, whose \$2.5 million dollar endowment saved the aging film palace from certain demolition after 1966). The magnificent art deco Paramount Theater in Oakland California

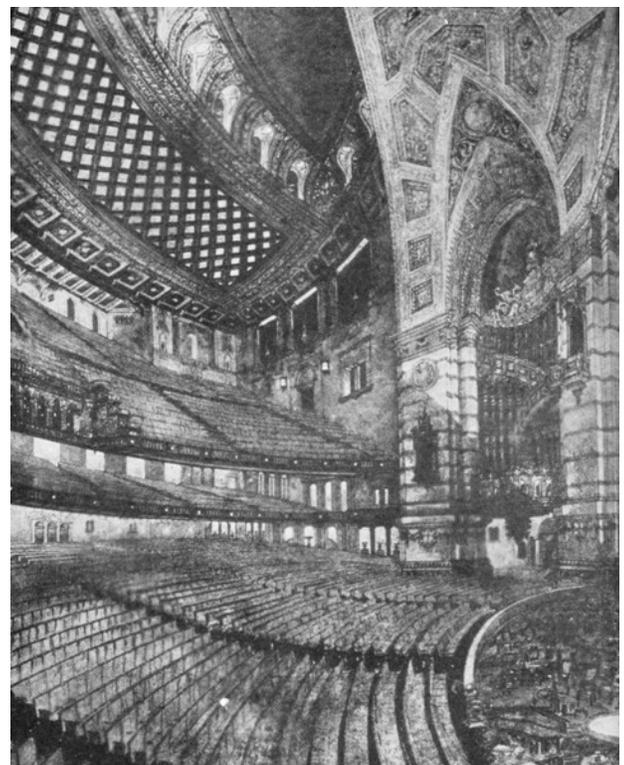




(Top: Three views of New York's elegant Paramount Theatre designed by Rapp and Rapp. A quasi-Deco exterior was offset in taste by French baroque interiors. This 4,000 seat movie palace also housed Paramount's east coast corporate offices. Middle: the half a block long Hall of Nations lobby showcased 'one of a kind' murals depicting famous buildings from around the world and a grand staircase inspired by the Paris Opera House. Right: the auditorium was unusually narrow, with cove-lit arches on the main and mezzanine floors, dwarfed by the rectangular dome. In the early 1960s the Paramount was leveled. Its adjoining skyscraper – erected at the same time – still stands.



Right and below: The Roxy – described as *'the Cathedral of the Motion Picture'* by its founder Samuel Rotheffel. A relatively modest exterior marquee did not begin to suggest the lavish absurdity inside. At 6,000 seats, The Roxy was by far the largest of the picture palaces. Opened in 1927, a newspaper cartoon of the day had a small child entering the vast grand lobby and asking its mother, *"Does God live here?"* Perhaps for a time, he did. Multiple staircases led to an oval auditorium that dwarfed beyond all expectation with an orchestra pit and a Wulitzer organ. The Roxy was razed in 1961.)



was lovingly cared for by the Oakland Symphony from 1970 until 1975 when receivership of the Symphony forced a sell-off to the city of Oakland for one dollar. Today, the city of Oakland continues to market the Paramount as a Theatre of the Arts. In Ohio, the Ohio Theater was rescued by a group of local citizens turned preservationist experts; their meticulous efforts in restoration effectively resurrecting the authenticity of the theater's original construction. And in 1981, St. Louis' Fox Theater became the subject of a rescue effort launched by Leon Strauss – recreating virtually all of the old time opulence with painstaking attention to every detail.

These examples, and others like them, are reasons to remain hopeful about the future of so many picture palaces that continue to lay dormant across the United States. There is always hope. But in the beginning; there was much more – skill, artistry, excitement and pride; the hallmarks of genuine greatness for a primitive dumb show that had quite suddenly captured the public's fascination.

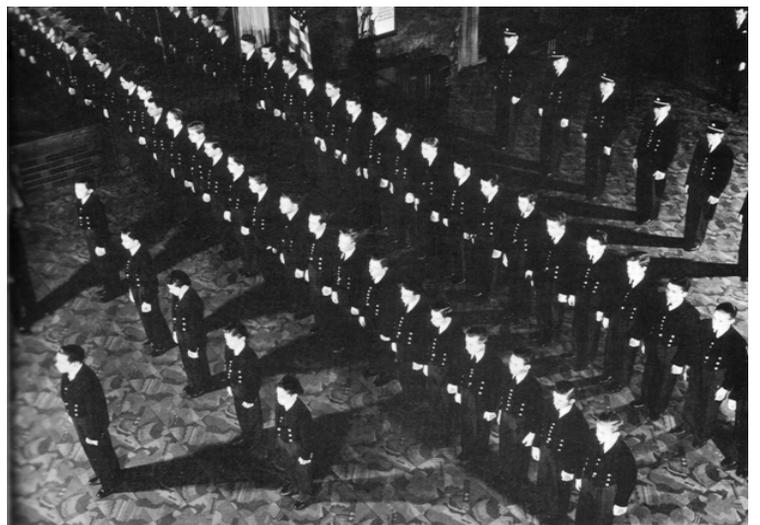


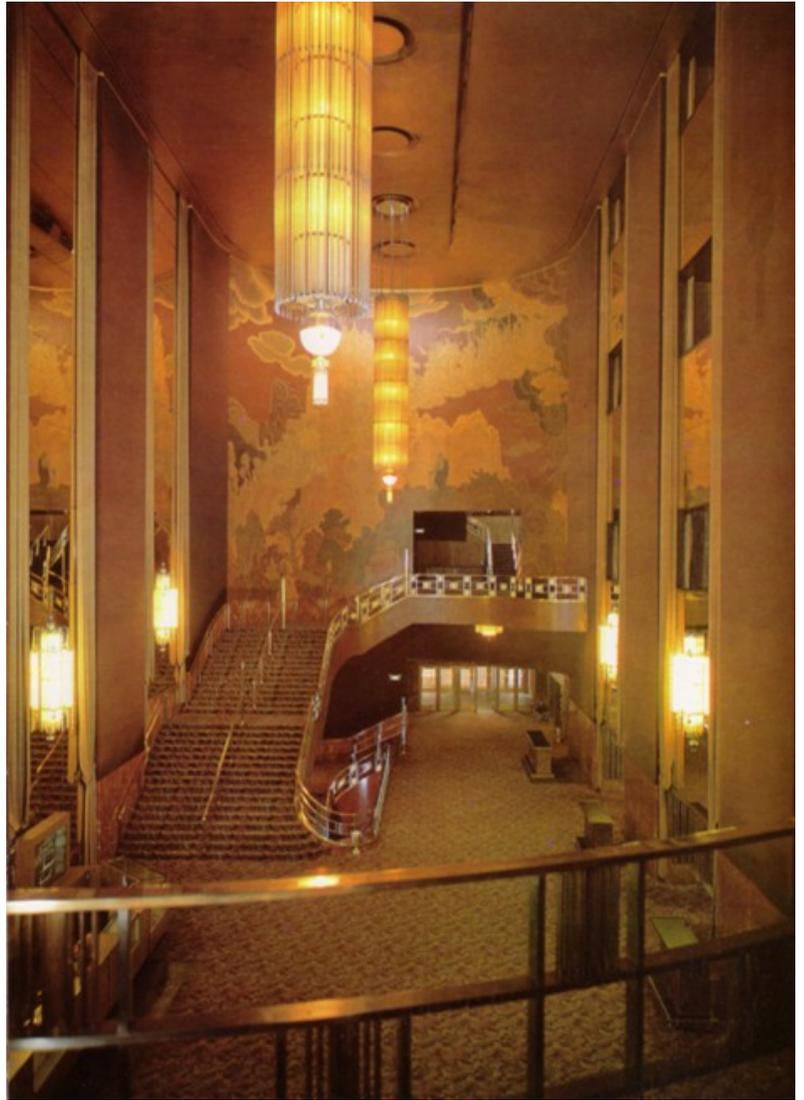
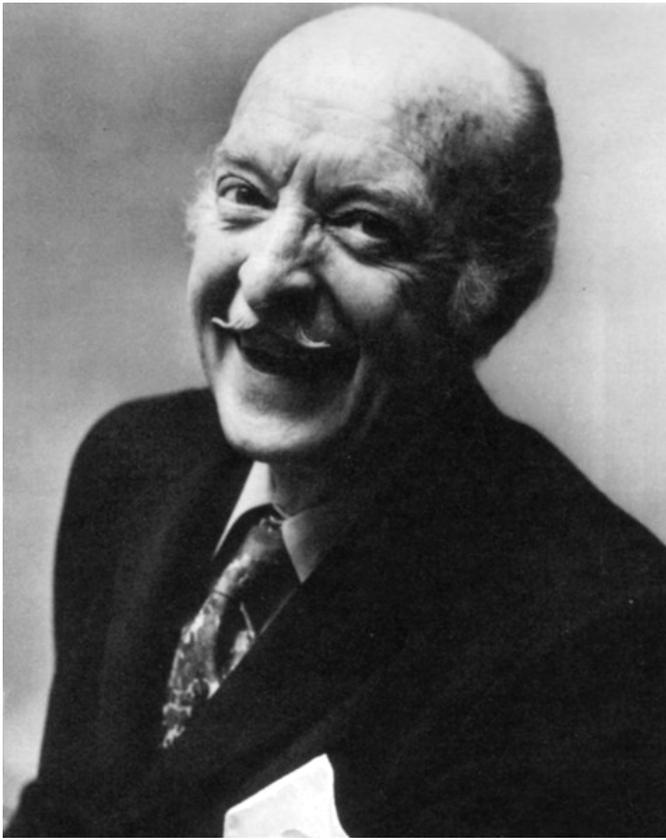
ART FOR COMMERCE SAKE

Despite their mind-boggling elegance that could rival even some of Europe's grand opera houses, movie palaces were more of a necessity than a luxury during the early part of the 20th century. At the movies' infancy, it had been quite acceptable to show silent shorts in refurbished storefronts along the already constructed downtown core. Primitive Kinetoscope projection devices were hardly capable of blowing up an image to vast screen proportions while maintaining integrity and sharpness of the image. In any event, audience appeal for the movies in general had been deemed as limited and fleeting at best by the critics.

However, in 1893 Thomas Edison made a good showing of a series of short subjects at the Chicago World's Fair, showcasing rarities that the common patron found exotic and beguiling. These first movies were nothing more than life studies but the patrons who saw them quickly developed a voracious appetite for more of the same. Within a few short years, technological advancements had paved the way for longer movies structured around crude narratives.

(This page: the last of a dying breed; New York's Radio City Music Hall, a 6,200 seat colossus whose auditorium 'sunrise' effect {top} is breathtaking. Right: partial view of Donald Deskey's 'moderne' grand lounge circa 1942. Bottom: an army of ushers get their final inspection before the show.)





(Top left: Russell 'the Rocket Man' Markert who developed Radio City's other tangible asset 'The Rockettes'; an all girl chorus line that first appeared in 1925 and would eventually include 90 dancers.)



Three of Radio City's most famous Rockette dancers are Lucille Bremer, Vera Ellen (both became Hollywood stars) and Maria Beale (who won Miss America). Reportedly, Markert told Ellen to stop showing off or give in her notice. She promptly gave turned in her resignation and became a popular leading lady of the late 1940s and early 50s. Left middle: The Rockettes prepare in their costume and fitting room below stage in 1942. Bottom left: a pleasant, though determined Rockette advertises her displeasure with management's expectations during a 1967 strike.



Above: Donald Deskey's understated 'grand foyer' described as 'mammoth' and 'magnificent' and reflecting the designer's aim to "impress the customers by sheer elegance, not by overwhelming them with ornament!" The cylindrical chandeliers are each 29 ft. in length and consist of 2 tons of molten glass. Six matching bracket lights each weigh 950 lbs. The room itself is a staggering 150 ft. long and rises 60 ft. from floor to ceiling with a stunning oriental mural painted by Ezra Winter along the grand staircase. In 1960, a visitor either leapt or fell to his death from the third mezzanine to the floor.)

In no time at all, early Kinetoscope parlors were becoming as popular as the penny arcade. Then, in 1905, the first Nickelodeon debuted in Pittsburgh, PA – launching a franchise that would soon grow to monumental proportions. Even so, the movies and their showplace venues quickly acquired unflattering monikers like ‘the fleapits’ to denote class distinction. Live theater was for the highbrow. The movies appealed the lowest common denominator.

Determined to break that line of distinction, in 1904 entrepreneur William Fox established the Greater New York Film Rental Company with the purchase of a dilapidated Nickelodeon in Brooklyn. Thereafter, Fox quickly set about creating a monopoly of theatrical establishments.

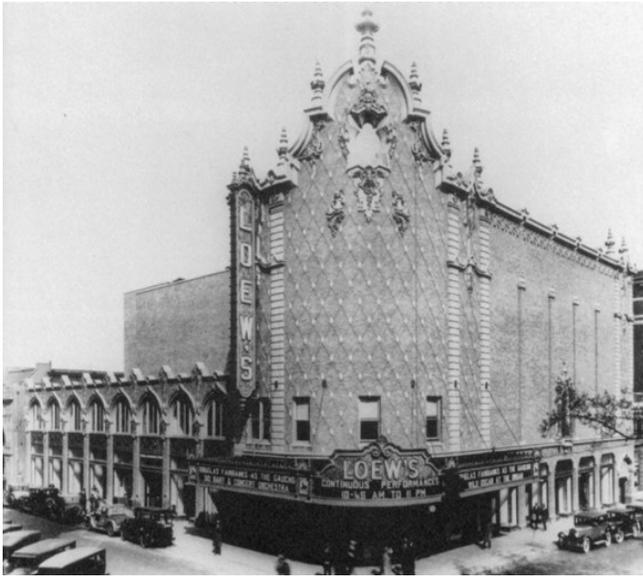
The Kinetoscope gave way to the single projector and the first legitimate movie ‘theaters’ were born. Plain and primitive, these early theaters attracted enough attendance to warrant new legislation in both local and federal public safety laws. The chief concern then was fire, since movies were shot on highly flammable nitrate stock and patrons frequently enjoyed their cigars in the isle, while hot stage lamps were precariously located near fabric drapes.

Hence, the new generation of movie theaters began with the dream merchants acquiring failed opera houses, concert halls and churches – buildings already up to code that had been specifically designed to hold large congregations of people. The problem was simply one of supply and demand – the public’s insatiable interest in the movies outweighing the number of available properties that could be incorporated to show them to a large audience. More and larger auditoriums were needed.

It is one of the ironies of the movie industry that its purveyors – once common folk themselves - suddenly became multimillionaires. Hence, this rise in the movie’s stature amongst popular forms of entertainment demanded a more mainstream and cultured setting in which to showcase them. At the same time, old established forms of entertainment like ballet and the opera were readily falling out of favor and patronage.

(Top: Illinois Southtown Theatre as it looked when it first opened Christmas day 1931. In 1958 the 3,200 seat Spanish revival theatre, with its Flamingo Pool officially closed. It was converted into a department store in 1961 and remained as such until 1986. Today, it sits abandoned. Middle: a view of the ornate ceiling plasterwork for Illinois’ 4,381 seat Uptown Theatre, designed by Rapp and Rapp. Middle: Texas’ Majestic Theatre, which closed in 1978 but was revived with a restoration in 1983. Bottom: California’s State Theatre’s ornate curtain is one of its most unique features. In 1963 the State became one of the first movie houses to show only Spanish-language movies. It continues to operate as such to this day.)





(Top left: Virginia's Carpenter Center, formerly the Loew's, with its Moorish design suggestive of a Spanish castle and seating 2,000. After sitting vacant for almost 2 decades, the theater was saved and restored in 1983. Middle: California's Wiltern began life as Warner Bros. Western Theatre in 1931 – a stunningly handsome Deco design that in 1980 was stripped of virtually all its former beauty and closed, only to be resurrected with a \$4.6 million dollar restoration five years later.

Top right: Boston's Keith Memorial Theatre built in 1928 by Thomas Lamb and commissioned by E.F Albee as a tribute to his fallen partner, Benjamin Franklin Keith. Lavishly appointed with real marble columns and genuine gold leaf throughout at a 1928 cost of \$5 million, the theater was converted into an opera house in 1970 and remains operational as such to this day.

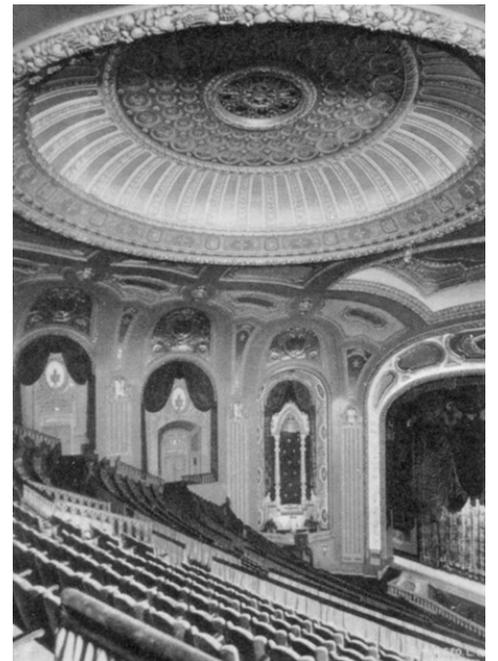
Right: views of Missouri's Powell Hall, formerly the Loew's St. Louis Theatre. Designed by Rapp and Rapp and described by noted architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable as "Silver Screen Versailles" – the reclamation of this theater as a concert hall has changed its original color scheme to crimson and gold highlights on a cream white backdrop. Otherwise, little has changed.)



There were obvious pluses to acquiring these venues for the movies; most notably, in that they already contained the essentials of space and structural requirements necessary to accommodate an audience. Furthermore, they were clean and well-appointed in luxuries far surpassing the movies' current venues.

Built in 1902, Tally's Electric Theater in Los Angeles became the first permanent structure converted as a showcase for the movies. However, the entrepreneurial spirit of theater moguls and their architects would not simply be satisfied with the acquisition of hand me downs. In the west, Sid Grauman became the most prolific exhibitor; moving out to Hollywood to build his famed Egyptian (1922) and Chinese theaters (1927). In the east, Manhattan's Samuel Rothapfel proved to be the trend setter; first ensconced as manager of the Capitol (1919) before becoming chief architect of a visionary picture palaces too grand to last – the Roxy (1927).

Adopting the edict of film pioneer Marcus Loew, that "we sell tickets to theaters, not movies", the major Hollywood studios quickly began to horn in on the independents – hiring the best architects who had already proven their worth in designing theatrical venues elsewhere. One of the most promising, Thomas W. Lamb had begun his career designing classical architecture in New York and New England. For Loew's Incorporated, Lamb embarked upon a level of



opulence unseen before for the movie palace. Lamb's debut of the palatial Kansas City Midland Theater (1927) and two more titanic picture houses in Syracuse, N.Y. and Columbus, OH the following year set the standard for movie palaces elsewhere.

Meanwhile, the amalgamation of Lasky/Famous Players into Paramount Pictures united the creative design talents of 'Balaban and Katz' and 'Rapp and Rapp' – two rival architectural firms that together expanded their operations in design well beyond Lake Michigan. Rapp and Rapp built Time Square's Paramount Theater (1926) as well as other similar movie palaces in Seattle and Portland.

They also freelanced, building the Westchester (1930) and Erie (1931) for Warner Brothers; a studio that had first acquired the independent chain of Stanley theaters designed by Hoffman and Henon.

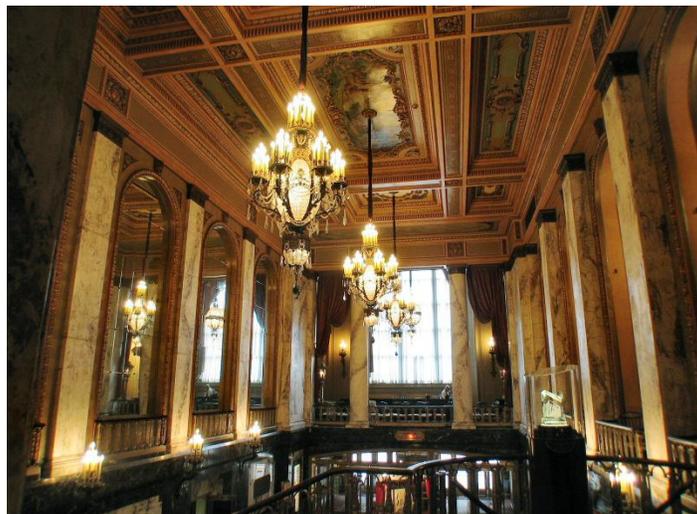
In Hollywood, the creation of United Artists by Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin put architect Howard Crane to work with impressive debuts in Chicago and Detroit (both in 1928). But Crane's prowess in design was most readily exercised for rival film pioneer, William Fox.

By 1930, Crane had designed lavishly for Fox on twin 5,000 seat behemoths in Detroit and St. Louis. He had also unveiled his craftsmanship with The San Francisco. William Fox proudly proclaimed that the sun never set on a venue in which his name did not appear.

But within two years, financial hardship ousted Fox from the empire he had worked so hard to build. Although he lived the rest of his days in relative comfort, William Fox would never again participate in either the theatrical or production end of motion pictures after 1932.

Top and middle: 2 views of Shea's Buffalo Theatre created in 1926 by Rapp and Rapp with the royal elegance of a French palace in mind. Michael Shea envisioned this showplace as his flagship. The lobby is lined in marble columns and polished brass rails with ornate Tiffany chandeliers and meticulously detailed frescos painted on the walls and ceiling. Working with city council, the non-profit 'Friends of the Buffalo Theatre' restored much of this showplace's old world glamour during the 1980s. Today Shea's O'Connell Preservation Guild manage the property.

Middle: a stunning view of ceiling art in the auditorium of the newly refurbished Chicago Theatre, built by Rapp and Rapp in 1921. Seating 3,800, the theatre stopped being a movie palace in 1984, but continues to operate for live performances. Bottom: a close up of just one of the hundreds of unique relief patterns adorning the Chicago's lobby walls. No two are alike.)





WELCOMING THE BRIEF AGE OF MAGIC

"A shrine to democracy, where the wealthy rub elbows with the poor..."

– George Rapp

The birth of the movie palace was an instant and palpable commercial success. Between 1914 and 1922 over 4,000 picture palaces opened in the United States. Although the architectural heritage of these leviathans borrowed readily from virtually all the classical models of imperial Europe and other exotic locales, the special needs and design of movie palaces presented unique challenges, not the least of which was their consignment to irregular plots of land. Movie palaces were among the very first super structures to incorporate central cooling. They were also among the first to utilize incandescent lights to inspire mood and atmosphere.

The initial inspiration for movie palace's exotic interiors is generally linked to the 1922 much ballyhooed discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb and great hall of Karnak. Overnight, the far away and the mystical had become fascinating to the common man. To this initial mix of intrigue, theater designers borrowed heavily on Oriental elements; the most readily and instantly recognizable of these still Sid Grauman's Chinese Theater in downtown Hollywood.

(Top left: Chicago Theatre 1936 - front exterior with the giant 'C' motif in the center of its marquee. Top right: the original auditorium. Right: views of the serpentine winding lobby staircase and ornate front window overlooking the marquee.)





(Of majesty and grandeur – interior views of St. Louis' Fox Theatre mark it a virtual twin of Detroit's 4,000 seat behemoth, but its exterior terra cotta façade is in stark contrast to Detroit's neon marquee. Inspired by an east Indian architecture, red velvet throne chairs have armrests that form a camel, while scores of monkeys and elephants decorate the auditorium and lobby ceilings and walls, with gold-plated warriors raising their scimitars.)

Despite being closed in the late 1960s and succumbing to severe vandalizing in 1970, local investors banded together for a \$2 million dollar restoration. The results speak for themselves.)





(Top left: doorway ornamentation for Utica's Stanley Theatre that opened in 1928 and incorporated designs that architect Thomas Lamb referred to as 'Mexican baroque'. In 1974 the Stanley stopped showing movies. Four years of intensive restoration have brought back its original splendor.

Top right: one of only a handful of picture palaces incorporating a Meso-American theme, this sacrificial alter chandelier once hung in the eerie lobby of San Antonio's 3,000 seat Aztec Theatre (built in 1926). At last check, the chandelier now hangs in a cafeteria specializing in Mexican food. The gargantuan auditorium is currently subdivided into three screens.

Right: the ultra-elegant French baroque lobby of the Los Angeles Theatre, designed by S. Charles Lee in 1931. Mirror lined and mimicking the pageantry of Versailles, the lobby also contains a triple-tiered crystal fountain. The Los Angeles still operates as a movie house and exists in a relatively untouched state.

Bottom: South Bend Indiana's Morris Theatre (formerly The Palace 1922). Designed by Edward Eichenbaum, The Palace began its life as a Vaudeville house that was later converted into a movie palace. In 1970 it ceased operations, but was salvaged by the end of the decade as a civic auditorium. It's architecture is inspired by Renaissance décor.)



Theater exteriors incorporated a large horizontal canopy – usually slightly bumped out in the middle - and a giant vertical electric sign; a holdover borrowed from the early Nickelodeon days. For their time, these signs, with their ingenious nighttime illuminations (a combination of bulb and neon tubing), were cutting edge miracles of design – eye-catching to deliberately entice patrons with the promise of even greater spectacle lurking inside.

Theater lobbies were strategically located on every level; vast, spacious and opulent beyond all expectation in order to divert patrons' attentions from recognizing how long they had to wait for their tickets and other concessions. While lobbies were brightly lit, auditorium lighting was much more subdued;



partly to induce a romantic look and mood, but more prudently so as not to detract from the central focus – the movie screen itself. Most movie palaces also had smoking rooms, men’s and women’s lounges, children’s playrooms and emergency aid areas. The splendor of public amenities extended to the private dressing rooms located below and backstage for the performers who, with increasingly regularity, rounded out the movie goers’ experience with lavish stage spectacles.

In the grander movie palaces it was not uncommon to find more obscure and somewhat bizarre amenities. New York’s Roxy, as example, had a barber shop and billiard room to service its patrons. Chicago’s Southtown had a reflecting pool in its lobby populated by live fish and the occasional flamingo. In their efforts to provide ‘one of a kind’ experiences for the movie-going patron, designers of these fanciful creations cannibalized virtually every conceivable architectural style from the past – combining them when necessary to produce what one critic in 1928 called a *“pitiful degradation of...art”* and *“the prostitution of architecture”* with *“taste and beauty abased to the lowest degree”*.

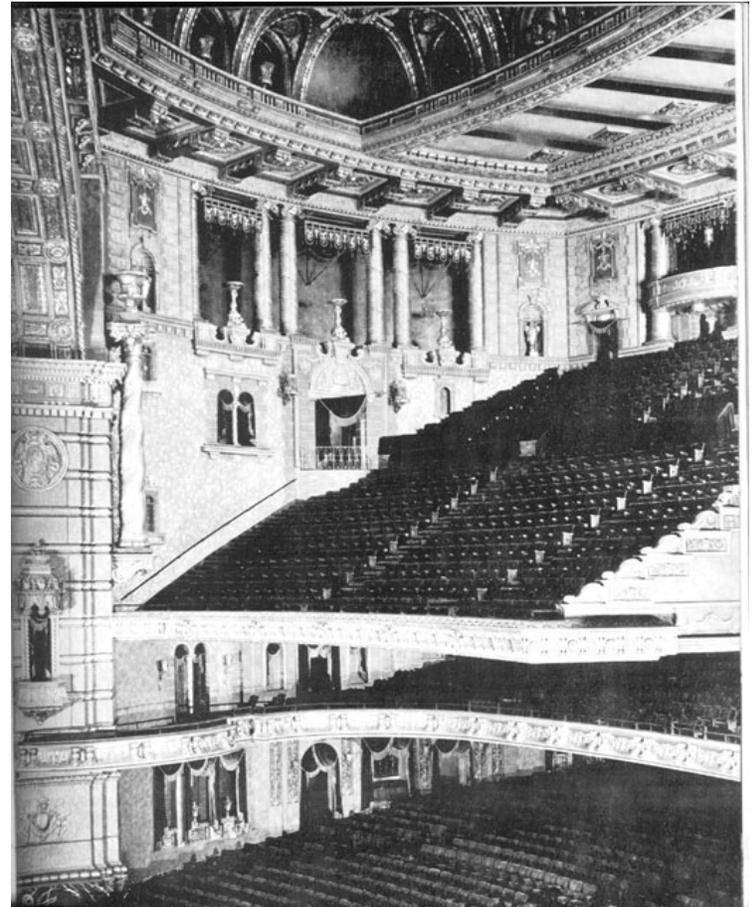
Not surprising, many of these designers were European born; hence the first wave of picture palace construction celebrated French and Italian influences. Scottish born, Thomas Lamb pioneered this first wave of lavish escapism. However, it was Austrian John Ebersson who took theater décor in a new direction by creating the ‘atmospheric’ theater – romanticized revisions on a Mediterranean courtyard theme; ceilings painted as though they were sky and with tiny pin pricks of light as stars filtering through. Even more startling in appearance were the suddenly popular creations of whimsy anchored to a Spanish Colonial Revival style pioneered by The Boller Brothers; a Missouri design firm.

By the end of the 1920s, the meticulous intricacies of these early efforts gave way to the ultra modern chic of Art Deco pioneered by California architects S. Charles Lee in Los Angeles and Timothy L. Pflueger in San Francisco. Lee’s 1930 designs for the Fox Wilshire may have launched the Deco trend, but it was Pflueger’s Paramount Theater in Oakland that set the standard in 1931.

The final jewel from this period opened one year later; New York’s Radio City Music Hall – a gargantuan homage to the end of an era in construction. With the Great Depression biting hard into pocket books even Rockefeller Center’s newest showplace struggled to turn a profit almost from the moment it opened.

(Top and middle: the most costly theatre per square foot – Chicago’s Paradise, built by John Ebersson in 1928 with its half a block long marquee and stunning stage. By 1956 it was an unprofitable relic to be torn down. Middle: Catalina Island’s Avalon Theatre, built inside a casino complex that continues to operate today; John Gabriel Beckman’s murals depicting a hunt. Bottom: the lobby of New York’s Loew’s Paradise built by John Ebersson in 1929. The fountain at lower right and statuary throughout are gone today and the cavernous auditorium has been cut into four smaller screens with little regard for preserving the design integrity of the original.)





LEGENDS AFTER THE FALL

In hindsight, precursors to the demise of the motion picture palace seem obvious. The Depression was only half of the story. Blind-sighted by the meteoric rise in popularity of the movies themselves, the dream merchants built their arsenal of glamorous picture palaces too fast – overextending into cavernous spaces that simply could not be filled by a single entertainment.

By the mid-1930s, theater owners were juggling live stage performances, guest appearances from stars of stage and screen, movie premieres and often unrelated weekly contests and promotions as part of their regular repertoire of attractions, just to break even.

(Arguably the best, undeniably the biggest – New York's Roxy Theatre as it appeared at the cusp of WWII. Top left: looking down at the massive stage and orchestra pit from a side box balcony.

Top right: peering into the general seating area and front balcony from the same vantage. Right: the rather understated outdoor marquee hardly suggesting the opulence to be found inside. Bottom: the Roxy's gargantuan concessions stand on the main floor could accommodate up to fifty patrons at a time.)





(Two conflicting views of Detroit's Michigan Theatre, built in 1926 for the W.S. Butterfield theater chain. At left, the romanticized French baroque lobby glistens with pageantry and spectacle. At right: after being gutted in the late 1960s to make way for a car barn. Apart from a few fragile columns (at left) and a crumbling ceiling, little remains to compare The Michigan's current state with its former glory.)

At right: the original Mayan inspired lobby designed by Graven and Mayger for Detroit's Fisher Theatre in 1928. Bottom: in the early 1960s the Fisher was gutted and transformed into a ultra-moderne venue for the live theater; its décor today most reminiscent of Washington D.C.'s Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.)



The stylish lobbies that had been designed with care to stand alone as glamorous examples of stunning architecture were now cluttered with poster art and other advertising campaign materials to lure patrons into seeing the movies. By the mid-1940s booths selling war stamps and bonds were also added.

At wars end, the debut of television cannibalized theater attendance by half and the move away by baby boomers from cluttered city centers to the more spacious suburbs meant that movie palaces suddenly found themselves located in 'out of the way' districts inaccessible to most of the paying public.

Theater owners responded to this mass audience exodus in a destructive way; by subdividing their cavernous auditoriums into smaller venues without much regard for the original architectural design. Balcony boxes were removed; cornices and ornamental coves cut into by partitioning walls.





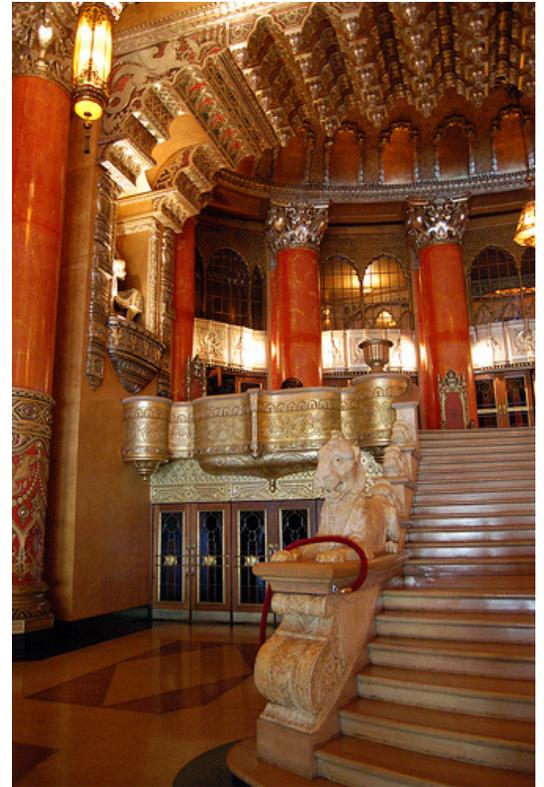
(Above: three views of the mammoth restoration effort that civic fundraising paid for on St. Louis' Fox Theatre. At left: the lobby gets a fresh coat of paint. Middle: a plaster expert painstakingly rebuilds part of one of the huge columns inside the grand lobby. Right: a construction worker relocates scaffolding on wheels by pushing it through the cavernous auditorium sans seating.

At right: the lovingly restored grand lobby as it appears today, shiny, lavish and timeless.)

Picture palaces were streamlined, but with little regard for keeping their original esthetic value in tact.

The more savvy theatrical businessmen revived stage shows and put on rock concerts to supplement their revenue. Too late to save many of the ailing picture palaces, did the cultural tide shift in the mid-1970s toward preservation and restoration efforts, with many state and local theaters being added to landmark registries. In between their initial rise in popularity and this much welcomed resurrection/conversion to 'performing arts' centers there came an abysmally dark period of pillaging and dismemberment.

San Francisco's 'irreplaceable' Fox Theater – arguably one of the most lavish of Thomas Lamb's early designs – was among the first to be hit with the wrecking ball in 1963; two years after Samuel L. Rothapfel's beloved Roxy in New York had suffered the same fate. The Paramount on New York's 43rd Street toppled not long afterward; its attached skyscraper still in existence today – marking that point where art trailed off and commerce continued along the road into immortality.



Realistically, not every movie palace of yesteryear can be converted into a contemporary performing arts center. Arguably, perhaps not all of them should. Too many of these remaining aging leviathans require major and costly rehabilitation – well beyond what is either financially feasible or, in some cases, structurally possible. Scores more, like The Michigan, have gone beyond that threshold where any sort of refurbishment would make a difference.

However, those that do survive and are in a relatively sound condition, and, are of cultural significance to a specific region should at least be deserving of a more concerted effort to salvage them from the brink of extinction; if for no other reason, then because today's architects of the movie multiplex no longer think along esthetic lines. Theirs' is a strictly functional domain, where the maximization of audience capacity per screen outweighs establishing a timeless opulence for all to admire. Thankfully, we have the opportunity to preserve and rescue a fair portion of the wondrous historical record that remains left behind. Time is of the essence, but the surreal and sublime beauty of these great picture palaces will always be timeless.

