

Theater Engineering Conference

Physical Construction

Influence of West Coast Designers on the Modern Theater*

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Summary—The influence of the motion picture studios on West Coast motion picture theater architecture is described. The typical present-day motion picture theater of West Coast design is discussed.

ON THE WEST COAST there is a point of view on theaters which may not be superior to any other part of the country, or the world, but which has been influenced by the ideas and desires of the people who make motion pictures. Being close to the motion picture studios we are guided a great deal by what the producers, directors, cinematographers, and other creative artists say at the time their pictures are being screened in the theaters. They often come into our office to present their observations and we have from time to time used designers from the studios who attack the problem strictly from the standpoint of showmanship and not from the staid architectural school. This has presented a rather free idea. We have developed the point of view that perhaps all of the things we were taught in architectural school were not the essentials of the motion picture theater.

The entrepreneur of the motion picture is attempting to create an illusion of reality, not reality itself, but a series of plausible situations which are interesting, exciting, and which provide the audience with a means of escape from the monotony of everyday existence. During the time the picture is being screened he does not want the possible distracting influence of illuminated interior decorations no matter how beautiful they may be, or of any other light or sound effect that might compete with the picture interest. He is in complete agreement that the motion picture theater should be an attractive showcase for his product; however, he will vigorously oppose anything that might interfere with the illusion he has created.

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The importance of our designs of interest in this paper begins and ends with the typical present-day motion picture theater operation. This type of design took hold on the West Coast about 1935 and the pattern is continuing at the present time.

The Academy Theater which we constructed in Inglewood, California (Fig. 1), is an outstanding example of advancements made in



Fig. 1—Academy Theater, Inglewood, California.

theater design on the West Coast. As the patron approaches this theater, a slender round tower 130 feet high attracts his attention. A spiral relief resembling a ramp carries a triple column of color-changing light which ends at the top in a scintillating ball of neon. The front and back of the tower displays the name of the theater in neon-outlined letters while the two sides support the word "preview" in neon, which is only visible when the tubing is illuminated at night.

The parking lot with an entrance at the left of the theater allows

the passengers to alight on the same side as the box office. Angular designs in the ornamental sidewalks of terrazzo suggest an approach to the streamlined box office of white metal. Translucent plastic letters announce the current pictures on the front and two sides of the marquee and the marquee soffit is studded with reflector-type incandescent bulbs and neon tubing in modern form. By the time the patron has passed through the wide lobby and glanced at the free-standing poster cases, he has been taken out of his everyday



Fig. 2—Black-light illumination in Academy Theater.

atmosphere into one of entertainment psychology. He is now better prepared to see the show inside.

The lobby reflects the conscious study to be modern without being severe. We do not believe the theater patron of today will enjoy an atmosphere of severe modernism devoid of surface ornament. The ornament should, however, be well placed and lean toward the unusual.

We believe that one of our outstanding contributions to modern motion picture theater design is what we term the "light trap." We have long recognized that extraneous light flashing across the screen

has been a barrier to good operation. This light, of course, appears from the foyer when a door at the end of the aisle is opened to admit patrons. In order to eliminate it we designed the light trap, a very simple device created by turning the doors at right angles to the screen. Consequently the light from the foyer will never enter into an aisle to distract attention from the screen. Some capacity is lost in gaining this end; however, we have found it well worth the sacrifice.

We believe that this theater is the first one in which a major experiment was made in the use of black light (Fig. 2). The covers in the



Fig. 3 -Tumbleweed Theater, Five Points, California.

ceiling are designed to take dimmer-controlled neon lighting and in these same coves we have placed black-light sources. The wall decorations have been painted with fluorescent paint, and many combinations of neon and fluorescent colorings are available. The producers object to the use of fluorescent colorings during the time the picture, particularly one in color, is being screened, but inasmuch as the lighting may be controlled from the projection room it is only used when it is effective. The aisle carpet also is fluorescent and is illuminated with black light which aids greatly in seating. These

lighting units are placed at the aisle seats. Attempts were made to illuminate the aisle carpet from overhead, but the light reflected from eyeglasses was disturbing to the wearers of glasses.

We have used black-light decorations in many of our houses and found that lamp replacement offers a major problem to the operator. This may be due to the intervening war years in which these lamps were not available and while we built the first fluorescent-lighted theater in 1939 and several in Mexico in 1941, the black light was unavailable chiefly during the war years and our experience record is incomplete on this item.

We have built some very low cost theaters on the West Coast that have been extremely interesting and well-paying ventures (Fig. 3). Outstanding is probably the Tumbleweed Theater, Five Points, California, which we designed for the Edwards Circuit and which was built at a cost of \$30.00 per seat.

Having the problem of a small country area and a rural community the owner of this theater stated he would like to have a barn in which to put pictures. So the building sits back from the street with a barnyard in front which contains a wishing well, an old oaken bucket, and cast-plaster ducks and ducklings. Search was instituted for an abandoned windmill, and this was erected on a pump tower, operated by an electric motor, and is a landmark for miles about.

The marquee was built around the base of the mill tower, with a box office below, and forms the main entrance. Poster cases alternating with old wagon wheels, also the product of an entertaining search, form the fence for the yard. Gay farm colors of white, yellow, and blue with red wagon-wheel spokes make the exterior bright and cheery. The ranch atmosphere is carried out inside the theater by a foyer treated as the living room of a farm home. Papered walls with early American furniture make this appear authentic.

The auditorium has a ceiling formed by the roof trusses as barn beams would appear. Lighting fixtures are wagon wheels, three colors of lights being used in the glass rims of the wheels. Walls have appliques of western rural ornaments. An interesting note is the fact that the chimney on the front of the building is used as a port for the ventilating system, fresh air being introduced into the front of the building and removed from the rear.

Our West Coast office has also had some interesting experiences in connection with food operations in the theater. This lucrative addition, which started as a folding candy and popcorn dispenser, has

developed into elaborate concessions which include soft drinks. We have even had proposed records, sheet music, and greeting cards.

In Mexico we were privileged to design a few theaters where we entered into the full impact of concessions in the theater. The show-going habits in that territory were affected by the siesta period following which the theaters opened, usually around four o'clock in the afternoon, and considerable food was sold in the building. We, therefore, developed full-sized food concessions, usually consisting of a large room off the main lobby.

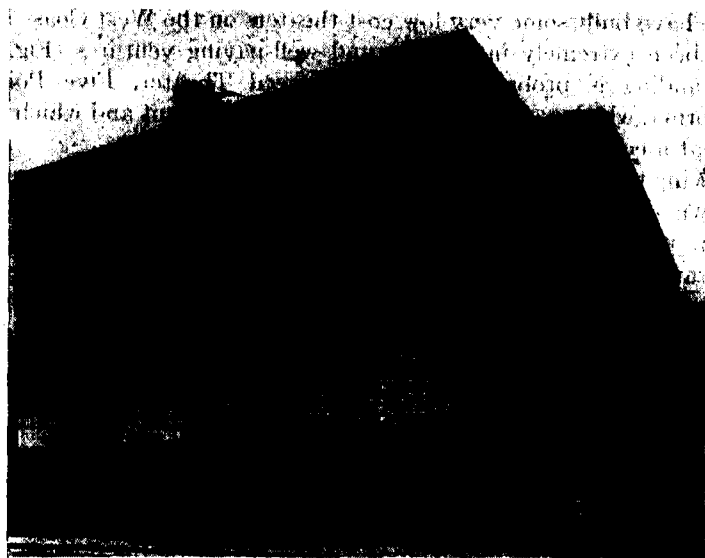


Fig. 4—Integral design of restaurant and theater fronts, Miami Theater, Miami, Florida.

In the Linda Vista Theater at Mexico City we provided two food departments, one directly off the main lobby for the service of sandwiches and the other connecting with the building and occupying a common patio with the theater for full food operation. The food concession inside the theater also handled candy, and serving light lunches and coffee, did a steady business.

One parallel operation in the United States is the Miami Theater, Miami, Florida (Fig. 4), which our West Coast office designed. Built on the main street of the city, it has a combination Huyler's

candy store and restaurant in conjunction with the theater. We accomplished the dual operation by having the candy department on the foyer floor open directly from the candy store to the foyer. Outside, the doors lead from the candy store to the box office, or from the street to the candy store, and we designed the mezzanine level of the theater to be the second-floor level of the restaurant. Service for candy and drinks operates on either the theater side or the luncheon side and there is direct access from the mezzanine of the theater to the restaurant.

Having the appearance of one operation, the flow of traffic is easily attracted from one to the other. The way the doors are arranged there are no serious problems in handling pass-out checks. The only construction problem encountered was the requirement of a fire wall

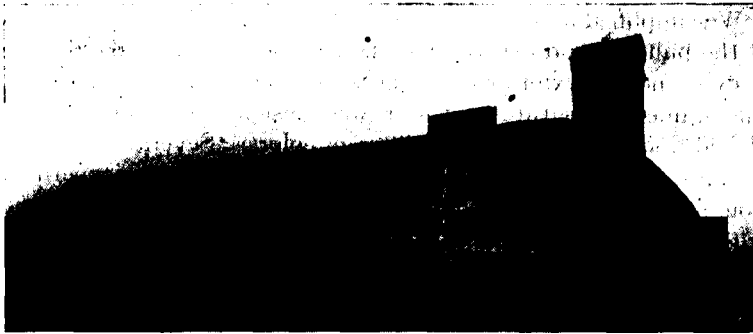


Fig. 5—Model of pre-cut-principle theater.

with fire doors between the two units. This was easily accomplished by handling our construction architecture accordingly.

The basement contains the entire kitchen facilities and food on the various levels is handled by dumbwaiters. The entire front of this building does not separate the theater and food departments except for the marquee and although the front portion of the second floor is entirely occupied by the food department, the outside appearance indicates that the theater uses the entire upper area.

We believe that the West Coast was one of the first areas to adopt large parking spaces for automobiles. Some areas potentially are on wheels and practically every patron arrives by motorcar. We started building large areas behind the theaters for accommodating the patrons and attempted to make the automobile park an integral part of the theater by having the park entrance directly under the

marquee and located so that passengers may alight as near the box office as possible while the driver, or attendant, parks the car.

Fig. 5 shows a successful design effort in what we believe is an answer to the complication of present-day low-cost theater construction. This is not a de luxe operation, it cannot be used in every situation, and it will be controlled somewhat by fire ordinances. It was designed first for Latin America and then applied to the United States. In the illustration shown the auditorium was left above ground level because of a high water table. Where the high water table does not exist we drop the stairs and start our construction two ways; one from the ground and the other by having the walls six or seven feet above the ground. This is not a prefabricated idea but is somewhat a precut principle.

We simplified all of the elements that go into general construction of the building and constructed the roof out of a proportioned wood system and the exterior covering is in interlocking aluminum. For the oramental feature, a tower was designed of aluminum pipes played upon by floodlights of different colors. Several of these projects are in construction and while they are still semiexperimental from a cost standpoint, we believe that our construction cost will be in the neighborhood of \$75.00 per seat.