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Photographs by Jason Oddy

THE FINAL CURTAIN

Britain's great pre-war cinemas put today's multiplexes to shame. But now the interiors are desecrated, and the only full houses are of the bingo variety, says Agnes Villette

GAUMONT STATE
KILBURN
(left)
Built in 1937, this was one of 300 cinemas designed by Thomas Lamb. The 4,000-seat Gaumont was the largest in Britain and paid homage to the monumentality of modern America. It is now owned by Mecca Bingo

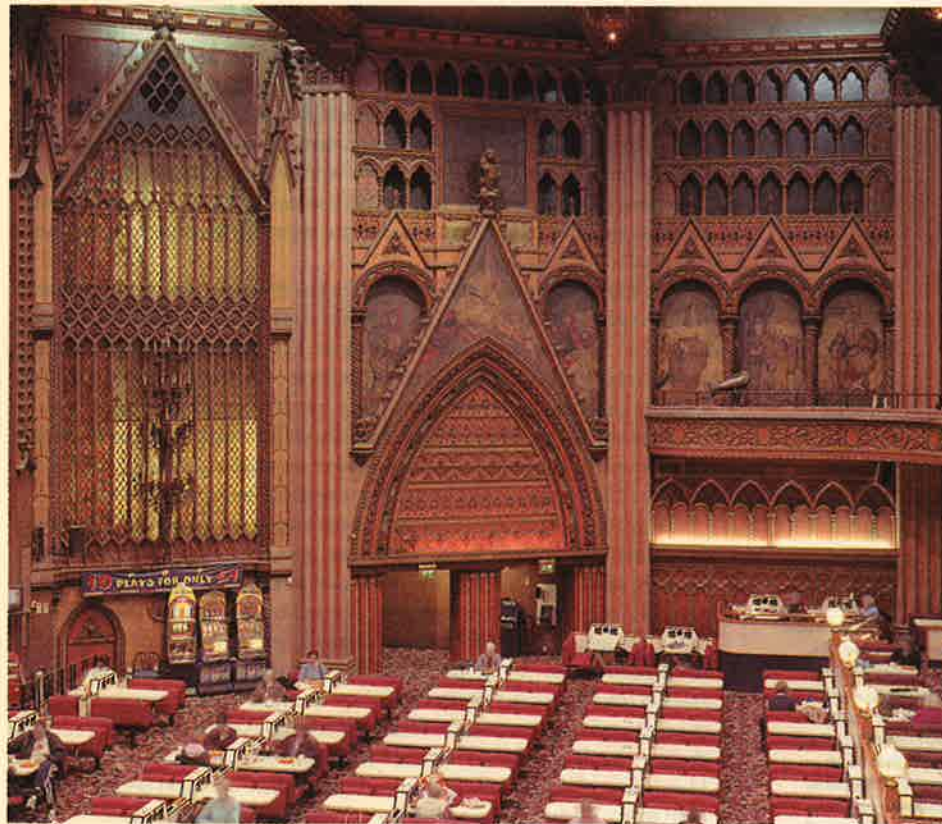
THE TROXY
MILE END
(above)
This 3,520-seat cinema opened in 1933. It cost £250,000 to build, with luxury furnishings and mirror-lined restaurants. On its first night it showed 'King Kong'; in 1963, it became the London Opera Centre and, in 1991, a Mecca Bingo hall

It's all down to the approach. From the back these buildings look like blind brick walls, featureless apart from the flimsy emergency exits that zigzag from top to bottom. Side-on they're not much different, and it's only from the front that you get an idea of what lies within. Yet even here there's no hard-and-fast rule. In Tooting, south London, the sober, almost bare façade of the 1931 Granada scarcely hints at the building's extraordinary gothic interior. While over in Islington, the deco palms and bright Tutankhamen colours of the former Carlton give no forewarning of the French Renaissance fantasy that lies within.

Now celebrating its 75th anniversary, the exterior of this improbable architectural jewel may owe more to Cecil B de Mille's 1934 epic *Cleopatra* than to the Egyptian rooms at the British Museum. But like the medium they once served, London's movie palaces of the 1920s and 1930s did away with the pre-established rules and turned existing logic on its head.

Today, in the age of television and multiplexes, the most astonishing thing about them is their scale. After the First World War, the average auditorium held 600 people, but this number rose to a staggering 2,400 just a few years later. By 1921 there were 4,000 such cinemas nationwide. In 1949 this figure peaked at 4,800 and they kept on growing in size too.

With projections throughout the day, intervals were filled with orchestras and music-hall acts. Films like *Intolerance*, *The Three Musketeers* and *The Birth of a Nation* played to packed houses. In 1933, Greta Garbo's *Queen Christina* at the Empire in Leicester Square broke all records, selling 70,000 tickets in its first week. Many of the cinemas were built in poor, working-class areas. To locals they must have seemed like fantasy cathedrals dedicated to a world of dreams. →



THE GRANADA
TOOTING
Designed as a 'cathedral for the movies', the Granada was the first cinema to be listed by English Heritage. The interiors were designed by the Russian Theodore Komisarjevsky, who also worked with the Ballet Russes. It is now owned by Gala Bingo

In large part this was down to the architecture. Dalston's Picture House was a fusion of Edwardian England and Ancient Greece, with candelabras, Ionic columns and gold-velvet seats all contributing to the air of luxury. But from 1960 onwards even this once grand spot was being used for car auctions, its lobby later becoming the venue for a seedy club. By the 1990s it had closed altogether, a sorry and abandoned relic of a bygone age.

The old Astoria in Finsbury Park fared better, and today its 1928 Hispanic-Moorish interior lives on as the unlikely backdrop for a Pentecostal Church. Its trompe-l'oeil feast of turrets, belfries, tile roofs and blue skies was accompanied by moving clouds and simulated twilight. Such an al fresco Mediterranean scene no doubt served as a welcome antidote to Depression-era Britain.

Britain's cinemas evolved hand-in-hand with technology. Just as the arrival of the talkies ended the Edwardian tendency to furnish movie palaces with monumental but acoustically unreliable domes, so Cinemascope put paid to orchestras and organists, as they interfered with the audience's view of the new wide-screen format.

The first film projection in Britain took place at the London Polytechnic Institution in 1896. And within a few years there was a stampede to open cinemas. Skating rinks, circus grounds, shops and covered markets were converted. Quick to follow was legislation controlling this new activity, since the highly flammable nature of nitrate film made going to the movies a potentially perilous experience. Included in the Cinematograph Act of 1909 was a whole host of building regulations; it was these that provided the architectural guidelines for the new-fangled "electric theatres".

If Edwardian picture palaces were characterised by a sort of tame classicism, then architects gradually began to cast off their shackles, blending baroque with neoclassicism or Regency with Flemish style. But before →

THE CARLTON
ISLINGTON
Designed by George Coles and built in 1930, the Carlton boasts a Hollywood-Egyptian façade, while the interior is decorated in lavish, French Renaissance style. The 2,248-seat cinema closed in 1960 and is now a Mecca Bingo hall

long this eclectic approach was joined by the hyperbolic, futuristic designs of America, which did away with history as swiftly as the talkies had dispatched with silent films.

For then, as now, America's influence was dominant. Hollywood provided the images. The distribution system ran along US lines. And if the architecture did not directly ape its New World counterpart then, like the Gaumont State in Kilburn whose 1930s skyscraper tower lit up the north London night as though auditioning for a part in Manhattan's skyline, it still paid it due homage.

But if Britain took its cue from across the Atlantic, American cinema in turn owed a debt to Britain. In part this was thanks to men like Thomas Lamb, a Dundee-born architect whose credits include 300 cinemas around the world, among them the largest ever, New York's 5,000-seat Capitol on Broadway. And then there was Robert Hope-Jones, who in 1900 set off for the New World armed with his invention – an electronic organ capable of producing the sound of an entire orchestra. When his firm went bankrupt, it was bought by a certain Rudolph Wurlitzer.

Today the golden age of cinema seems long gone. If a few of the curious dinosaurs it gave birth to remain dotted across our cities, they have survived by adapting – albeit to the detriment of their once splendid interiors. Overblown in size and exceeding all normal bounds of taste, they suffered countless ignominies before being belatedly recognised as demotic architectural treasures. Those that English Heritage did save before they were turned into car-parks or supermarkets are now mostly bingo halls. But even these face an uncertain future. With the eyes-down set in terminal decline, the days of the proverbial full house may themselves be numbered. How these extravagant behemoths might survive a second obsolescence is hard to say. Perhaps only a Hollywood ending can save the day. ■