

MOVIE THEATERS

YVES MARCHAND & ROMAIN MEFFRE

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With an Essay by ROSS MELNICK

PRESTEL

Munich · London · New York

It was one morning in October 2005, after our friend Guillaume lent us his solid shoulders to access the emergency staircase... We were both in complete darkness for close to an hour already, waiting for the light of dawn to dimly illuminate the neo-Gothic interior whitened by three decades of abandonment in the United Artists Theatre in Detroit. We were concerned about the success of our long exposures with our respective 35mm devices fitted onto frail tripods. This was our first foray into a movie theater, and our fascination with these venues was born there.

Back in Paris, and galvanized by our visit, we began to search for these “cathedrals of cinema” elsewhere in the United States. We quickly realized, thanks to Cinema Treasures, a website with a providential database on cinemas, that there was a barely discernible quantity of them, at a time when it was difficult to collect detailed information on the Internet. In October 2006, we departed on a journey of discovery of what was left of the movie theaters around New York, and we also went back to Detroit, equipped with a view camera that had been delivered a week prior via FedEx. Upon arrival, we were helped by the inexhaustible Orlando Lopes, former projectionist, local director of the Theatre Historical Society of America, and a true living history of these forgotten venues.

Yielding to the passionate logorrhea of our guide, defeated, the salesman of the clothing store located in the former lobby of Proctor’s Theatre in Newark finally let us in the abandoned complex through the back door. Climbing the steps of the vertiginous balcony, we were captivated and overwhelmed by the scale of the site... and the discovery of the delicate handling of the 4×5 view camera and its uncertainties. Later, we visited a gleaming furniture store in a Jewish section of south Brooklyn whose storage was located in the decaying auditorium of the Loew’s 46th Street Theatre. For us, used to visiting totally empty buildings, there was something incongruous in this state of in-between — the dust of abandonment and the atmospheric-style interiors with an air of Mediterranean garden — alongside life as it pursued its course. The effect was even more striking the next day, when visiting the monumental Paramount Theatre in Brooklyn with its glossy basketball court in a monumental neo-Baroque and outrageous setting.

When the film industry began to take off at the beginning of the twentieth century, the reproducibility of the medium (which was already a primary form of dematerialization) allowed for a large-scale diffusion, and going to the cinema became a prime leisure activity. To charm the millions of spectators and “create the psychological conditions of dream and travel,” the major studios opted for seductive, eclectic décors inspired by the canons of the great European opera houses and theaters, adorning interiors with the formality of culture and luxury in order to gain legitimacy. Indeed, Marcus Loew, founder of Loew’s Theatres and of MGM, once declared, “I don’t sell tickets to movies, I sell tickets to theaters.”

The film industry and its movie theaters became mass culture: at once creators of and sites of diffusion for the American mythology, witnesses to and protagonists of the national narrative. But as soon as technology was able to allow the individualization of the means of diffusion with the arrival of television in the 1950s, the idea of movie theaters was in fact condemned to decline. Within a few decades, society shifted from a pastime whose experience was essentially still and collective to a condition of individuality and contemporary mobility; in short, from movie palaces with over 3,000 seats to our smartphones... When not demolished, these symbolic sites of American cultural identity have fallen into neglect, and many have often found themselves hybridized as storage space, stores of all kinds, supermarkets, churches, sports facilities, parking spaces, etcetera.

These repurposed theaters were therefore strange ruins, a form of subconscious memory, a chimera made of our past hopes and our current condition. Their décors constituted a form of over-framing of our everyday, which, instead of the stage, became the spectacle. This historical extension made of adaptation, reuse, and reappropriation thwarted our expectations for a romantic or apocalyptic ruin, which is something we could usually project on a “pure ruin” that would have no other symbolic function than to be ruin, like the ones we had visited until then. It almost seemed to us to be a form of demystification of the “classical ruin.” These complex relationships led us to various paths, titillating our spirit of deduction, questioning (even constraining) our imagination, and pushing us to reconsider the notions of decadence, historical conservation, morality, and aesthetics.

So, we set out in search of these venues in their state of metamorphosis. Hours and hours of prospecting online and on site through several stays and road trips. Announcing almost from the beginning of the series the coming of a book to whoever wanted to hear it... We finally devoted over fifteen years to this project, from venue to venue, from one request to the next, from one meeting to the following, alternating refusals and successes, but, above all, with many surprises. One photograph after another, one long exposure after another, often equipped with a halogen spot connected to a car battery to produce the lighting... With the indispensable help of the countless enthusiasts dedicated to safeguarding these monuments, and who granted us access to these movie theaters. We are deeply grateful for their patience, kindness, and passion. While our project obviously does not constitute an exhaustive inventory, we have humbly attempted to capture these near-subconscious memories with the hope that some of our images may someday contribute to refresh our collective memory.

**YVES MARCHAND & ROMAIN MEFFRE
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INTRODUCTION

MOVIE THEATERS, MOVIEGOING, AND THE FUTURE OF THE PAST ROSS MELNICK

Toward the end of *Cinema Paradiso* (1988), director Giuseppe Tornatore's love letter to moviegoing and movie theaters, Salvatore "Toto" Di Vita returns to his (fictional) hometown of Giancaldo, Italy, for the funeral of Alfredo, the former projectionist at the Cinema Paradiso. Alfredo's death coincides with the imminent demolition of the movie house after years of audience and civic neglect. Toto is granted one last chance to walk inside the cinema's cobwebbed ruins and, accompanied by Enrico Morricone's haunting score, Toto briefly recalls the sounds of the audiences that once crammed into the Paradiso. The wolf whistles, the cheers, the electricity of the crowd, they all rise in a crescendo, and then, like the many theaters captured by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre's beautiful photography, the Paradiso is silenced. Toto walks up to the shuttered projection booth and looks out from its back window onto a cacophonous world of traffic, construction, and noise. The moment is a subtle condemnation of late twentieth-century urban development, in which the city's cultural history is bulldozed to make way for a parking lot. It is precisely the kind of transformation that doomed so many historic theaters not only in the United States but around the world. Marchand and Meffre's photography captures not just the unrelenting pace of commercial redevelopment in small and large cities over the past century but the ongoing lack of care and attention given to these theaters that has led to their fragility as repurposed retail outlets and storage as well as numerous other non-theatrical spaces. The venues captured in *Movie Theaters* represent some of the survivors of a century of industrial, aesthetic, cultural, and social change. Their continued existence prompts a sense of loss, a distant hope, and a perennial question. Are we staring at cinema's past or its future? The photography in *Movie Theaters* represents a liminal moment in time — what was, what is, and what might be once again.

EARLY CINEMA AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MOVIEGOING

Understanding the history of motion picture exhibition is central to the context and content of Marchand and Meffre's sumptuous yet heartbreaking photography. That history spans three different centuries. Film was treated first as a technology, then as a medium, and, soon after, as a cultural, artistic, and social force with a growing acclaim and fascination. The first exhibition of projected motion pictures in the United States occurred in 1895 using an Eidoloscope and a Phantascope. Thomas Edison's own projector, the Vitascope, was installed at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York City in April 1896, leading to its wider adoption in the waning years of the nineteenth century. Vitascope were subsequently installed in numerous vaudeville theaters across the country as a selection of short films often became part of "an evening's entertainment."

The Vitascope and other projectors facilitated a "public" experience of moviegoing, though many experienced early cinema not as part of a collective audience, but as a single, atomized individual through another invention, the Kinetoscope, which enabled customers to view a series of short films through a "peephole" viewer. Kinetoscopes and Kinetoscope parlors served the factory worker, the shopper, the salesperson, and innumerable others looking to trade a few cents in these "penny arcades" for a simulacrum of life and a little bit of time consumed through distraction. These short films, the TikToks of their day, were a mainstay of the early motion picture business.

One of the most successful penny arcades in the nation, prominently situated just south of New York City's Union Square, was Automatic Vaudeville, owned and operated by former furrier Adolph Zukor. The venue's diet of Biograph, Edison, and other films helped turn the Hungarian immigrant into an early mogul. Marcus Loew, another furrier who had a been an early investor in Automatic Vaudeville, started his own firm, the People's Vaudeville Company, in 1904, opening penny arcades in Manhattan as well as in Ohio. In Cincinnati, Loew converted the second floor of his "Penny Hippodrome" into a successful movie theater. The transition from arcade proprietor to theatrical film exhibitor took advantage of several economies of scale. Rather than having to own and service dozens of Kinetoscope or Mutoscope machines, Loew needed only one or two projectors, seating, and a screen. Once the show ended and ticket sales were reconciled, the audience was broomed out and more pennies and nickels flowed into the theater. During the first decade of the twentieth century, the films became longer and longer, as did the lines to see them.

Loew was now one of the many successful movie theater operators around the country. Thomas Tally in Los Angeles, Harry Davis in Pittsburgh, and Sid Grauman in San Francisco were just a few of the entrepreneurs projecting film for audiences rather than spooling them into parlors. By 1907, *Harper's Weekly* dubbed the explosion of "nickelodeons" — named for their ticket price and the Greek word for theater — a veritable "nickel madness" in which thousands of Americans were erecting small theaters inside former dining, office, retail, and storage spaces. Outdoor theaters dotted the nation as well, in both urban and rural areas. These open-air cinemas — "airdomes" — often allowed food and drink that would be barred from more formal indoor theaters, especially after the deluxe cinema movement began in the 1910s. The most distant, rural locations also contracted and attracted this cinematic contagion. A legion of traveling exhibitors — Lyman Howe of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, was among the most celebrated — fanned out across the dirt roads and untrammelled outposts to bring a projector and a screen to those without more formal motion picture venues. The proliferation of these venues and their impresarios spurred more filmmakers, distributors, and exhibitors to join the boom as the rising tide of cinema lifted all industry boats.

One of those inspired entrepreneurs was bartender Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel, who was working at the Freedman House (hotel) in the small coal mining town of Forest City, just forty miles away from Lyman Howe. Roxy, looking to expand his responsibilities and his fortunes, transformed the Freedman House's disused storage area into a makeshift film and vaudeville theater in December 1908. He focused his curation on the musical accompaniment of silent films and devoted care and attention to booking filmed and live entertainment. By 1911, with his national reputation secured, Roxy was hired to transform the 3,000-seat Alhambra Theatre in Milwaukee into a movie theater. The Alhambra's musicians were prominently featured on stage — not in the pit — to accompany the silent films and Roxy lowered ticket prices dramatically to attract a multiclass audience. It was an instant success. A 3,000-seat movie theater was now possible.

Roxy performed a similar transformation in Minneapolis, turning the 1,700-seat Lyric Theatre into the city's largest cinema and, in 1913, he was brought to New York City to manage Harlem's



BOULEVARD THEATRE, BALTIMORE, MD, 2013
 RAMOVA THEATRE, CHICAGO, IL, 2009
 WESTMONT THEATRE, WESTMONT, NJ, 2013

RIALTO THEATRE, BROWNFIELD, TX, 2017
 GRANADA THEATRE, HOUSTON, TX, 2017
 SCHUBERT THEATRE, GOODING, ID, 2017

CENTER THEATRE, LENOIR, NC, 2018
 UPTOWN THEATRE, CHICAGO, IL, 2009
 HANOVER THEATRE, HANOVER, PA, 2018



TIMES THEATRE, ROCKFORD, IL, 2014
LOEW'S PITKIN THEATRE, BROOKLYN, NY, 2008
MAYFAIR THEATRE, BALTIMORE, MD, 2012

MAYFAIR TRIPLEX, WEST NEW YORK, NJ, 2018
MAJESTIC THEATRE, EAST ST. LOUIS, IL, 2011
NATIONAL THEATRE, DETROIT, MI, 2009

SATTLER THEATRE, BUFFALO, NY, 2015
SAENGER THEATRE, PINE BLUFF, AR, 2017
LA SALLE THEATRE, CLEVELAND, OH, 2011

1,900-seat Regent Theatre. Roxy brought his signature blend of music, showmanship, and curated films to New York and made the Regent the subject of nationwide industry attention. The Regent's success lay in not only offering a large audience an affordable brand of mass entertainment but also luring repeat patronage with uniformed and gloved ushers, luxurious bathrooms, sumptuous music and live entertainment, as well as an opulent theater the likes of which urban audiences could rarely experience in their own homes, workplaces, or other places of leisure. For those living in city tenements, amid dingy shared facilities, a trip to the Regent's restrooms was to experience the movie palace's eventual mantra that it was there that the rich rubbed elbows with the poor. The cross-class fantasies of the movie house were paired with the cross-class fantasies on the screen.

Roxy's success at the Regent encouraged the owners of the new Strand Theatre near Times Square to abandon their plans for musical comedy in favor of motion pictures and to hire him as the Strand's first manager. The Strand's success in 1914, wherein journalists observed that even New York's most fashionable residents were now patronizing motion pictures, demonstrated the movie theater's new efficacy and prominence in an area once dominated by legitimate theater. The Strand had a demonstrable effect on theater construction and operation as movie theaters began opening throughout Times Square over the next two decades.

In Chicago, exhibitors Balaban & Katz opened their Central Park Theatre in October 1917 as the nation's first air-conditioned cinema. In February 1918, Sid Grauman unveiled the Million Dollar Theatre in Los Angeles featuring a bevy of opening night attendees including Mary Pickford, Sessue Hayakawa, Lois Weber, Douglas Fairbanks, Fatty Arbuckle, and Charlie Chaplin.

Opulent cinemas had been opening across the United States as well during this period, and not just in the nation's largest cities. The American Theatre in Salt Lake City, Utah, had debuted in 1913 with 3,000 seats; the elegant Al Ringling Theatre opened in Baraboo, Wisconsin, in 1915; and, that same year, the Majestic Theatre began delighting Austin, Texas, moviegoers. Small towns, too, were filling up with theaters. Growing industrial cities from Scranton, Pennsylvania, to Fall River, Massachusetts, to Long Beach, California, lit up each night with movie houses along their main thoroughfare and in outlying neighborhoods.

Alongside the growth of downtown theaters, neighborhood theaters ("nabes"), small-town cinemas, and rural movie houses, were a rising number of ethnic theaters. In Los Angeles, movie theaters in ethnic neighborhoods such as Little Tokyo and Chinatown became community and entertainment centers, while others downtown catered to Chinese, Japanese, and Latin American cinema. In Chicago, Milwaukee, and other cities with large numbers of European immigrants, movie houses presented German, Polish, and Yiddish films, filling diasporic needs to connect communities together through the union of both cinema and culture.

This process of cinematic separation was voluntary and curated. For Black moviegoers, however, racial segregation forced many into lesser sections inside the auditorium and, in other cases, led to outright exclusion from theaters altogether. Separate theater entrances, racially divided seating, open hostility, and poor sightlines all served to reinforce that the movie house before the 1964 Civil Rights Act was not, in fact, always a palace of dreams. but one

that could aid and abet a wide range of nightmares. In Rowland, North Carolina, white, Black, and Native American moviegoers at the Rowland Theatre were forced to enter one of *three* different entrances based solely on their identity. Instead of enduring this kind of treatment, white and Black exhibitors began building cinemas across the country that catered respectfully to Black audiences.

MOVIE PALACE ERA

The success of the deluxe theaters built during the 1910s inspired the construction of ever-larger movie palaces during the 1920s. The debut of the 5,300-seat Capitol Theatre in New York City in 1919 jumpstarted the building boom of ever-more colossal cinemas and was followed by similarly opulent and cavernous movie palaces built by Loew's, Paramount, and Fox as well numerous independent theater chains and exhibitors across the country. In addition, an enormous influx of capital from private and institutional investors — which converted individually owned film companies into publicly traded multimedia and multinational corporations during the 1920s — supported the rapid vertical and horizontal integration of the American film industry in which companies like Paramount were able to produce, distribute, and exhibit their own films, enabling them to guarantee distribution and exhibition and, collectively, control the best-grossing cinemas across the United States. In subsequent years, these same companies built sales offices around the world and many began operating their own cinemas in cities like Paris, Tokyo, and Cairo.

Independent exhibitors were also gaining access to more and more capital for their movie houses. The industry's cinematic and aesthetic fascination with Egypt, for example, found its full expression in Sid Grauman's Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood when it opened in October 1922, just weeks before Howard Carter's "discovery" of King Tutankhamun's tomb and the ensuing Egyptomania that enraptured the increasingly Roaring Twenties. At a time when international travel was rare, visiting Grauman's Egyptian was a tourist attraction unto itself, with moviegoers and tourists making the Egyptian Theatre a must-see destination. Grauman's Chinese Theatre, which opened in 1927, just weeks after the rapturous debut of Roxy's own colossus, the 5,920-seat Roxy Theatre in New York City, performed a similar magic for moviegoers and tourists, then and now.

The live entertainment offered at these movie palaces was another attraction, as were the newsreels, travelogues, and other "shorts" that presented opportunities for education, information, and entertainment. All of this programming was created for an increasingly diverse nation and was intended to enthrall, overwhelm, and provide tremendous value for the low ticket price. Moviegoers at the Roxy, for instance, were entertained by organist Lew White; a 110-piece orchestra led by alternating conductors; a ballet corps trained by Léo Staats from Paris; a stage show produced for each film presented; and, later, the introduction of the Roxyettes, a precision dance troupe later renamed the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall. These attractions were alongside the newsreels, short films, travelogues, and the feature film, all for a price affordable to most New Yorkers and the many tourists who visited upon hearing Roxy's famous radio show on NBC. In San Francisco, the enormous Fox Theatre told its patrons that upon entering

the new theater they would be "King for a Day ... Listen to the music in the grand hall, where your feet rest in luxury upon rugs as lovely as rare museum fabrics. King Louis XVI enjoyed no finer, and it is yours, for today, tomorrow, next week!"¹

By the end of the 1920s, the introduction of Vitaphone, Movietone, and Photophone synchronous sound technology — which brought sound newsreels, cartoons, travelogues, and feature films to audiences — began brooming out the live orchestras in favor of studio-assembled scores and soundtracks. By the end of the 1920s, when the US population was still around 120 million, over 110 million Americans attended the country's 20,500 movie theaters each week; that number represented over 35 percent of the total cinemas throughout the world.²

The stock market crash in 1929, however, and the ensuing Depression, wreaked havoc on Hollywood, America's movie theaters, and the audiences who patronized them. Economic, aesthetic, technological, and cultural change ultimately spelled the end of the movie palace era despite the back-to-back openings of Radio City Music Hall and the RKO Roxy Theatre at Rockefeller Center in late December 1932. Their openings, and the earlier debut of the stunning Oakland Paramount in 1931, capped off the construction delirium that had gripped the industry. Architect John Ebersson and others had already been calling for smaller theaters to be built by 1930.

Theater architects during the Depression were commissioned to build neighborhood, suburban, and small-town theaters instead that emphasized physical and sonic intimacy. New theaters pared down the opulence, lowered the number of seats, and stressed simplicity. Exhibitors relied on bank nights, games of chance, door prizes, amateur nights, double features, dish giveaways, and other promotions to lure audiences back. Newsreel theaters grew during this period as well, especially after the United States' entrance into World War II in December 1941. Throughout the war, the American movie house served, as it had during World War I, as a community and recruitment center, war bond fundraiser, news outlet, and entertainment venue.

POSTWAR DEVELOPMENTS AND THE FATE OF THE MOVIE PALACE

The meteoric rise of the movie theater and theatrical film exhibition during its first half century in the United States, from roughly 1895 to 1945, was marked by a mass adoption of movies and moviegoing and enabled by a lack of competition. Motion pictures had largely brushed vaudeville aside by the 1920s, concerns over radio keeping audiences at home proved overblown, and television spent two decades in development and diffusion without large-scale implementation.

The postwar period in the United States, however, presented almost immediate challenges to the dominance of the movie theater. The end of World War II enabled couples to reunite and begin forming nuclear families. Many city dwellers, especially those returning from the war, left crowded apartment buildings and public housing to buy houses in formerly rural areas that were quickly being redeveloped into suburbs for the GI generation and their baby boomer offspring. The Depression had chilled the middle-class automobile market, while wartime tire, gas, and other material shortages had further depressed



COYLE THEATRE, CHARLEROI, PA, 2015
COLONY THEATRE, CHICAGO, IL, 2014
LOS ANGELES THEATRE, LOS ANGELES, CA, 2018

GARDEN THEATRE, PITTSBURGH, PA, 2011
WYNNE THEATRE, PHILADELPHIA, PA, 2009
CITRUS THEATRE, EDINBURG, TX, 2017

BROOKLAND THEATRE, RICHMOND, VA, 2017
RIVOLI THEATRE, INDIANAPOLIS, IN, 2011
AMBASSADOR THEATRE, BALTIMORE, MD, 2017



CAPITOL THEATRE, LOUISVILLE, KY, 2011
 PLAZA THEATRE, LAREDO, TX, 2017
 LOYOLA THEATRE, LOS ANGELES, CA, 2017

5TH AVENUE THEATRE, INGLEWOOD, CA, 2008
 GRAND THEATRE, SAN FRANCISCO, CA, 2013
 LIBERTY THEATRE, LEWISTON, ID, 2017

TIOGA THEATRE, PHILADELPHIA, PA, 2015
 RIG THEATRE, PREMONT, TX, 2017
 VILLA THEATRE, SALT LAKE CITY, UT, 2017

car ownership and use. Now, automobiles, refrigerators, and other appliances and household items were being saved for and purchased en masse, decreasing the kinds of discretionary cash that had once been put to almost quotidian use for the movies. The movement to rural/suburban areas also made moviegoing difficult. Many of these growing areas contained no movie theaters at all, and roads back into the distant cities, before the full bloom of the interstate highway system, were too slow for frequent moviegoing. Drive-in theaters popped up to meet surging demand and shopping centers began including single-screen theaters as anchor tenants to draw in bank financing and foot traffic. Still, the baby boom kept many couples home and, especially when children were older, leisure activities changed. Outdoor camping, sightseeing, and a wide range of sports became part of the postwar existence.

Movie palaces remained crowded in America's major cities for years after the war, but a myriad of industrial, economic, legal, and urban developments began impacting their long-term success. First, in 1948, Paramount settled a longstanding U.S. Justice Department antitrust action against the studio and other vertically integrated motion picture companies (Fox, Warner Bros., etc.) by announcing a Consent Decree. Between 1948 and 1959, all five major Hollywood film companies divested their theater chains, leaving, for example, Loew's Theatres separated from MGM, and Paramount Pictures from United Paramount Theatres. This separation removed the guaranteed distribution of company films at company-owned theaters. Now, every film had to be booked market by market, theater by theater. This vertical disintegration made production and profit less secure, decreasing the number of films made and distributed overall by Hollywood.

At the same time, in 1948 more and more television sets began to roll off the assembly line to a growing mass of increasingly prosperous consumers. The number of local stations and national networks grew accordingly, and the steady stream of prime-time programming enabled a growing number of urban, suburban, and, later, rural families to stay home for free (ad-supported) entertainment. Meanwhile, parallel to the slow decline in urban moviegoing from 1946 onward, commercial real estate prices were rising, making movie palaces — which were enormously expensive to heat, cool, and maintain — prime targets for sale and redevelopment. In 1956, Chicago's elaborate Paradise Theatre was cut down before its thirtieth birthday, sold off and demolished for a supermarket. Four years later, Gloria Swanson bid her famous farewell inside the ruins of the Roxy Theatre in New York amid its demolition, and it has symbolized the end of the movie palace era ever since. The destruction of the massive Fox Theatre in San Francisco followed in 1963.

The film (exhibition) industry turned its focus instead on the suburbs, where parking was plentiful and a new cadre of cinema chains built twins, triplexes, and ever-larger multiplexes. An increasingly divided nation could now patronize an increasingly divided theater. The development of the MPAA Rating System enabled filmmakers to address social and cultural issues more directly. These films also fed a growing desire for more action, violence, sex, and nudity in American cinema, commensurate with a new generation and a new sensibility.

During the 1970s, crime, or the perception thereof, grew in many cities across the country, as did the challenges and expense of parking downtown. Hollywood's own economic troubles, especially during the 1968–72 box office nadir, led many downtown movie palaces to program more locally, booking martial arts, counterculture, blaxploitation, adult, and other youth-oriented films. Many of these enormous buildings couldn't sustain the economics of having a few hundred patrons in a theater built to house thousands. Some adapted by dividing the balcony and orchestra levels into multiple, segmented auditoria to diversify their bookings. This often created bad sightlines, sound bleed between the walls of these conversions, and other issues. Many exhibitors simply gave up. Some theaters were sold for as little as a dollar, others were donated to churches or nonprofit groups. Some were rejuvenated as performing arts theaters and saved due to a burgeoning preservation movement. Others simply closed their doors and have sat vacant or have been used for other purposes. As evidenced by Marchand and Meffre's evocative photography, many are still hiding in plain sight. But for how long? Converted into storage spaces and retail establishments, some have been hidden behind drop ceilings. Others have simply vanished from view, adoration, and prominence. In *Movie Theaters*, they are receiving their curtain call. There is a haunting beauty, elegance, sadness, and reverence in Marchand and Meffre's sumptuous photography. These images hold up a mirror to our collective past and the theaters that we are continuing to neglect.

In recent years, the very future of theatrical exhibition has been called into question by numerous journalists, industry executives, and other players and pundits. The rise of streaming services; the critical and commercial success of contemporary television; the shortening of theatrical windows; changes in consumer habits related to smartphones, videogames, work hours, and attention spans; as well as concerns about the safety of movie theaters related to the pandemic have all led to a dramatic moment in which, as this book goes to press, the present and future of movie theaters and theatrical moviegoing is very much in flux. Still, after 125 years of motion picture exhibition, it is hard to count this venue out. Movie theaters provide a collective experience that is distinct from home/mobile viewing. Take the screening of these film genres: the thunderous sound of collective laughter at a comedy and the building sound of terror and anticipation during a horror film. The movie theater is not just a theater for movies; it is a temporary collator of human experience, wonder, emotion, and collectivity. For two hours, the audience is one. As one, they are irreproducible, reactive to one another, connected visibly and invisibly, aurally and visually. The movie theater experience has always been as much about what is on screen as what is happening all around it.

Like Toto's walk through the old Cinema Paradiso, viewing the photography of Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre conjures up the ghostly sounds of these cinemas' past. It may also trigger your own childhood memories, reflecting back on a complicated cinematic history that was never as uniform or as simple as nostalgia and time has inscribed it. It's the defects, the blemishes, the forgotten elements, the missed opportunities, and the debris that make these theaters come to life. After all, those are the essential elements, the very building blocks of life itself.

Ross Melnick is Professor of Film and Media Studies at UC Santa Barbara. He is the author of *American Showman* (Columbia University Press, 2012), co-editor of *Rediscovering U.S. Newsfilm* (AFI/Routledge, 2018), co-author of *Cinema Treasures* (MBI, 2004), and co-founder of the Cinema Treasures website. He was named an Academy Film Scholar and an NEH Fellow for his most recent book, *Hollywood's Embassies* (Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

NOTES

1 Preston J. Kaufmann, *Fox, The Last Word: ... Story of the World's Finest Theatre*, Pasadena, CA 1979, p. 101.

2 "Distribution of Motion Picture Theatres," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, February 8, 1930, p. 31.



JEROME THEATRE, BRONX, NY, 2016
 LINCOLN THEATRE, NEW YORK, NY, 2017
 PLAZA THEATRE, NEWARK, NJ, 2016

LAWDALE THEATRE, CHICAGO, IL, 2009
 LOEW'S BEDFORD THEATRE, BROOKLYN, NY, 2011
 REGENT THEATRE, NEW YORK, NY, 2016

FAIRFAX THEATRE, OAKLAND, CA, 2013
 LYON'S STATE THEATRE, FRANKLIN, VA, 2017
 PARKWAY THEATRE, BROOKLYN, NY, 2016



JUBILEE THEATRE, BUFFALO, NY, 2015
 ADAMS AVENUE THEATRE, SAN DIEGO, CA, 2017
 CASTLE CINEMA, PROVIDENCE, RI, 2018

GOLDEN GATE THEATRE, EAST LOS ANGELES, CA, 2013
 EL CAPITAN THEATRE, SAN FRANCISCO, CA, 2013
 ORIENTAL THEATRE, BROOKLYN, NY, 2016

BELVEDERE THEATRE, CHARLOTTE, NC, 2017
 COLON THEATRE, EL PASO, TX, 2017
 GOTHAM THEATRE, NEW YORK, NY, 2017



UNITED ARTISTS THEATRE, PASADENA, CA, 2017
CASINO THEATRE, SAN DIEGO, CA, 2017
SPOONER THEATRE, BRONX, NY, 2009

STUDIO THEATRE, STUDIO CITY, CA, 2017
TOWER THEATRE, HOUSTON, TX, 2017
ALABAMA THEATRE, HOUSTON, TX, 2017

AVENUE THEATRE, DALLAS, TX, 2017
RIALTO THEATRE, LOS ANGELES, CA, 2018
WILRIK THEATRE, SANFORD, NC, 2017



PROCTOR'S THEATRE, NEWARK, NJ, 2007 POPCORN POPPER

Although available outdoors from street vendors, food was banned in theaters as it was deemed unhygienic by establishments that wanted to display respectability. In the late 1920s, however, theater operators began to set up concession stands to stabilize an economic situation that had become precarious during the Great Depression. Popcorn would accompany the development of talking cinema and become a significant part of a theater's income. During World War II, sugar rationing ensured its dominance as the most accessible and by far the most profitable treat (up to 1,000 percent).



PARAMOUNT THEATRE, NEWARK, NJ, 2011

Originally opened in 1886 as H. C. Miner's Newark Theatre for theater impresario Henry Clay Miner. It was bought in 1916 by theater owner Edward Spiegel and remodeled (1,996 seats) by architect Thomas W. Lamb (see p. 21). In 1932, it was taken over by the Paramount-Publix chain (see p. 189), renamed after it, and started showing movies. It closed in 1986 after insurance rates increased 500 percent, which also caused the closure of the nearby Adams Theatre (see pp. 24, 25). The lobby has been used for retail while the auditorium has been vacant. During the winter of 2020–21, the auditorium roof collapsed from the weight of the snow.



PARAMOUNT THEATRE, NEWARK, NJ, 2011 AUDITORIUM

Thomas White Lamb (1871–1942) was a Scottish-born American architect. Particularly associated with Loew's Theatres (see p. 187), Fox Theatres (see p. 166), and the Keith-Albee chains of vaudeville and film theaters. During the 1910s and 1920s, he became one of the leading architects of the fast-growing movie theater industry and especially those that were large and opulently decorated, known as movie palaces. He planned or redesigned more than 170 theaters throughout his career, in the United States, Canada, but also India.



PROCTOR'S THEATRE, NEWARK, NJ, 2007 LOWER AUDITORIUM

Opened in 1915 for vaudeville impresario F. F. Proctor (see p. 33), designed by his nephew and architect John W. Merrow as a "double decker" theater with a ground level auditorium (2,300 seats) and a smaller theater on the top floors. In 1929, it was taken over by Radio-Keith-Orpheum (see p. 238), renamed RKO Proctor's Theatre, and progressively switched to movies. In 1966, it became a burlesque house...



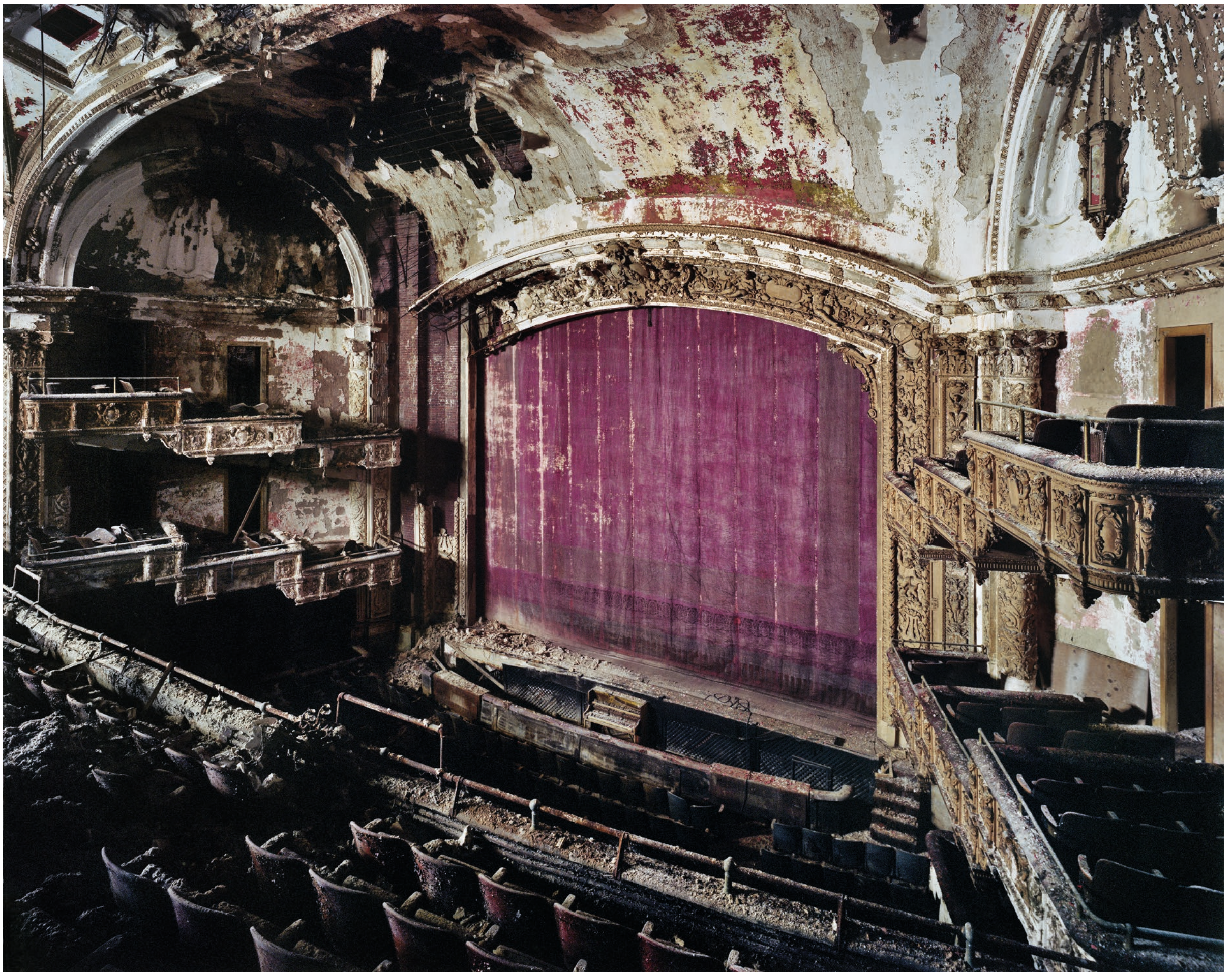
PROCTOR'S THEATRE, NEWARK, NJ, 2006 UPPER AUDITORIUM

... Occupying the top floors and designed with a capacity of 900 seats. In 1961, it was renovated for the presentation of foreign films and renamed the Penthouse Cinema. In 1968, one year after the violent urban riots of Newark, the complex was closed by operator Stanley Theatres/Warner Bros. (see p. 168) to privilege the nearby and more profitable Branford Theatre. It was reused temporarily by Essex County College, hosting classes before being vacated. Lobby space has since been used as clothing stores and storage while the two auditoriums are vacant.



ADAMS THEATRE, NEWARK, NJ, 2011 PROJECTION BOOTH

It originally opened in 1912 as the Shubert Theatre, designed (2,037 seats) by architect William E. Lehman. It successively presented Broadway plays and tryouts until 1913, when the name and operator changed to Payton's Theatre and Keeney's Theatre, and then started showing vaudeville and movies. In 1931, two Greek immigrant brothers renamed the theater after their own adopted names, Adams...



ADAMS THEATRE, NEWARK, NJ, 2011 AUDITORIUM

... In addition to stage performances and motion pictures, the theater showcased big bands and artists such as Eddie Cantor, Duke Ellington, Sammy Davis, Jr., the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy, the Andrew Sisters, Ella Fitzgerald, Tommy Dorsey, and Cab Calloway. In the 1940s, the theater was operated by Paramount Picture Inc. (see p. 189). It continued as a grind and B-movie house through the 1980s and finally closed in 1986 after their insurance rates went up 500 percent, which also caused the closure of the nearby Paramount Theatre (see p. 20).



RKO KEITH'S FLUSHING THEATRE, QUEENS, NY, 2007 GRAND FOYER

Originally opened as the Keith-Albee Theatre in 1928, designed (2,974 seats) by architect Thomas W. Lamb (see p. 21) for Keith-Albee-Orpheum Corporation, which became Radio-Keith-Orpheum (see p. 238), in 1929 and renamed the theater after it. It hosted artists such as Bob Hope, Jack Benny, the Marx Brothers, Judy Garland, Mae West, Milton Berle, Jimmy Durante, and Jerry Lewis. In 1976, it was divided into three screens. In 1982, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and in 1984 the ticket lobby and grand foyer were designated by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission...



RKO KEITH'S FLUSHING THEATRE, QUEENS, NY, 2007 AUDITORIUM

... In 1986, the theater was bought and closed by its new owner who planned to build office space and a shopping mall on the site, intentionally damaging the auditorium despite the preservation efforts led by the Committee to Save the RKO Keith's Theatre of Flushing, Inc. From 2004, the theater changed ownership many times until it was sold in 2016 to a Chinese developer. In 2019, the auditorium was demolished to make way for a condominium tower. The plasterwork of the lobby had been previously cut and stored in a warehouse and is supposed to be reinstalled in the new building.



EMBASSY THEATRE, PORT CHESTER, NY, 2013 AUDITORIUM

Opened in 1926, designed (1,591 seats) by Thomas W. Lamb (see p. 21), originally owned and operated by the Rogowsky Brothers. It started to show only Spanish-language movies in the late 1970s and closed in the early 1980s, lastly operated by local Westchester Playhouses Inc. It reopened as a dance club for teenagers in 1986 but the police forced it to close after only one night due to noise complaints. The Port Chester Council of the Arts tried to get the Embassy listed on the National Registry of Historic Places but was unsuccessful in obtaining the funds to restore the building. Despite rumors of renovation projects, the interior was gutted in 2017.



CONGRESS THEATRE, BROOKLYN, NY, 2008 AUDITORIUM

Opened in 1927, designed (2,177 seats) by architect Charles A. Sandblom with an additional roof garden theater (1,298 seats) for the Supreme Circuit founded by Hyman Rachmil and Samuel Rinzler. It was later bought by William Fox (see p. 166) and was renamed the Fox Congress Theatre. It closed in the 1970s. The ground floor was converted into a supermarket that closed in 2006. It was gutted in 2012 to make way for apartments.



FABIAN THEATRE, PATERSON, NJ, 2007 AUDITORIUM

Opened in 1925, designed (3,263 seats) by local architect Fred Wesley Wentworth for local movie operator Jacob Fabian. During the 1940s and 1950s, the theater held several film premieres of Abbott and Costello, the American comedy duo. In 1948, civil rights pioneer Reverend Charles Tarter repeatedly took a seat in the building's first floor lobby, challenging the segregated facility's rule that African Americans were only permitted upstairs. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the theater was divided into three and then five screens. It closed in 1993 with a screening of *RoboCop 3*. It was gutted in 2012 to make way for condominiums and retail space.