



LIGHT FANTASTIC!

The Electric Cinema, a grade 2* listed cinema, in Portobello Road, is unique in the roll-call of recently completed cinema projects in the UK. It is England's oldest operating cinema and now arguably London's finest luxury cinema. This all the more astonishing when you consider that in 1993 the cinema was run down and appeared to close its doors for good, having struggled under a succession of different owners since the mid 80's. However, the cinema was rescued from oblivion by Peter Simon, founder of the Monsoon and Accessorize chain of shops and who had himself started his career with a stall on Portobello Road many years ago. The multi-million pound modernisation of The Electric Cinema and restoration to its former Edwardian glory was carried by the present cinema operator, Nick Jones and his colleagues at Soho House Ltd UK.

their multiplexes. These cinemas mimicked the trends in business class travel. The premiere cinema generally consisted of a plush and spacious cinema environment with 40 to 50 recliner chairs located within them. However at The Electric the concept of the luxury cinema has been taken to an entirely new level altogether. Mandy Kean, cinema manager at Soho House explains 'Nick Jones initially wanted the cinemas to be like the first class cabin in an aircraft, where you can have whatever food and drink you want and watch a film at the same time... and it has gone on from there'. In addition to the cinema, The Electric Cinema complex comprises a brasserie next door and a private members club on the first floor with private function rooms available for press launches, photo shoots, etc. The cinema has also been designed as a multi-purpose venue capable of being used for film premieres and press conferences.

The Electric and the Era of The Luxury Cinema by Bill Chew

The Electric has been described by David Atwell in his book 'Cathedrals of The Movies' (1980) as having 'the earliest unaltered cinema interior in Britain ...built a few months after the Biograph in 1905 (sic)'. 'Like almost every early cinema, it is a simple rectangular hall with a barrel-vaulted roof, and moulded plasterwork arranged as ribs and as decorative panels.' Remarkably this cinema interior including the proscenium arch and globe above it has been preserved to this day.

The UK has experienced a boom in cinema construction in the past 20 years- the 2 discernible trends being the multiplex revolution and

Proscenium arch and globe



The private members club

the recent revival of the budget cinema. The rationale of the multiplex is to pack as many seats and programmes as possible into each cellular cinema with the aim of increasing the bottom line. With the budget cinema, however, the aim is not too dissimilar; it is to sell as many cheap seats as possible on the internet prior to the performance, providing a cinema environment with few frills. It is therefore refreshing that The Electric Cinema has chosen to eschew both

these trends. The Electric has reduced its seating capacity but at the same time invested heavily on comfort in the auditorium and in endeavouring to provide the optimum viewing conditions both in picture and sound quality. By doing so it has ushered in an entirely new film performance environment - that of the luxury cinema.

The idea of the luxury cinema is not new. A few years ago some national operators created the idea of the 'premiere cinema' within

So what are the main features of a luxury cinema which distinguishes it from other cinemas?

Cinema Hall

The ideal proportions of a cinema hall in respect of the relationship of the screen to the seated area (ignoring sight lines for the time being) are approximately 1:2. What is meant by this is that the depth of the cinema i.e. the last row from the screen should be roughly twice the width of the screen or picture size. Some cinemas have ratios of 1:2.5 or even 1:2.8, but anything more than this would create a tunnel-like and therefore unacceptable film environment. It has been said that The Electric previously housed 600 tip-up seats, but in order to maintain the ideal viewing proportions for a luxury cinema The Electric now has 98 luxury leather armchairs complete with their own footstools and providing plenty of legroom. Beside each armchair is a low-shelf for light snacks complete with wine cooler for that obligatory bottle of Chablis or Chardonnay to complement the film viewing experience. You can even get sushi

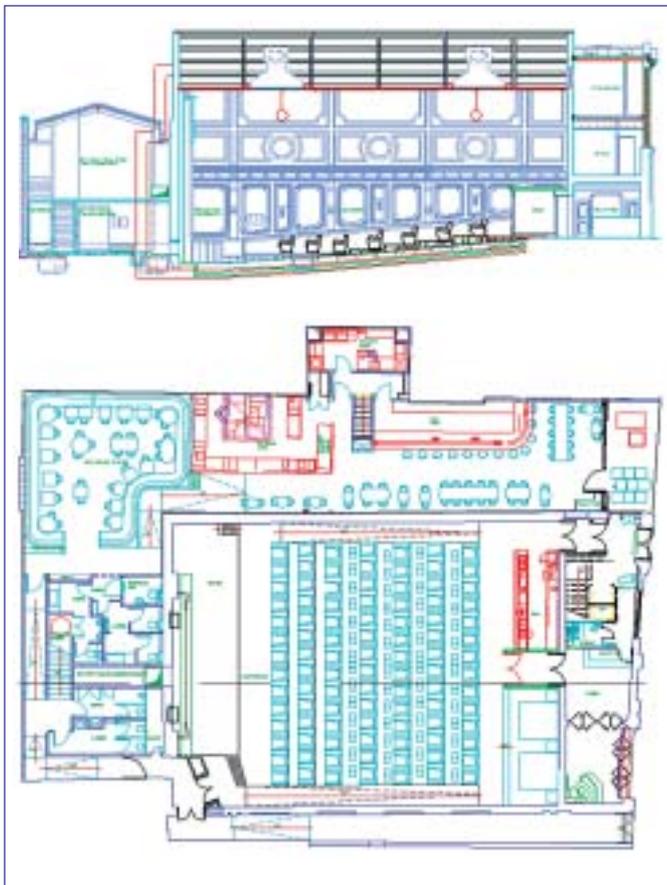


The Electric's luxury leather armchairs

from the brasserie next door delivered to your seat if that is your choice. If you prefer to view your films in an inclined position there are four futons available. The 98 armchairs are arranged in 7 rows of 14.

Despite the 'seat' of the armchair being slightly lower than a normal cinema seat, the sight lines to the screen worked extremely well and the audiences simply loved the relaxed atmosphere of the cinema. The seating arrangement proposed proved so unusual to the local authority, The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and unlike other cinemas or multiplexes that had encountered before that

The Electric - plan and section drawing



the local authority requested cinema management to obtain the approval of the seating plan from the film distributors first, before granting approval themselves. Another feature of The Electric is the presence of a fully stocked bar at the rear of the cinema and within the confines of the auditorium. The bar closes as the film begins.

A unique screen arrangement

If the seating configuration is unusual the screen arrangement is altogether unique and unlike anything seen before. The Academy sized proscenium arch had always posed a problem with aspect ratios greater than the Academy ratio of 4:3. The lighting truss system for the cinema was designed by Unusual Rigging and they were asked to come up with some ideas to overcome this dilemma. Unusual Rigging is a company which is world renowned for solving problems with rigging structures. The solution which they came up with has to be seen to be believed and is best explained by describing the film performance itself in The



The Electric's unique screen arrangement and below, the bar

Electric Cinema. The lights are dimmed and the screen tabs are slowly opened to reveal the Academy sized screen within the proscenium arch. Images are projected onto the screen welcoming patrons to The Electric, including a short slide show depicting vintage shots of this 1910 cinema - England's oldest operating cinema. Slowly the screen structure moves forward of the proscenium arch and proceeds to expand sideways, as the ads and trailers begin to roll, to take on the size of the Cinemascope or Widescreen picture. The house lights dim to zero as the feature film begins. The process is reversed when the film ends. This ingenious idea is made up of aluminium tubing over which the screen fabric is stretched, with the vertical rollers



driven by tooth belt drive and the horizontal movement controlled by a scissor guide.

Sounds great

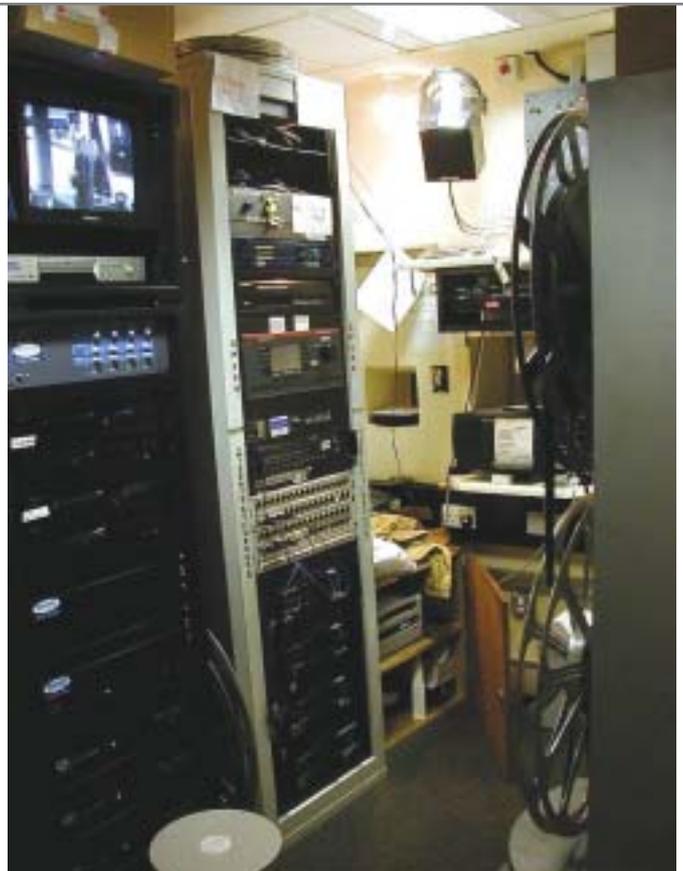
The cinema surround speakers consist of the Martin Audio Surround System but in the last few months the left, centre, right behind screen speakers have been replaced with 'state of the art and ground breaking' ArtCooustic DF75-55 slimline speakers which are fixed on to the moving screen frame itself. According to Jason Moore, Chief at The Electric Cinema, this is

The auditorium's sound system





The projection room



The sound racks, and below left the screen controls and right the video projection system

the first time the ArtCoustic speaker has ever been installed in a commercial cinema. This speaker system was selected following discussion with consultants and after several tests were carried out. The new speakers deliver a 'softer and cleaner sound' and provide greater clarity in quieter films in which conversations predominate. As a lot of media people frequent The Electric, according to Jason Moore, and it was important that the sound system in the cinema was of the highest quality. The cinema is fitted with an infrared system, using headsets, for patrons with a hearing impairment, should they wish to use this.

Heritage

The globe map from the original 1910 cinema is still intact above the proscenium (pic page ??). Mandy Kean says that in one sense this 'symbolises The Electric Cinema's commitment to showing the very best of world cinema including it's rich diversity' yet on the other hand

it perhaps 'symbolises the international growth ambitions of Soho House'. The company has already made a move in this direction with the recent opening of Soho House, New York, consisting of a screening room, members club and hotel in the Tribeca district in New York. Other expansion plans are also being considered.

Projection Room

The projection room is tucked away on the first floor of the building and unlike other projection Rooms, even though space is limited, has the benefit of full air-conditioning. A far cry from the 'box up in the gods'. The equipment spec is listed elsewhere in this article but basically consists of a 35mm Kinton projector with a 2.5kw lamphouse . The projector caters for the following aspect ratios- 1.66, 1.85 (Widescreen), 2.35 (Cinemascope) and 1.33 (Academy).

The sound system is represented by a Dolby CP500 processor, which supports all popular formats including SRD, SR, Dolby A and Mono. The system consists of 'audio management' power amplifiers with ArtCoustic screen speakers and Martin Audio Surround system as described elsewhere in this article. Video projection is provided via a Proxima PRO AV9320 multimedia projector offering inputs for DVD, VHS, BETA SP and laptops. An inspection of the projection



room would not be complete without identifying the mechanism for operating the remarkable and unique screen system.

The cinema does not currently feature the DTS-CSS Cinema Subtitled System providing audio description and captioning to audiences who are blind, partially sighted, deaf and hard of hearing.

Conclusion

It is remarkable in this age of the multiplex that a cinema which dates back nearly a hundred years should have survived – and not only survived but has kept intact almost all of it's original form and interior decor. That it has done so is a testament to the versatility of the

cinema form as a building type but also to the commitment, foresight and financial investment made by the current operator and freeholder. These parties should be congratulated for having done a very good job and long may The Electric Cinema continue and survive!

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The external architecture

