

New preview theatres and screening rooms springing up in Soho are not an uncommon phenomenon. Indeed, in recent months, several screening rooms have opened their doors. They are either plush facilities linked to the chic new hotels burgeoning in the area or reappearing as refurbished facilities attached to existing post-production houses.

However, Soho Images stylish new preview theatre located in Meard Street (a little 'backwater' off Wardour Street) is uniquely different. It was planned from the outset with two distinct functions built into the design. Paul Collard, Managing Director of Soho Images and Past President of the BKSTS explains: 'In it's first format the theatre is a 36 seater film and digital preview theatre capable of running full feature length films with changeovers, with a 2.3 x 5.4 m screen size and a throw of 10m; and in it's second format a block of 4 seats are removed from the centre rear row and replaced by a digital grading desk, where da Vinci colour correction panels control remotely a Quantel iQ workstation and the HD graded pictures are projected onto the full screen sized screen by a Barco DP100 2K digital projector. Immediately behind, and slightly elevated above the desks are comfortable client chairs where clients can observe the colourist at work. This is the first purpose built 2K grading suite/preview theatre of its kind in Soho to meet the new demands of the creative community to grade digitally and view on the large screen'.

Soho Images

Soho Images, of course, is no newcomer to providing post-



Fig 2

production facilities. It's history goes back over eight decades when the company began life in the 1920's as Studio Film Laboratories in Meard Street. In 1990, 2 investors, Bob Burnett and Philip Gwyn took over the company and made vast improvements to the film laboratory and video facilities business by investing heavily into rebuilding and re-organising the existing facilities as well as adding new facilities. The company subsequently changed it's name to Soho Images. Today the company is owned by the Ascent Media Group of the U.S., one of the largest post-production companies in

the world, which employs 1300 people in the UK and over 3000 in the U.S. and worldwide. In the U.K. alone, the Group owns 7 creative services post-production companies in the Soho area (offering all aspects of post-production services to the commercials business and feature film market) as well as several transmission facilities, as part of Ascent Media Services Europe. Camden (which hosts Turner Channel and Stephen Street (which transmits The Discovery Channel, Channel 5 and some shopping channels on independent channels and Sky TV).

In the U.K. the post-production companies have access to 5 telecines offering overnight colour correction facilities for the commercials business and the film industry.

More recently, in the U.S., Ascent Media have become a leading player in 'digital intermediate' business based on the Quantel iQ system. Ascent Media Facility Company 3, based in Los Angeles, specialises at the top end of the telecine colour corrections business and have a leading proponent of this art in Stefan Sonnenfeld whose recent credits include Collateral (Michael Mann), Man on Fire (Tony Scott), Bad Boys 2, etc.

As a result of increased studio demand for digital post-production facilities in the UK, Ascent Media has recently invested £1.5million in D.I. technology at One. St. Anne's and Soho Images, with further investment of equal significance planned for 2005. As part of this investment, One has opened a dedicated D.I. department at 71 Dean Street, London W1, with fully operational suites mirroring the D.I. division set-up at Company 3, with colourist Stefan

Soho Images dual purpose preview theatre

by Bill Chew



Fig 1

Sonnenfield advising UK technicians on the build of the new department, in conjunction with the One's managing director, Paaul Jones.

Preview Theatre Design

The preview theatre (see Fig.1) is housed in a space measuring approximately 11.3m x 6.8m x 3.3m high, formerly used as sales office. The contractor, Modernarc, and it's designer Andrew Wong has managed to maximise the use of the space and created a theatre which is at the same time stylish, functional yet giving the appearance of calm.

Over the years, I have been involved with the design and construction of many cinemas, preview theatres and screening rooms. The key aspects to focus on in cinema design can be summarised as follows (although not necessarily in any order of importance)-a) approach, b) theatre proportions, c) seating and sightlines, d) interior finishes. So how does the new Soho Images Preview Theatre measure up?

Approach

The theatre entrance is approached via an extended and slightly narrow reception corridor (see Fig.2). On entering the theatre a full height wall separates the auditorium aisle from the dimmed approach 'corridor'. It is only at the end of this short 'walk' that the theatre in it's full can be fully seen and appreciated. By creating this oblique entrance to the theatre, Modernarc was further able to capitalise on the sense of anticipation and drama in the design of the theatre layout, in effect giving it more of a 'cinema feel' than preview theatre appearance (see Fig.3). The 'Soundcheck' acoustic fabric side wall treatment is colour graded from greys (at the rear) to browns (in the middle) to black (at the screen end) to give a 'tonal calm' and blend in with the screen end surround which consists of black serge masking and acoustically transparent black cloth used to drape over the speakers located below the bottom picture line (see Fig. 4).

Proportions

The optimum theatre geometry of screen to seating should ideally be 2: 1, i.e. the distance from the screen plane to the rear seats should be twice the width of the screen. The screen width is 5.4m and the distance from the screen to the rear wall is 9.6m, so the proportions are almost perfect. The ability to achieve ideal theatre

proportions are both a matter of luck and skill, but are always subject to architectural considerations and building geometry. However, great credit must be given to the Soho Images team for selecting the right room for this theatre!

The screen installation and the matt white screen was carried out by Chris Hitchens, a screen and stage engineer of many years experience. Paul Collard met Chris some years ago on another project when Chris was with another firm and was quite impressed with the way Chris had worked on the project by solving problems encountered in a pro-active and helpful way. When Chris left to set up his own business Paul said he did not have to think twice about wanting to use Chris Hitchens for this installation.

As a result of some huge structural columns being located at the screen end and the desire to have the longest throw possible, the screen frame is being positioned almost tight against the columns with the left, centre, right and sub-bass speakers sitting on the floor below the b.p.l.. Normally the left, centre and right speakers are suspended off the screen frame with the speaker cones at a distance of about two thirds of the picture height above the b.p.l. but this option was not available on this project due to the location of the columns.

Seating and Grading Desk

The theatre has a seating capacity of 36 consisting of 32 Hille cinema seats and 4 luxury leather client chairs from Lyndon Furniture (see Fig.5), arranged in 4 stepped rows.

The back to back dimension for the Hille seating is 1m and approximately 1.6m for the leather seats. Sightlines to the screen are excellent throughout from all seats. As the theatre has a dual purpose function as described previously, a block of 4 Hille seats from the centre rear row can be removed and stowed away in a storage area located on Actors Left adjacent to the screen and be replaced with a purpose-built 'grading desk' (see Fig.6) which Modernarc designed and built to specifications provided by Soho Image's engineers and technicians. The grading desk worktop is made from a special 44 mm thick Danish plywood. I am told it currently takes 2 men about an hour to remove the seats and put in place the grading desk!

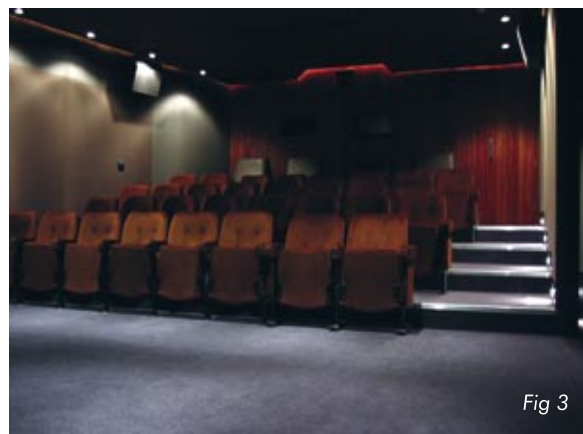


Fig 3

Finishes

The 'Soundcheck' acoustic fabric is complemented by the use of 'Latham' profiled acoustic cladding across the whole of the rear wall of the theatre and also overhanging part of the ceiling area directly above the seated areas (see Fig.3). Because of the directional nature of this material the effect of the design is to channel the viewers attention towards the screen.

Another unusual feature of this preview theatre not found in many others (for obvious reasons of needing to minimise sound breakthrough from the box to the theatre) is the introduction of a door from theatre to the projection room. The management of Soho Images felt it was vital for a door to be provided in order to provide easy communication with staff working in the projection room. The solution was the installation of a 'Leaderflush Audiodor 47' which gives a performance rating of 47 dBA. The acoustic isolation has proved to be quite effective.

Colour Grading and Correction

One of the key responses from Soho Images clients (film directors and film producers) is to be able to see a good sized image (hence the 10m throw) for the digital grading of feature films

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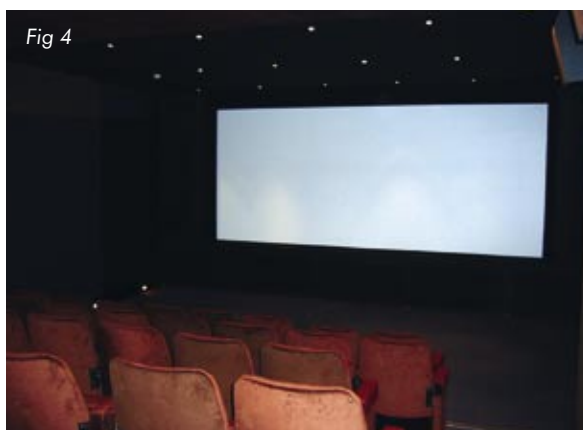


Fig 4



Fig 5

also to receive all kinds of sound input and decoding capability (see Fig.8).

Conclusion

The Soho Images Preview Theatre is a technically well-designed, spacious, comfortable, viewing environment yet architecturally stylish in a calm and an understated way. It will provide an invaluable and much needed resource in the W1 area for the film and media community. In an age of rapid technological change, flexibility could still be the buzz word!.

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intended for either digital projection or going through a digital intermediate process and subsequently being re-recorded back on film. The directors and producers want to be able see the image in it's full size and grade or colour correct it in it's full size. At the time of writing Soho Images had not yet taken delivery of the Barco DP100 2K digital projector which was expected imminently. The projector will allow 2K images, HDTV images and images in lower formats to be shown in the theatre and the pictures on the screen can then be calibrated with the images on the Grade 1 monitors in the remote Digital Grading Suite.

Projection Room and Sound System

In addition to the Barco digital projector the room is equipped with 2 existing Vic 5's illuminated by 1600W Xenon lamps (see Fig.7). The sound system consists of a QSC amplifier and a new Dolby CP 650 processor (upgraded from CP 65) to enable the theatre to run multiple digital input sources in addition to the normal cinema requirements such as Dolby SRD and Dolby SR. This processor gives the theatre the flexibility to run HDD5 or to run off a server or separate digital sources or dvd and

In an age of rapid technological change, flexibility could still be the buzz word!



Fig 7



Fig 8

Soho Images Theatre Specification

Soho Images Theatre has been planned from the outset with two distinct functions built into the design. In it's first format the theatre is a 36 seat film and digital preview theatre, capable of running full feature films with changeovers, with a 5.4m x 2.3m screen size and a throw of 10m.

In it's second format, a block of four seats are removed from the centre rear row and replaced by a digital grading desk, where da Vinci colour correction panels control remotely a Quantel iQ workstation and the HD graded pictures are projected on to the full screen size screen by a Barco DP100 2K digital projector. Immediately behind, and slightly elevated above the desk are comfortable client chairs where clients can observe the colourist at work.

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Specification

- 35mm Projection Equipment
- 2 x Cinemecanica Victoria 5 professional film projectors
- Full remote control via AMX touch screen panel.
- High Power 1600W xenon light sources
- Schneider Cinelux lenses
- 1:1.375 (Academy) 1:1.85 (Widescreen) 1:2.35 (Cinemascope)
- 3 perf option available
- Super 35

Sound

- Dolby 650 processor multiple digital inputs
- QSC amps
- JBL 3678 stage speakers x 3 * JBL 3685 sub bass * JBL 8330 surround speakers

Digital Projection

- Barco DP100 2K digital projector
- HD, 2K, SD & SVGA inputs

Digital Grading Desk

- Remote da Vinci 2K grading panels, signal monitoring.

Lighting

- Lutron programmable lighting system.

Seating

- 32 Hille velour cinema seats : 4 Leather client chairs at rear

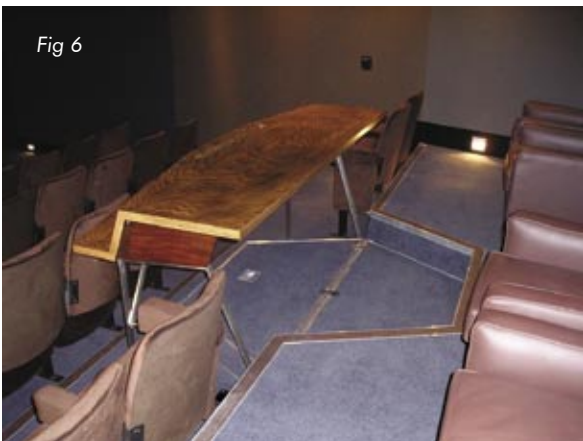


Fig 6