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Con il patrocinio



«I call it cinematograph»  
Architectures and Stories of the Movie Theatres



REMORDIMIENTO

CINE OLIMPIA

NANCY CADDOLL  
EL ANGEL DE LA NOCHE  
CON FREDDY BAST...

VENTA REALIZADA

PARA VERANO ADMIRABLES

FINAL

EXISTENCIAS

## INTRODUCTION

### «I CALL IT CINEMATOGRAPH» ARCHITECTURES AND STORIES OF THE MOVIE THEATRES

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This volume is composed by a wide and articulate collection of essays about the central theme of the cinema theatre, also defined as the "cinematograph", quoting here the famous lexical preference of Francesco Rosi. This definition of the Italian director is also borrowed for the title of the present work.

The physical space for cinematographic projections was called, in the first place, to respond to a new, specific function: for that reason, preexistent buildings were adapted, as well as provisional constructions were temporarily provided. Only later, cinema became a real and independent architectural typology. However, its first definition was undermined very soon by the advent of sound. This original typology seems today definitely dismissed: while cinema theatres are nowadays absorbed in new multipurpose buildings, old cinemas – mainly built between the 20s and 60s of the Twentieth century – are often subjected to unfortunate transformations in shopping malls or supermarkets.

The unexpected and sudden loss of many cinema theatres – due to the absence of protection measures and specific studies on this type – was contrasted in Italy during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by a renewed attention on this topic: the point of view through which this theme was addressed was prevalently devoted to saving from destruction a big part of the Twentieth century and movie theatre architectural heritage. This fruitful research season – that also resulted in praiseworthy publications<sup>1</sup> – had its main center of investigation in Tuscany, both for the commitment of local scholars as well as for the systematic actions of census and studies carried on in that region. Moreover, regional studies were able to conduct surveys on the cinemas to a local scale, mainly aiming at the preservation of those buildings<sup>2</sup>. This attention devoted to the protection of the surviving cinemas was supported by the important study led by Saverio Salamino<sup>3</sup>: his study considered the evolution of the type of the cinema theatre during its heroic phase from a more general point of view, referring not exclusively to the surviving theatres.

Beyond the commitment of the Italian scholars and considering the Western historiography more in general, the architecture of the cinematograph represents still today a topic never properly investigated. Only a limited number of authorial theatres are necessarily cited in the history books about contemporary architecture. Among them, the Skandia in Stockholm by Erik Gunnar Asplund must be mentioned: this cinema represents a poetic interpretation of the necessary "darkness in the room" translated into an open-air starry night, sowing an analogy, maybe not completely casual, with the Cinema Olympia in Catania, Sicily, by Francesco Fichera. The Universum by Erich Mendelsohn cannot be neglected: its author interpreted it as a sort of wild beast with "jaws frightfully opened, roof as a turtle, protecting vault as a curved ceiling..."<sup>4</sup>. More generally, it is yet to be verified and reconstructed the potential role of this typology in the development of modern architecture. For sure, the role of the cinema theatre was determinant in the culture of German Expressionism. In 1924, in the pioneering essay *Filmbauen*, Hugo Häring was deeply questioning the specific problems of the configuration of this typology: he intelligently connected the functional needs – at the time, visibility – with the symbolic-emotional needs, the ones that can be obtained by "molding the spatial elements, intensifying the drama (...)" so that "the whole space can be involved in what is happening". One of the most heretic experiments belongs to this context: the step-theatre designed by Bruno Taut for an audience who lay down and lean towards a screen placed at the top. It is not by chance that the most avant-garde and convincing studies of the Expressionism addressed this program not only from a quantitative perspective (linked to the boom of the constructions of cinema theatres in the Berlin of the Twenties) but also from a more problematic point of view, as it is demonstrated by the study by Wolfgang Peht in 1998: the German scholar dedicates an intense chapter to the questions deeply intertwined, and equally central for the architects of that cultural climate, of the movie and the cinema theatres, identifying a theme of research absolutely rich and promising<sup>5</sup>.



Fig.1. Erik Gunnar Asplund, Cine Skandia, Stockholm. Interior Perspective

Together with the “authorial” cinemas, a big production of theatres following a different direction does also exist. Indeed, even in the period following the First World War, the norm was the use of “reassuring” and more traditional elements, with images linked to the styles of the Nineteenth century. Just consider the case of Thomas and Frank Verity in England, authors of a big number of theatres in the first postwar: their work was inspired by the cinemas built in North America in the previous decade, buildings that often alluded to an idea of luxury linked to Second Empire style or to late-eclectic forms. All over Europe are present theatres – and buildings – in a Neo-Moorish style, justifying in this way the name of Alhambra, later used also in the context of modern architecture<sup>6</sup>: among the most famous ones, in France, in Pas-de-Calais in 1930, the Alhambra designed by Emile Renardier was inaugurated, while in the following years the modern materials and eclectic decorations were fused together in the cinemas built by Marcel Oudin and Eugène Vergnes, architects specialized in the construction of cinema theatres<sup>7</sup>. This is a theme faced in 1921 also by Le Corbusier on the pages of “L’Esprit Nouveau”, nevertheless, the dominant models are German and American<sup>8</sup>. As noted by Cristoph Bignens, the capacity of evocation and suggestion was connected to the need of attracting the viewer, guiding him from the world of reality to the one of imagination<sup>9</sup>. “Not a temple, not a church I had to do, but a pure and simple cinematograph”, says Marcello Piacentini referring to the project for the cinema Corso in Rome in 1916, words recalled fifteen years later by Luigi Piccinato commenting the Piacentini’s Barberini cinema, considered as a real “modern architecture”<sup>10</sup>.

Even if the assimilation of the cinema in old theatres is the most immediate and easy solution, very soon it appears clear that the typology of the cinematographic theatre is different from the traditional ones, and that this requires a completely different design approach<sup>11</sup>. The first representations illuminated by light – necessary to take a seat in any moment and for “decency” reasons – are replaced after the First World War by the projections in the dark. In 1928 Fred Cohendy, author of a sort of “guide” about the opening and success of a cinema, writes that the darkness in theatres induces “a special hypnotic state”, able to intensify all the senses of the viewer<sup>12</sup>.

If the Twenties represent a sort of “heroic phase” for the architecture of the cinematographic theatres, well portrayed by the work of the German Expressionists, with the advent of sound in 1928 a new, particularly rich season is inaugurated. The disappearance of the mute film leads to the withdrawal of the place for the orchestra and deeply modifies the indoor space. Furthermore, another rich period for the cinema theatre starts in the second postwar, when the reconstruction of the city in Europe begins with the leisure places, a choice that reveals the intention to alleviate and quickly forget the recent drama of the war.



Fig.2. Marcello Piacentini, Cine Barberini, Roma [Domus 1931]

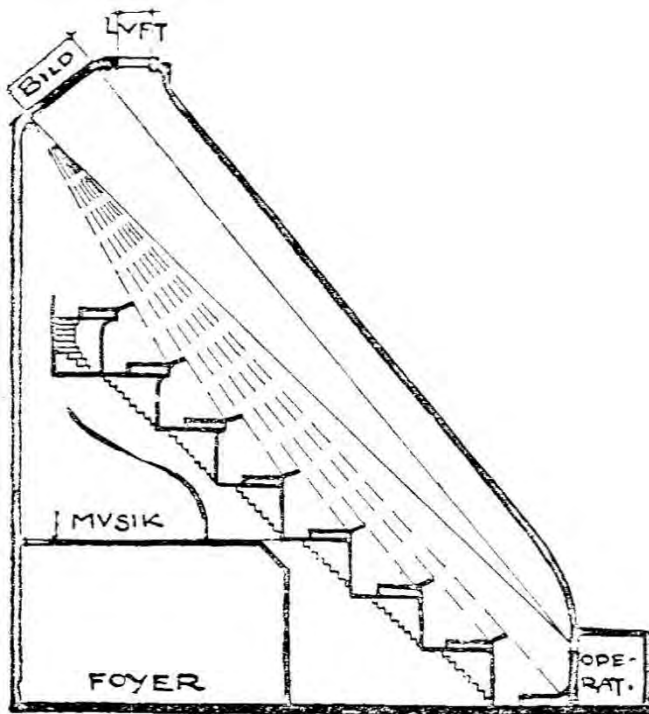


Fig.3. Bruno Taut, Imaginary project for a movie theatre with lying viewers, 1924 (or previous)

Both for the construction of new cinemas as well as for the adaptation of the existent buildings, the main technical changes are determined by the introduction in 1953 of the cinemascope, based on a different format and used until the end of the Sixties.

The second postwar is the last decisive moment for the construction of the cinema, in a new perspective founded on the functional adequacy and inspired by the needs of the new market. This is also a period less deeply investigated by historiography, especially if we compare it to the attention dedicated to the cinemas built between the two wars. Large theatres, even wider than the ones of the pre-war period, are built following the idea of a modernity apt to the needs of a specific business. This is the case, for example, of the cinema Metropolitan in Naples, completed in 1950, the biggest in Italy for the number of viewers and directly influenced by the rationalist culture; but also the French cinemas designed by Émile Vergnes are yet to be posited in a correct historical and architectural perspective<sup>13</sup>.

The ambition of this collection of essays is to demonstrate the significance of the cinema theatre in architectural history beyond the chronological and geographic limits of the German Expressionism. The focus is prevalently – but not exclusively – European, largely concentrated on the Twentieth century, but with excursions on the very first phase of the typology and on the following decades. The present volume aims to represent the multifaceted character of the historical phenomenon of the cinematographic architecture through a deep and balanced choice of different views and case studies, alternating questions related to the census and cataloging, with others linked to the individuation of works and architects of exceptional significance. The essays also investigate the theme of heritage and the survival of the memory of the first heroic phase, the ephemeral structures for projections, the questions and changes in the structural and spatial conformations, the installations and the interior design.



Fig.4. Hilding Ekelund (with Wäinö Gustaf Palmqvist), Cinema Capitol in Helsinki, 1926. View of the atrium



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *L'architettura italiana dei cinema*, edited by E. Godoli and G. Belli, monographic number, "Opus incertum", Firenze, 2007; *Buio in sala: architettura del cinema in Toscana*, edited by M. A. Giusti, S. Caccia, M&M, Maschietto, Firenze 2007; *Cinema in Italia: sguardi sull'architettura del Novecento*, edited by M. A. Giusti e S. Caccia, M&M Maschietto, Firenze 2007; *Luoghi e architettura del Cinema in Italia*, edited by S. Caccia, ETS, Pisa 2010.
- <sup>2</sup> *Territori del cinema. Stanze, luoghi, paesaggi. Un sistema per la Puglia. Letture e interpretazioni*, edited by V. Ieva, F. Maggiore, supervised by F. Moschini, Gangemi, Roma 2013.
- <sup>3</sup> S. Salamino, *Architetti e cinematografi. Tipologie, architetture, decorazioni della sala cinematografica delle origini, 1896-1932*, Prospettive, Roma 2008.
- <sup>4</sup> Cit. from W. Pehnt, *Per una genealogia delle forme espressioniste*, in *Espressionismo e Nuova Oggettività. La nuova architettura europea degli anni Venti*, edited by M. De Michelis, V. Magnago Lampugnani, M. Pogačnik, R- Schneider, Electa, Milano 1994, p. 23.
- <sup>5</sup> W. Pehnt, *Architecture espressioniste*, Hazan, Paris 1998, pp. 260-269.
- <sup>6</sup> The names of the cinemas are often evocative, but they also adapt to the historic moment and to political stances. On this topic, with a particular focus on the Italian context, cfr. S. Raffaelli, *Introduzione all'onomastica del cinema*, in "Rivista italiana di onomastica", II, n. 1, 1996, pp. 113-124.
- <sup>7</sup> J.-J. Meusy, *Écrans français de l'entre-deux-guerre*, Association française de recherche sur l'histoire du cinéma, Paris 2017.
- <sup>8</sup> A.É. Buxtorf, "La salle de cinéma à Paris entre les deux guerres", in *Entre nostalgie et utopie. Réalités architecturales et artistiques au XIXe et XXe siècles*, edited by J.-M. Leniaud, Champion-Droz, Paris-Genève 2005, pp. 117-144.
- <sup>9</sup> Ch. Bignens, *Kinos: Architektur als Marketing. Kino als massenkulturelle Institution. Themen der Kinoarchitektur. Zürcher Kinos 1900-1963*, Hans Rohr, Zürich 1988.
- <sup>10</sup> L. Piccinato, *Aspetti di architettura d'oggi in Italia. Il cinema Barberini di Marcello Piacentini*, in "Domus", n. 49, 1931, pp. 18-21.
- <sup>11</sup> M. Calzini, *Cento anni di cinema al cinema. Storia dei cinematografi dalla saletta dei Lumière ai Multiplex*, Gestioni editoriali Agis, Roma 1995.
- <sup>12</sup> F. Cohendy (J. Mac Freddy), *Comment lancer un cinema et le conduire à la prospérité*, Drouin, Paris 1928.
- <sup>13</sup> Cfr. F. Lacroche, *Architecture de cinéma*, Moniteur, Paris 1981; J. Laurans, *Dans la salle obscure*, Seuil, Paris 1997; see also the PhD work of S. Hosseinbadi, *Une histoire architecturale de cinémas. Genèse et métamorphoses de l'architecture cinématographique à Paris*, Université de Strasbourg, 2012.