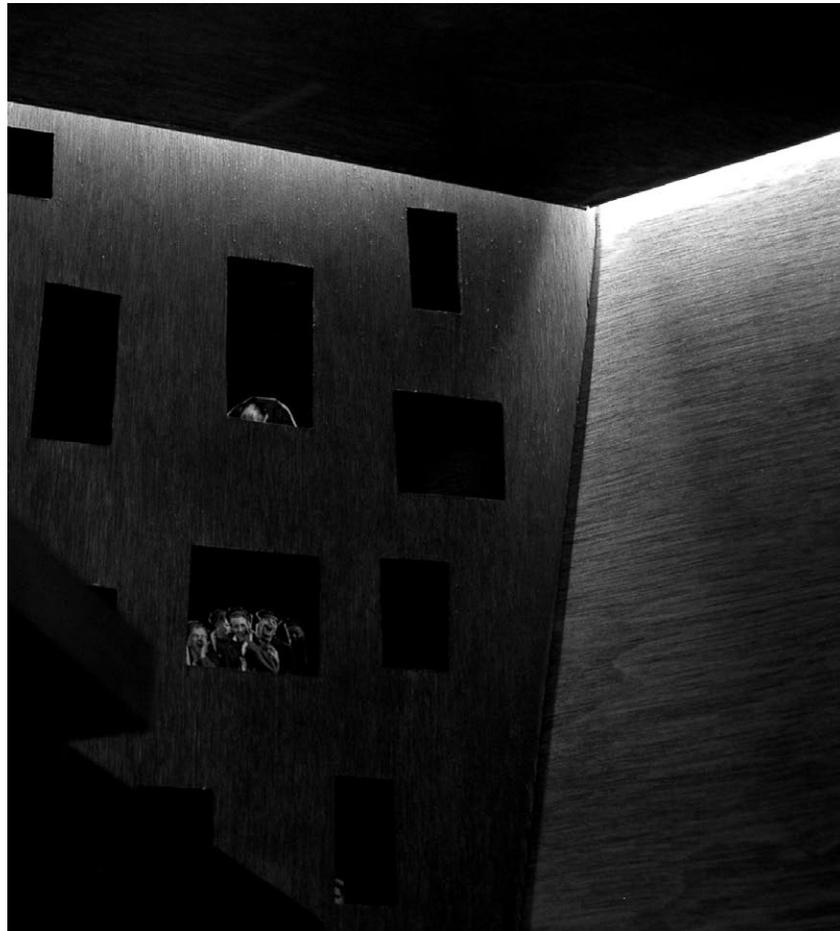


THE REVEALING BUILDING

A NEW CINEMA FOR OLDTOWN



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ACT I.

Raison d'Etre

"We sell tickets to theaters, not movies."
Marcus Loew



PROLOGUE

The city of Alexandria lies on the southern tip of the Washington Metropolitan Grid, across the Potomac River. At its nexus, a grid of approximately 200 square city blocks, commonly known as Old Town. It is named so because its street scale, facade treatments and urban arrangement have been preserved, for the most part, to its 18th century origins. Despite the burgeoning District of Columbia and rampant sub-urban developments, Old Town Alexandria maintains a sense of place. It resembles in many regards, the early American town- due in part to strict zoning and historical preservation measures. The main thoroughfare in Alexandria is King Street, comprised of storefronts on the ground level and apartments in the floors above. And while the businesses therein have changed, the fundamental buildings that have defined the early American town have always been present. The town hall, judiciary court, and churches are there. There are law offices, bars, and pharmacies. And the theatre can still be found on King Street- its broad marquee still hangs over the brick walkways. The dark courses of brick are of the original facade, though the neighboring buildings on either side have been demolished and rebuilt over the years. This theatre is the only cinema in Old Town, a ubiquitous presence in the small city. Yet of all the primary institutions in Old Town, only this theatre exists on the brink of extinction- closing repeatedly due to disinterest.



PREVIOUS LIVES

In 1914, the Richmond Theatre is established on King Street as a venue for vaudeville and dancehall entertainment. With the advent of motion pictures, the theatre expands its program to accommodate films - later doing away with stand-up comedy altogether. The theatre, now called “the Old Town Theatre”, thrives in this fashion for quite some time. Matinees are shown on weekends and filmgoers dine at local restaurants after screenings. It is a mainstay of King Street, and evenings see lines of patrons stretched down the brick walkways. But the city of Alexandria is entering a downslide. During the 1950-70’s, Old Town suffers from lack of upkeep and as a result, an influx of lower-income families. Patrons, wary of late-night crime, keep to the suburbs and attendance at the Old Town drops. At some point, the Theatre is purchased by the National Society of Puppeteers, then re-sold again. The Theatre building is also in need of a thorough refurbishment. Sixty years of use has seen the facilities of the building antiquated. Understandably, funding is scarce and the building is sold to new owners who misinterpret the flagging sales as a reaction to the type of entertainment being shown. Comedic routines are reinstated in an effort to draw more viewers - followed by a schedule of live music, box office films and classics, but to mixed results. Ironically, the diversification in program reveals not a host of varied entertainment options, but an institutional relic flailing for funds and its lost foothold in the community. Growing more desperate, the theatre introduces puppet shows and weekend screenings of football games - further compounding this opinion. Over time, even the staunchest advocates grow disenchanted and alienated. There seems to be no standard of attraction the Old Town will not sink to. In 2001, a final insult is dealt. A community action committee raises sufficient funds to save the theatre which is, by this time, on the brink of bankruptcy. Three months after the celebratory re-opening, (actually a mere re-carpeting and addition of ADA compliant restrooms) the cinema is forced to close due to disinterest.

Stage and projection screen,
Richmond Theatre, circa 1950



THE RISE OF THE CINEPLEX

Alexandria's sub-urban development is also the harbinger of a shift in the pursuit of leisure activities. The inconvenience of driving to multiple stores is *out*. Consumerism en masse is *in*. To make shopping convenient, shops, restaurants and leisure activities (including the cinema) are housed in one complex. The growth of shopping mall complexes create not only an amended place for movie theatres, but exposure to a different type of movie-goer: the shopper. The shopper does not often attend films out of a conscious decision- but as a default form of entertainment. A convenient nightcap, so to speak. "Catching a flick", becomes a rather commonplace outing and as the shopping mall ethos centers around mass consumption, the cinema within follows suit. Audiences demand more options in their films: more screening times, more seat occupancies and more parking spaces. In an attempt to meet the demand, the cinema swells to gigantic proportions - exploding out in all directions trying to contain the crowds of people that flood the vestibules. This is the rise of something new... the rise of the Cineplex.

Cineplex entrance, the new proportions of entertainment



OPENING SCENES

If there is a maxim for the Cineplex, it is: *one can never have too much*. There are always more options. And with each option comes a waiting line. The foyer is a place of waiting lines. There are lines for purchasing tickets. There are lines for the toilets. Lines for popcorn and candy. Lines that lead to various theatres. But waiting in these queues is often dull and the Cineplex has anticipated options for even this. To counteract the boredom of the lines, customers are bombarded with stimuli. Flashy lights and cardboard advertisements create the ornament of the foyer. Previews for upcoming films flicker above on hanging television screens. Adorning the walls are themed motifs- aiming to invoke a sense of nostalgia or fantasy, and most importantly, distraction from the waiting lines. These are the opening scenes which greet the patron. Disorientation, displaced by boredom, displaced by distraction, displaced by further distraction. One notices that nobody relaxes and chats, discussing the film over a coffee- because there is no place to do so. Rather, there is no *invitation* to do so. In truth, the foyer takes on more the semblance of a marketplace, belying its new surroundings and becoming an extension of the shopping ethos. Amidst the gauntlet of solicitations and moving lines, one hopes to find a film at the end of the tunnel.



PAGEANTRY

For all the pageantry of the foyer, the theatre itself couldn't be more unadorned. Rows and rows of identical seats, allowing for the minimal amount of legroom, crowd the dark, drab rooms. Narrow aisles do little to differentiate one row from another. The seats themselves are awkward, upholstered flip stools- ornamented only by a plastic drink holder. The negligible rise above the preceding row has everyone hoping that the tall in height will sit elsewhere. And some seats offer even less. Sadly, the multitude of options experienced in the foyer do not apply here. As the room is box-shaped, viewers to the far left/right sides inevitably watch a skewed screen. Those unlucky enough to be seated in rows 1-4, spend the film craning their heads back to account for the screen, practically overhead. Commencement of the film consists of simply dimming the house lights and starting the projection- though the first ten minutes of viewing will be dedicated to the showing of advertisements and previews. After the film, (but during the credits), house lights come on and ushers throw open the back doors, and the room is flooded with sudden noise. The magic is over and it is time to leave. To finalize this point, patrons do not pass through the vestibule again- more often they are herded down a different hall, and out an emergency exit door. This one-way door deposits one directly into the parking lot and back into reality. The final act of the Cineplex: a post-coital shove-off.



FINAL ACTS

Whereas the cinema once held a sense of allure and intrigue, the Cineplex becomes a spectacle of the pornographic: baring all at once, substituting base desire for refined attraction. Reinforced by sheer scale and sensory overload, an assembly-line of consumption and circulation emerges, its patrons first dizzied, then disillusioned. Not surprisingly, more and more people recede into their homes, overwhelmed by the prospect of such an evening.

In this crisis, the need for an alternative is felt. To be fair, the Cineplex, in spite of itself, maintains its place in society. However, those who do not share this commercial idea are not represented. To worsen matters, the fashionable growth of the Cineplex perpetuates the idea that to expect more from the cinema is to make an exceptional request, further marginalizing those who seek a richer experience. An estranged relationship emerges, a loveless affair between patron and film house.

But always, a longing for reconciliation.

Cineplex signage,
the complete union of
theatre and shopping mall



RAISON D'ÊTRE

Out of this longing, an idea takes shape- a participatory theatre where the patron, rather than merely filling the space, activates it. Here, the cinema fulfills a social responsibility, where the interaction of patrons with each other becomes just as important an element as the film itself. For as solitary as it can be, the cinema experience is in essence a communal one, a true cross-sectional gathering rarely found in a community. The idea is not a new one. The great auditoriums of history re-appear. Apparitions of theatres past.

Rather than stagnating in nostalgia, this new cinema draws from the spirit of these places. In particular, the theatres of 18th century Europe, which themselves had a history of becoming venues of high drama. Framed by box seats, elevated by balconies, the public found themselves on display, players in their own right. Rather than the play, it was often the architecture of the theater which “performed”: raising boundaries of social class and debuting modes of fashion and decorum. These were places full of encounters. Full of moments. *Momentous places.*

Out of the disenchantment of the Old Town theatre, a new cinema emerges- the *momentous* Cinema. It's intention made clear. *A raison d'être.* Moments unfold frame by frame, as in a storyline: revealing depth, nurturing anticipation- choreographing the perspectives that the Cineplex has abandoned. A place free of solicitation, free of congestion.

It is here that the small cinema finds its niche....



In the intimacy of a small theatre.



In the allure of unforeseen circumstances.



In an evening of surprising moments.

ACT II.

The Revealing Building



“We need a type of theater which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field... but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.”

Bertoldt Brecht

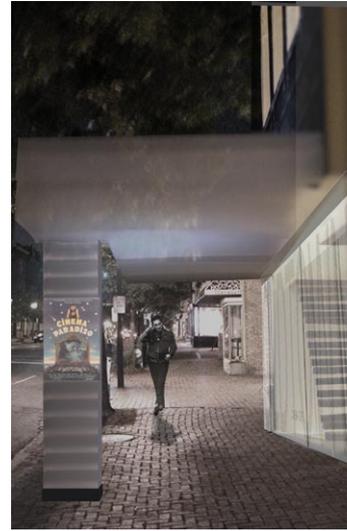
The Oldtown Cinema
after its most recent closing.
Boarded-up windows hide the
second level in disuse, 2004



A NIGHT AT THE CINEMA

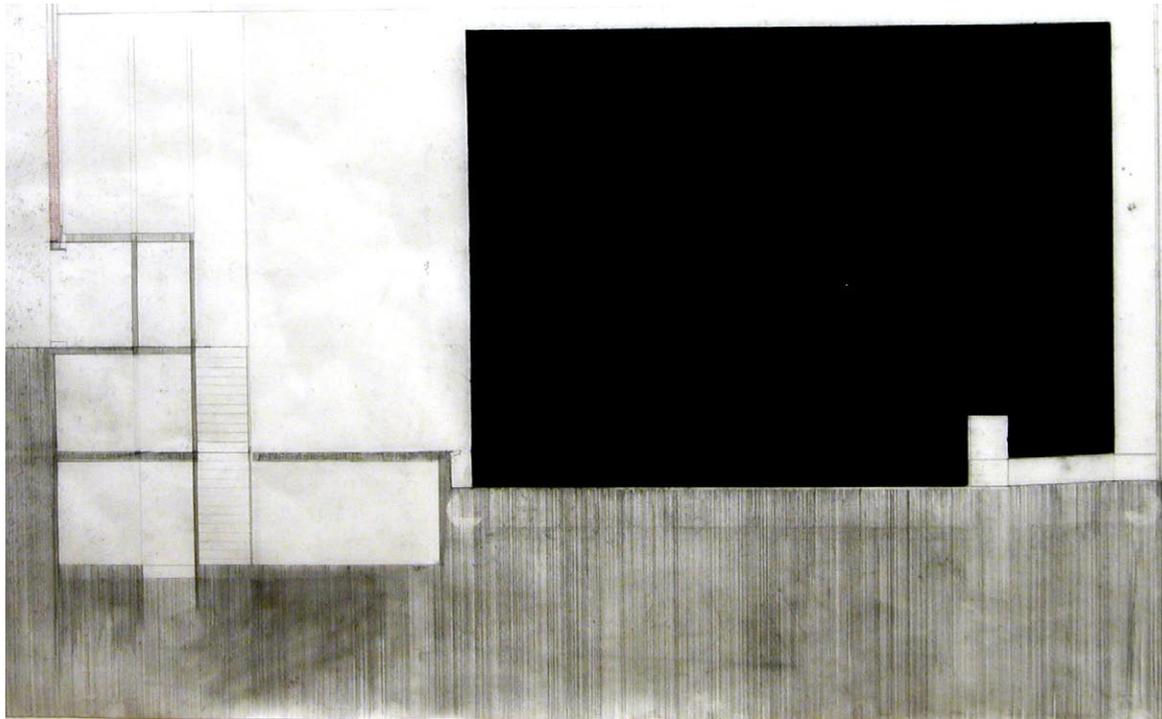
On a warm summer evening, amidst the leafy trees that line King Street, the Cinema glows like a lantern. The broad marquee, with its gentle blue light, illuminates the walkway, inviting curious passers-by inside. Gazing upwards, the three arched windows reveal an image superimposed across the ceiling. Silhouettes of people inside can be seen. People enjoying a coffee. People conversing, moving between the levels. People looking out; seeing and being seen.

Exterior perspective from
King Street, Model

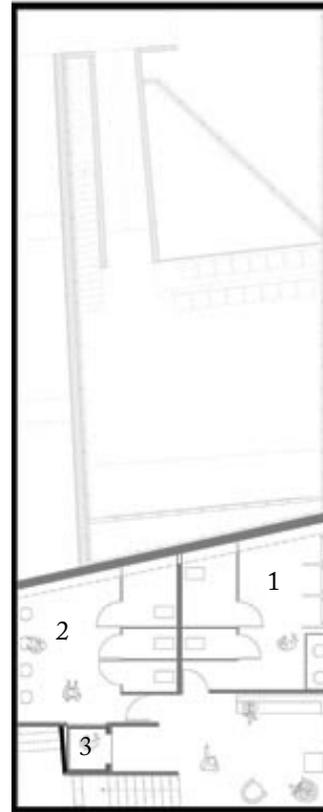
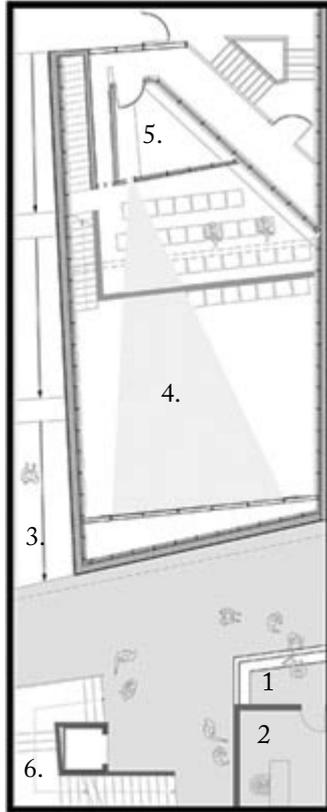


The entrance foyer is broad and low, an extension of the sidewalk. Further into the building, it gives way to an area that is open to the triple-height ceiling. Here guests sit enjoying an *apertif* or a small bite to eat. The cafe is not spacious, the tables are close- though the aura is one of intimacy rather than overcrowding. Low lighting allows the distant ceiling to disappear out of perception. One notices that the commotion of the street feels very far away. Sounds of tableware and low conversation fill the hall, pleasant and humane.

Entrance and foyer conditions
of the Old Town Theater,
Models



In the backdrop, standing in contrast to the muted off-white tones of the hall is what appears to be a towering solid mass of wood. Closer, dark slats can be seen, horizontally stacked, the joints flush, creating a tall volume that projects upwards through the space. It stands apart from the rest of the building, objectified, nearly touching the ceiling. Curious guests peer at and around the volume. A gap of air allows the mass to continue beneath the edge of the floor. Suspicion builds. This is a container. A theatre is inside.

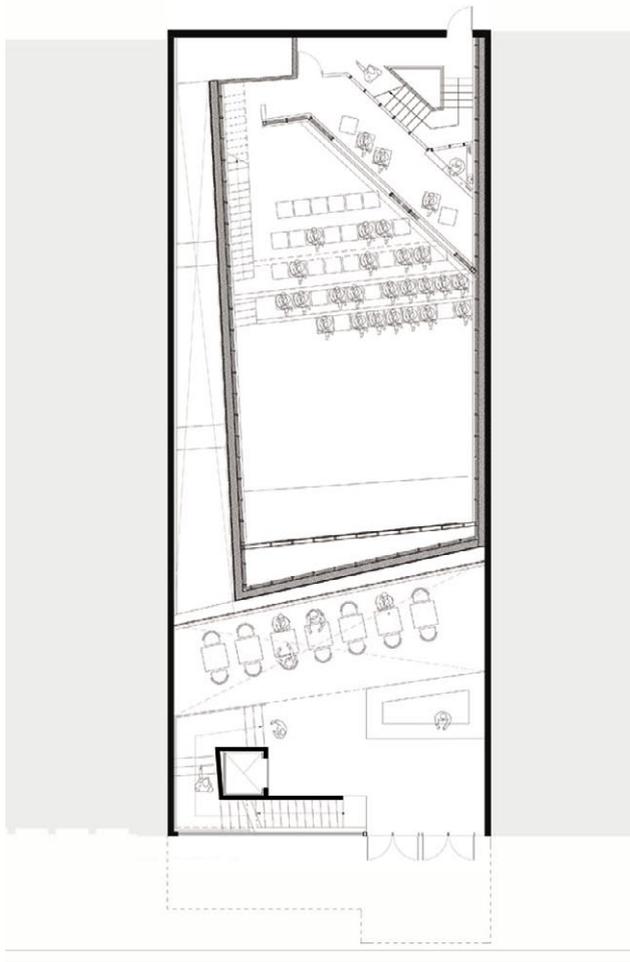


Level -1.

1. Ticket Office
2. Manager's Office
3. Ramp
4. Theatre Box
5. Projection Room
6. Stairwell

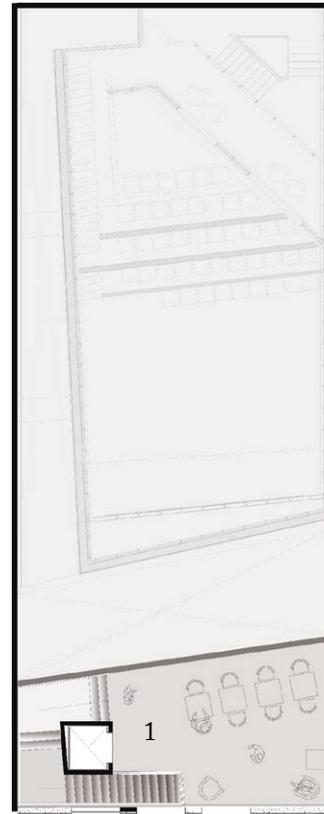
Level -2.

1. Men's Restrooms
2. Women's Restrooms
3. Elevator



Level 1.

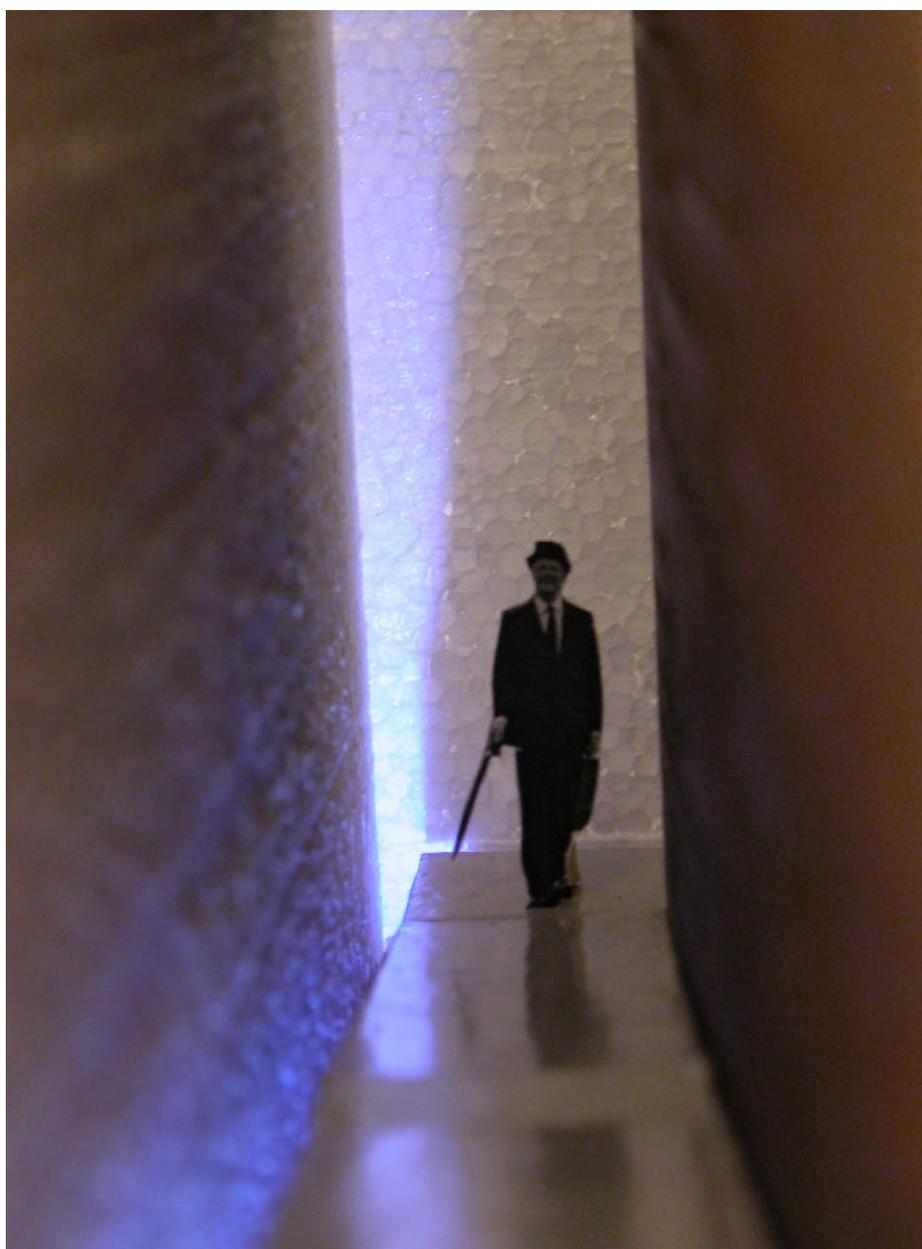
1. Marquee
2. Bar/ Service Counter
3. Cafe Seating
4. Upper Balconies
5. Box Seating



Level 2.

1. Cafe Seating





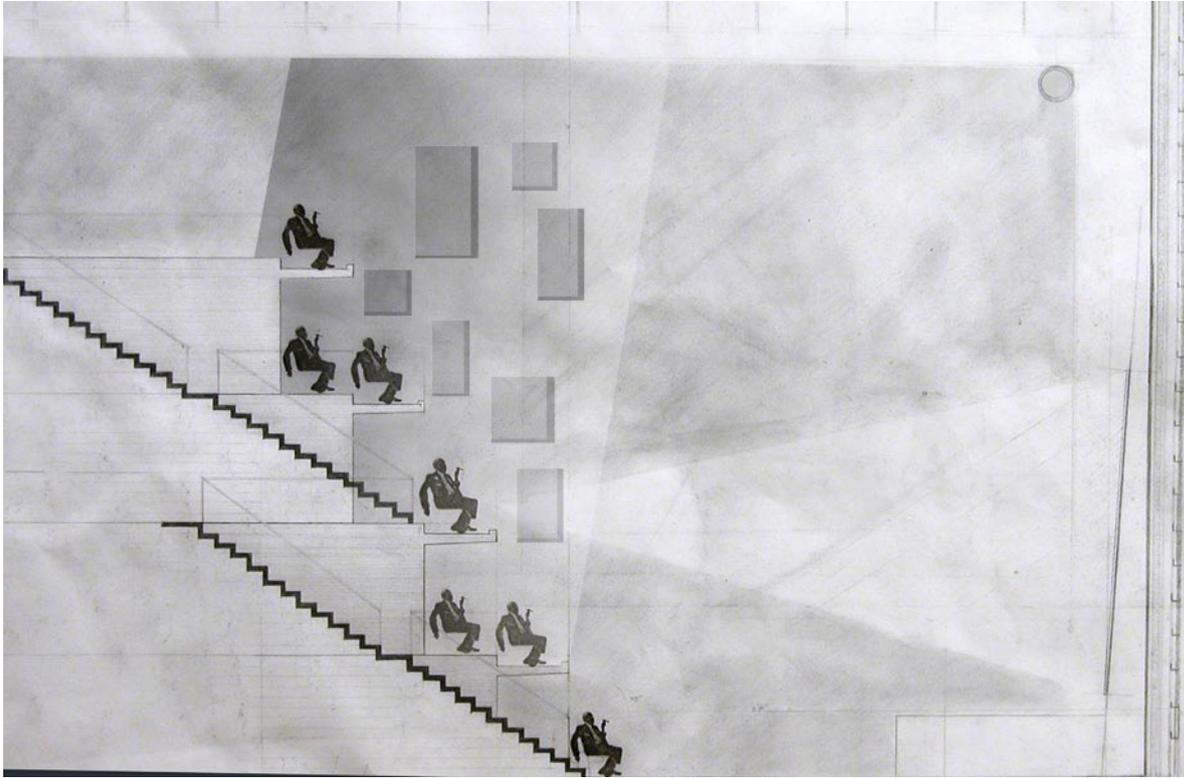
The lights dim once, twice...the film is about to begin. Guests make their way down one level and towards a ramp which continues along one side of the wooden volume towards the back of the building. The ramp is of polished concrete, a light-colored aggregate, reflecting the light of the narrow passage between the container and the building wall.

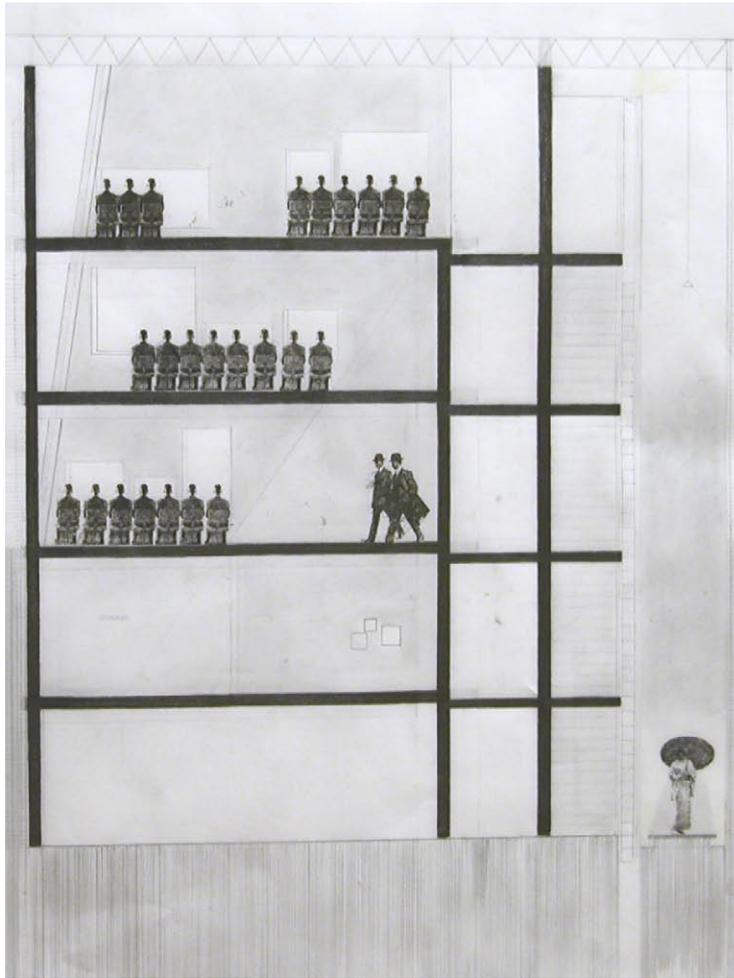


Everything about the descent is gentle, paced. The lighting overhead recedes higher into the space. Eyes adjust to the dimming surroundings. Both sides of the ramp begin to glow, softly guiding the path. As it descends, the heaviness of the two masses on either side become more present, squeezing the guests further, deeper into the building. The wooden container becoming taller and taller. The guests whisper and giggle- there is a blind turn ahead. Things are becoming uncertain. The path turns into a low corridor- the entrance into the theatre box.



For the first few steps inside, there is only darkness and the narrow frame of the hallway. Then... emerging into another world. The space is vertical, it draws the gaze upwards. The first instinct. Tiers of balconies project into the space, dramatically stacked towards the ceiling. An adjoining wall, equally tall, angles itself so as to tilt over the viewer. Openings in the wall, seemingly arbitrary, reveal people in pairs and groups, watching...and being watched. Dark, thin wooden slats line the surfaces of the walls, their rhythm enhanced by a few beams of light. The ceiling plane is heavy and ominous. It hangs in the space as light peeks out from its edges.



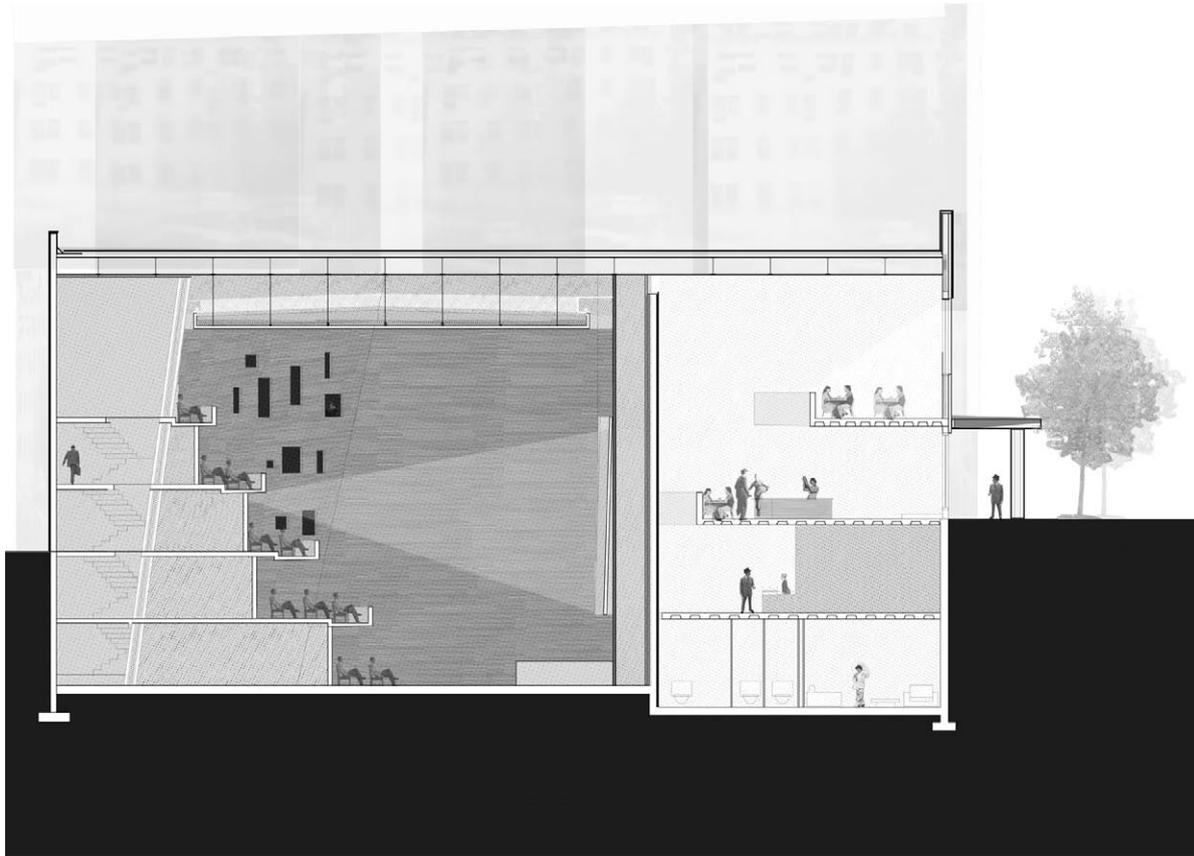


opp.
Interior section of theatre
box, Drawing

Building section of box
seating and ramp, rear
perspective, Drawing



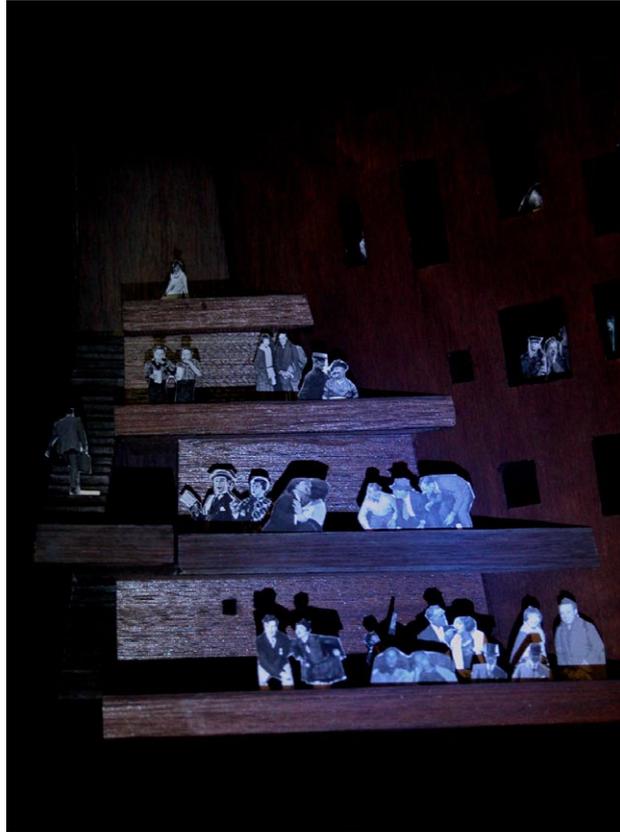
The guests disperse upwards into the audience, moving tentatively at first, then with more determination. Rather than finding their seats, they *discover* them. They make their own way down aisles, into higher balconies, into the box seats- choosing from where they wish to view the film. Every seat offers a different perspective. Every seat allows room to breathe, look around and enjoy its special view.





opp.
North-facing building
section, Drawing

Perspective from upper
balcony, Model



As the lights go down, the thick red curtain on the opposite wall scrolls upward to reveal the glowing screen. Everything fades to black and a hush moves through the audience. Only the flicker of the projection remains. A night at the cinema.



AFTERTHOUGHTS

One of the most troubling aspects in the plight of the American cinema is the loss of identity. Society, more than ever before, is forced to question the purpose and legitimacy of these theatres which, in many cases, still exist only out of nostalgic reverence. The prominence of convenient multiplexes and consumerist tendencies threatens not only these theatres, but the collective opinion about the role of a cinema in the community. As in the present situation of the Oldtown, a great source of confusion arises for the individuals who argue its future. It seems that no one quite knows any longer the purposes of these places.

Allowing oneself a moment of naivete, the most obvious question is presented: 'is this a special place to experience a film?' The simple pleasure of the cool matinee on a hot summer's day. The relaxing assurance that the next 90 minutes are free of interruption or solicitation. The inherent moment of intrigue when a curtain parts. Can it be then, that the real challenge of the Cinema lies not in its ability to compete with the enormity of the Cineplex, but in its striving for an architecture which expresses these timeless qualities? And could it be, that in preparing a building which cultivates such an experience, that the film content shown therein would then be persuaded to aspire to a similar standard?

As this timelessness is achieved, many tired questions become trivial. Gilded ornamentation or austere formalism? Classical acoustics or state-of-the-art technology? The issues fall away, and the nature of the Cinema is revealed, legitimizing itself. A portrait emerges. The identity has been here all along. What is needed is a frame.

Boston Memorial Theatre,
Interior, Thomas Lamb
architect

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IMAGE CREDITS

1. Images of the Richmond Theatre: from archives of Oldtown Theater Community Action Committee, www.oldtowntheater.org
2. Images of Loews Entrance and Cineplex interior, Photographed by Ed Patrick
3. Image Cineplex Lobby, San Francisco: Photographed by Armeen, www.persianpix.com
4. Illustration, Comedie-Francaise: watercolor by A. Meunier, 18th century
5. Boston Memorial Theater: from Historic American Building Survey, Library of Congress



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