The visual and aural environment as part of the 'presentation' used to attract audiences to picture theatres, circa 1910 to 1950.

Ross Thorne.

A number of entrepreneurs developed methods of presenting motion pictures in a theatrical manner, but it was Balaban and Katz, in Chicago, who had developed and shown that 'presentation' was more important to drawing in an audience than the quality of the films to be exhibited. The factors that they found important for presentation were location of the theatre, the design of the building, the service provided by management and employees, stage shows (to supplement the movies), and air-conditioning. Balaban and Katz became the richest and most copied picture theatre chain by 1924.

To describe the importance of the development of presentation the paper delves into the exhibitors' journals in the USA to see that the concept was embraced by architects and decorators, as well as the showmen (or entrepreneurs). The paper proceeds to show the adoption of presentation in Australia with examples drawn from both a country cinema and the deluxe Prince Edward Theatre in Sydney. From when the Prince Edward was built in 1924 to after the advent of television, presentation was important in Australian (as well as US) picture theatres to maintain a regular audience.

Movie film exhibition; Cinema history; Cinema publicity.

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The visual and aural environment as part of the ‘presentation’
used to attract audiences to picture theatres, circa 1910 to 1955.

Ross Thorne

Economic importance of ‘presentation’.

In his book, Shared Pleasures, Douglas Gomery explains the economic importance of presentation to the exhibition of motion pictures. In describing the speedy growth of regional chains of picture palaces in the USA from the mid-teens to mid-twenties of the 20th century, Gomery notes that one of the most successful chains, that of Balaban and Katz in Chicago (later to become the Publix Theatres arm of Paramount Pictures), gained that success from ‘presentation’ rather than the quality of films shown. Indeed, he points out that the chain often had to accept films that other theatres would not show. The firm’s ‘secret’, that made it both the richest and most copied theatre chain in USA by 1924, had five important factors – location, the theatre building, service, stage shows, and air conditioning (Gomery, 1992: 40-54). These factors comprise the term ‘presentation’.

Certainly, when reading the motion picture exhibitors’ journals of, in particular, the 1920s, published in USA, one is taken by the references to ‘psychological’ effect and the (social) understanding of what attracts cinema-goers. The articles were like lessons to exhibitors on how to attract audiences and retain them. Today, the content of these articles appears to possess a certain logic that was forgotten when the first multiplex cinemas were built in the 1970s/80s.

In reading these journals it might be expected that authors who have a proprietary interest in promoting ‘good showmanship’, through the environmental setting of cinema experience (architects and exhibitor company managers), will argue a case for environments that they think might assist to boost audience numbers; but a more academic critic also possessed views similar to those of entrepreneurs and designers associated with the industry. John Grierson was a Scottish academic “who had studied film technique with the eye of a scholar” (Perry, 1974: 95) before going on to make his first, and famous film documentary The Drifters, in 1929, and setting up the National Film Board of Canada at the end of the 1930s. In 1926 Motion Picture News refers to him as a critic in its brief introduction to his article, “Two Principles of Good Showmanship” (Motion Picture News, 31/12/26: 2499). Reproducing the complete description of those two principles is important as a start to this paper. It illustrates that the concept of the picture palace was not only supported by cinema industry “showmen” and their architects, but was also approved (with some reservations) by an observer of the industry. Grierson’s article reinforces what architects and entrepreneur exhibitors also say about the cinema becoming more democratic than live theatre, and providing environments that are aimed to emulate art:

“The industry thinks deeply and acts with certain farsightedness when it comes to showmanship. Who was it first thought of taking people up to the gallery in bronze elevators? The principle was that even the people in the cheap seats should participate in the air of grandeur.

The revolutionary nature of this attitude cannot be overestimated. For the first time in the history of the democratic spirit the common people have been given a generous deal, and the success of the modern movie theatre is largely due to the spirit of good-will which has resulted. The red carpet, the lounges, the decoration, the uniformed attendants, are all evidence of this attitude. Every effort is made to enrich the atmosphere.

Note you, there is no apparent return for this beneficence. On the old outmoded conception of showmanship they are things extra, thrown away, having nothing to do with the immediate transaction of showing people pictures. But anybody of average sense would laugh at a showman who argued that way nowadays. It is precisely this beneficence and these extras, it is precisely the richness of the effects and the variety of the offering, which make for the spirit of good-will and tie
Grierson then describes a showman who, although forward-thinking in 1898 by initiating a cinema in Jersey City, was “born and bred in the old school and incapable of seeing the new point of view”. He finished up running a deadwood-dick movie theatre in a “lone village in the sticks.” This early initiative, then stagnation of ideas by some Australian showmen, can be seen in a few of the papers presented at the 1995 “Going to the Pictures” Conference in Sydney. For those showmen who are receptive to new ideas Grierson goes on to describe his two principles:

“Behind the more modern attitude lies a firm grasp of a very fundamental principle in public appeal. To get under the skin of the public, you must make them wonder. We are all blue-eyed infants more or less, and never quite beyond the fairy tale stage. The picture theatre is or ought to be Ali Baba’s magic cave all over again.

Wonder, of course, is altogether a matter of richness; inexhaustible riches. The argument that people will not notice or appreciate this or the other thing, has no place in the psychology of wonder. It is the mass effect that counts: the very inexhaustibility of the effect. Like Niagara, a theatre at its greatest ought to beat the imagination. This is the only guarantee that it will never grow dull.

The principle of rich effects is so thoroughly grasped in showmanship that there is seemingly no end to the amount of luxury which showmen are prepared to lavish on their houses.

And, according to Grierson, a theatre design must have “staying power” and continue over a long period to create satisfaction and interest in the patrons:

“Here comes the second principle of good showmanship. It is being grasped more slowly than the other. As the first is the principle of richness and variety, the second is the principle of good taste, and good taste involves reserve. With reserve, richness achieves that more intriguing subtlety which preserves it from the vulgarity of pomp. Dignity lasts; a dignified theatre lasts. Howling and ballyhoo – whether it is in publicity or in theatre decoration, or in showmanship in general – last only for a time. The knock-em-dead school is out of date in first line showmanship; it frays the nerves.

The reason for this is that the picture theatre has a place to keep in the affection of its people. Its relation to the public is not the relationship of a mistress or a lady of the line; it is more constant. People take it on a diet, as regularly as they used to take the church. It is something the community is coming to live with and belong to, almost as one might belong to a church. It is their palace of dreams – the only palace of dreams which means anything very much to the common people of the modern world. Necessarily, that palace wins out in which the dreams are most magical and the appeal most constant” (Grierson, 1926: 2499).

Grierson goes on to suggest that the richness and atmosphere of the cathedrals of medieval Europe – but not necessarily the architecture – should be the inspiration to showmen to produce a new generation of super theatres that make people “wonder and wonder continuously”. He then turns his attention to the film makers – their inertia in not using better film stock, and not using effects of photography and lighting that are available in 1926.

At the start of the article Grierson praises whoever thought of the idea of taking people up
to the balcony in bronze elevators. It should be noted that live theatres, built at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th century, had their balcony access direct from the street up a mean plain stairway that emptied directly into the balcony that possibly did not possess upholstered seats (See for example, Birkmire, 1901; Sachs, 1898: 82). Most of the balcony seats were under a rather plain section of the auditorium ceiling that sloped up from the main domed space, thus forming, with the floor, a coupled or appended space that was referred to in condemnatory tones as a ‘well’ by Sachs (1897: 37). It was like an enlarged version of the isolated spaces tucked up at the corner of the wall and ceiling of European and Scandinavian royal court theatres that were used by the servants of the royal family. Like servants, balcony patrons were seen as members of lower-class society.

It is not entirely clear who was responsible for placing the gallery or balcony fully within the auditorium space, although architects, George and C.W Rapp claim at least some of the credit. Certainly it seems that they integrated patrons for the balcony with those for other parts of the house through the one lofty entrance lobby, thus democratising theatre design. They designed their first theatre in Chicago in 1902 after standing night after night at the exits of the then famous playhouses, “watching the expressions and listening to comment as the crowds of theatre-goers passed in and out.” Design principles were evolved from this informal evaluation:

“People want a clear direct view of the stage. This requires the elimination of all pillars and columns, substituting therefore the elliptical shape construction. The purchaser of the cheapest ticket dislikes the feeling that he is isolated from the rest of the auditorium. And so there has been introduced broad and gradually ascending staircases leading up from the lofty and impressive lobbies, making the way to the upper levels of the auditorium attractive and inviting” (Rapp, 1923: xi)

This view was reinforced by architect, John E. O’ Malley (1923) who, after designing the Leroy Theatre at Pawtucket, Rhode Island, said that the balcony contained the key to the design of the auditorium; that is, “to make the balcony attractive to the people to overcome their feeling that the balcony is markedly a second-class part of the house” (pp xi, xxxiii). S. Charles Lee (1929), architect from the West Coast of USA, referred to stairs that “pull up instead of encouraging down”.

With regard to a direct view of the stage, it was as early as 1897 that the Her Majesty’s Theatre in London was designed with only four posts set back four rows from the front of the dress circle rather than being at the front edge of the circle. At the same time the balcony above, possessed no posts, and ten rows were within the main decorated auditorium space (Sachs, 1897, II: 35,36 plus plates, n.p.n.). In Australia, the theatre architect, William Pitt, remained well within 19th century design themes up to 1911 when he redesigned the auditorium of the Theatre Royal, Hobart, with a forest of posts supporting the two tiers above the stalls. It was not until 1915 that his design followed a more contemporary style with the Hoyts De Luxe picture theatre in Melbourne (see Thorne, 1971 and Thorne, 1976) The second Australasian theatre architect Henry White, was more up to date in his design. However, he too remained locked into a style of engineering and decoration from 1911, when he designed the St James Theatre in Wellington, New Zealand, to 1921 when he changed his decorative style from Louis XV (which he incorrectly termed Louis Seize) to quasi-Adam (possibly copying it from Thomas Lamb’s theatre examples in USA). His alterations to the Theatre Royal in Sydney, when he rebuilt the auditorium in his Adam style, provided none of the improved conditions for gallery patrons as advocated by George Rapp. It was not until 1926, with the design of the St. James Theatre, Sydney, that White achieved the kind of design for gallery patrons that had been occurring in the USA since before 1920. The two picture theatres in Australia that first fully followed the principles of “good showmanship” or presentation were the Prince Edward, Sydney (1924), and Capitol in Melbourne (1924) – both commissioned by independent exhibitors (not by the two established cinema chains, Hoyts and Union Theatres), and both designed by architectural
firms not generally associated with theatre design – Robertson and Marks, and Walter Burley Griffin respectively.

**Samuel ("Roxy") Rothapfel and his influence on presentation.**

The concept of 'presentation' of movies may have been one of those ideas that came to a number of people at the same time but the person who is attributed as having the edge on his competitors was Samuel L. Rothapfel, nicknamed 'Roxy' – the first Roxy – the originator of the name for all those cinemas and milk bars.

Ben Hall (1961: 28,29) provides a summary of his formative years as a presenter of motion pictures. Rothapfel took over a large room behind his father-in-law’s tavern in the little mining town of Forest City, Pennsylvania, and opened it as Rothapfel’s Family Theatre at the start of 1908. He and his wife performed all the tasks from painting posters and distributing handbills to cranking the hand operated projector. He constantly experimented and thought up new ideas. He provided a curtain over the bed-sheet screen, then changing coloured lights around the screen. This was followed by augmenting the musical accompaniment, with the members of his new trio providing solos during reel changes of the films.

Rothapfel’s little theatre grew to hire as many films as a busy city nickelodeon and so commenced to attract attention from within the embryonic industry. Vaudeville entrepreneur, B.J. Keith, was showing films as an add-on to his variety acts in his chain of theatres across USA. He commissioned Rothapfel to improve the motion picture presentations on all Keith vaudeville programs. During one of his intercity train trips Roxy met Herman Fehr who owned a large, handsome (live) theatre in Milwaukee – but it was a flop as a money maker. Fehr persuaded Rothapfel to take over the organisation of his Alhambra Theatre. But rather than retain it as a live theatre Rothapfel convinced Fehr to make it a movie house not presenting the then usual variety of short films but the new much longer “photoplays” (i.e. feature films) that told complete stories. Roxy almost bankrupted Fehr in his make-over of the Alhambra right down to the uniforms for, and training of ushers in “courteous manners”, and writing an “elegantly composed” letter to all the community business leaders in Milwaukee drawing their attention to the “beautiful new theatre”. Success followed.

That train trip was from Minneapolis where Rothapfel had been organising the presentation to include films at Keith’s Lyric (vaudeville) Theatre. J.S. McQuade of the *Moving Picture World* interviewed him in Minneapolis and, in 1911, wrote a couple of articles about this “Belasco of moving picture presentation” (Belasco being the doyen stage producer of the late 19th century). McQuade then said:

“He takes a picture that ordinarily awakens but little interest and transforms what were only shadows into living, sentient beings whose varied emotions fill us with joy or sadness, or thrill us with fear. How he takes one into the very atmosphere of the story, so that we live amid scenes and listen to its sounds” (McQuade, 1911).

In reviewing Rothapfel’s career nine years later McQuade remained just as complimentary: “The influence by Mr Rothapfel on moving picture entertainment and indirectly on the production of moving pictures and the uplift of the entire industry has been invaluable. He has aided greatly in raising the moving picture from the level of a mere toy, a plaything, to the importance of a thing of art and beauty, and of intellectual enjoyment” (McQuade, 1920: 1065).

This adulation of his presentation skills continued over into the era of sound films when Rothapfel organised the entertainments and presentation for the opening of the Radio City Music Hall and its sister theatre (demolished 1954). He was recognised as having “created a

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1. For the St James (Her Majestys) Theatre, Wellington, the information was gained when the author was a consultant to the Historic Places Trust of New Zealand to save the theatre. See Thorne, (1971) for Theatre Royal, Sydney, and the St. James, Sydney. The Prince Edward Theatre and Capitol Theatre, Melbourne may be found in Thorne (1981).
unique type of entertainment and a new influence in the show world” (Herschel, 1932: 58), and as “the legendary movie-house impresario” by Jowett in his social history of American film (1976: 60).

That influence was to snowball from 1911 after his work at the Alhambra Theatre in Milwaukee. Returning a worthwhile profit within a week of opening, an opposition movie chain, after three months, paid Herman Fehr handsomely to gain control of the theatre (Hall, 1961: 30). Rothapfel was tired of being troubleshooter and designer of the total presentation of a theatre, he wanted to be a theatre manager in his own right. He and the family moved to New York where he met Henry Marvin, founder of the Biograph (film production) Company. Marvin had employed Thomas Lamb to design what Hall (1961: 31) claims to be the first deluxe theatre built expressly for the showing of movies. The Regent Theatre opened in February 1913, but it was right up at 116th Street at Seventh Avenue in the then German immigrant section of Harlem. It was what would be the archetypal two-level picture theatre design – a stalls that sloped back under a deep balcony (that in turn contained both expensive front lounge and cheaper rear seats) supported without sight obstructing posts by trusses hidden within its depth. It possessed a highly decorative proscenium that framed a wide stage, plus columns, cartouches, friezes and cornices, lavishly gilded, throughout the lobby and auditorium. The Motion Picture News said “there is no finer theatre in New York in point of construction” (Hall, 1961: 35).

Notwithstanding such a fine theatre the original management floundered, it lost money, and S.L.Rothapfel was brought in hopefully to be the white knight. He sized up the neighbourhood and its likely tastes, closed the theatre, changed the position of projection to achieve a better picture, enlarged the orchestra and placed it within a scenic setting on stage, and “began assembling a music library of opera-house pretension”. He needed this so before a film was shown “he painstakingly scored it with an accompaniment to fit the action and mood of each scene, drawing from Beethoven to Herbert and leaning most heavily on the Russians” (Hall, 1961: 32). The Regent reopened under Rothapfel’s management at the end of November, 1913, being lauded by the Motion Picture News as “a remarkable incident in the history of the motion picture took place Monday evening of last week at the Regent Theatre...mechanically as well as artistically, the presentation was flawless throughout. It was, from every standpoint, the best that has been seen in this city” (Hall, 1961: 33,35). Quite a feat for New York.

In 1913 Mitchell and Moe Mark commissioned Thomas Lamb to design the best theatre possible at Broadway and 476th Street, then lured Roxy Rothapfel downtown from the Regent in Harlem.. The [Mark] Strand Theatre opened on April 11, 1914, again to rave reviews both for the lavish architecture (with the innovation of luxurious Louis XVI furnished ladies retiring rooms), and what then was a stunning integrated performance of music and (silent) films. Following this success Roxy was hired and “given a free hand in making another Rothapfel landmark” – the Rialto Theatre at Broadway and 42nd Street, which he called a “Temple to the Motion Picture – Shrine of Music and Allied Arts” (Hall, 1961: 45) It opened on April 21, 1916. Thomas Lamb was again the architect, designing it in the Adam style, to be later used repeatedly from 1921 to 1926, by Henry White in his makeovers of existing Australian theatres (Princess, St. James, Athenaeum in Melbourne, and Theatre Royal, Sydney) and the new St. James, Sydney.

The owners of the Rialto decided to build another theatre further up Broadway at 49th Street, and make Samuel Rothapfel the director of both theatres. The new Rivoli Theatre was also designed by Thomas Lamb, this time with a facade replicating much of a classical Greek doric temple, and interior being in Italian Renaissance – " a Rothapfel Masterpiece", headlined the Exhibitors’ Herald (Vol. 6, 3, January 12, 1918: 17). It opened on December 28, 1917.
Roxy's golden touch was to remain until the opening of the Radio City Music Hall at the Rockefeller Centre in 1932, but he had suffered a heart attack and did not produce his usual magic on opening night. He declined and died in 1936 (Hall, 1961: 256, 257) but his legacy, particularly of those heydays from 1913 to 1918 were picked up by movie-house entrepreneurs, until his style was almost universal in deluxe picture theatres across USA by 1925.

The factors that comprise ‘presentation.

Picture theatre chains were originally regional in nature – Loews belonged to New York (before growing and finally buying Louis B. Mayer's Metro and Goldwyn's film production studios, and becoming the vertically integrated nationwide combine of MGM and Loew's Theatres). The Stanley Company belonged to Philadelphia (before expanding and being bought by Warner Bros.). Gomery claims that neither of these companies established the standard for running a national theatre chain. This would be the accomplishment of Balaban and Katz of Chicago: “By 1924 this one company was making more money than any theatre chain in the United States and was being copied from coast to coast” (Gomery, 1992: 40). But when Sam Katz joined the Balaban brothers in 1916 they “decided to follow the model of Samuel Rothafel's New York City Rivoli and Rialto theatres (sic)” (Gomery, 1992:41). Rather than employ Thomas Lamb as their architect Balaban and Katz used George and C.W. Rapp who in 1911-12, had visited Bordeaux, Paris, and Versailles from where the “palace and theatre built under the lavish patronage of Louis XIV became the inspiration for many of the present-day American theatres”. They studied Italian architecture the following year. (Exhibitors Herald 17, 10/11/23 “Better Theatres”, vi).

As mentioned at the start of this paper Balaban and Katz evolved five important factors to create their total presentation of motion pictures, Gomery (1992) also claims that this and other movie chains used the principles behind the development of the 5 and 10 cent (and supermarket) chain stores that commenced in USA at the end of the 19th century (but did not really get underway in Australia until the 1930s). Suitable location was important for the economic success of both types of chains. Then, for picture theatres, there were the building, the service provided by the staff, and the stage shows (integrated with the movie exhibition). These were developed from Rothafel's model of presentation. As soon as available Balaban and Katz added air conditioning to the other four. This, (from 1921 at the new Chicago Theatre) was a drawcard in itself on stifling hot summer days when other theatre managers expected a reduction in patronage. So, what was so unique about the three factors inspired by Rothafel's management of the Rialto and Rivoli Theatres?

In June 1925, the respected American journal Architectural Forum, published a special large edition (some 125 pages) sub-titled, “Motion Picture Theater Reference Number”. The first article was written by Samuel Rothafel (he dropped the “p” before the “f” in later life). Other articles were written by the famous theatre architects, Thomas Lamb, John Eberson, Howard Crane, a representative of George and C.W. Rapp, and a few consulting engineers. It must be remembered that these architects and Rothafel often talk of taste and art in the theatre designs for which they were responsible. They were a product of an era that used architectural styles from the past and were educated in American schools of architecture that were based on the French Ecole des Beaux Arts:

“A return to traditionalism was accepted by the country at that time [in the 1890s]; it also accepted a return to the grandiose, and to the Federal style of architecture which had dominated the horizon in Washington. By the end of the century . . . theatres . . . continued to build in the styles as they became fashionable. If any particular period seemed to attract the theatre owners, it was the Renaissance – so long a symbol for the artistic way of life” (Edwards, 1963:204).

These theatre architects were simply continuing within a tradition. Late 19th century theatres, such as New York's Fifth Avenue Theatre (1893 rebuild), possessed architecturally elaborate foyers (Edwards, 1963:Plate LXXXIX) that would rival many of those of the later picture palaces.
It would not be until the end of the 1920s that the manifestos of the spartan decorationless Modern Movement would infiltrate, then indoctrinate the education and taste of architects and the visually educated ‘elites’². By the 1950s the movie palaces of the 1920s would be seen as vulgar, tasteless and lacking in ‘Art’, because they belonged to some ‘style’³. Their architects would be despised as if they should have known better, even before anything of the Modern Movement in architecture had been published⁴. These after-the-event dismissive attitudes indicate, in my opinion, a lack of logic and anti-intellectual nature of some members of the architectural profession.

In the following, therefore, it should be remembered that the architects of the 1920s considered the reuse of Italian Renaissance elements, as in the Capitol and State (later Forum) theatres in Sydney and Melbourne respectively, Louis XIV and XV styles as in the State Theatre, Sydney, or neo-classical and Adam styles as in the Regent Theatre, Melbourne – and a number of others in various parts of the buildings – quite legitimate and tasteful if used ‘correctly’ according to the architectural mores of the time.

Samuel Rothapfel, in his article said:
“First of all, the public likes to permit its imagination to have full play. Its intelligence must not be under-rated. It must be given credit for as much discrimination as that of the exhibitor who offers his entertainment to the public. One must avoid striking false notes, and should strive to get real human-ness into the programs, - and it can be done” (Rothapfel, 1925: 362).

This, of course, was the antithesis of the Modern Movement and its adherents late in the 20th century – it wished to tell the public what it must have as a product of the “expert” making his or her “personal statement”. By contrast, Rothapfel expressed his manifesto in a conciliatory vein rather than one of arrogance:
“We make no attempt to ‘please the public’, a phrase which is easily bandied about, for the simple reason that we do not presume to know what it is the public really does want. But we do know one thing. We try to keep faith with our public. We try to create a program based on the fundamentals of good taste, honesty and sincerity, and within the bounds of average intelligence.”

This did not mean ‘playing down’ to some perceived lowest common denominator for he points out that the musical works of Tchaikowsky, Liszt, Beethoven and Wagner were all well received – even Richard Strauss’ Heldenleben was an “overwhelming success” and “its reception by our audiences was the most gratifying and encouraging element in the performance of this composition, and it justified our belief that our audiences are the finest in the world and capable of rising to the greatest heights of aesthetic appreciation....” (Rothafel, 1925: 362).

Roxy spurned the “old-time showman” who demaded, “Give the public what it wants” This attitude, to Rothapfel, simply belonged “to a long forgotten age”. He also did not believe that the picture is the only thing:

2. Early Modern Movement architects such as Auguste Perret and Adolf Loos were against the use of decoration. Loos went so far as to say it was “a crime” (Blake, 1964:22). A review of the attitudes of later Modernists, especially towards theatre design, is discussed in Thorne (1994:90-94). Whereas the first volume of American Theatres of Today took the traditional view of picture palace design (Sexton and Betts, 1927/1977), the second volume (Sexton, 1930/1977) had one chapter by architect, Ben Schlanger (1930/1977), who stated that “theatre architectural decorative manner” (1977:5).

3. In his Introduction to The Look of Architecture Witold Rybczynsk (New York:2001:xi-xiv) explains how architects from the beginning of the Modern Movement, to the present, have refused to accept that they are designing in a style They like to think that “Style” belongs to the past, yet Rybczynsk shows that they cannot escape from designing in a style. Even if avant-garde at the time of the design, it will be seen as fitting to a style sometime in the future. During the author’s studying architecture from 1950-1954, the design/history lecturers considered picture palace architecture as vulgar pastiches of past architectural styles, and attempted to indoctrinate me and my colleagues (with some success) into the bare “rational” and “functional” delights of the Modern Movement. My own designs successfully followed this “pure” architecture even with the addition of a little romantic warmth. As late as the mid-1990s the overseeing architect for the restoration of the Capitol Theatre, Sydney. Andrew Andersons (who completed his architectural education in 1961, and designed some fine Modern buildings) commented to me that he felt almost guilty resurrecting a plaster rendition of a Florentine walled garden under a midnight blue sky ceiling of an internal space.
Of course the picture is important, and we could not do without it; but what we have tried to do is to build around it an atmospheric program that is colorful, entertaining and interesting. This type of program, with its ballets, musical presentations, stage settings and lighting effects, calculated to form a series of pictures sometimes contrasting and sometimes gracefully merging into one another, was originated by ourselves" (Rothafel, 1925: 362-363).

At a time when the musical accompaniment for films was drawn either from rolls (for automatic piano players and similar instruments) or sheet music of existing compositions without much relationship to the action, Samuel Rothapfel considered that music “should do more than merely accompany the picture. Its function is to interpret the action and character of the picture, to lift it up and carry it over the flat dimensions of the screen. It is interpretative music that supplies the body and foundation of the presentation... [And] the lighting, too, is most important ....Neither is it an indiscriminate or haphazard throwing together of colors, since behind each lighting effect there is an idea, consistently conceived and executed”. (Rothafel, 1925: 363).

He believed that “elemental passions and emotions have their counterparts in the primary colors”, and different ranges of colours expressed the emotional nature of the individual music used.

The shared view of ‘presentation’ by architects and decorators with showmen.

In 1927 the editor of the Motion Picture News acknowledged “the fact” that showmanship “is not alone concerned with the selection of pictures, the arrangement of programs and the advertising and exploitation of the show, [but also it] is illustrated in the unique and remarkable method developed by an interior decorator who has classified and interpreted the public’s preferences for colors and decoration, and which is described in detail in this issue” (MPN, May, 1927, “The Showman” n.p.n.).

The article referred to commences by saying that: 
“Soon after it was discovered that a theatre, by reason of its impressive architecture and sumptuous furnishings, could be capitalized as a co-attraction of the entertainment, enhancing the drawing power of the motion picture and stage shows which it housed, there began a systematic study of the public’s reactions to the various types of theatre decorations.” It claimed that: “there have been many instances where the change of a color scheme to something better suited to a type of theatre and audience catered to have been reflected in box office receipts”. It then provides a number of examples from architect-cum-interior decorator Ann Dornin, who was “on loan” to Loews Inc. from Thomas Lamb’s architectural office. She provides examples both of colours and schemes that have been ‘successful’ and some ‘unsuccessful colours’, saying that colour “plays an important part upon the emotions... and has the power to cheer and animate, or quiet and subdue...” (Dornin, 1927: n.p.n.).

The notion of stimulating pleasurable emotions was discussed further by Frank Cambria, the Art Director of (Paramount’s) Publix Theatres Stage Productions. He said: “The fact that the success of artistic decoration in the theatre is measured by its ability to stimulate pleasurable emotion upon the majority of the people explains the prevalence of the colorful treatments used in the deluxe picture houses. Architects and decorators have sought their inspiration and styles in the productions of the Orient, the Mediterranean countries, the Louis XIV period, in which the Renaissance reached its highest degree of splendor in France” (Cambria, 1927: 2185).

He describes how the lobbies and foyers are designed to hold the attention of patrons while they are waiting in line, then maintains that interest as they are psychologically ‘led’ up the grand stairway towards the auditorium. Cambria certainly understands what audience members expect when they go to a theatre – something which theatre directors and designers have not understood in the last three decades of the 20th century, with many insisting on
dark or black auditoria:
“The first impression the theatre should create is one of brightness, gaiety. People coming to a theatre are seeking amusement and they are in the frame of mind to be pleased by effects that make an immediate impression of attractiveness. Objects which quickly engage the attention are therefore needed in the decorative scheme – spaciousness, elegance and the vivid coloring of a fairyland are the elements of the ensemble.” (Cambria, 1927: 2187).

Harold Rambusch was a major interior decorator of theatres. He also wrote along similar lines to Dornin and Cambria, further illustrating the concern for the patrons as well as the clients:
“Decoration may be defined as the treatment of a room already built in such a manner that it should be adapted to its specific use . . . . Decoration is done to affect the comfort or mood of people….It is our end to create a definite mood in a definite room.” (Rambusch, 1930: 23)

He includes ventilation and heating as part of ‘our decoration’ because they also affect comfort and mood. He said that the auditorium is the most important room since the audience spends most of its time there. And although its members are mainly interested in the performance, this “does not prevent them from being subconsciously affected by the scheme of decoration”. So although the audience may not be specifically conscious of the decoration, Rambusch claims that will “make them appreciate the show either more or less”. He describes the theatre – either live or movie – as it had developed through the teens and twenties of the 20th century, to when he was writing in 1930:
“The modern theatre is more than a house in which to see a picture or to produce an act. It has a very important place in our social and economic structure. The vast majority of those attending our theatres are of very limited means. Their homes are not luxurious and the theatre affords them an opportunity to imagine themselves as wealthy people in luxurious surroundings. They may come here as often as they please by paying a small fee within their means and feel themselves to be the lords of all they survey. In our big modern movie palaces there are collected the most gorgeous rugs, furniture and fixtures that money can produce….In a sense these theatres are the social safety valves in that the public can partake of the same luxurious surroundings as the rich and use them to the same full extent” (Rambusch, 1930: 24).

Rambusch distinguishes between “gaudy and vulgar taste” desired by some film producers and “rich and good taste”. He says that “the best architects and theatre decorators disagree with them [i.e. the film producers] and believe that the public is fully satisfied with good taste provided it is sufficiently pompous and ostentatious”, and that a theatre is not the place for “reserve and refinement in its most constrained form” (p.25). He acknowledged Samuel Rothapfel’s theory that the public be given the very finest and best taste in music and art, but “a trifle richer than you would in a home”.

Like other prominent theatre decorators and architects of the time Rambusch (1930: 26) claimed that “decoration is decidedly psychological and colors are of enormous psychological

5. From the 1970s to the turn of the century many black or very dark theatre auditoria have been built or reconditioned in such a way. They range from the Opera Theatre at the Sydney Opera House (and the Drama Theatre) to the theatre at the Araluen Arts Centre at Alice Springs, Northern Territory. This “colour” is recommended by theatre company artistic directors, or directors who have become ‘theatre consultants’. When the black and deep navy blue York Theatre, Seymour Centre, Sydney came up for refurbishing in the early 1990s, the original architects and some members of the management committee regretted the original sombre colour scheme and wanted the space brightened up. The committee chairperson consulted entrepreneurs who might have hired the theatre; they said “No, we would prefer it all black!” As anecdotal evidence indicated that audiences found the original scheme depressing they said a compromise colour scheme was produced – although still too dark.

Unlike their counterparts in the Melbourne Arts Centre, Covent Garden Opera House (London) or the Metropolitan Opera House (New York), Sydney’s opera-goers are forced to sit in a black auditorium gazing at a plain black stage curtain because, it is claimed, a coloured curtain detracts from the mood of the opera. The authors of such arrogance are simply treating their audiences as sub-normal beings who cannot differentiate the two experiences – one of sitting and waiting in the lit auditorium as it fills, needing something to keep them mentally stimulated with a feeling of expectation, and the other of focussing on the new experience of, hopefully, a stimulating performance on the stage when the auditorium is darkened.

Cinema owners and operators were swayed by similar arguments when the first multiplexes were built. Hoyts, in its George Street complex that opened in 1976 followed this pattern with black painted boxes as auditoria.
value. Our warm golden colors tend to make people glad and cheerful...."

Paul J. Henon (1928: n.p.n.) of Hoffman-Henon, Architects (who had designed some one hundred picture palaces in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and other cities in eastern USA), asserted that the showman had "delegated to the theatre architect a considerable share of his added responsibilities. He has required the architect to merge beauty, utility, safety and economy of operation in the theatre plant". He said that each of the terms was used with special significance, giving as an example, that of 'beauty'. He said that it "means beauty not in the classic sense. It is here used not in the abstract – but specifically to mean that which shall be held beautiful by the particular type of people upon whom the particular theatre will be dependent for its patronage . . . . Indeed, the theatre architect is required to assume responsibility for the success of the theatre he designs for all time after he has turned the completed plant over to the . . . operator for its conduct as an amusement center" (Henon, 1928: n.p.n.).

The examples provided in the photographs of Hoffman-Henon designed theatres are truly profuse in decoration yet refined, ranging from the Adam Brothers through neo-classicism generally, to Edwardian.

To emphasise the importance of the architect at this time for this particular building type Paul Henon commented:
"A theatre proprietor often finds that there is something that deflects trade from his house, but not always is he able to determine exactly what that something is. The fact that the specialist in theatre architecture is in most cases better able to diagnose the ailment seems rather conclusively proved by the number of instances wherein the architect has successfully analysed the situation when called in for consultation" (Henon, 1928: n.p.n.).

John Eberson (1927) supported this opinion of the architect’s role in theatre design. Eberson claimed that he was the "originator of the atmospheric style" where an auditorium had a simulated sky ceiling surrounded by walls that represented exterior walls derived from past architectural styles (e.g. Venetian or Spanish Renaissance) or from exotic places (e.g. Persia or China). His first example of this 'open-sky style' was built in 1923, but it seems that he was unaware of the Cort Theatre, a 1908 example built in Chicago and designed by J.E.O. Pridmore (1929), (and had conveniently forgotten historic examples with sky ceilings such as the Teatro Olimpico at Vicenza). Notwithstanding his claim, it was Eberson’s architectural office that promoted the style and was responsible for the design of many examples (even in Australia with the Capitol Theatre, Sydney), and he discussed what he believed a theatre architect should be and does (Eberson, 1927: n.p.n.).

First, Eberson was convinced that to be a successful theatre architect one had to be a showman, meaning, "to make your audience feel at home, to make them feel that they have a most important role to play in the entertainment which they are attending". And to achieve this "it is most necessary to create a warm and friendly atmosphere in the theatre" (Eberson, 1927: n.p.n.). In designing a genuine atmospheric theatre, Eberson felt that the detail design work was considerable, being more than for a traditional formal ‘indoor’ theatre style. As he and his office staff were "glorifying classic architecture, and are copying Mediterranean art in color, sculpture and form . . . to make the illusion perfect requires not only a thorough understanding and knowledge of old world architecture, but we must know how to transform and create these antique soft textured and interestingly polychromed buildings with modern tools and artcraft."

The psychological nature of colours arises with Eberson as it did with Ann Dornin and Harold Rambusch. Today we might look askance at the claim of “fact” for the effect of the particular blue Eberson used for his sky ceilings:
"It releases the nerve tension of the audience; refreshes the eye; makes one feel that one can breathe, and it has one hundred and one beneficial effects on the mind and nerves. Blue is always described as the color of Hope. This is not a fanciful and trivial sentiment, but a fact which can
be scientifically proved, but it must be a certain, defined and distinct blue on a certain defined and distinct textured surface” (Eberson, 1927: n.p.n.).

Thomas Lamb (1928: n.p.n.) thought that decoration should be “defined in psychological terms”, while H.B. Franklin (1929: 17-19) believed that different theatres were uniquely expressive: “they have distinct and consistent personalities.”

Lamb designed his first theatre in 1909 (Hall, 1961:105) and his office blossomed from that time to designing many theatres across USA, and even in Australia with the original Metro Theatre, built in Adelaide in 1939 (Thorne, 1981:224).

He believed in the concepts promulgated by Rothapfel and the need to understand what the intentions of the showmen were in ‘presentation’. His own ideas are fairly well summarised in the following paragraph:

“To make our audience receptive and interested, we must cut them off from the rest of the city life and take them into a rich and self-contained auditorium, where their minds are freed from their usual occupations and freed from their customary thoughts. In order to do this, it is necessary to present to their eyes a general scheme quite different from their daily environment, quite different in color scheme, and a great deal more elaborate. The theatre can afford this, and must afford it for our public is large, and in the average not wealthy. The theatre is the palace of the average man. As long as he is there, it is his, and it helps him to lift himself out of his daily drudgery” (Lamb, 1928: n.p.n.).

Another architect who was very aware of the claimed effect of a space and its decoration on the people who visit and/or use that space was C.A. Balch (1929). He reminded the readers of Motion Picture News that “on the first visit of a theatre patron he comes with an open mind. The first things he sees form an impression. The beauty of lobby and foyer he can see and appreciate. Its pleasing decoration and lighting puts him into a pleasant frame of mind” (Balch, 1929: 25).

Constantly in these articles there is mentioned the effects of colour, space, style, decoration etc. on people – theatre patrons – and on their ‘moods’, ‘nerves’ and ‘psychology’. Eberson even claimed that some effects were ‘fact’.

However, in the seventy odd years that have followed the 1920s there have been very few systematic studies of such characteristics. For example, studies that have evaluated colour preferences, where a general colour theme (of more than one colour, shade or tint) has been used within a ‘lived-in’ environment, are rare. Certainly a study of elevator lobbies by Hall et al (1976) confirmed that people perceive one visual dimension that can be termed ‘warm-cool’ in lighting/colour, and another separate one that can be termed ‘patterned-plain’ in texture. Such a study indicates that these dimensions are important to people’s perception but do not indicate which ‘end’ of the dimension, if any, is preferred. Another study has compared office environments showing a preference for ‘colourful’ as opposed to ‘drab’ environments where the office workers selected the design that confirmed the respective descriptions (Thorne and Turnbull, 1992: 63,64). However this study found that “good appearance is only appreciated after functional items are satisfied,” but “function and appearance are not mutually exclusive”. It also found that “the design of an interior does not only communicate a pleasing appearance and feelings of spaciousness which may be satisfactory to the employee, it also communicates a particular image to both the employees and visitors to the office by the symbols it uses” (Thorne and Turnbull, 1992: 59).

Likewise, in looking at what has been said about theatres by the entrepreneurs and architects, although dressed up in unacademic language, we find that they have been aware that the functions of seeing and hearing, and air conditioning (or at least good ventilation) cannot be separated from visual appearance. That is, they are not mutually exclusive. Also,
since an ‘image’ is important for an office design, an image that symbolises ‘theatre’ to its patrons is important. This was achieved, as we have seen, by their using the current styles of architecture, but with a (theatrical) exaggeration – making them a little richer and somewhat more sumptuous than when used for other building types. This appears to be a reasonable intuitive assumption to make, and decrying it, as was done by a later generation of Modern Movement architects, simply indicates a lack of understanding of the socio-cultural nature of this architecture for its time (and possibly later, with the general population’s constant love of homes and furnishings that reflect historical styles).

The adoption of ‘presentation’ in Australia.
The concept of ‘presentation’ that has been detailed above was an ideal that was available in Australia in three to four de luxe picture theatres in each of the cities of Melbourne and Sydney and fewer in the other capital cities. In ‘lesser’ theatres in the capitals, large country towns and ‘better’ suburbs, the concept was modified, usually by dropping the stage show, but there remained the decorative architecture, the uniformed ushers, the coloured lighting; and some had an organist to keep the patrons entertained during the interval, and who presented a short ‘concert’ that may have preceded the main feature (i.e. the second half of the program).

However, to achieve this there was ‘encouragement’ from the US film producers via their Australian distributing subsidiary companies (Shirley and Adams, 1983: 78). Some of them threatened to build their own theatres if ‘better’ ones were not built by exhibitors, at least in the main capital cities. On the publicity side, the distributors required “US style and scale” in a films publicity campaign (Collins, 1987: 162). Suburban and country picture theatres set up publicity events outside their theatres or in the form of decorated vehicles to tour the district. Such were frequently suggested by the publicity departments of the movie distributors, and at times, were taken up with alacrity by managers with a flair for ‘showmanship’. Other types of publicity for the theatre itself were derived from competitions held, particularly at special children’s matinees; and the charity events in the theatre for the benefit of, say, the local hospital or wartime soldiers’ comfort funds. The distributors were somewhat assuaged with the building of the major picture palaces in the capital cities at the end of the 1920s decade – some opening in 1930 (e.g. the

![Publicity events pursued by one cinema in the NSW country town of Junee in the 1930s.](image)

A charity “Queen” in a fund-raising event in 1941, for the Second World War, held at the Athenium Theatre, Junee, NSW.
Plaza, Sydney) but, instead, individual distributors took the step of contracting with major exhibitors to only show films from that company’s present studio (such as the Prince Edward Theatre only showing Paramount pictures). Notwithstanding, Metro Goldwyn Mayer did go into the ownership or long lease of picture theatres in the 1930s and continued thus into the 1950s (e.g. the Metro Theatres in mainland capitals, including Kings Cross, Sydney; and the Liberty and St James also in Sydney); and 20th Century Fox gained access by purchasing Hoyts Theatres Ltd. Thus the Rothapfel inspired influence on ‘presentation’ arrived indirectly to Australia through the film distribution arms of the US film studios and the US film exhibition journals which, in turn, transported much of the philosophy to Australian exhibitors’ journals. In 1948 the supplement in The Film Weekly celebrating the 40th anniversary of Hoyts Theatres commences and is spotted throughout with lines that could have come out of US exhibitors’ journals of the mid-1920s:

“Only in the correct setting can a film impart the full richness of its entertainment value. Quality product alone is insufficient to maintain the motion picture as the foremost entertainment medium for the whole community.”

“. . . methodically and deliberately, the task of staffing the circuit with showmen who knew their business was tackled”.

“. . . The first step in practical showmanship is the provision of the theatres whose very atmosphere – that quality brought about by cheerful service and courtesy, comfort, cleanliness and general efficiency – attracts and holds patronage. The second stage lies in presentation – the highly complex and exacting business of welding the actual show so the maximum degree of entertainment is achieved . . . . The third stage lies in retailing the show to the public” (The Film Weekly, 18 March 1948, Supplement, 4, 5).

Generally, Australian theatre architects were a few years ‘behind’ their American counterparts. The Capitol Theatre, Melbourne was extraordinary for Walter Burley Griffin’s design drawings date from 1921, yet, being rich and ostentatious, it was not in any past architectural style.
The Prince Edward Theatre in Sydney, also opened in 1924, was indeed “up with the US trend’, but the output of the major theatre architect, Henry White was lagging. In the early 1920s until 1926 he followed the Adam Brothers style of refined neo-classicism, as Thomas Lamb and Hoffman-Henon had done in USA. It was his trip to USA with Union Theatres’ director, Stuart Doyle, that he changed to the more ostentatious styles. But then he was virtually pushed into the change by Union Theatres’ employing John Eberson from USA to provide the sketch and some detail design for both the Capitol and State Theatres, Sydney, for which Henry White became the Australian associate architect. The first of those designs published was for the State Theatre in the *Motion Picture News* for July 1st, 1927, with photographs of the completed building in the same journal for October 5th, 1929 (pp. 1221-1223) – both noting the role of Eberson. The completed Capitol Theatre was published in the US *Exhibitor’s Herald-World*, February 16, 1929 (p.21), with the report again noting the association of the two architectural firms. This association was not publicised in Australia when the theatres were being built so was much later “discovered” from the US exhibitors’ journals.

The Prince Edward Theatre, Sydney, was one of the first Australian cinemas, built in the 1920s, that followed the United States example of providing cinemas of European opera house proportions and decoration.
Prince Edward Theatre: Castlereagh Street entrance lobby beneath the auditorium, with the end foyer and its perennial urns of flowers.

Presentation at the Prince Edward Theatre: The theatre orchestra on a lift in front of the stage curtain and the Wurlitzer organ console. The orchestra usually played at the de-luxe afternoon and evening sessions. The organ was played at intermediate sessions.

Presentation at the Prince Edward Theatre: LEFT: The theatre ballet girls of 1933. RIGHT: The “usherettes” at the end of the Castlereagh Street long entrance lobby, standing to take the patrons’ tickets. They also arranged the flowers in the urns (1954).
Presentation at the Prince Edward Theatre. LEFT & RIGHT: Stage sets for the "live" segment of the show, usually for 15 or so minutes following the interval. As can be seen, the orchestra is on stage. Most other performers are singers, although variety acts may have also been included.

Presentation at the Prince Edward Theatre. As well as luxurious facilities of foyer, rest rooms, and auditorium, there were stage sets, orchestra and variety performers at the de-luxe sessions. There was also the house magazine. At right there are three examples of this component of presentation – they show detailed aspects of the main film being shown, together with what the theatre provides for the patrons. The examples all belong to the 1920s decade.

NOTE: The Prince Edward was demolished in the early 1960s.
Cedric Ballantyne, as an architect, did not seem to require another architect to design his theatres although the Regent and Plaza Theatres in Melbourne are as opulent as any US example. Certainly the report on these two theatres in the US *Motion Picture News* (October 5th, 1929: 1217-1220) only mentions Ballantyne’s firm. Ballantyne, and partner Hare, had designed the Wintergarden Theatre, Brisbane, using Australian motifs (opened 1924) but then he went on to design a number of the Regent Theatres for Hoyts, commencing with the one at South Yarra that opened in 1925, (Thorne: 1976; 18,22). According to the Melbourne *Argus*, April 27, 1925, it was designed after Ballantyne had investigated theatre design during an overseas visit. In the time between designing the South Yarra and Melbourne Regent Theatres, he designed the ones of the same name in Sydney and Adelaide, both opening in 1928 (See Thorne, 1981: 184, 308).

Charles Hollinshed was another Australian theatre architect who eminently absorbed the American influence and could change easily from style to style (for example, the Regent, Brisbane; State (now Forum) Melbourne and Civic, Auckland) while George McLeish of Brisbane was reported in the US *Exhibitors’ Herald* as early as 1925 (April 25, p. 31) as being an “ardent advocate of better and finer theatres”, he designed mostly country town theatres in Queensland and Northern NSW (e.g. Saraton Theatre interior rebuilding in 1940; see Thorne, 1999:3-6). One of the other few published design philosophies by Australian theatre architects was from Kaberry and Chard. Kaberry had designed a rebuilt auditorium for the Lyceum Theatre, Sydney, in 1918 and he and his partner continued distinctively along their own adaptation of theatre design styles from then through into the 1930s. The Australian *Architecture* journal (Vol. 25, No.6, June 1, 1936: 150-152) published this partnership's views. On decoration they felt that the best was "the one an audience can view [with] a feeling of exhilaration and yet behold repeatedly without boredom". This was expressed vaguely as “harmony and proportion and the absence of eventually irritating features that move or change”.

The major exhibition chains operated theatres in the capital cities, large country towns and populous or more affluent suburbs where they could spend money and attract sufficient income to pursue their policy of ‘presentation’. Smaller country towns and ‘poorer’ or sparsely populated outer suburbs possessed a declining quality of theatres but they still exploited as many of the characteristics of ‘presentation’ as was possible. Some were more luxurious than most homes in furnishing (for example, foyers with wall to wall carpet), light fittings, coloured lighting that was dimmed as a prelude to the ‘performance’ and velvet or velour curtains, electrically drawn at the start, the interval and close of the performance. Many theatres possessed a second set of curtains, usually in a light, glazed silver coloured fabric immediately in front of the screen. Coloured side lighting was frequently used to shine across the folds of such a curtain between the time the main velvet curtain was opened until the final strains of recorded music and the title of the first film flashed on the silver tabs (as they were called). These lights were quickly dimmed as the curtains billowed open and the show began. And from this moment: "the narrative is delivered so effortlessly and efficiently to the audience that it appears to have no source. It comes magically off the screen as if spontaneously creating itself in the presence of the spectators in the movie theater for their immediate consumption and pleasure" (Belton, 1994:22).

**References**


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