



## THE CADILLAC OF MOVIE HOUSES Monday, July 27, 1998

Gerald D. Adams, SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

### AMC 1000 RECALLS THE GLAMOUR OF THE OLD FOX THEATRE

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**SAN FRANCISCO** -- WHEN THE WRECKER'S BALL tore down San Francisco's Fox Theatre back in 1963, it destroyed the most elaborate interior space in town.

Glitzy it was, but also dazzlingly baroque, especially its lobby with a majestic staircase, tapestries, red carpeting, towering columns of gold, and every inch of wall and ceiling festooned with ornamentation.

As current movie house lobby decor goes, there has been virtually nothing in these parts to compare with the Fox - until now.

The entrance hall of the AMC 1000 multiplex, which opened July 10, is unlike any motion picture theater foyer seen in these parts, past or present.

Its ceiling and staircase look like relics from a European palace. Columns, outside and in, recall those by Bernini in St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City.

As to the lobby's numerous ornamental details and beautiful tile - well, they just don't make places like this anymore.

Of course, it isn't really a new lobby at all but rather the restoration of a chamber built in 1921, not for movies but to sell Cadillacs.

It is on the ground floor of the seven-story Don Lee Building, a City landmark. On its upper stories are a new health center and 53 loft-type apartments. Behind the Don Lee Building and connected to it, the Martin Group has built a structure housing 14 movie theaters.

The combination, marvels principal architect John Field,

"is the most complex mixing of uses in San Francisco."

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And, he adds, "It still preserves the exterior of the 1920s design and landmark lobby."

And it is the lobby that is the eye-popper.

While less gaudy than the visual extravaganza of the old Fox Theatre foyer, its rehabilitated, newly cleaned and freshened-up interior is stunning. Moreover, since it's the ticket lobby, you can see it without paying the cost of admission.

Notice the front doors. Dulled by the passing years and by Van Ness Avenue pollution, the original bronze portals are now polished to a sheen. While developers have painstakingly tried for authenticity in their restoration, they did alter something. For the sake of speedy exiting in case of emergency, the doors now swing outward instead of in.

Rising like a monumental platform in a noble's country estate is the lobby's most impressive feature: a double staircase of carved and molded wood, looking so important you think it ought to lead to the main events. Rather, it serves as the passageway to Papashon, a restaurant specializing in Eurasian food, which is yet to open. Back in Cadillac days, the stairway led to offices.

Supporting the stairway are the four Bernini-esque spiral columns - a design called Solomonic fluting, according to project preservationist architect Jay Turnbull, who says the name derives from architecture of the biblical days of King Solomon.

As with the front doors, strict authenticity of restoration was slightly sacrificed here to permit the addition of a brass railing on the steps to meet today's building codes.

The stairway's ornamentation includes colorful, hand-set tile work, which also decorates a fountain that is almost altar-like in its setting.

Such attention to detail even extends to the lobby's African walnut wainscoting. Co-preservation consultant Anath Ronan says that, though it has the appearance of being carved, it is, in fact, molded.

One of the most eye-catching features is the lobby ceiling, a lavish series of golden coffers adorned with rosettes, stars and cruciforms. Mighty beams cross the ceiling at intervals and they, too, are ornamented with motifs similar to those of the coffered sections.

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If you look closely at the ceiling, you can see innovations that were not there back in 1921. While they may not fit requirements of authentic historic preservation, fire sprinklers are essential today, and they are surprisingly inconspicuous.

"We made an effort to get them in without ruining the ceiling's effects," says Turnbull.

Except for the word Cadillac carved onto the Don Lee Building's facade, there is little trace of the showroom's automotive past. But if you peer upward long enough, you can spot a crest that pictures a wrench and a cog.

Indeed, except for several chain-suspended chandeliers that have been lost, the baronial splendor of the 1921 showplace that huckstered Cadillacs is mostly intact.

Preservationists are pleased. "The developers were extraordinarily sensitive in the way they restored the lobby space," says David Bahlman, executive director of the San Francisco Foundation for Architectural Heritage, who monitored the project's progress.

"Our feeling was, if you're going to do a project of this significance," says Martin Group Project Manager Matt Field, "it was important to restore the integrity of one of the great buildings of the city."

But there were still other reasons. Field had a special feeling for a cinema project because his grandfather was a movie theater developer back in the Midwest, for one thing. But there was also pressure from local preservationists and the San Francisco Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board (which guards historic structures' integrity and issues certificates of appropriateness for any changes to landmarks).

A more materialistic impetus is the 20 percent tax credit that accrues to developers who succeed in complying with standards and guidelines set by the State Office of Historic Preservation and the U.S. Secretary of the Interior.

Which brings up the question of whether a hall designed to help sell Cadillacs will attract moviegoers.

Turnbull cites his belief that the building's original owner took his cue from motion picture theater designers of that era. "Don Lee," he says, "wanted an aura of romance, similar to that of going to the movies."

As to whether a coffered ceiling, a monumental staircase, cruciforms, rosettes and Renaissance columns create sufficient romance to draw the public, ticket sales will tell.

"For the thousands who will pass through that lobby," says architect Field, "it will be a reminder of the kind of grandeur that is a legacy of our past." <



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