# The impact of the talkies on Scottish cinema architecture

Bruce Petera\*

aProfessor of Design History, Glasgow School of Art, UK

\*B.Peter@gsa.ac.uk

Bruce Peter is Professor of Design History at The Glasgow School of Art. As an undergraduate student in the early-1990s, he researched and wrote ‘Glasgow’s Amazing Cinemas’ (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996) featuring interviews with cinema impresarios, architects and customers of the 1930s-50s period. In more recent times, he has researched extensively the design of international style hotels and of modern passenger ships and has assisted in the curation of the Victoria & Albert museum’s Ocean Liners: Speed and Style’ exhibition.

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## Abstract

Whereas much recent scholarship on sound cinema focuses on its technologies and socio-cultural effects, here instead the consequences for the architecture of cinema buildings will be considered with a focus upon examples in Scotland. It will be shown that the first new Scottish cinemas completed in the 1929-30 period and promoted as being intended for the ‘talkies’ were actually little different in terms of architectural resolution from other recent examples from the silent era. In London, meanwhile, the involvement of the building acoustics pioneer Hope Bagenal in the design of the New Victoria cinema brought about a fresh approach in Britain in which the auditorium was designed to absorb sound evenly and to give an equal quality of acoustic experience to the entire audience. As the cinema’s interior, which relied to a greater extent upon lighting effects rather than on neo-classical architectural detailing, was considerably cheaper to realise than comparable examples of more traditional and ornate design, the solution also proved economically attractive to cinema owners. Inspired by this precedent, cinema architects in Scotland, such as Alister G. MacDonald (1898-1993), David Stokes (1908-1990) and James McKissack (1875-1940), produced their own early examples of ‘moderne’ cinema interiors. This clean-lined and fashionable look was not only was more easily adapted for good sound reproduction but also signified that cinema as a medium was entering a new phase.

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The impact upon cinema of the advent of films with soundtracks was profound. Historians and theorists have mainly considered the effects of ‘talking’ movies either in terms of ensuing changes in perceptions of film as a medium and of the types of performer and performance expected of film actors, or in terms of the relative early applications and spread of different sound systems developed by rival manufacturers.[[1]](#endnote-1) By contrast, the present work will focus instead on the spatial and stylistic impacts of sound films on the design of cinema buildings with a particular focus on Scottish examples. The period of study – from 1927 when the first widely-marketed sound film, Warner Brothers’ *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson and with a Vitaphone sound track, was shown in the UK, to 1933 when the first major Scottish cinemas designed and constructed in the sound era were opened – will enable important design developments to be described and contextualised and key exemplar buildings to be identified.

It will be shown that the coming of sound was perceived by cinema owners not only as a marketing opportunity for new types of film, but also for more technically advanced and comfortable cinema buildings. These changes occurred at a time of rapid development in aesthetics and visual culture, reflected in the international acclaim of the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* – a great exhibition of architecture, design and couture held in central Paris – and of the emergent Modern Movement in architecture and design more generally.[[2]](#endnote-2) It will be shown how modernist thinking and aesthetics made early impacts on British cinema architecture through the writings and proselytising of the architecture critic, P. Morton Shand, whose 1930 book *The Architecture of Pleasure 1: Modern Theatres and Cinemas* was widely read by architectural practitioners either involved or specialising in cinema design.[[3]](#endnote-3)

When *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927) was released in the UK, it had been a mere eighteen years since the passing into statute of the Kinematograph Act of 1909, the legislation which had helped to give cinema buildings popular legitimacy as safe and potentially respectable venues and had led to the first major wave of cinema construction. Hitherto, film had mostly been shown either in variety theatre or circus buildings, in converted shop units or in collapsible fairground booths run by itinerant showmen. Although the individual designs of examples of the initial generation of purpose-built cinemas were often widely diverse and experimental in terms of form and decoration, to a greater or lesser extent, they nearly all took inspiration from theatre and fairground design traditions.[[4]](#endnote-4) The latter years of the First World War saw a suspension of cinema construction as increasingly resources were diverted in support of the war effort. Thus, when from latter-1920s onwards the layout and material finishes of cinema auditoria needed to be re-thought so as to provide optimal acoustics for sound films, there had only been around fourteen years in which cinema design and construction had actually taken place. Given the sheer quantity of cinemas already in existence at the time of the advent of ‘talkies’, the pace of design development and construction hitherto had therefore been quite remarkable. From a situation of no purpose-built cinemas existing in 1908, by the latter 1920s there were few even small towns lacking one.

Although the façade treatments and interior décor of cinemas of the 1920s were varied in terms of style, their general layouts tended to follow a number of fairly generic solutions, dependent upon size and expense. The largest examples were developed from the layout and structural solutions employed for variety theatres since the Edwardian era, with two balconies cantilevered from the external walls and supported by girders. Such cinema buildings usually had full stage facilities for the presentation of cine-variety programmes – for example the 4,368-seat Green’s Playhouse in Glasgow and the 3,053-seat Playhouse in Edinburgh, completed in 1927 and 1929 respectively to designs by the Glasgow architect, John Fairweather.[[5]](#endnote-5) A significant planning development, blurring the line between where the design of variety theatres ended and that of large cinemas or cine-varieties began was a tendency in both genres for the balcony or balconies to face the stage squarely, as opposed to the horse-shoe shapes of earlier theatres and even some cinemas of the Edwardian era. In some instances, stage boxes were retained, though by the 1920s the spaces were these traditionally had been located were sometimes used instead for heating or ventilation plant, faced with ornate grilles.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Medium-sized cinemas of the 1920s were more often modelled on the layouts of town halls and, again, there was a certain amount of ‘slippage’ between the two genres. Usually, their one balcony had long slips, accessing the front emergency exits on either side of the proscenium while ceilings typically were barrel-vaulted as the undersides of the iron or steel roof trusses were of that shape. Small cinemas, meanwhile, often had a stadium layout with one tier of seating – a solution both similar to early purpose-built Edwardian examples and to numerous meeting halls used for various purposes.

Such generic layouts could, however, be overlaid with a wide variety of decorative schemes, ranging from simple neo-classical treatments to so-called ‘atmospheric’ designs in which, just like at the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, designed by Palladio and built in the 1580s, the ceiling was painted like a sky and ‘exotic’ buildings in low relief were installed around the perimeter with false windows and arches framing views of distant landscapes. For cinemas, this approach had been revived in the mid-1920s by the specialist American architect and interior designer, John Eberson, who was at that time based in Chicago. As ceilings representing skies were smooth, rather than coffered and frescoed, Eberson’s ‘atmospheric’ approach was cheaper and quicker to realise than traditional neo-classical-derived ‘theatre’ interiors and this made them popular for around a decade with cinema owners around the world. Audiences, meanwhile, enjoyed viewing films in what appeared to them to be exotic courtyards in which the sky-like ceilings were illuminated by twinkling electric stars.[[7]](#endnote-7) When the first ‘talkies’ were shown, it was within cinemas such as the ones described above in which they were often first experienced.

As with many commercial enterprises, the typical characteristics of the inter-war ‘luxury’ cinema emerged gradually. Indeed, many cinema buildings of the silent era were designed with rudimentary acoustic considerations in mind, either to provide a high quality of sound reproduction for the orchestral accompaniment of films or to enable use for cine-variety with live performances on stage interspersing the film shows.[[8]](#endnote-8) During the ensuing period, increasing competition for audiences encouraged greater investment in comfort-giving signifiers of luxury, such as fitted carpets and upholstered seating. When the ‘talkies’ arrived, the fitment of sound equipment to existing premises offered cinema owners an opportunity to carry out more general refurbishment work so that, upon re-opening, audiences would perceive a significant stylistic transformation as well as a technological advance. As Hanssen has demonstrated, investment in aesthetics and comfort in cinemas was driven by economics as the costs of film exhibition rose due to higher rental charges.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Anticipation of the advent of ‘talkies’ caused cinema owners to claim that newly-opened buildings that in actuality had already been designed or were under construction when the first sound films were being prepared had been specially created for the purpose of hosting them. A significant Scottish example for which this claim was made was the Ritz Cinema in Rodney Street, Edinburgh, designed by the Glasgow-based architects, Albert V. Gardner (1884-1944) and William R. Glen (1884-1950), and opened in 1929. Both of the building’s architects were born in 1884 and were graduates of the Glasgow School of Architecture (a joint diploma and degree programme run by the Glasgow School of Art and by the Royal Technical College) and both went on to specialise in cinema architecture to the exclusion of all else.[[10]](#endnote-10) Not only was the Ritz promoted as being the first purpose-built sound cinema of the important and rapidly-expanding Scottish Cinema and Variety Theatres circuit (which subsequently was incorporated into Associated British Cinemas, or ABC), but it had a manager, James Nairn, who was himself an enthusiastic amateur film-maker. Indeed, Nairn filmed the cinema’s construction from the laying of foundations to the building’s completion, thereby not only providing its first audiences with a (silent) documentary insight of the entire process, but also leaving for posterity a fascinating archive record of how such a cinema was built and initially operated. In Nairn’s 1929 film, entitled *Construction of the Ritz cinema*, the captions emphasise that the building had benefitted from design modifications to make it suitable for sound films; the main one of these was the fitting of carpets in the auditorium, which simultaneously added to the aura of luxury while assisting with acoustic absorption.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Apart from that (hardly unique) feature, however, the Ritz was otherwise indistinguishable in terms of planning and layout from numerous other medium-sized cinemas of its era, it being a rectangular hall in neo-classical style with one balcony, slips (extensions to the balcony on either side of the auditorium, perpendicular to the proscenium) and a barrel-vaulted ceiling. The building’s exterior too was unremarkable, even by the eclectic standards of British cinema architecture at that time, being an austere treatment of rock-faced sandstone with dressed window surrounds and therefore more resembling typical Scottish industrial building of the era. Only the canopy’s polychromatic colouring and graphics revealed it to be a place of entertainment.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Shortly after the Ritz project, Gardner and Glen split to go their separate ways; Gardner remained in Glasgow, where he continued to produce cinemas while Glen subsequently became the ‘in house’ architect of Associated British Cinemas, moving to its London office in Golden Square, Soho.[[13]](#endnote-13) In Glasgow, Gardner next designed the 3,002-seat Astoria at Possil Toll on the city’s industrial north side – an exceptionally large cinema for one located in an inner-city suburb. Indeed, it was promoted in the cinema trade press as ‘the largest working class sound kinema in the world’ when it opened in 1931. Gardner's biggest-ever project, the fan‑shaped building was erected in the triangular space in a Y-fork between two roads on the site of a filled‑in quarry. Excavation to a depth of thirty feet was necessary to allow the foundations to stand on solid rock, and the sheer size of the site (6,000 square feet) meant that it took sixteen months to complete – a long time in cinema construction terms.[[14]](#endnote-14) Externally, however, the Astoria was remarkably dour, presenting vast monotonous flanks of grey roughcast auditorium wall, occasionally punctured by small prison‑like windows and capped with an industrial-style asbestos cement roof. This monolithic structure dwarfed a two-storey entrance block at the apex of the road junction, which was octagonal in plan and with entirely different detailing from what loomed behind. As with the Ritz in Edinburgh, only the external signage, which was held aloft on a metal framework, gave any impression that the Astoria was an entertainment venue, as opposed to an industrial one. Also in common with the Ritz, the interior was neo-classical, but on this occasion decorated in the then-fashionable ‘jazz moderne’ idiom. A flavour of its appearance was recorded by *Building Industries* magazine:

The vestibule is octagonal in shape, as is the box office, which stands in the middle of the space. The colour scheme... is very brightly carried out. From the entrance hall one sees on the first landing a very effective rising sun motif in gold, green and red... The auditorium decoration is carried out in modified futur­istic fashion with a shade of marigold predominating... the design of the ceiling is emphasised by four large cubist lights, sus­pended to form a square and with a huge, brightly coloured inverted cone slung in the centre. The sun decoration is enhanced by grotesque figures on the side walls...[[15]](#endnote-15)

While it is difficult from the above to imagine exactly how the interior would have looked, especially as a term like ‘modified futuristic’ today seems vague, it certainly seems to have been very bright and this alone was a marked contrast with the treatment of the exterior. The author visited the building in the late-1990s in its final years as a bingo hall when only the arches, pilasters and barrel-vaulted ceiling of the original design remained and it looked far more conventional than the impression given in *Building Industries*’ text. As with the Ritz in Edinburgh, there did not appear to have been any fundamental design modifications made to enhance the audience experience of sound films.

When sound films were introduced in cinema auditoria with balcony slips, stage boxes, or in the case of ‘atmospheric’ examples, low-relief buildings and plaster foliage, these protrusions were often found to generate echoes of the amplified sound track or to cause dead patches where it could not be heard properly, or at all.[[16]](#endnote-16) In some instances, it was necessary to remove such obstacles – the Boulevard cinema in the Knightswood district of Glasgow, completed in 1928 to a design by William Beresford Inglis, being one Scottish example of an ‘atmospheric’ cinema where this was done.[[17]](#endnote-17) An easier solution was to hang drapes to lessen reverberations. For even reproduction of amplified sound, auditorium walls without protuberances were greatly to be preferred and it was better still if the walls could be finished with sound-absorbing surfaces, such as rough-textured sprayed plaster (plaster mixed either with sawdust or with shards of asbestos). Essentially, the effective acoustic design of a sound cinema was extremely simple to achieve and the best solutions were often the cheapest, avoiding altogether any need for ornate and costly architectural decoration.

In Glasgow, the Broadway cinema in the city’s Shettleston district, designed concurrently with the Astoria but completed before it in 1930, demonstrated this approach, at least with regard to the design of its auditorium. In terms of external arrangement the two were conceptually similar, the Broadway likewise having an entrance block designed and externally decorated as a separate entity from the plain exterior of the auditorium block, located to the rear. The Broadway was around half the Astoria’s size, however and, within, its auditorium was largely unadorned, having smooth expanses of textured plaster and side walls which curved into the ceiling. So far as can be ascertained, this was not primarily in consequence of any concern for good acoustics or allegiance to emergent modernist design principles either on the part of the architect, James McKissack of John McKissack & Son,[[18]](#endnote-18) or the building’s owner, the Glaswegian cinema magnate, George Singleton, but rather due to the latter’s parsimony, as he explained to the author in a 1994 interview:

We never felt that ornate decoration would be needed because we always showed films in continuous performances and usually started them before the audience was allowed in, so they rarely saw the auditorium with the lights on. This trick also spared electricity and in that respect our cinemas were ahead of their time as simple interiors became standard practice for everyone later in the thirties…[[19]](#endnote-19)

Singleton’s architect, McKissack (born 1875), was a Glasgow School of Art and Glasgow and West of Scotland Technical College graduate who had initially specialised in designing churches, but went on to design cinemas almost exclusively. His cinema designing career had begun around the time of the Kinematograph Act when he converted a shop unit and tenement back court premises in Glasgow’s Lauriston district into the Eglinton Electreum. In addition, he was a film and cinematography enthusiast himself who acted as an advisor to Miss Cranston, the tea-room owner, when she opened a Cranston’s Cinema De Luxe in Renfield Street in 1916. After the Broadway, McKissack went on to design further Singleton cinemas – the Commodore, Scotstoun (1933) and the Vogue cinemas in Dundee (1936), Rutherglen (1936) and Govan (1937), all of which followed a similar design formula; he also produced numerous cinemas for other owners.[[20]](#endnote-20)

In elite and avant-garde European architectural circles in the latter-1920s, meanwhile – and probably barely known to a majority of Scottish cinema owners and their architects – emergent modernist architectural discourses, which advocated a quasi-scientific rationalism allied to an aesthetic utilitarianism, not only sought to realise the most functionally effective design solutions for buildings of all types but also ones that would hopefully tend to negate class differences to help bring about a more egalitarian society, organised according to socialist principles. The latter of these aims, of course, ran contrary to those of commercial architecture and interior design, which almost invariably sought to provide glamorous and aspirational environments with spatiality and detailing suggestive of grandeur and high socio-cultural status. The fact that the mass cinema was inherently an escapist medium and that the bulk of its audiences came from the working and lower-middle classes only intensified such requirements. Thus, the modernist aim of achieving cinemas that – to paraphrase Le Corbusier’s characterisation of the ideal modern house as being a ‘machine à habiter’[[21]](#endnote-21) – were ‘machines for watching films in’ was in conflict with the desires of cinema owners and audiences to have buildings suggestive of luxurious fantasy. Nonetheless, as Singleton and McKissack demonstrated, avoiding pretentious decoration could save money and, from a commercial perspective, that aim was very desirable,.

While several of the larger and better capitalised British cinema owners continued to build ornate ‘picture palaces’ well into the 1930s, for those of lesser means or of more progressive persuasion with regard to aesthetic matters, an attractive alternative approach was provided by the modern decorative styles showcased in Paris in 1925 at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*. It proved a seminal event in the development of twentieth century visual culture. Initially conceived as an international exhibition, it ended up being primarily a showcase for France to re-assert its authority as the pre-eminent international style leader for fashion and luxury goods design and production. Perhaps inevitably, given the political and economic troubles in the wake of the First World War, the *Exposition* was heavily politicised and Germany – France’s main rival in the manufacture of all that was modern and desirable – was not even invited to attend. For the most part, the *Exposition* showcased lavish and exquisitely crafted French couture design, with an emphasis upon interiors and fashion, all of which utilised very striking materials and aesthetics combining elements of Art Nouveau and an eclectic mix of French colonial styles from North and West Africa, French Indo-China and Central America. Often such enrichments were used to decorate forms that were otherwise essentially modernist and the tension between large unadorned expenses and highly intricate and luxuriant detailing was arguably a major part of the visual appeal.[[22]](#endnote-22) From a commercial point of view, the fact that the effects achieved at the Paris *Exposition* could equally be achieved relatively cheaply and quickly, especially in large spaces such as cinema interiors – where the architectural details were usually relatively far away from the audiences’ scrutiny in the semi-darkness – was also advantageous.

In the latter 1920s, new and renovated luxury hotels in London’s West End were among the first public buildings in Britain in which aesthetics inspired by the Paris *Exposition* could be experienced by members of the public. In these and in increasing numbers of cinemas completed in the ensuing period, such as the Astoria in Glasgow, described above, an angular ‘jazz moderne’ aesthetic was evident, usually involving polychromatic paintwork applied over essentially neo-classical architectural detailing. The approach was influenced in part by the discovery of King Tutankhamun’s tomb in Egypt and the brightly coloured treasures it contained, as well as by the stepped forms of ancient Mayan pyramids, aspects of German expressionism and, above all, the syncopated rhythms and riffs of American jazz music. Slightly later on, in the early 1930s, ‘streamline moderne’ emerged with a distinctly curvilinear, horizontal emphasis. This coincided with a widespread fascination with racing cars, high-speed trains, aircraft and Blue Riband-winning trans-Atlantic liners. Fittingly, the origins of streamlining spanned the Atlantic. In 1920s Germany and the Netherlands, architecture by Erich Mendelsohn, Rudolf Fränkel, J.J.P. Oud and others had rounded corners, repetitive horizontal coursing, metal-framed fenestration and extruded balconies.[[23]](#endnote-23) By the mid-1930s in the United States, the French émigré industrial designer Raymond Loewy had begun to ‘streamline the sales curve’, helping American manufacturers to recover from the Great Depression by encasing their products in fashionable ‘streamform’ cladding.[[24]](#endnote-24) Both ‘jazz moderne’ and ‘streamline moderne,’ which to an extent superseded it, were criticised by design reformers of the inter-war era and since for being superficial as they could be applied to buildings and objects little different in terms of structure, planning and technology from those already existing. Yet, for most of the public at large, these fashionable styles soon became highly emblematic of bright, comfortable modernity and progress – characteristics that were surely particularly welcome in the era of the Great Depression. With regard to the focus of the present work, a streamlined approach also easily lent itself to imaginative application in cinema auditoria for sound films as its soft, curvaceous forms could be sprayed with textured plaster so as not to interfere with the acoustics.

It was in a large cinema in London that a British cinema design paradigm shift took place. The New Victoria in Wilton Street, close to London Victoria station, was to prove highly influential, not least in Scotland where, as we shall see, elements of its design were closely emulated. The design was by an upcoming architect of the ‘modern school’, Ernest Wamsley Lewis (1898-1978), who involved in the auditorium design Hope Bagenal (1888-1979), an architect who in the inter-war era became Britain’s leading expert on building acoustics and, indeed, a key founding figure in the emergence of acoustics as a distinct scientific discipline.

Born in Dublin in 1888, Bagenal had moved to northern England with his family as a child and, there, he studied Engineering at Leeds University. In 1909 he enrolled part-time at the Architectural Association in London while also working as an architectural draftsman. His combination of engineering expertise with that of an architectural training – coupled with an enquiring and entrepreneurial intellect – led to his corresponding with others who shared his interests in building science. Indeed, he was a considerable polymath and a prolific author and editor who in the inter-war era invited to his home in the Lea Valley many leading figures in the arts and sciences who became friends of his; Wamsley Lewis was one of them.[[25]](#endnote-25) He too was a remarkable figure but whereas Bagenal became internationally famous and sought after, once Wamsley Lewis completed the New Victoria project, he abandoned architectural practice to nurse his mother and so what might have been a stellar career was but brief and involved the designing of just one major building.

Wamsley Lewis (born 1898) had studied full-time at the Architectural Association school in the first half of the 1920s and was more immersed in the discipline and its emerging *avant garde* discourses than many of the other specialist cinema architects of the era, who typically had studied part-time at evening classes while also working as draftsmen by day. While employed in the office of the architect and academic, H.S. Goodhart-Rendel, he won a travelling scholarship which he used to study cinema and theatre design in Germany and in the United States. When interviewed by the developer of the New Victoria, William Evans of Provincial Cinematograph Theatres, it was the latter experience that caused him to be offered the job of designing it. Evans reckoned that an architect with American experience would know how to work quickly and to make best use of the site to achieve the optimum seating capacity. The design influence employed by Wamsley Lewis, however, was almost entirely German. In the 1920s, Berlin was regarded as the epicentre of modern entertainment culture and the latest commercial buildings there had clean, streamlined lines and forms which lent themselves to the use of dramatic night illumination, combining neon and flood-lighting. Berlin cinemas, in particular, were thought to be state-of-the-art and many of the latest examples, unlike their American and British counterparts, eschewed the use of historicist ornamentation altogether in favour of smooth, curving surfaces suffused with indirect lighting which effectively represented the beginnings of a distinctive ‘cinema’ aesthetic (as opposed to ones derived from the traditions of theatres or opera houses). The type of architecture created mainly by German-Jewish architects in Berlin has frequently been related to expressionism as a wider tendency in German visual culture of the Weimar Republic era, but it could equally be described by the subsequent moniker it acquired in Britain and the USA – ‘streamline moderne.’ Completed in 1930, the New Victoria was the first British cinema – and, indeed, one of the first public buildings of any kind in the country – in which this soon-to-become ubiquitous aesthetic for new and extensively rebuilt commercial buildings of many kinds was deployed.[[26]](#endnote-26)

Whereas the exteriors of cinemas such as the Astoria and Broadway in Glasgow – and nearly all other large free-standing examples – had entrance blocks that were separately treated from their auditoria, on the New Victoria’s facades, the two elements were harmonised using the same material, Portland stone, with vertical ribs accenting the former and horizontal ones on the latter and curved junctions between. On the interior, meanwhile, rather than the auditorium being designed with classically correct proportioning and decorative detail governing the sizes and forms, it was instead designed to offer the best possible acoustics for sound films. The overall inspiration for the lighting scheme is widely argued to have come from a multi-functional auditorium in Berlin called the Grosses Schauspielhaus, designed by Hans Poelzig and completed in 1919, in which rows of illuminated plaster ‘stalactites’ created an impression of the audience being seated in a dramatic underwater cave. For the New Victoria, a variation using stacks of large plaster uplighters resembling shells was employed with additional lighting from stalactite-style ceiling fittings, hanging down between. From an acoustical point of view, the fact that all the auditorium walls and the uplighters were sprayed with a coating of coarse-textured plaster increased their absorption, the aim being to achieve as acoustically flat an effect as possible. At Hope Bagenal’s suggestion, the ceiling dome was entirely lined with halved rubber sports balls, which were glued on tightly packed together all over its surface, then spray-painted in a uniform colour. These greatly increased the dome’s total surface area and thereby its absorption of sound. Thus, at the New Victoria, the ideal of a highly absorptive space without any echoes or ‘bounces’ was achieved while at the same time a unique and spectacular viewing environment for films was provided, unlike that of any other British cinema in existence at that time. In addition, the fact that the project was completed on schedule and significantly under budget must have greatly pleased Provincial Cinematograph Theatres’ management.[[27]](#endnote-27)

The New Victoria was widely and positively reviewed and illustrated in the British architecture, construction and cinema industry professional journals. It also was one of only a few British cinemas to be featured prominently in a highly influential book written by the architecture critic, food and wine writer, P. Morton Shand, entitled *The Architecture of Pleasure 1: Modern Theatres and Cinemas*, published later in 1930. Shand – who was gentry, a self-confessed cultural elitist and a great advocate of modern architecture – included the newly-completed New Victoria as the frontispiece of his book only days before it went to press. The majority of cinemas otherwise illustrated by Shand as being worthy of praise were, perhaps unsurprisingly, German.[[28]](#endnote-28)

With regard to the influence of the New Victoria on Scottish cinema architecture of the early-1930s, it was significant that one of the attendees on its opening night was a young and well-connected architect, Alister G. MacDonald, who was the son of the Labour Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald. Having studied at Slade School of Art and Bartlett School of Architecture, both parts of the University of London, he had joined the office of the cinema and theatre architect Frank Verity as Clerk of Works in 1926. This introduced him to cinema design and it may have engendered an interest in film, for at the end of the decade he left for New York to study skyscrapers, then continued to Hollywood to examine lighting and acoustics on film sets. This indicates his growing interest in building science, which was to prove useful in the 1930s when he designed a number of innovative cinemas on awkward sites. Apart from his architectural pursuits, MacDonald, the son of a famous father, was evidently a great success on the Hollywood social scene. He made friends with Charlie Chaplin, whom he invited to Chequers to meet his father when he next came to Britain. Later, MacDonald travelled to Italy to study a marsh drainage scheme near Rome. There, he met Mussolini and was invited to collaborate in designing a skyscraper in Milan – an offer which was tactfully declined.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Back in Britain, MacDonald was commissioned by Caledonian Associated Cinemas to design a number of new cinemas, of which the Playhouse in Elgin, completed in 1932 was the first. CAC, as it was known, had its head office in Inverness and its properties were concentrated in the Scottish Highlands, along the North-East coast between Inverness and Aberdeen, with subsidiaries in Fife, East Lothian and the Borders. Although a lot smaller than the New Victoria, the Playhouse’s auditorium nonetheless featured a similar arrangement of uplighters on the side walls, enlivening a space otherwise characterised by expanses of flat plasterboard.

The Angus Playhouse in Montrose followed in 1933. Whereas the Elgin cinema was entered through an existing shop unit and therefore had no façade of its own, the Angus Playhouse had a long frontage with the auditorium running parallel to the street. MacDonald’s treatment of this exterior also showed the New Victoria’s influence as the volumetric design seamlessly tied the tapering auditorium into the foyer block with smooth coloured render and bold horizontal lines. The staircase was emphasised by a tall window, while the interior made use of layered plasterboard, the shadows of the edges of which were picked up by concealed lighting. The Playhouse had 1,059 seats, around a third of which were on a fully cantilevered balcony, plus a tea-room, and altogether cost only £15,000.[[30]](#endnote-30) MacDonald went on to design the Playhouse, Peebles (1933) for CAC, followed by the Broadway in Prestwick (1935) and the Lyceum, Dumfries (1936) for other owners. The latter’s interior was also very similar to that of the New Victoria, though was again on a smaller scale.[[31]](#endnote-31)

While the first MacDonald-designed Playhouses for CAC were being built in Scottish provincial towns, a much larger and prestigious city centre cinema was under construction in Aberdeen. The project needed to come to fruition quickly because its promoter, Aberdeen Picture Palaces, the local circuit controlling most of the cinemas there, had learned that a rival firm, Poole’s from Edinburgh, was planning to build a large cinema in the city centre (eventually completed as the Regent). As this would cream off the best of the new releases by offering film distributors more seats to fill, and hence potentially more profits (films were hired on a percentage basis), Aberdeen Picture Palaces felt obliged to trump Poole’s project.[[32]](#endnote-32)

A local architect, Clement George (1879-1932), had already produced plans for a cinema on Union Street in 1927 and, as this was almost directly in front of Poole’s site on Justice Mill Lane, it seemed ideal. George was asked to revise his design to make it as large as possible and he took the project with him when he went into partnership with one of Aberdeen’s most distinguished architects, A. Marshall MacKenzie, in 1931.[[33]](#endnote-33) Shortly, George’s health began to fail and he died in February 1932, leaving MacKenzie’s firm to complete the cinema which was built over the course of the following year and opened as the Capitol. Within MacKenzie’s practice, the job architect responsible for designing it was a recent graduate from the Architectural Association in London, David Stokes.[[34]](#endnote-34) For new graduates, the early-1930s was a difficult time to find jobs in the architectural profession, and so Stokes was fortunate to be employed, even if that meant travelling nearly from one end of Britain to the other. By chance, therefore, this most prominent city centre cinema project fell into the hands of Stokes, a young man who was heavily influenced by the Modern Movement (he had attended lectures by Eric Mendelsohn and other forward-looking Continental architects while at the Architectural Association). As Marshall MacKenzie’s firm also had a London office, which was headed by his son, Alexander G.R. MacKenzie, it may be that Stokes initially sought work there, but was re-directed to Aberdeen instead.

Clement George’s conventionally neo-classical design was subjected to a bold reworking by Stokes and, as with the New Victoria, the solution was strongly influenced by German practice. The existing Union Street frontages (which George had intended to keep) were swept away and replaced with a new flat granite facade, the centrepiece of which was three tall windows, rising to a flat modern-style pediment which was outlined at night with blue neon and white floodlighting. Indeed, blue and silver tones were used throughout the interior because Aberdeen was, after all, ‘the silver city by the sea’ With regard to the interior, a fashionable tone was set by four sets of entrance doors, with modish stainless steel semi-circular windows and hand plates; these formed fully circular ‘targets’ when the doors were closed.

The foyers and auditorium were symmetrical and in line. The outer foyer was panelled in polished teak, while the inner vestibule was at mezzanine height and was dominated by the balcony staircase, with its tubular steel railings and flanking stairs down to the crush hall for the stalls. The walls curved into the ceilings and there was little by way of applied decoration. The auditorium, in pale blue, made use of Holophane – a patented type of coloured effects lighting – which was concealed behind coves to suffuse the space in ever-changing colours. As a city centre cinema on an important thoroughfare, the Capitol had a restaurant, full stage facilities and a cinema organ. Arguably, the Capitol’s most stylish feature, however, was its ladies’ powder room; this was accessed off the balcony foyer, replete with bevelled mirrors, fluted make-up tables in black, cream and mint green and a stylish Art Deco carpet. Thus, Aberdonian women could attend to their make-up in a setting suggestive of the types of environment they may have imagined their favourite female film stars using for this purpose.[[35]](#endnote-35) The cinema’s interior design and facilities thereby extended throughout its interior the glamorous aesthetic and lifestyle found in some of the films shown within it. Thus, in addition to the acoustic design of the Capitol’s auditorium being effective and up-to-date, the entire experience of the building mimicked the sophisticated atmosphere conjured by the set designs of some of the latest films – and of many more subsequently produced. Technology and style were thus well integrated in its interiors.

The Capitol was much admired in the architectural press and it was included in the Royal Institute of British Architects’ centenary exhibition, International Architecture 1924-1934, held in London, as an example of best practice.[[36]](#endnote-36) An enduringly successful cinema, it remained substantially intact until the late 1990s in all of its details – including 1930s carpets and soft furnishings. Thereafter, despite being a listed building, its interior was entirely destroyed when converted into two nightclubs. All but its outer foyer and façade to Union Street have since been demolished and an office block built in its place. It is most unfortunate that such a historically significant and intact cinema building was lost so recently.

## Conclusion

From technological and commercial perspectives, the re-thinking of cinema exterior and interior design from ornate ‘picture palace’ and ‘atmospheric’ approaches to smooth, streamlined ones were necessary developments. As shown above using Scottish case studies, through these processes, the new cinemas of the early-1930s exemplifying streamlined approaches not only were capable of providing audiences with a higher fidelity of sound reproduction for lower architecture and interior design costs but also engendered a distinct ‘cinema’ style, separate from those of the variety theatre and public hall. In place of three-dimensional ornamentation derived from neo-classicism, the baroque and other historic or ‘exotic’ themes, smooth surfaces were preferred, sprayed with textured plaster and illuminated using concealed coloured lighting.

Unsurprisingly, given the relatively slow pace of change in provincial commercial architecture in general, there was a lag between the introduction of sound technology and the arrival in Scotland of architectural solutions better suited to its particular requirements. The first cinema designers working in Scotland to use approaches derived from Art Deco and German expressionism, Alister G. MacDonald and David Stokes, were both trained in London and therefore had the advantage of being more closely connected geographically to debates regarding progressive developments in architecture. They had also experienced new cinemas and theatres there exemplifying in the UK such emergent fashionable design styles. It appears to have taken Scottish-trained and located cinema architects slightly longer to embrace such developments. As shown above, however, Scotland once possessed some very notable examples of cinemas exemplifying the transition from silent film to sound but most unfortunately none of the ones used as case studies in this paper survive today.

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1. See for instance: Black, ‘Cinematic Realism and the Phonographic Analogy’; Belton, ‘Awkward Transitions’; Griffiths, ‘The Talkies Triumphant’; Rossell, ‘*Demolition d’un mur*’. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Benton, Benton, and Wood, *Art Deco 1910-1939*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Shand, *Architecture of Pleasure 1*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Gray, *Cinemas of Britain*, 9-34. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Peter, *Scotland’s Cinemas*, 65-69. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Earl and Sell, *Theatres Trust Guide*, ix-x. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Gray, *Cinemas of Britain*, 44-46. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Griffiths, ‘Sounding Scottish’ [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Pokorny and Sedgwick, *An Economic History of Film*,86-120. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Dictionary of Scottish Architects, ‘Albert V. Gardner’ and ‘William R. Glen’ [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Nairn’s film ‘Construction of the Ritz Cinema, Edinburgh 1929’ can be seen at the National Library of Scotland’s Moving Image Archive, in Glasgow. See <https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/0774> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Thomas, 1984: 83-84. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Eyles, *ABC*, 28-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. ‘Largest Working Class Sound Cinema’, *Building Industries*. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Peter, *Scotland’s Cinemas*, 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Author’s interview with George Singleton, 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Dictionary of Scottish Architects, ‘James McKissack’ [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Author’s interview with George Singleton, 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Dictionary of Scottish Architects, ‘James McKissack’ [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Le Corbusier, *Vers une architecture*, 73. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Benton, Benton, and Wood, *Art Deco 1910-1939*. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Baacke, *Lichtspielhausarchitektur in Deutschland*; James, *Erich* Mendelsohn; Shand, *Architecture of Pleasure 1.* [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Loewy Design, ‘The Man who Streamlined the Sales Curve’. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Trevor-Jones, ‘Hope Bagenal and the Royal Festival Hall’, 18-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Wamsley Lewis, ‘An Internationalist at Home’, 8-10; Unger, ‘The Mermaid’s Palace’. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Wamsley Lewis, ‘An Internationalist at Home’, 10-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Shand, *Architecture of Pleasure 1.* [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Gray, ‘The Cinemas of Alister MacDonald’, 30-31. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. ‘Modern Cinemas’, *Architect’s Journal*, 32-34. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Peter, *Scotland’s Cinemas*, 87-88. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Thomson, *Silver screen in the silver city*, 200-201. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Dictionary of Scottish Architects, ‘A. G. R. MacKenzie’ [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Thomson, *Silver screen in the silver city*, 201-202. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Thomson, *Silver screen in the silver city*, 202-207. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. RIBA, *International Architecture, 1924-1934*. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)