

Figure 1. The Regent on Park Avenue (photographed in 1930), designed by Montreal architect D.J. Crighton in 1916. (National Archives of Canada, PA 119681)

Montreal Movie Palaces

The greatest theatre-building boom there ever was, in Montreal and in many other cities, was the one occasioned by the sudden and stupendous success of motion pictures in the 1910s and 1920s. The movies had only recently been invented. But never before (as was observed at the time) had an “amusement of so absorbing a character been provided at so small a cost.” And people – immigrants and the poor at first – responded in huge numbers.

The first movie houses were converted storefronts, with a few chairs inside and some lurid posters outside. The price of admission was as little as five cents, giving these early cinemas the name of “nickelodeon.” The fare was generally a half-hour of short films from France, then the leading film-producing nation.

But films became grander by the 1910s. They were longer, technically better, narratively more sophisticated, and had their own stars. Audiences continued to grow, too. It was natural that a more dignified space to see films was required. Weekly movie admissions were already in the millions, so money was no problem.

by Dane Lanken



Figure 2. The Loew's (photographed above in 1930) and Capitol theatres were designed by the master of the genre, Scottish-born New York architect Thomas Lamb. (Famous Players Collection, Parks Canada)

It was understood from the start that these new movie theatres would be fancy places. There was already a tradition of ostentation in theatres, the grand opera houses of the 19th century, for instance, or the big theatres being built even then by the vaudeville chains. But more important, a palatial place to sit would contrast spectacularly with the paying customer's dreary flat and workplace, and considerably increase the impact of the show.

So size and splendour were *de rigueur* from day one. Plaster was the key material — it was cheap and could be molded into the most fanciful forms. But fine painting was important, too, and marble stairways and velvet drapes, along with silk on the walls, and perhaps some stained glass.

Purity of style wasn't important. Adamesque was the major influence (at least until the late 1920s). But architects and decorators were free to mix 'n' match. Egyptian, Oriental, Amerindian, Natural and later, Art Deco, were always welcome, too. But mongrel or not, many movie palaces were very beautiful and elegant spaces.

The first big, fancy movie house built in Montreal (and maybe the world) was the pioneering Léo-Ernest Ouimet's Ouimetoscope of 1907. It had all the required marble and plasterwork, and set a standard for the 35 or so major movie theatres built in the city over the next 25 years.

What ended the theatre-building boom was the Depression. Movie attendance remained strong through the Dirty Thirties, even increased, but there was no money to build more theatres. In the late 1930s, with times a little better, a handful of new theatres opened. But then came World War II, and construction shut down again. The return of peace saw another few theatres built. But the arrival of television in the early 1950s put a stop to any thought of further theatre expansion. Though movie attendance peaked in Canada in 1953, at about five million admissions per week, it declined quickly after that and remains only a fraction of that figure today.

Besides, theatres in the postwar period, like so many other buildings, became plain. The days of paint and plaster excesses had passed.



Figure 3. The Palace (photographed in 1930) was designed by Howard Crane of Detroit. (Famous Players Collection, Parks Canada)

So it was in the period roughly 1910 to 1930 that both the greatest number of theatres were built, and that theatre architecture and decoration were at their peak. It was truly a golden era. The most accomplished of Montreal's theatre architects was D.J. Crighton, designer of at least eight movie houses in the city between the earliest days and the late 1930s. One of his early works was the Regent (figure 1), from 1916, on Park Avenue. It was given a handsome terra cotta facade, and a richly-decorated hall highlighted by a bold criss-cross-pattern proscenium arch.

The plasterwork was particularly ornate: all sorts of floral and geometric patterns, with a series of huge discs depicting Classical figures around the top of the walls. But the painting was particularly good, too, especially a series of eight large panels in a dome under the balcony representing, with crests and human figures, the provinces of Canada.

The Regent remained in perfect condition throughout its life, operating for many years as a double-bill theatre, then as an X-rated

house. Tragically, however, city authorities allowed it to be gutted by a development firm early in 1988. The shell, terra cotta facade intact, now stands unused.

The biggest movie theatres — the true movie palaces — were built in the late 1910s and early 1920s. They were situated downtown and, in their heyday, featured their own orchestras, magazines, and armies of uniformed ushers. It was in these theatres that movies traditionally opened first, before going out on a circuit of the neighborhood houses.

There were three such palaces built in Montreal, the Loew's (1917), and the Capitol and Palace (both 1921). The Loew's (figure 2) and Capitol were designed by the master of the genre, the Scottish-born New York architect Thomas Lamb, and the Palace (figure 3) by his rival, Howard Crane of Detroit.

True to their style, all three theatres were huge — 3,000 seats — with great domes in their ceilings and every available bit of wall space adorned with classically-inspired paint and plaster decoration.



Figure 4. The Rialto, also on Park Avenue, built in 1924. The decorator was the Maltese-born Montreal artist Emmanuel Briffa. (Photo: Julie Greto, 1988)

The Loew's hall had a very grand arrangement of columns and arches on each side and, over the screen, a dramatic painting of rearing horses pulling a chariot full of diaphanously-gowned women. The Capitol was a particularly refined space, with huge Corinthian columns around the walls. The Palace was the most exuberant of the three — epitomizing the movie palace ethic of decorative excess — all manner of figures, human and mythic, swarmed on the walls.

All three theatres came to sad ends in the 1970s: the Capitol was demolished, the Loew's was split into five mini-cinemas, and the Palace was gutted.

The neighborhood theatres built away from downtown Montreal were less grand than the true palaces, but were often very fancy places just the same. For instance, the Rialto (figure 4), from 1924, also on Park Avenue, featured a facade based on that of the Opéra de Paris. Its interior walls were jammed with detailed plasterwork, panels painted with *putti* playing musical instruments, carved wood around the doorways, silk wall panels, and, in the ceilings of the hall and under the balcony, rather spectacular stained glass domes.

The decorator of the Rialto was the Maltese-born Montreal artist Emmanuel Briffa. He designed the interiors of dozens of theatres in Montreal and elsewhere from the 1910s to the 1950s. But the Rialto was one of his most unrestrained and striking. It has fared much better than most Montreal theatres: half the interior was whitewashed some

years ago; the other half remains in grimy but good condition.

The late 1920s saw a shift in theatre decor, away from the classical inspiration that had served from the start to a single theme or atmospheric style, often with the ceiling painted as a star-studded blue sky.

Thus there was an Egyptian theatre in Montreal, a second where the walls were painted with pastoral scenes, yet a third made up as a royal court, and two others designed as little Spanish towns.

One of these last-named was the Monkland (figure 5), from 1930, on Monkland Boulevard. D.J. Crighton was the architect, Emmanuel Briffa the decorator. The walls — each was different — were plastered to look like stucco exterior walls, with windows and balconies, all topped with traditional red tile roofs.

The windows and balconies were electrically lit, and glowed softly. With an evening sky twinkling overhead and vines trailing over the red tile roofs, it was a lovely and relaxing setting.

The Monkland survived in original condition until the early 1980s, when it was gutted.

The final spurt of fancy theatre building in Montreal was in the late 1930s, and the style then was very modern — airy spaces with soft curves and recessed lighting. A good example was the York on St.

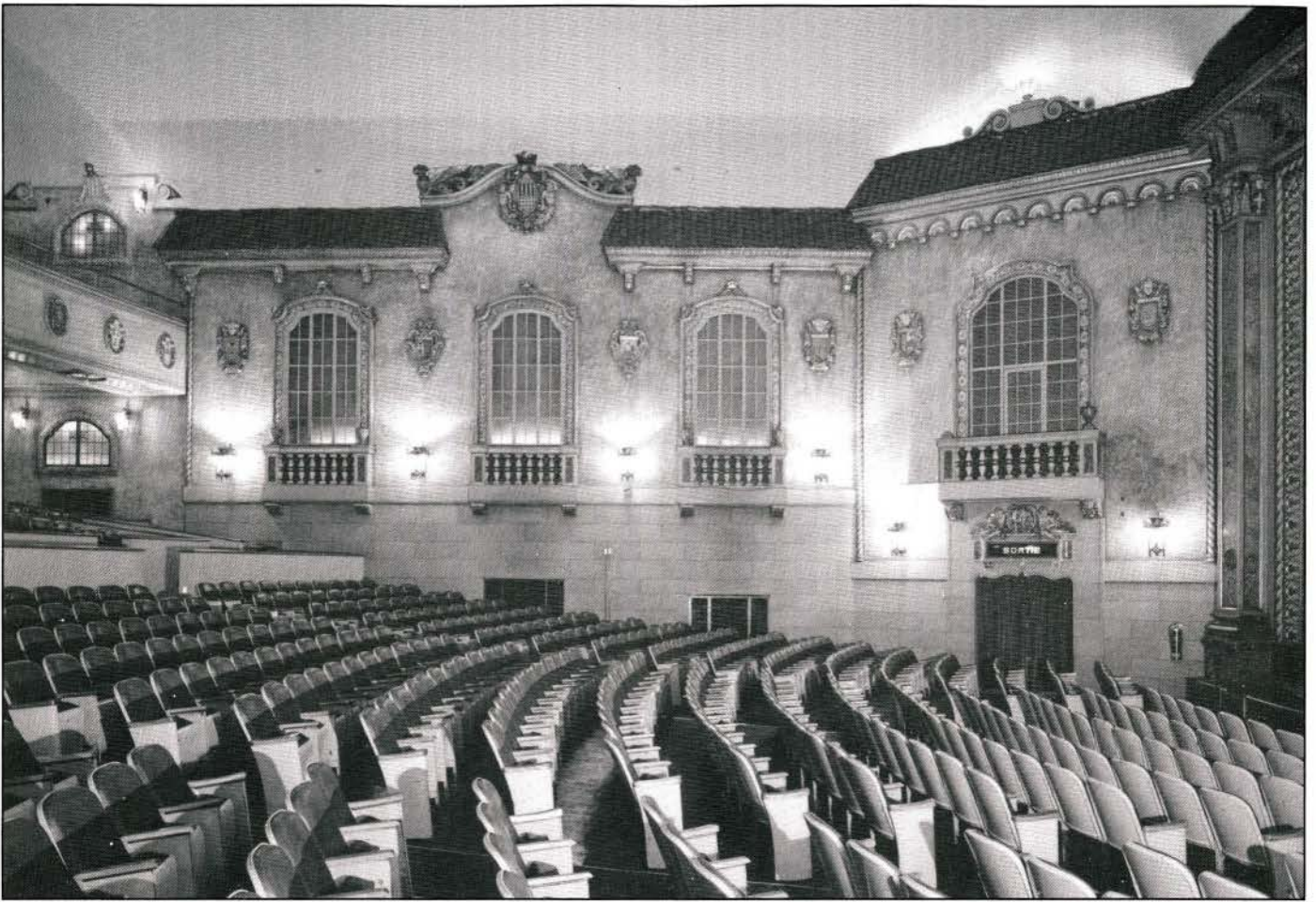


Figure 5. The Monkland (above), from 1930, on Monkland Boulevard. D.J. Crighton was the architect, Emmanuel Briffa the decorator. (Photo: Brian Merrett, 1981)

Figure 6. The York (right), from 1938, on St. Catherine Street, by the Montreal architectural firm of Luke, Little & Perry. (Photo: Brian Merrett, 1981)

Catherine Street from 1938, by the Montreal architectural firm of Luke, Little & Perry (figure 6).

It had a clean, spacious lobby (later invaded by a candy counter), and a perfectly curved and airy hall. It was much admired when it opened, as much for its quiet good taste as for the contrast it offered to the exuberance of so much earlier theatre decoration. The York remained in good condition over the years, but it closed recently and its future is in doubt.

Exuberant theatre design of the 1910s and 1920s fell out of favour with the emergence of the Modern Style. Ornate painting and plasterwork was anathema to adherents of the less-is-more school. And though movie palaces have always had at least some fans, it is only in the past few years that the style has begun to be taken seriously and given the attention it deserves.

Too bad there are so few of these theatres left.

