

Extinguishing Spotlights: the Uncertain Future of Cinematic Heritage in London's Leicester Square

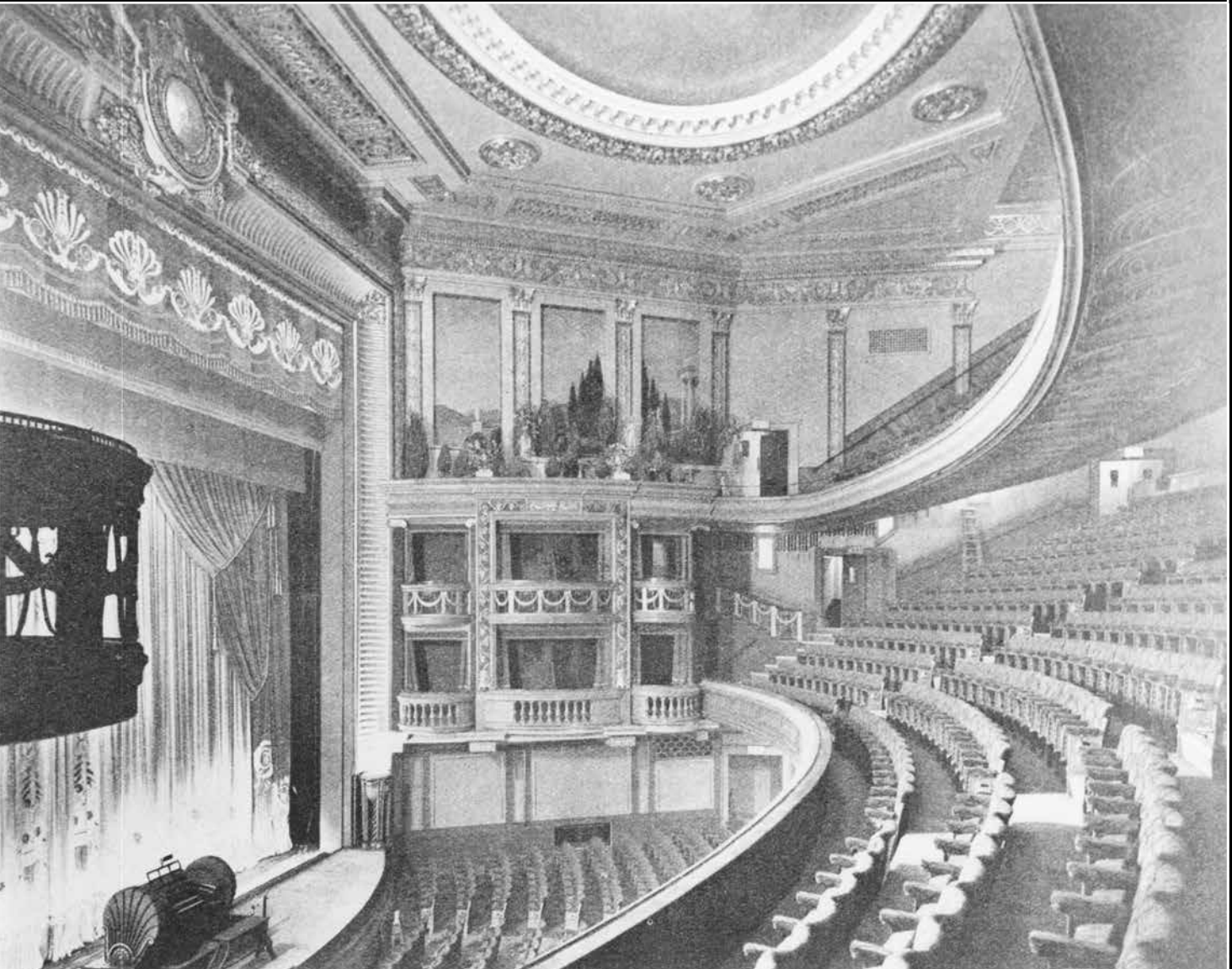
Alexa Raisbeck

Thank you to each and every one of my contributors
for your accounts, memories and stories.
(In memory of KJ)

As was previously marked by a plaque in the Empire foyer (now Cineworld), it was here in Leicester Square during March 1896 that the Empire Theatre of Varieties was to host the first *public* shows of the Cinematograph, by the Lumière brothers, which had moved from the Regent Street Polytechnic (now the newly restored Regent Street Cinema). It was from this point onwards that film would be entwined with the cultural association of the area and became cinema-land where opulent film palaces were built to honour the home of UK cinema. Decades of tradition still dictate that cinema managers don full suits to greet the Hollywood glitterati and the rest of their patrons, for they are the esteemed guests of the 'house' for the evening. However, any weekend night in the square seems very far from this world.

The current and rapid proliferation of bars and nightclubs has seen the area become an epitome of excess weekend binge drinking. Each night scores of inebriated groups of men and women trawl around the square, frequenting the various venues offering alcohol. For a period when the central gardens were closed for refurbishment (between 2010 and 2012) a die cast statue of Charlie Chaplin was removed then relegated to Leicester Place (the alley adjoining the Empire). Previously locked away at night, it was then under darkness that the opportunity for a climb or a lewd photograph was undertaken without care or regard to the statue or indeed the surrounding area. Before long his cane was broken off and the statue was removed for repair¹. Drinking, petty theft and indecent behavior in the square is a grave concern for Westminster City Council and disquiet over all of these things has been broadcast numerous times by mainstream press throughout the noughties (BBC, 2003) (Lydall, 2003). Today a large chunk of the square is hidden behind scaffolding poles and hoardings whilst large cranes tower several meters into the skyline. As of early 2016, extensive demolition and building work continued over three sides of the square with the entire western side completely under construction. In examining the history of the area for this paper, it is apparent that the economic fortunes of the square are cyclic and regeneration historically follows a distinct pattern of urban decay. The *passé* and/or underperforming tend to be demolished; with what is raised in its place reflecting new tastes, trends and fiscal opportunity. Indeed, it was film that initiated a cycle of change on the square, linking it with the moving

1. Charlie was removed from the Gardens in 2010 and was repositioned in Leicester Place during 2013. After his cane was broken off he was taken for repair and now as of April 2016 been placed back in the gardens. I witnessed a lot of late night 'interaction' with the statue when walking through the square at night.



*(Image courtesy of
the Cinema Theatre
Association - CTA
Archive)*

Extinguishing Spotlights: the Uncertain Future of Cinematic Heritage in London's Leicester Square

El futuro incierto de un patrimonio cinematográfico en Leicester Square, Londres

Un avenir incertain pour un patrimoine cinématographique à Leicester Square, Londres

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Abstract

London movie theatres have been considered some of the finest palaces to house the moving image. Even the tiles adorning the Northern and Piccadilly lines at Leicester square tube station, depict the iconic film perforations along its platforms. As the focus point of movie marketing, the fetishisation of stars and directors in the numerous film premieres hosted along the red carpets in the square have been recorded and disseminated worldwide via print and broadcast for decades. Today, the huge hoardings (now digitized) still attempt to entice those milling past to venture inside for the latest Hollywood blockbusters. However, as cinema attendance has waned the square has had to respond to the changes in public demand for a wider choice and different kinds of experience. Many of the former cinemas have now been multiplexed; their singular former grandeur stripped in favour of modernist simplicity and choice. Now in a much more worrying trend, parts of the square (including the Odeon West End) are in the process of being fully demolished. Audience demands for variety and spectacle plus industry developments in digital technologies and new trends in experience such as giant screen formats, 3D films and more immersive sound have fuelled the need for change to keep up with demand and profit. Using Leicester Square as a case study, this paper will explore the need of cinema holding companies to evolve in an increasing multi-platform era of choice. The question is at what cost to preservation and heritage is this current strategy having on our national and collective cinematic history?

Keywords: movie theatres, commercial architecture, architectural conservation, public spaces

Resumen

Las salas de cine londinenses han sido consideradas como ejemplos de la mejor arquitectura construida para albergar la exhibición cinematográfica. En lo que resulta un caso muy particular, la célebre plaza denominada Leicester Square fue durante varias décadas, el escenario de un marketing cinematográfico basado en la mediatización y fetichización de estrellas y directores que desfilaban por la tradicional "alfombra roja" desplegada allí con motivo de los numerosos estrenos cinematográficos organizados en los cinemas que delimitan dicho espacio urbano. Incluso hoy, las enormes vallas publicitarias digitales instaladas en la plaza, intentan seducir los paseantes que se mueven por este concurrido sector de Londres para que se aventuren a ingresar y observar alguno de los últimos éxitos de taquilla de Hollywood. En vista de la decreciente asistencia al cine debido a múltiples factores, el espacio de Leicester Square ha sido intervenido en repetidas ocasiones buscando ofrecer opciones más variadas: es así como los antiguos cinemas situados allí, han sido transformados en multiplex, con lo cual dichos edificios han sido despojados en buena medida de su grandiosidad original para dar paso a una simplicidad más acorde con los tiempos. Recientemente sin embargo, se han tomado medidas que preocupan: algunos elementos tradicionales de la plaza, entre los cuales figura el emblemático cinema Odeon West End, se encuentran en proceso de demolición. En el fondo, este tipo de decisiones que atentan contra un patrimonio arquitectónico y urbano son impulsadas por el afán de los circuitos de exhibición en buscar a toda costa la generación de opciones más rentables; todo lo cual va ligado al acelerado desarrollo en tecnologías digitales y en tendencias como los grandes formatos de pantalla, las películas en 3D y el audio inmersivo. En este contexto, tomando a Leicester Square como objeto de estudio, el presente artículo aborda diversos aspectos que han moldeado la evolución de la arquitectura de las salas de cine en una época marcada por la oferta de todo tipo de plataformas por medio de las cuales es posible ver cine. ¿Cuáles son las consecuencias que traen consigo el desarrollo de estas nuevas estrategias empresariales, en lo que respecta a la preservación del patrimonio, para nuestra historia cinematográfica nacional y colectiva?

Palabras clave: salas de cine, arquitectura comercial, conservación arquitectónica, espacio público

Résumé

Les cinémas de Londres ont été considérés comme certains des meilleurs palais pour accueillir l'image en mouvement. Même les carreaux qui ornent les lignes Northern et Piccadilly à la station de métro Leicester Square représentent les perforations emblématiques du film le long de ses quais. En tant que point focal du marketing cinématographique, la fétichisation des stars et des réalisateurs dans les nombreuses premières film organisées le long des tapis rouges de la place a été enregistrée et diffusée à travers le monde à travers des publications et des émissions pendant des décennies. Aujourd'hui, d'énormes panneaux d'affichage (maintenant numérisés) tentent toujours d'attirer ceux qui se déplacent autour de l'endroit pour s'aventurer dans les derniers blockbusters d'Hollywood. Cependant, comme la fréquentation du cinéma a diminué, la place a dû répondre aux changements de la demande du public pour un choix plus large et différents types d'expérience. Beaucoup de vieux cinémas ont maintenant été multiplexés; son ancienne grandeur singulière s'est effacée au profit de la simplicité et du choix modernistes. Maintenant, dans une tendance beaucoup plus inquiétante, des parties de la place (y compris le West End of Odeon) sont en train d'être démolies. Le public exige de la variété et montre plus de développements industriels dans les technologies numériques et les nouvelles tendances, telles que les formats d'écran géant, les films 3D et le son plus immersif ont nécessité un changement pour maintenir la demande et les profits. En utilisant Leicester Square comme étude de cas, ce document explorera la nécessité pour les entreprises cinématographiques d'évoluer dans une ère croissante de choix de plates-formes multiples. La question est: quel est le coût de la culture publique, de la préservation et du patrimoine dans la présente histoire cinématographique nationale et collective?

Artículo de investigación

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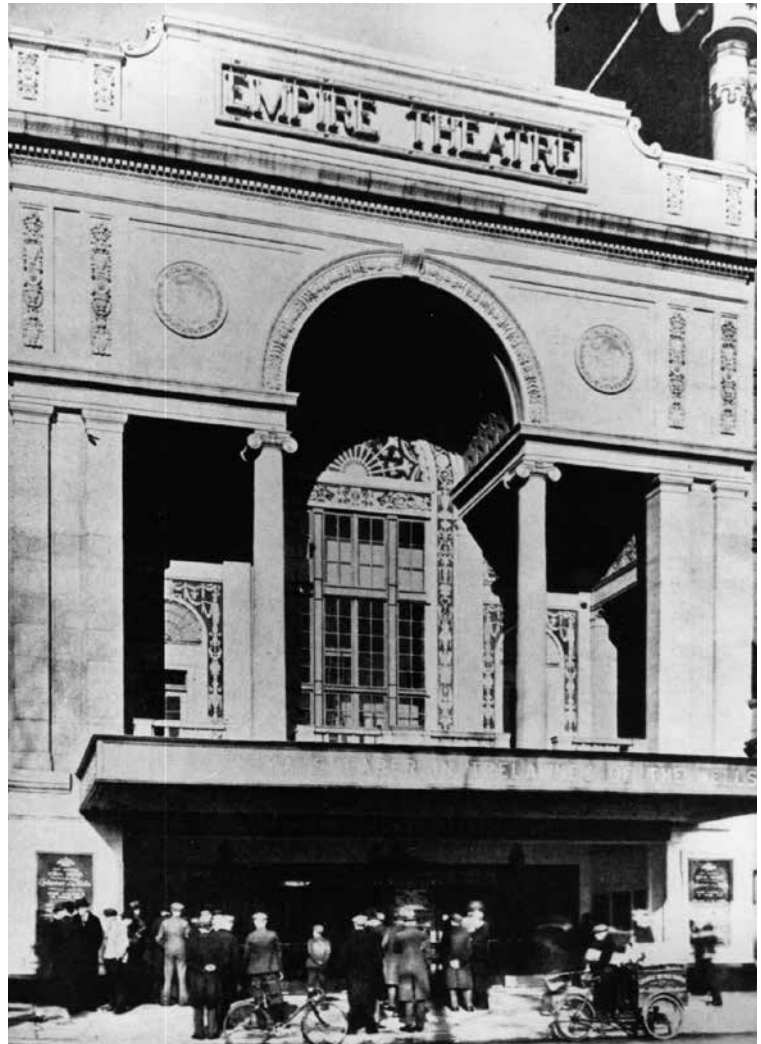
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image and escapism and transforming it into the iconic landmark of film in the United Kingdom.

After the Lumière brothers presented their Cinématographe to the first paying audiences of England at the Empire Theatre, their outfit was commissioned for further runs, which continued onwards as part of a mixed variety programme (High, 1985). On the Eastern side of the square the now demolished Alhambra (a large theatre built in the Moorish style) started presenting Robert W. Paul's films on the Theatrograph (another type of early projector) (Barnes, 1976, 1998). Film soon began to thrive however due to the use of nitrate film stock it was also dangerous and highly flammable. With the passing of the 1909 cinematograph act and the 1922 celluloid and Cinematograph film act dictating new safety features (such as a separate projection box containing the projector to prevent the spread of fire) buildings now required adaptations to present film (Cinematograph Act, 1909; Celluloid and cinematograph film act, 1922). This either meant an adjustment to existing buildings (usually theatres) or the raising of purpose built structures fit for purpose. The first cinema to exclusively run film in the area was a small unassuming building situated next to the grand Alhambra theatre. Known by several names including *The Circle in the Square*, the building no longer exists as a cinema and has been a Weatherspoons pub for some years now (Eyles, 2014). It is also the chosen drinking hole for many of the projectionists serving the cinemas on the square – especially after a special event such as a Premiere. With the establishing of the film industry at home and abroad (of which Hollywood came to dominate) it was soon clear that more cinemas were needed to keep up with spectator demand. By the late 1920s the Empire Theatre had passed into the possession of the dominant American Studio Metro Goldwyn Mayer. They deemed a new improved building (at the cost of £750,000) to house the moving image was necessary and a full demolition of the theatre space was undertaken (High, 1985). Most accounts suggest the building was demolished in its entirety however, a small amount of brickwork high up on the western facing side of the building suggests some of the original entrance part of the theatre was reincorporated into the build of the new design². Also extending out from the main cinema is a fire exit running down to Leicester Street, which weaves its way through a series of



Figures 1 and 2. The grand and sumptuous Empire Leicester Square (Images courtesy of the Cinema Theatre Association - CTA Archive)

outhouses. These features are also part of the old pit entrance from the original theatre (Melnick &

2. I came to this conclusion after extensively studying the Empire and its former layouts and schematics. The older brickwork is characterised by a darker colour and more weathered appearance. The bricks are also uneven and handmade.

Figures 3 and 4.
The grand and sumptuous Empire Leicester Square
 (Images courtesy of the Cinema Theatre Association - CTA Archive)



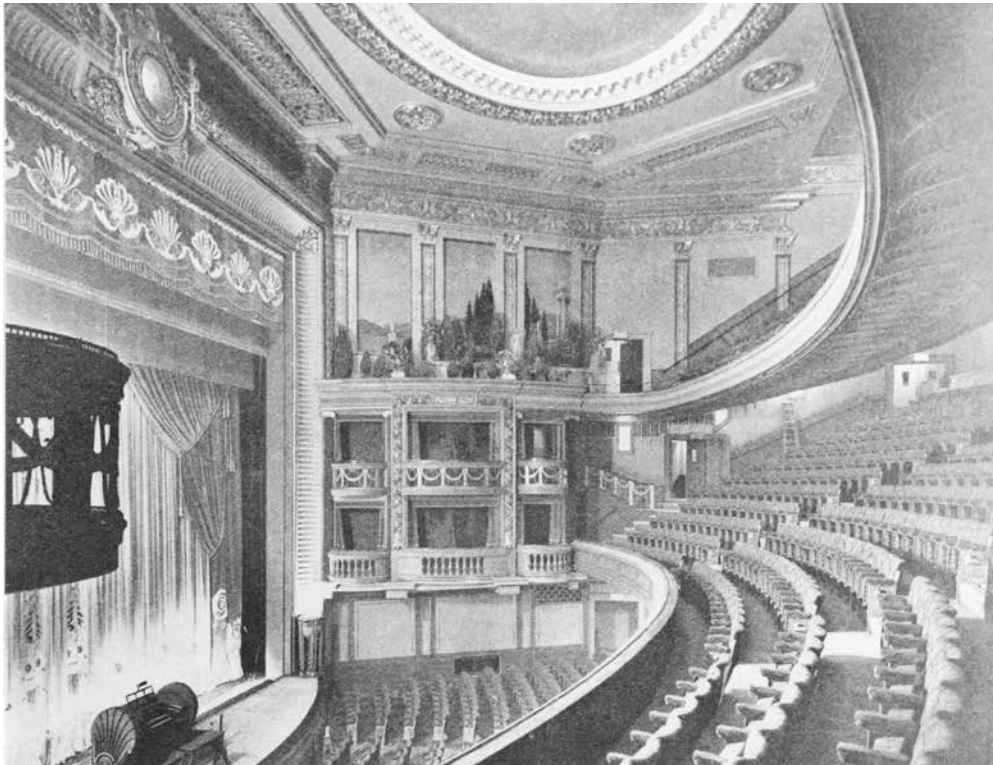
Roe, 2000 - 2016). By all accounts and surviving photos (of which there are few) the new Empire Leicester Square was a palace of extravagance and decadence (figure 1). Designed by architects and designers Thomas W. Lamb and Frank Matcham & Co. the architecture and décor was grand and sumptuous. Decorated in the renaissance style, the cinema was a pinnacle of grandeur with ornate wood carvings and sculpted reliefs (High, 1985). Large mirrors reflected twinkling chandeliers whilst the thick patterned carpet added another layer of luxury (figures 2 & 3). The entrance hall

was quite spectacular with a carved MGM logo taking center stage (figure 3).

Furnished with approximately 3100 seats the grand auditorium with decorative dome was the largest ever built in London's West End (figure 6) (Eyles, 2014).

With the Empire firmly establishing its dominance on the northern side of the square it was not long before the Alhambra theatre on the eastern side was scheduled for demolition, which eventually took place in 1936 (Lloyd, 2001 - 2013). In its place the Iconic Odeon Leicester Square and its thirty-seven-meter-high tower was built (Eyles, 2002). It was developed as the flagship and Premiere cinema for the entire Odeon chain run by Oscar Deutsch. Designed by architects Harry Weedon and Andrew Mather with the cost of land and the build coming in at £782,755 (*ibid.*). The outside was finished in black polished granite stone slabs, which stood out somewhat imposingly from the lighter coloured buildings either side of it (Gray, 1996). The huge auditorium consisted of approximately 2116 seats including those in the stalls and circles (Eyles, 2002). The decorative ribbed lines around the top and sides of the auditorium focused the eye towards the screen and gave a modern, yet streamlined futuristic appearance in keeping with the art-deco design trend that was sweeping Europe at the





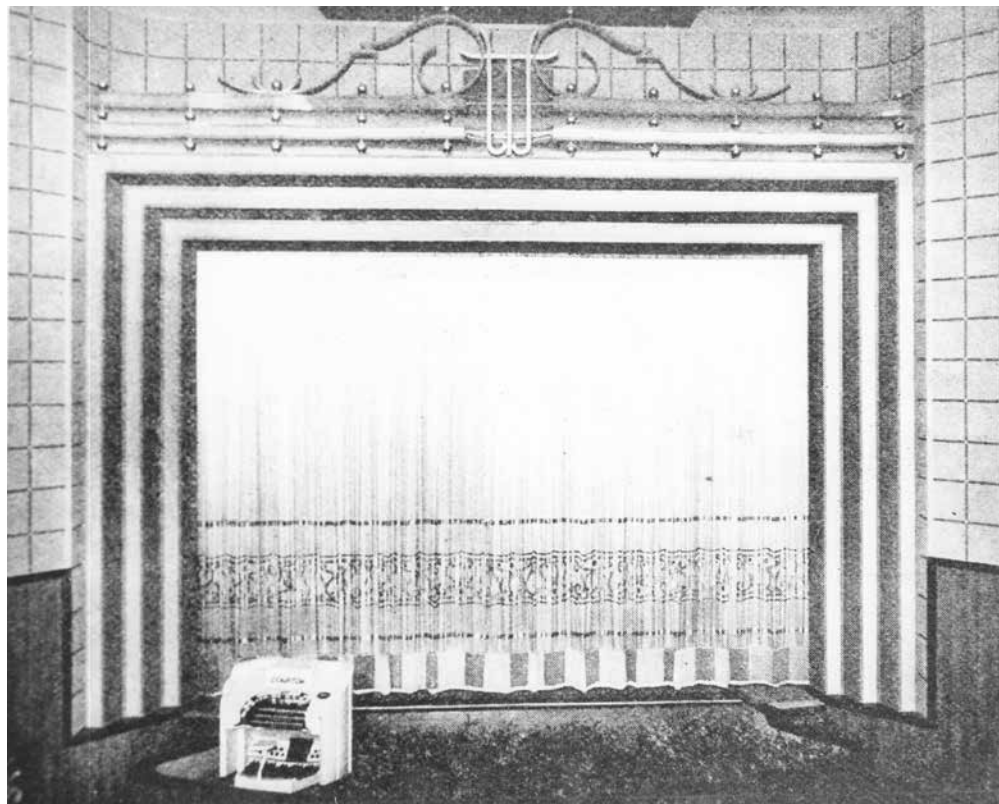
Figures 5 and 6.
*The Leicester Square
 Theatre (Odeon
 West End)* (Images
 courtesy of the Cinema
 Theatre Association
 - CTA Archive)

time. Its distinctive faux leopard patterned seats and leaping nymph/dancing lady reliefs on the screen wings made it instantly recognisable in both broadcast and print. A beautifully crafted Compton organ with 5 manuals and 17 ranks was installed to add accompaniment to the film pro-

gramme (Jenkins & Twamley, 2013). The console case was quite spectacular, offering both illumination and colour changing side panels. Charles Theobalds and architect Andrew Maher conceived the art deco 'scroll type' design, which reflected the interior décor of the auditorium (*ibid.*). "The



Figures 7 and 8.
*The Warner West End
 1938 (now Vue) (Images
 courtesy of the Cinema
 Theatre Association
 - CTA Archive)*



Duchess” (as the organ later affectionately came to be known) could rise up on a lift, many feet from the basement and up into the middle of the orchestra pit for extra effect. James Bell was the first in-house organist to play at the Odeon Leicester Square and he featured in many broadcasts made from the cinema on national radio (CinemaOrganSociety, 2016). Due to its unique architecture and décor plus the sheer number of stars that have graced its doors, the Odeon Leicester Square retains its place as the most iconic cinema on the square today. Its sister cinema on the south square was much smaller though no less impressive (figures 7 and 8). It had approximately 1500 seats in the stalls and 507 seats in the balcony (Melnick & Roe, 2000 - 2016). After changing hands several times and being remodeled after bomb damage, the Leicester Square Theatre was passed to Odeon in 1946 (Eyles & Skone, 1991). Later known as Odeon West End, the Cinema often continued the run of films that had premiered at the Odeon Leicester Square and also became a venue for smaller premieres and festivals (including the BFI London Film Festival) in later years. The last prominent cinema on the square was to be built on the site of the demolished Daly’s theatre. Situated on the northeastern side of the square the Warner Theatre (figures 9 and 10) was

raised in 1938 by the Warner Brothers film studio (Lloyd, 2001 – 2013). The architects A. Stone and T.R Somerford built a 1789 seat auditorium inside and an impressive façade on the outside (Eyles, 2014). Here the spirits of ‘sight’ and ‘sound’ were carved in relief externally near the top of the building by sculptor Bainbridge Copnall and can still be seen today (Grundy, 2000).

Many other cinemas surrounding the square were to open, operate and subsequently close in the last century including the Monseigneur News Theatre situated next to the Empire, which operated from the mid-1930s to its closure in 1978 (Eyles, 2014). It has been a long succession of restaurants that refurbish, trade for a short time and then close down. Nonetheless, the four guardians of the square (Odeon LSQ, Odeon West End, The Empire and Warner/Vue respectively) have (until recently) endured. All of these ‘super’ cinemas became places where both royalty and film stars would appear to grace the red carpets with their presence. Grand and lavish affairs, no expense was spared in the detail and execution of what was ultimately a fantastic promotional tool in the push of new feature films. Reporters and broadcasters would wait for hours alongside ecstatic fans waiting to snap photos and capture interview snippets (now known as junkets) ready for broadcast and publication for dissemination worldwide. The sheer size of the auditoriums with the added touches of luxury and decadence fed into the fetishisation surrounding both the stars and the films. For further reference, the atmosphere and sense of excitement and grandeur surrounding these events can be viewed in the archived news reel footage held by British Pathé on their website³. When cinemagoing was the prime leisure pursuit these auditoriums could be filled for each performance and it was not uncommon for queues of patrons to wind from the front doors and back out into the square. However, by the 1950s and 1960s cinema attendance was in a steep decline – mostly due to the rise in television and other leisure pursuits plus the introduction of the Eady levy (Baillieu & Goodchild, 2002). Content over spectacle became more important and the narrative of films took priority over the grandeur of buildings (that had begun to feel stuffy and old) (Carder, 1984). New technologies in both picture and sound were mitigated by bad sightlines in the auditoriums and unsatisfactory sound reproduction (large auditoriums also suf-



ferred from the inevitable reverb created by their size). The day-to-day costs of running such a large auditorium had become unmanageable for MGM (Gray, 1996). In an attempt at modernism both the Odeon and the Empire (to the horror of subsequent generations) decided to internally rebuild and refit their expansive auditoriums. In 1962 The Empire lost its entire stalls area – just keeping the circle area and putting a floor across to partition the building into two. The ornate ceiling was broken up and a new suspended ceiling was added in its place. The new configuration of the auditorium can be seen in figure eleven.

Figures 9 and 10. Warner, and Odeon, in 1989 (Images courtesy of Nick Fyffe)

3. British Pathé Archive <http://www.britishpathe.com/search/query/Empire+Leicester+Square>.



Figure 11.
Empire Leicester Square in 1989 (Image courtesy of Nick Fyffe)

The entrance hall was cut in half to allow separate access to the new cinema (formally the tea rooms and circle) and the stalls became an independently operated dance hall taken over by Mecca Ltd (High, 1985). The screen auditorium became much smaller with 1,336 seats and a throw of 121 feet from projector to the new screen (Cricks, 1962). This would have improved picture quality and brightness and with the projection room being moved towards what was the back of the original circle the rake would have also improved. The projection room was also furnished with two Todd-Ao projectors and a Phillips FP70 (*ibid.*). The new auditorium housed seats with plenty of legroom and distinctive coves in the new suspended ceiling. The coves housed fluorescent tubes that faded in cycles between pink, yellow and blue with a slow cycle and fade out just as the film was about to start (as shown in figure three). The rebuild was fresh, modern and quite spectacular in many ways and the work overseen by architect George Coles was well executed and was generally well received in industry press. *Kinematograph* weekly described the refurbishment as ‘a way that the traditional can be changed to the modern without harming either its function or character’ (KW, 1962). Perhaps a testament to the forward thinking design and function of the new Empire, the auditorium remained relatively unchanged up until 2013 when the next round of large scale works was to be undertaken. However, all of the original grandeur of the space was lost during this rebuild and is often lamented today (Once a dewy eyed pensioner who had seen the

Empire before the 1962 conversion spent two hours describing to me in painstaking detail the loss of the former sculptures, chandeliers, paintings and carpets that had once fitted the place). I couldn’t help wonder at the time if the building had been maintained as a theatre whether it would still exist in its former glory today. In many ways cinema is linked to ideas surrounding the advance in its own apparatus; the futuristic spectacle of the moving image technology (as marketed in the very first film performances) continues to influence the surroundings in which film is shown. Fussy and ornate expression did not fit in with ideas surrounding modernism, which needs to appear fresh, clean and minimalist. Perhaps it was the modernisation of the Empire and the need to ‘catch up’ that had led to the extensive changes or simply the need to keep up with modern interior design trends but on the other side of the Square the Odeon Leicester Square fared much more poorly in its renovations. During 1967 the iconic deco features that had so elegantly defined the space, such as the ribbed scroll and ceiling detail, beautiful nymph/lady reliefs and faux leopard print seats were literally scrapped (Eyles, 2014). The delicate ornate frontage was also dismantled and an imposing light box was installed above the doors (*ibid.*). This refurb in the history of the Odeon Leicester Square has gone down in memory as a poorly thought out venture, with many pointing out the irony in the title of the re-opening film being a ‘Smashing Time’ (1967) (Laugharne & Roe, 2000 - 2016). In a later refurb (1998) during many of these elements were recreated to try and restore what had previously been lost (Eyles, 2014). The Odeon is shown in figure fourteen, where the entrance to the stalls area from the main foyer (entrance doors are behind) can be seen. The photograph was taken in 1989 just after a further refurbishment. The ‘modernist’ style ceiling panels installed during the 1967 refurbishment are still visible. On the small kiosk in the shot, both popcorn and cigarettes are available for purchase.

In 1968 the Leicester Square Theatre/ Odeon West End was also modernised with most decorative elements stripped in favour of a less fussy modern approach. Warner West End underwent a redecoration in 1957 and then another in 1964, which included changes to the seating and a new ceiling. The ‘improvements’ made to the cinema during this period are described by Eyles and

Skone in London's West End Cinemas as 'Paralysingly bland' (Eyles & Skone, 1991). After this the Warner would come to be refurbished again and twinned. This decade saw a great deal of change in the interests of keeping up with trends in interior design and the realisation by cinema operators and distributors that extremely large spaces did not function as well as smaller spaces with the option of more choice in content. These changes kept the buildings profitable for a decade or so but by the end of the 1970s the square was appearing shabby and dated again. The dustbin men's strike of 1979 left huge piles and mounds of rubbish bags filing the square, which fuelled people's perceptions of the area becoming downtrodden – indeed the square during this period was christened 'Fester Square' (Perkins, 2008). With urban-decay setting in, the square was pedestrianised to improve the area for visitors (Westminster, 2010). It was about this time the cinemas also started to make bigger and bolder changes to their existing buildings. A wave of change had swept through the exhibition sector after 1985 when the first purpose built multiplex opened its doors in Milton Keynes (Gray, 1996). Improvements in projection technology had meant that labour saving devices such long play platter systems could be utilised in multiple screens simultaneously (Enticknap, 2005). These only needed one projectionist going between them, which gave cinema operators the facility to offer more choice, gather more profits but also cut staff, which in turn slashed



Figure 12. *The Odeon Leicester Square Foyer just after the 1989 refurbishment; the ceiling in the shot is still from the 1968 refurbishment. (Image courtesy of Nick Fyffe)*

costs. Leicester Square was not immune to this new trend in exhibiting movies and very quickly the appetite for more screens was insatiable. The Warner had already twinned its large screen back in 1970, with the lower screen in the stalls space being known as the Warner Rendezvous (Allen & Eyles, 1991). By all accounts this version of the Warner was well executed and the décor by designer Alan Best included 400 fiberglass drums suspended from the ceiling of the main auditorium (figure 13) (Eyles, 2014).

However, within years the Rendezvous had disappeared and in its place two screens were built into the space. Not long after, two more screens were added making the number up to five screens (Grundy, 2002). Across the Square



Figure 13 *Warner Rendezvous with fiberglass drums (Image courtesy of Nick Fyffe)*

in 1988 the Odeon Leicester Square raised a very long and narrow building along its south side in what had been an alleyway where the bins for the cinema had been stored. In this space, five long and narrow screens were fitted without changes being made to the existing Odeon Leicester Square structure (Eyles, 2014). It was known as the Mezzanine up until recently when the name changed to Odeon Studios ('Studio' is now an industry to described very intimate screens built in smaller spaces"). In the same year Odeon West End were to twin their main auditorium so as to have the use of two screens. With the closure of MGM's distribution arm the Empire was sold to CIC (Cinema International Corporation) who they then became a partner with (Eyles, 2014). The basement cinema next door had also been owned by MGM and was used for second runs (the former Ritz) so it made a logical choice to merge into the main cinema without having to divide the existing auditorium further. The screen had a separate entrance just to the left of the main cinema entrance and under CIC it became known as Empire 2 (*Ibid.*). Situated in an area close to the right hand side box of the original Empire auditorium – a new smaller screen of approximately 80 seats was built and known as Screen Three, and was never really well received, which is why for many years the Empire never had a numbered screen three. It went from screen 2 to screen 4. Choice of content was now the most important driver in the profits of exhibitors. Multiple screens allowed for offset film timings of a large release as well as more than one title to be played at the same time. Reflecting this trend and unable to multiplex the building further the Warner West End was demolished in its entirety behind its front façade and a new building was opened on the site (Grundy, 2002). With nine screens (four of which were in the basement) the building became the first 'proper' multiplex on the square. Constrained by its boundary, screens and boxes were built over several floors on top of each other – unlike the traditional long plan multiplex buildings with a single projection box. During this period Leicester Square was still very much the powerhouse and focal point of film in the UK. Premieres costing tens of thousands of pounds would continue to attract the world's press and film stars from across the world (especially Hollywood) would continue to tread the red carpets leading up into the cinemas. All premieres were a well-run operation with the cinemas usually suspending their normal opera-

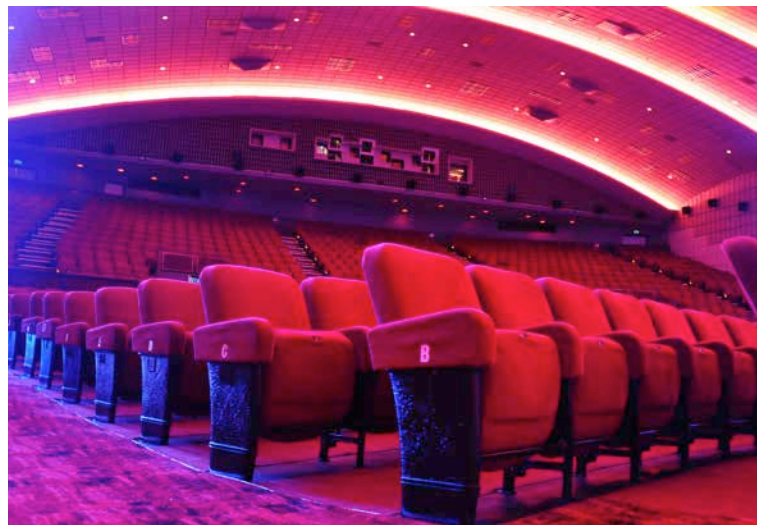
tions and going into 'lockdown' some hours before the main event. During this period a large number of workers would get set on preparing the cinema for the evening. Outside, contractors would build podiums, assemble railings, change the frontages and lay the red carpet, whilst security teams would manage fans and press. Inside engineers would work with projectionists to test the film and fine-tune the audio and picture to the director's (and/or his teams) specification. Ushers would start laying the complimentary snacks, programmes and promotional gifts given to guests on seat armrests ready for their arrival. They would also clean, polish and vacuum every exposed inch of decor. For a royal performance, live bands and orchestras would announce the arrival of the royals to their seats. A little button pressed at the entrance to the screen would light a cats-eye light to prompt the conductor when he was to start the National Anthem. It was in the 1990s that the Odeon West End projection team was also put in charge of taking plaster casts of the actor's handprints that arrived for the premieres at their cinemas. A closely guarded recipe thought to be dental plaster and salt was prepared for each imprint and calculated for the exact time an actor was ready to pass on the red carpet and get their hands dirty. Prepared too early with the wrong amount of ingredients and the mix would harden too soon – the moment lost. Then the casts were sent out of London to be fixed in bronze before being returned and placed in the ground around the square in front of the cinemas. These alone soon became a tourist attraction and visitors would place their own hands in those of the stars including Kate Winslet, Michael Caine and Tom Cruise. Sadly, these were removed in the 2011 refurbishment of the Square's gardens and have yet to be returned (Prynn, 2014).

The newest cycle of regeneration and change appears to have started in the noughties. In 2008 the Swiss Centre which has sat on the North-western side of the square for over forty years was demolished – having been deemed a 'failed' building by Westminster council in 2002 (Althorpe, 2016). In itself this may not have much bearing on cinematic heritage however there was a cinema inside the building. One former film projectionist remembers seeing the demolition of the Swiss Centre from the window of her workplace. She stated in a horrified voice that "They demolished it with the projection equipment still inside" and vividly recounted seeing the projector tumbling out from



Figures 14, 15 and 16. The former 'Empire One' Auditorium (pre-2013 conversion). The original seats and fluorescent lighting tubes from 1962 were still in place up until 2013. The seats in the foreground are situated on the new floor. (Images : Alexa Raisbeck)

the side of the building before falling several stories onto the rubble below. This very lucid image of the destruction of the projector, for me marks the real weakening of cinematic heritage in the square. In its place a large, brash and modern architectural cuckoo was raised - a luxury five-star hotel which ushered in a new era of gentrification and urban development that started to pull the square away from its cinematic stronghold yet ride on its fetishism. In 2004 Adam Minns had expressed concern at the future of filmic identity and the cinemas on the square in an article featured in *Screen International* (Minns, 2004). It seems his predictions regarding the growth of Casino's did come to pass. After the gambling act of 2005 was passed, three large Las Vegas style casinos were opened in close proximity to each other and 'Las Leicester Square' started to become a reality. The large Hippodrome building at the end of the square (which had also once housed film) became a super casino - enticing punters to enjoy the slots, bars, live sports and burlesque. Then in 2006 The Casino at the Empire (whose parent group Caesars Entertainment Corporation now own the building) became a reality (Caesars, 2016). Operating in the old stalls area (that previously had become a nightclub and dancehall) it now offers several bars and restaurants and numerous opportunities to gamble. This was one such shift in the identity of the square during the noughties. Another shift



was the divulsion of ownership of the Leicester Square cinemas (and their chains) by the film studio companies. In 2000 the Odeon chain had been sold by Rank to Cinven a private equity group for £280 million (Hobson, 2000). Under Cinven's reign, the well-known "fanatical about film" slogan was developed (Simpson, 2016). By March 2003 the chain had been sold on to a consortium including West LB (a German investment bank) for £431 million (*Ibid.*). In May of 2003 Warner Village sold The Warner West End and the other 35 cinemas in its chain to SBC International Cinemas a venture capitalist company for £250 million (Forde, 2003). They were quickly to rebrand as Vue Cinemas LTD (Wray, 2003). In December 2010 Vue Entertainment was acquired by Doughty Hanson & Co before being sold to OMERS private Equity and Alberta Investment Management Corporation in June of 2013 (Neville, 2013). By July 2013 the Vue West End building had been sold to an unnamed pension fund overseen by Cordea Savills for £23.46 million and leased back to the company (Peterson, 2013). In 2004 the private equity group Terra Firma Investments bought the Odeon cinema chain for £400 million and later in the year, Terra Firma capital partners went on to acquire the UCI chain for £182 million with the intent on merging the two chains (Simpson, 2016). All cinemas were to be rebranded Odeon, however this now meant that Terra Firma owned Odeon Leicester Square, Odeon West End and the Empire. Threatened with the merger being referred to the UK Competition Commission, Terra Firma divested eleven cinemas in saturated areas (*ibid.*). One of the cinemas divested was the Empire Leicester Square. It was purchased by Thomas Anderson of Cinema Holdings Ltd alongside other cinemas from another merger between Cineworld and UGC by the Blackstone Group (another private equity group). The cinema would come to form a new independent chain behind it known as 'Empire Cinemas Ltd' (the title of which came from The Empire).

Now assets in investment portfolios, the cinema buildings and their operations became opportunities for profit. This new era of business ushered in streamlining and also the adoption of digital projection technology, which saw the mass redundancies of thousands of projectionists and the increased use of centralized automation systems. As there were no employees to run shows, new multiplexes began to be built without projection rooms and without tabs (curtains). Where

previously this had all been carefully set by the projection team to ensure the perfect show (even choosing music to match before the film) a now fully automated process became standard. Many of these new cinemas (boasting large modern screens and VIP seating arrangements) started to compete with Leicester Square. Operators actively sought to break with tradition and entice Premieres away to other parts of London; they were partly successful⁴. The Empire utilised digital technology from quite early on and used it to add screens into small places in the building that previously had not been feasible with 35mm equipment. Projectors could now be hung off of the ceilings in the auditoriums and remotely controlled by technicians. Soon a screen four and five was built and screen three was demolished to make way for two new screens (seven and eight) whilst another screen (nine) was built on top. The basement screen number two (formally the Ritz) was also fitted with a stage and roll up screen and new raised seating. These adjustments changed the fabric of the building but did not encounter resistance, as the space utilised did not affect the main auditorium. However, during August of 2013 came the decision to split Empire one – the grand 1,330 seat auditorium into two halves to create an IMAX with 728 seats and a large screen experience screen known as IMPACT with 400 seats (Empire Cinemas, 2016). Closing its doors straight after the closing night of the FrightFest film festival, the seats began to be dismantled and refurbishment work began feverishly to the plans drawn up by UNICK architects. A wall was built across the stalls area to meet the highest point in the curvature of the roof (it was actually hung as the floor could only support a certain amount of weight) to allow for the new size of screen. The Imax would take up the former space of the circle whereas another screen known as the IMPACT would take up the stall side of the wall. Over the following months the distinctive tiled paneling was removed, as was the lighting that cycled through pink, yellow and blue (though parts of this design is reflected in the new IMAX screen). The tabs and proscenium with the twinkling lights were scrapped – as was the seating that had served the screen (although reupholstered several times) since the 1960s. Details such as the stylised exit signs and crowns on the circle paneling were also removed and have not been returned. Opening in May 2014, what replaced the old Empire was again modern and

4. The Vue in the O2 (now a Cineworld in the O2) was an early example of one such cinema, which began to break the hold on premieres situated in Leicester Square. Other examples include the Vue in the Stratford Westfield shopping Centre and Picture House Central (formally Cineworld Trocadero) who have also hosted Premieres.

at the cutting edge of sound and digital technology (it had the first laser projectors in the UK). However, the work was still met with much controversy and in the week the auditorium closed it had spawned its own hash tag (#SplitEmpire) on twitter with many users encouraging people to share their fondest memories of the screen online in which many did – including Director Edgar Wright.

For many advocates and cinephiles that frequented the square the acceptance of the loss of the grand auditorium was difficult even with a good quality conversion being undertaken and yet there was more change to come. Just over two years later the Empire Leicester Square (along with four other Empire sites) was divested to the Cineworld Group PLC for £94 million and shares (Grater, 2016). In return Cinema Holdings Ltd (Empire's parent company) was to receive the Cineworld Haymarket site around the corner from the square (*ibid.*). A publicly traded company, Cineworld's largest shareholder (28%) Global City Holdings has direct interests in the developing and divesting of real estate property (GlobalCityHoldings, 2018). Whatever the feelings on the Empire conversion, across the square the historical and cinematic ontology of the area had also been thrown into quandary. Back under Terra Firma, many of the assets held by the Odeon chain were

being sold off for profit, then leased back to the business (Savills, 2014). However, this was not without consequence, as Terra Firma had sold off the Odeon West End site during 2006 to three Irish investors. After the investment entered receivership and the site was sold to the Edwardian group in 2012 for around £100 million (Ruddick, 2012). By 2014 the plan had been drawn up for the demolition of the cinema in its entirety. In its place a new ten story hotel and spa was to be built (Moore, 2014). A cinema was also to be included in the basement of the development plans. Following a large party thrown to celebrate the life of the building, the Odeon West End shut its doors on January the 1st 2015. A statement on the Odeon website (<http://www.odeon.co.uk/cinema/west-end/>) refers to the site being at the 'heart' of the cinema industry and that they are sad to announce the closure.

It goes on to read that the new Odeon West End will re-open in approximately three years' time. On this note, I feel it is pertinent to add that without fanfare the iconic Odeon Leicester Square property was also sold with a lease back agreement towards the end of 2013. (Savills, 2014)

Just as the rubble of the former Odeon West End was being cleared from the site (as seen in figure 6) and the large gap in the skyline of the square was barely concealed behind hoardings,

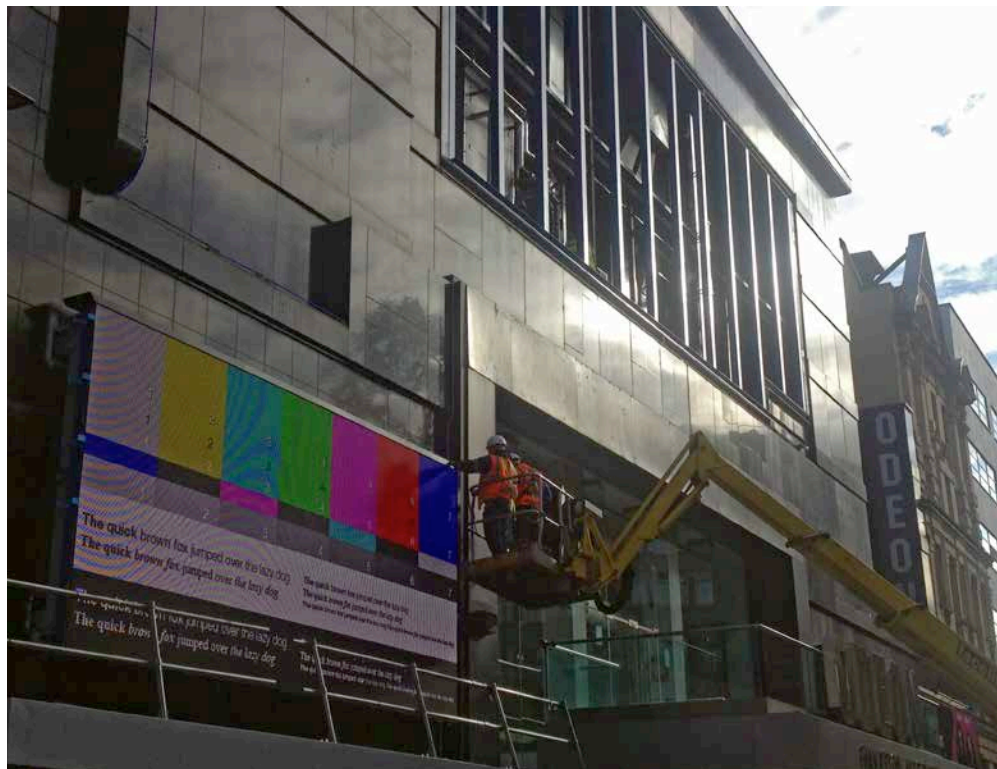


Figure 17.
The Odeon Leicester Square installs its new video screens – what will the future hold?
(Image : Alexa Raisbeck)

Terra Firma were gearing up for a third attempt to sell the entire Odeon chain. The bid was finally successful and the US brand AMC Entertainment (who are in turn owned by the multinational Dalian Wanda Group - China's largest commercial property company) bought the Odeon portfolio including the Leicester Square operation for approximately £921million (CT, 2016). Under this new owner, as of March 2018, the Odeon Leicester Square had closed again for a large refurbishment which is set to take many months. A statement on the website reads that they want the site to 'set the cinema standard for years to come' and it is for this reason it has shut its doors until late 2018. (<http://www.odeon.co.uk/cinema/odeon-leicester-square/>). As if in answer to this, across the Square, the Cineworld Leicester Square (or Empire) also undertook another refurbishment to modernize and rebrand the cinema. Gone are the reds and golds, the last vestiges to the golden era and the foyer has also lost its twinkling lights. In its place is a very dark, shiny, neon LED, spaceship style design, typical of the current new Cineworld branding. The projectors have also been upgraded to laser. The basement screen (formally the Ritz) has also been closed for the fitting of 4DX, a technology which augments films with vibration, scents and water effects (Lowry, 2017).

It is clear that currently Leicester Square is going through something of regeneration. As illustrated this in itself is not unusual and is typical of the cyclic pattern of degradation and regeneration that the square has seen for more since its designation as a publically accessible space. Indeed, the grand Alhambra and the original Empire theatres were both demolished to make way for the new trend in the moving image and this was undertaken when they had both started to make a downward economic trend. Moving with the times has been necessary for the survival of the square but indeed there are currently two concerns, which should be addressed. The first is that film has been a fixture in the square for more than a century now - which is the longest in which period a particular association has been made with the space. The second is the apathy with which we have allowed, uncontested these spaces to wither and then disappear. Cinema attendance has never quite recovered from the introduction of television and other technologies, increases in disposable income plus the rise in other competing leisure pursuits (Baillieu & Goodchild, 2002).

The 1960s really posed a difficult period in which to attract patrons back to the 'silver' screen and in these dark times lumbered with elaborate frilly and stuffy behemoths that were impossible to fill - the route of survival through evolution was to embrace the future of simplicity and choice. Film often represents the historic and the old. It is coded into our visual culture where scratches, dirt and blemishes indicate the past and history (Doane, 2009). Conversely technological spectacle has a symbiotic relationship with the future - it requires the novelty of fresh experience and wonder, which can only be achieved through the introduction of new and different types of experience and technology. Now with the further introduction of the Internet, computers, tablets and smart phones where films can be viewed at one's leisure in any setting plus the push from distributors to counteract illegal downloads and streaming by closing the release window on new feature films the need for experience alongside content is paramount to attracting customers (Dawtre, 2010). This experience includes digital technologies, larger immersive screens, three-dimensional immersive sound, 3D films and other 4D technologies. All of these technological adaptations serve to assist the viewer in total immersion of the content of the film and the building serves to assist in this. It is not enough anymore to stand awe-inspiring in its own right. Interestingly this can be starkly illustrated by the fact many of the West End theatres that remained as live venues for plays (yet built in similar periods) have remained with their ornate grandeur intact. Yet if we had these palaces today - would we not stop in wonder? Would we not make special trips to visit them and their glory? Unfortunately, the past has taken a different course - and with the loss of the original features and the trend in twinning and multiplexing screens, not a single cinema on the square today has been able to achieve listed building status due to the fact extensive changes were made to the interiors of the buildings before the first listing of cinemas were made in the 1970s (Smith, 2014). Had the cinemas kept their interiors intact a decade or so longer, they may have achieved a protected status and perhaps their future would have been more certain? It is worth noting however, that the square itself has managed conservation status (*Ibid.*). Although the Odeon Leicester Square is the only cinema to have currently kept its expansive auditorium intact from multiplex-

ing (also complete with the fantastic organ where none on the rest of the Square survived), it may not be profitable for the company to continue to do so in the future. I believe the success of the new refurb will decide this either way. It is clear from the extreme internal changes to the Vue/Warner and the Empire venues that the need for modernisation ensures the survival of the business operating within it. However, the same push for modernisation against the competing demand for other leisure pursuits and film viewing modes is threatening the ontology of cinema itself. As film companies no longer own the businesses or buildings, consideration must be given to what happens when the profit for venture capitalist/private equity companies is no longer sufficient. With the buildings being sold off to other buyers it is not a stretch to consider that a hotel, casino or bar built on that land might be more profitable to the investors instead of a cinema – and where would cinematic heritage be then?

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