

Del Mar Theatre To Become Triplex

The Del Mar Theatre, last remaining picture palace in Santa Cruz, appears fated to catch up with modern times, as United Artists Theatre Circuit has made firm plans to convert the venerable motion picture house into a triplex, or three cinema theatre.

Similar plans were announced nearly one year ago, but United Artists officials this week confirmed that the renovation will start immediately upon approval from city officials.

Jim Gallagher, an official with UA Theatres operations department in San Francisco, said that plans have already been submitted or will be submitted shortly to city engineering and planning officials. Spokesmen for those departments said they had received no such plans, however.

The future of the Del Mar, as both a first-run movie house, or a county performing arts center, has been much bruited about in recent years, but the reaffirmed UA plans seem to put the lid on a bubbling pot of rumors.

According to Gallagher, the Del Mar will be preserved in much of its art deco splendor, since the present ground floor of the theater will remain in its present format. Two smaller cinemas will be developed from the present balcony and loge sections, with the use of special soundfold, or cloth walls, designed to cut down on noise between the upper and lower floors.



An Egyptian-inspired plaster frieze stares grimly from the side walls of the gilt-encrusted Del Mar Theatre, perhaps pondering her fate in the newly-confirmed plans to turn Santa Cruz' oldest extant theatre into a modern triplex cinema.

SEE BACK PAGE

Del Mar Theatre To Become Triplex

FROM PAGE 1

Although declining to give a price estimate, Gallagher indicated that the renovation of the Del Mar will be considerably cheaper than a similar operation performed on the State Theater in Monterey, an even older picture palace converted a few years ago.

"That type of theatre (the Del Mar) is a thing of the past," said Gallagher. "Palaces and coliseums for movies are no more. The movie-going public wants a greater selection of product, and the problem is Hollywood only makes one quarter of the pictures they did in the '40s.

"Nobody builds a big theater now," continued Gallagher. "Most of them are boarded up, waiting for the wrecking ball."

The Del Mar was not always in the unhappy state of awaiting of facelift, of course. When first christened on Aug. 14, 1936, as "a modern temple of entertainment," the Del Mar was the epitome of a sleek, modern and streamlined film showcase.

That legacy lives on today. A walk into the lobby reveals angular Art Deco chandeliers, with arrows and quiver pointing like sharp rays of light. The theater was a riot of gilt, sinuous Egyptian designs, plaster terra cotta work, and luxuriant tapestries. Inside were the plushiest seats imaginable, although now many of them are tired and faded.

The Pacific States Amusement and Realty Corp. built the Del Mar in response to the

depths to which Santa Cruz picture exhibition had sunk. The old Theatre Unique and the Grand Jewel couldn't outlast the depression, and the New Santa Cruz Theater had degenerated to a sub-run policy.

The 1930s were filmdom's heyday, of course, and despite the lack of bread in the pantry, there were lines at movie box offices across the country. So it made sense at the time to sink \$100,000 into this "dream come true, Theatre Del Mar."

Opening night, Warner Brothers flew in for a special screening the world premiere of "China Clipper," starring Pat O'Brien, which unspooled on the giant silver screen while six matched blonde usherettes in red uniforms, and three male ushers in Phillip Morris page boy outfits milled around. The feature was preceded by the usual Paramount Newsreel and a Walt Disney short subject. Meanwhile, manager Barney Gurnette chortled to the press, "Santa Cruz finally has a real modern theatre, in fact ultra-modern, in every meaning of the word."

Along with 550 loge and balcony seats (the original high-backed chairs remain in the loge), and 950 seats on the main floor, there were the stylish lounges and smoking "chesterfields" that seated 75 in opulent luxury.

The seven months of frantic construction, using between 40 and 65 workmen per day, was concluded on the brilliant opening night, as klieg lights circled

the downtown area and 2,000 patrons filled the theater to capacity. The poor Unique, destined to close the next day, stood close by "dark and dingy by comparison," according to a Sentinel account of that day.

Those days of \$350 depression-giveaways, or bank nights, the Moo Cow lunch next door and "Phone 80 for theater times" are long gone, and now the Del Mar contemplates a restructured future.

"We won't change any of the decor," insists UA Theatres spokesman Gallagher. "The lower floor will be unchanged, with the same size screen. Nothing should be disturbed."

But what of the marvellous feeling one gets when the Del Mar is at that point of half-light, half-gloom? The rich red curtain bustles in a slight breeze, the towering Egyptian princesses glare from the wall side panels, and the vista of unbroken white screen stretches for cinematic miles.

A picture palace used to be a place where a youngster could lose himself and his cares for a few hours on a Saturday afternoon, or where a young couple could come for those moments of privacy away from the peering eyes of parents.

Those days, indeed, may be over, but hopefully the Del Mar will stand as testimony, however mute, that at at one time, movies were kings, and the cavernous theater was their palace.

— By DALE POLLOCK