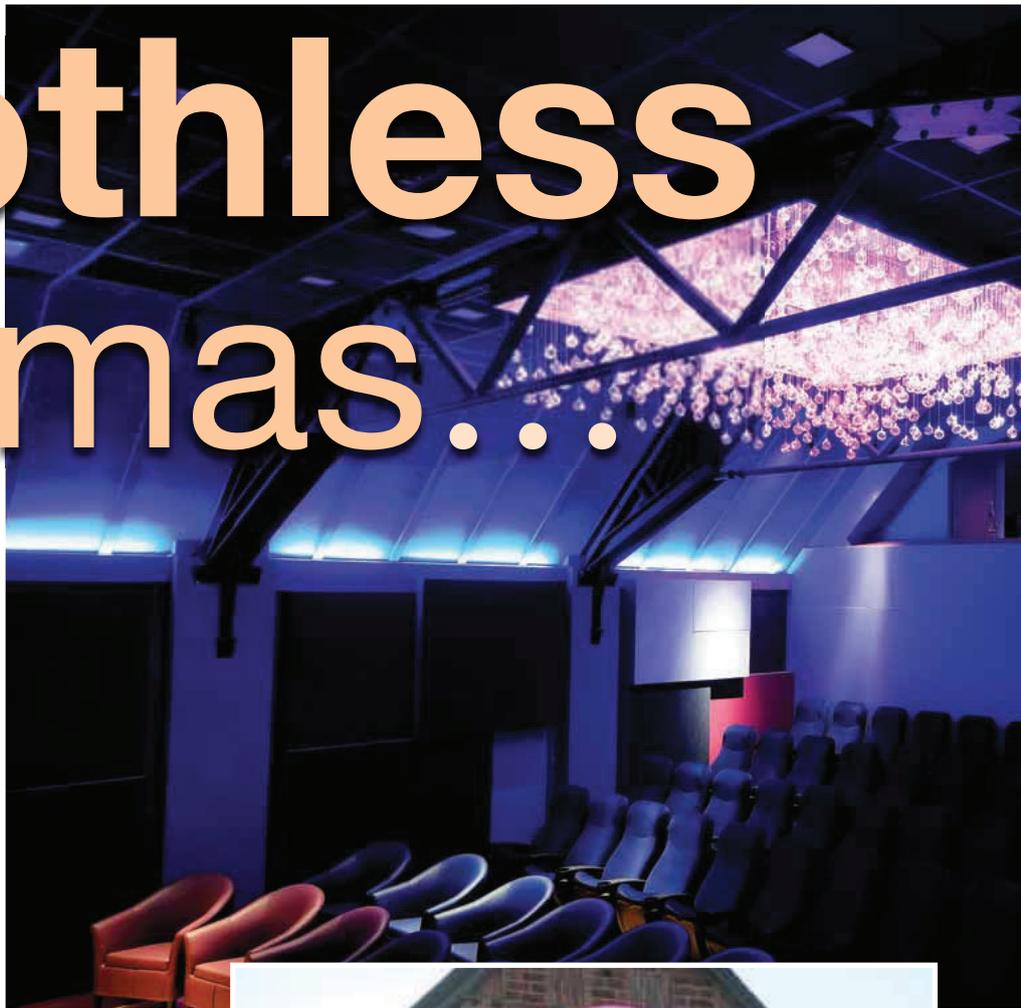


Boothless cinemas... is less more?



by *Bill Chew*



PART 2

Early boothless concepts in the UK

When I was at Cine Europe I spoke to Ron Inglis of Mayfield Arts (cinema consultancy) to trace the origins of boothless in the UK. He mentioned that 'the first cinema he knew that used a boothless design was the Lexi which opened in late 2008 adding that 'other schemes completed slightly later were HMV Wimbledon and the Picturehouse Hackney'. At the time of writing there are no boothless schemes on the scale of Cinopolis or SPI Cinemas proposed for the UK that I am aware of, but no doubt it is now just a matter of time.

The Lexi Cinema, London

The Lexi, situated in Kensal Rise, northwest London is a 77 seat single screen boothless cinema housed in a former small Edwardian theatre. It is also London's first not-for-profit art house venue. The cinema has served the suburb around Kensal Rise and Queen's Park well, providing a flexible programme of recent releases, classic films, re-runs and other themed product. When I visited the

cinema in June, cinema fare being offered included *A Royal Affair* (Nikolaj Arcel), *The Angel's Share* (Ken Loach) and *Polisse* (Maiwenn).

The Lexi was the brainchild of Sally Wilton, a successful businesswoman, who observed at the time that in other parts of the UK successful independent cinemas were being set up, such as the Kino in Hawkhurst and The Rex in Berkhamsted, so she wondered why not in NW10! The Lexi is part of the Pinkham Lighthouse, a social enterprise venture. All profits generated by the cinema are used to support charitable projects mainly in South Africa.

Rosie Greatorex, the manager explains 'the decision to use digital was made for two reasons. By 2008 the digital revolution was well under way and it was clear that no more 35mm projectors were being made



and that digital was to be the medium of the future. The first wave of UK Film Council funded digital projectors were already in cinemas - even with independent exhibitors - and the changeover was in full swing! At the Lexi lack of space was also a major consideration. There wasn't enough room for a 35mm projector (had that been considered) without losing the 16 valuable seats in the balcony! So when all things were considered the boothless option was clearly the best route to follow.' The NEC NC 800C DCI Compliant digital projector is located in a 1.5m wide by 1.0m deep 'housing' and



A feature article on the Lexi Cinema can be found in the November 2008 issue of Cinema Business (now defunct) giving more details for interested readers.

HMV Wimbledon, London

HMV Wimbledon, a 3 screen boothless cinema (having 265 seats in total), which opened on the High Street in October 2009 (to great media fanfare) is a joint venture between the well-known high street chain and Curzon Cinemas. It came about, as far as I can tell, due to two specific factors - 1) a desire by Curzon to promote an undervalued brand and 2) an urgent need by HMV to find other profitable uses for the redundant spaces leased or owned by them given the present retail downturn. These two reasons also coincided with the current progress made by digital, thus making this boothless concept possible. Don't get me wrong - the above comments are not intended as criticisms for the joint venture since I rather like HMV Wimbledon and have been to the pictures there. I think it is a great concept and should be rolled out as 'a formula' in other towns and high streets. However, the fact that no further sites have been opened since Wimbledon is perhaps a sign of how deep our present recession is.

The uniqueness of Wimbledon from the point of view of boothless, is that as a result of having severe space limitations within the building premises, the projection solution consisted of mounting the Barco 1200 projectors in a vertical position (thus saving valuable space) and using mirrors positioned at 45 degrees to direct the image to the screen. The projectors are linked to dedicated GDC 2TB servers located in a separate and remote server room. Heat and smoke detectors linked to the fire alarm system are located nearby. Jason Gaffney, who showed me around when I visited the cinema recently, took time to explain the proc-

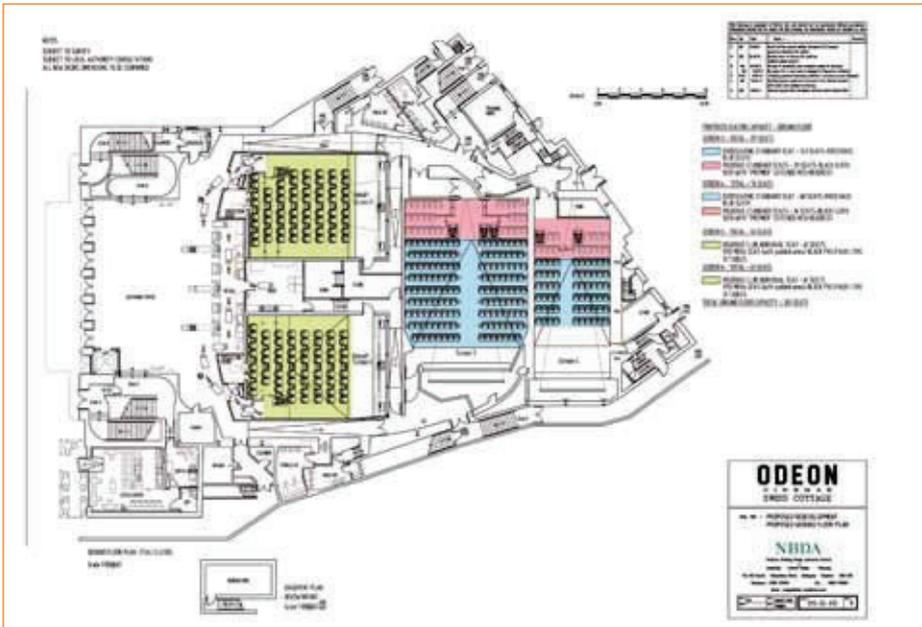
fixed rigidly to and just below the balcony parapet. Rosie Creatorex adds further: 'the theory states that a cinema needs to have at least 100 seats to be commercially viable - with only 77 seats, and 3 years on, we at The Lexi are still defying the conventional wisdom! So losing the balcony seating space was clearly untenable'. Thus all the more reason for selecting the boothless option. With annual audience admissions way above the pundits' expectations there is no doubt that the Lexi is a profitable cinema.



Right: The boothless HMV Wimbledon cinema uses a vertically mounted Barco digital projector pointing into a mirror. Note the access hatch above the back row of seats. The projection equipment in the twin auditoria are controlled from a remote server room.

Below: Outside and one of the auditoria.





Odeon Swiss Cottage

ess of loading the ‘films’ and getting the cinema and digital advertisements ready for cinema presentation. We also talked briefly about the performance of the lamps and the frequency they have to be changed. On such tight spaces as found at Wimbledon re-lamping can be a difficult and slightly hazardous operation. Further thought could perhaps be given by designers and installers on these issues in future projects?

The digital set-up for the cinema was carried out by Future Projections a well-known firm who has carried out many digital installations of such types in the UK. Mark Trompeteler wrote about the opening of HMV Wimbledon in a previous issue of CT (March 2010) from which further specifications relating to the cinema can be found for those interested.

Odeon Swiss Cottage, London

Designs which I have seen from Odeon Cinemas like the recent refurbishment of some screens at Swiss Cottage seem to have explored the possibility of ‘boothless’ in the

sense that the projector alone is encapsulated in a ‘cupboard’. No doubt the UK or Europe’s major cinema exhibitors will be (or perhaps already are) thinking of implementing boothless schemes in the foreseeable future given the advantages mentioned above. As of the date of writing I have no information of such projects coming on stream.

The Luxury touch

With or without boothless, Odeon Cinemas have, however, ventured into the sector of Luxury Cinemas and I understand this is turning into a great success. Odeon’s latest offering ‘The Lounge’ at Whiteleys in West London, which opened in January 2012 is an example. These sumptuous 5 screens above the existing multiplex provide approximately 50 to 60 seats each. Each auditorium has wide and luxurious leather seats with a waiter call button at each chair. Like the schemes at Cinopolis Luxury Cinemas and Escape, these new premises boast a fully equipped commercial kitchen capable of delivering chef-style hot and cold ‘finger’

food along with the necessary beverages for a sophisticated clientele. The fit-out of these luxury cinemas was carried out by Space Tailors, a specialist fit-out company, based in Cheltenham.

Conclusions

From the above commentary it seems that boothless cinemas have not only heralded a new cinema building ‘sub-type’ but have also introduced new levels of sophistication and comfort into the cinema going experience. At a time when HD, 3D and quality in picture and sound are now all available for home cinemas (of course for those who can afford them and have the necessary space) cinema exhibitors are fighting back with the big picture experiences in 2D and 3D deluxe environments and entertainment destination concepts comprising superior amenities, not unlike those presently found in 5 star or 6 star hotels.

As we have seen, ‘less is more’ in boothless cinema design has given architects and designers the choice to express the building form more freely. I believe that we may yet see new forms of fantastic cinema architecture once this new freedom has been fully digested and assimilated.

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Related websites of interest covered in both parts of the article:

- www.cinopolisusa.com www.sms-arch.com
- www.christiedigital.com www.bbtheatres.com
- www.escapecinemas.com www.qubecinema.com
- www.thelexicinema.co.uk www.odeon.co.uk
- www.spacetailors.co.uk www.hmvcurzon.com
- www.fproj.com

The auditorium, bar and the futuristic staircase at Odeon Whiteleys. Courtesy Space Tailors

