

HERITAGE

It's not the end...

Now showing: the architectural value of our vintage screens. **Marc Zimmermann**, Chairman and CEO of the Cinema Heritage Group, outlines local cinema history and his preservation efforts.

At first glance, the lights are off, the projector has quit its snap, crackle and pop and the audience has left the building. Yet, thanks to the Cinema Heritage Group, an interested audience is returning.

Established in Dublin in 2006, the Cinema Heritage Group joins people interested in recording and preserving cinema-going history.

"We are currently based in Malta and have members in more than 20 countries," says Marc Zimmermann, Chairman and CEO of the Cinema Heritage Group. "Interest in the subject is on the rise and has gathered momentum among the public and in the media. Among many projects, several mini-documentaries on heritage cinemas are currently being produced by young MCAST students."

The Cinema Heritage Group operates as a charitable NGO open to all. Beyond its preservation work, it presents special screenings, talks and tours, and publishes *The Cinematograph*, a free, subscription-based magazine.

"Among our members are enthusiasts of cinemas and film, as well as industry professionals such as film historians, cinema owners and projectionists – many of them volunteering their expertise to support our work."

"We work hard to preserve Malta's unique cinematic history and we further consult internationally," says Zimmermann, who is a building conversation engineer by profession.

"Cinemas aren't just brick-and-mortar – beyond their architectural heritage they are also rich in social history."

"Malta is rich in cinema heritage," says Zimmermann. "The rise and proliferation of cinemas during the 1930s to the 1950s mirrored the movie industry's golden age. In those days, new films would arrive in Maltese cinemas almost daily, typically as a single copy. This would have to travel from one cinema to the next, often taking several months before finally arriving at the local cinema."

"Cinema-going was cheap, appealing and easily accessible – escapist films made it to Malta even amidst WWII bombings. As an entertainment medium, cinema had little competition for many decades."

From the 1960s onwards, cinemas in Malta experienced a decline.

"Typically, television alone is blamed, yet it was just one of many factors. The introduction of paid holidays and a notable reduction in airfares took people further away from home and from their neighbourhood cinemas, opening up many new leisure pursuits. It is not the cinema

itself that has changed so much, but the entertainment landscape in general.

"From the 1990s on, multiplexes started attracting audiences again. Yet these new cinemas had often lost the charm their predecessors possessed, as well as their key function as social hubs. Today, multiplexes offer a streamlined experience, reflected in their stripped-down designs. As profit margins for cinemas are relatively low today, the creation of lavish interiors is often a prohibitive cost factor."

For Zimmermann, heritage cinemas are a fragile, non-renewable resource, which must be preserved.

"In Malta, many former cinemas have fallen victim to redevelopment. Most recently, the Hollywood in Hamrun, the Stoll in Senglea and the Pilot in Mgarr were demolished. Today, the Roxy in Birkirkara faces imminent demolition, yet at least its recognisable Art Deco façade will be retained.

"Cinemas aren't just brick-and-mortar – beyond their architectural heritage they are also rich in social history."

"Before cinemas are demolished, the Cinema Heritage Group records them. We are still piecing together their unique histories with support from local cinema-goers and we invite readers to share their stories and memories with us."

The Cinema Heritage Group has also enjoyed remarkable success.

"Based on our dedicated casework, the Rialto in Cospicua was recognised as a Grade 2-scheduled heritage landmark in 2010. It is the only building of its kind in Malta, surviving mostly intact."

Zimmermann believes that in the near future cinemas will have to reinvent themselves.

"The shoebox-type multiplexes have outgrown their appeal – they are often interchangeable and ageing rapidly," says Zimmermann.

"Two different types of cinemas would help recapture audiences' attention. While a new design approach to multiplexes is urgently needed to create striking new venues, the sustainable rehabilitation of unique historic cinemas in other countries has proven that audiences love to relive movie-going experiences of the past."

THE SHOW GOES ON

While the Rialto in Cospicua, the Orpheum in Gzira and the Australia Hall in Pembroke are among the largest and architecturally most significant, scheduled historic venues, many smaller cinemas were remarkably widespread across Malta during the 1930s to 1960s.

While often more modest in scale, they were decorated with great attention to detail and run by passionate owners and projectionists. This is where social life focused for many decades, where people met, lingered and courted. While numerous of these buildings have already been lost, others fortunately survive, to be rediscovered, including the Triumph in Zejtun, the Lido in Birzebbugia, the Adelphi in Rabat, the Hompesch in Zabbar and the Comet/ABC in Floriana.

For more information, contact the Cinema Heritage Group on info@cinemaheritagegroup.org or on 9959 0530, or visit www.cinemaheritagegroup.org



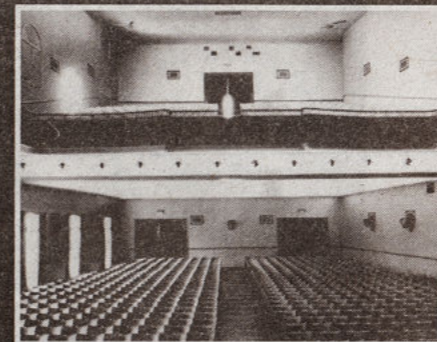
RIALTO (1956-1988)

Architect: Edwin England Sant Fournier.

Style: Art Moderne.

Scheduled: Grade 2.

This large, streamlined but stylish building was one of the most popular venues of its time. It was built for Cinemascope widescreen features with stereophonic sound. The first steps of refurbishment are currently underway.



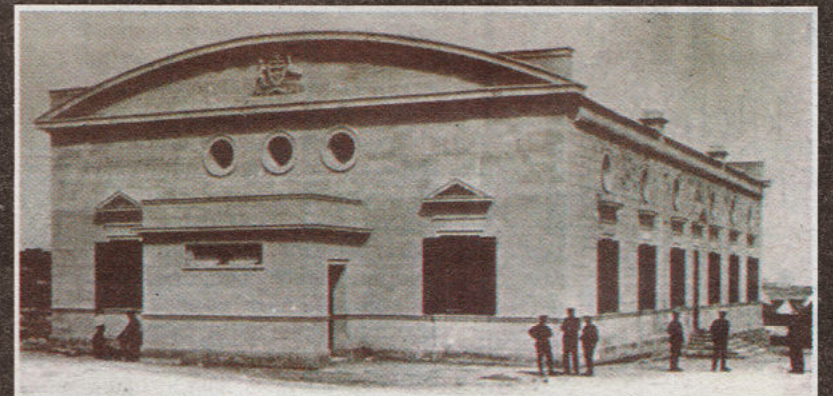
ORPHEUM (circa 1932-1989)

Architect: Harold Borg.

Style: Mix of Art Nouveau and Spanish Colonial elements.

Scheduled: Grade 1.

The Orpheum, once a cinema and renowned theatre, is now in use as a community and bingo hall. The building has deteriorated due to limited upkeep. Its conservation is envisaged.



AUSTRALIA HALL/GLOBE (1916-1990s)

Built: By the Australian branch of the British Red Cross.

Style: Simple but elegant Edwardian hall with domed roof.

Scheduled: Grade 2.

Operated as a cinema and entertainment hall for the Armed Forces, it was gutted by a fire some years back – it is currently abandoned and deteriorating fast. Its rehabilitation as an open-air venue and cinema has been proposed and a planning application for its restoration was filed in 2010, however, the application was suspended.

