

# Cover Story



The Egyptian's glamorous 650-seat auditorium features a high-tech framework built within the shell of the old theater.

Photos by PAUL MORSE / Los Angeles Times

## Ancient Egyptian's Reincarnation

Cinematheque's move to landmark is part of effort to reach more people.

By ROBERT W. WELKOS  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

When American Cinematheque officials went to James Cameron asking permission to stage a retrospective of his films to launch their 1999 programming at the newly refurbished Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood, the director of the Oscar-winning "Titanic" seemed surprised.

Cameron, they recalled, was on the set of the all-time box-office blockbuster at the time, wearing hip waders as he filmed flooding sequences below deck with stars Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet.

During a break, he jokingly said, "If thought you needed to make 60 films and be at the end of your career before you get a Cinematheque retrospective," recalled Dennis Bartok, Cinematheque's programmer. "We said, 'No, we want filmmakers who are at the peak of their careers.'"

Cameron's selection is an example of how Cinematheque, long known for showcasing foreign and independent films, is attempting to broaden its appeal.

"That's part of the reason for our move to the Egyptian Theatre," Bartok said recently. "We're now focused on bringing in mainstream Hollywood, younger directors and actively working filmmakers, in addition to showcases of rare films and overlooked directors."

Cinematheque will officially reopen the Egyptian on Friday with the "re-premiere" of Cecil B. DeMille's 1923 silent film, "The Ten Commandments," presented with the original live orchestral score. The evening's gala event, devised by Cinematheque executive director Barbara Smith, comes 75 years to the day after the movie premiered at the same theater.

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Much of the old theater's decor has been retained.

A \$14-million renovation connects historic theater's past with its future.

### Architecture Review

By NICOLAI OIROUSSOFF  
TIMES ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

Like most American historic centers that have begun the arduous process of revitalization during the last decade, Hollywood has vacillated between guarding its historic fabric too preciously and rubbing it out entirely. Now if Hollywood wants to know how to revive its faded legacy, it has a perfect model right under its nose.

The Egyptian Theatre, opened in 1922 by Sid Grauman as a home for movie premieres, underwent a series of disastrous alterations before shutting down in 1992. In its current incarnation as the new home of the American Cinematheque, which opens to the public Saturday, it is a perfect balance between preserving what is best about the past and taking a calculated leap toward the future. Located at the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Las Palmas Avenue, the theater will be the nonprofit film center's first permanent home and will give it an instant presence in Los Angeles' cultural landscape. But it will also have a much broader civic impact. By dissolving the border between the spontaneous energy of the street and the communal hypnosis of watching a movie, it will do more to reinvigorate Hollywood's decrepit street life than projects with 50 times the budget. It will create a sorely needed public event along a stretch of the boulevard that until now had little reason to exist but for its faded glamour.

The \$14-million project by Hodgetts + Fung, the Santa Monica-based firm best known for its playful pop-art sensibility, transforms Grauman's flamboyant theater into a lively space for the city. Please see Egyptian, Page 8



PAUL MORSE / Los Angeles Times

The forecourt of the Egyptian Theatre, with paintings and pharaoh's head, is conceived as an extension of life on the street and lobby inside.

## Egyptian: Restoration

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superior version of its former self by inserting a tough high-tech auditorium into the building's original historic frame and by stressing function over false stage effects.

The design begins at the sidewalk. Like its more famous cousin, Mann's Chinese Theater, the Egyptian is set back from the street and approached along a 140-foot-long forecourt. Much of the old decor remains: a faux pharaoh's head mounted on a wall; ocher-colored exterior walls meant to evoke the giant stones of the pyramids. But the forecourt is now conceived as an extension of the public life of both the street and the lobby inside.

### Courtyard to Function as a Meeting Ground

The architects inserted twin rows of slender palm trees along the exterior forecourt, strengthening the theater's central axis and drawing people into the building. Low stone planters function as simple benches. Along one side, a row of doors opens into what was once a men's clothing store and will soon become a cozy late-night restaurant. An exterior stairway—which originally led nowhere—will take you up to the restaurant's rooftop terrace. When it opens, the courtyard will function as a perfect public room, a place to watch and be watched, where strangers can intimately intermingle. But it is only the first in a series of thresholds leading to the auditorium.

During the '50s, the theater's main façade was covered by a grotesque aluminum storefront. Now, a massive portico—enclosed behind thick Egyptian-style columns—again frames the theater's entryway at the courtyard's far end. Both the front entrance and the doors leading to the auditorium are glass, visually connecting inner and outer worlds. The lobby's low ceiling—stenciled in an Egyptian motif—gives the room a strong horizontal feel, preparing you for the soaring grandeur of the

auditorium. In effect, the architects conceived the entire lobby as an extension of this exterior space. Once inside, your gaze extends all the way out to the street.

The lobby is also where the subtle tensions between the historic and the new first become apparent. Much of the faux Egyptian decor was damaged during previous renovations and the Northridge earthquake. Rather than seamlessly fuse the new with the old, Hodgetts + Fung play with the tensions between the two. Where the historical fabric has been torn out, the scars are preserved, so that the building's various incarnations are still evident. In order to give the lobby more breathing room, the auditorium has been pushed forward 25 feet, in the process eliminating what were once the worst seats in the house—those tucked awkwardly under the balcony.

To one side of the lobby, a ramp leads down to the entry of a 68-seat screening room. This smaller auditorium is designed as a free-standing black box, its low vaulted roof detached from the lobby's ceiling above, leaving the stenciled hieroglyphics exposed. This gives the lobby a sense of scale, but the ramp also provides intimate places to mingle and chat. The screening room becomes a counterpoint to the grander event within the auditorium.

### Setting for Glamorous Shared Spectacle

It is in the 50-foot-high, 650-seat main auditorium, however, that the delightful frictions of a public event are replaced by a more glamorous shared spectacle. The awkward form of the original, which had curved walls decorated in mock Egyptian themes, presented daunting acoustical and visual problems. The architects solved these by inserting a high-tech framework within the shell of the old theater. On either side, thick steel columns support mechanical acoustical plywood panels, their surfaces punctured by a

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