

The Plight of Movie Theatres in the Electronic Age

John W. English

Abstract

Given the central nature of movies to American culture during most of the twentieth century, movie theatres themselves have become cultural icons, representing the magical allure of American dreams, myths and tragedies. From 5,000 upstart nickelodeons in 1907 to 25,000 glorious theatres in the 1920s to less than 19,000 screens at the end of the 1980s, the number of theatres has fluctuated throughout this century. This paper describes many of the factors that have led to the closure and disappearance of thousands of the original, single-screen theatres built during the Golden Age of Movie Houses.

A similar pattern is evident in the history of Japan's movie theatres. Following a peak in movie attendance in 1955, many of the same problems cited in the United States began to impinge on the Japanese movie industry and the number of theatres now is significantly less than thirty years ago.

Keywords

movie theatre, movie house, cinema, movie exhibition, Japanese film industry.

Like most Americans who came of age mid-Twentieth Century, I grew up in the dark, watching movies in theatres. My early experiences as an eager, undemanding moviegoer eventually bloomed into a cinematic passion that's persisted. Yet I still treasure those first encounters with movie "magic." My primal movie memories are clearly anchored in time and place. It's unfathomable for me to think about Walt Disney's "Bambi," for instance, without conjuring up the seductive, dark ambiance of the Gilloiz Theatre in downtown Monett, Missouri. Specific movies and the exact theatres where I saw them are mindmarks and landmarks in my life.

My interest in studying the fate of old-fashioned, single screen movie theatres in small towns and suburban neighborhoods stems from a poignant novel titled "The Last Picture Show" by Larry McMurtry. The book and subsequent movie used a forlorn little movie house in Archer City, Texas, as a metaphor for the

decline of Main Street U.S.A. all across the country. That old theatre, which had once served as a window to the rest of the world, had been shuttered forever.

Director Peter Bogdanovich's popular movie struck a chord that wasn't just nostalgia. Those powerful images touched the nation's collective consciousness, serving as a reminder that even familiar, everyday experiences can disappear if neglected long enough. The film hinted at the passing of an old order, recalling and honoring simpler times. It lamented the declining quality of life in rural parts of the country and showed moviegoers how the march of time inevitably catches up with everything, its toll stirring dread, mourning and sadness.

As a popular culture scholar, I recognized that far more was at stake than real estate. Going to the movies was a commonplace or ordinary cultural experience, offering fare that people consumed with little resistance and enjoyed without thinking about the reasons why. As a result, the movies had more influence on people than they realized. Any change in that experience — shared by hundreds of millions around the globe — was certainly worth examining.

Using McMurtry's perceptive metaphor as my impetus, I began to try to discern some of the factors that led to the closure and disappearance of thousands of old movie theatres in recent years. My research revealed a web of causes — rather than a single reason — related to this phenomenon. Noting changes and explaining such shifts was my real purpose, rather than positing a theory of causation.

Given the central nature of movies to the American culture during the first half of the 20th century, movie theatres themselves have become cultural icons, not just relics from a bygone era. Do these places really qualify for icon status? They do, if the concept is expanded. Popular culture theorist and author Marshall Fishwick defines icon as "symbols and mindmarks that tie in with myth, legend, values, idols, aspirations." He observes that people are "starved for ideas and objects that give coherence to electric age culture" and that "ritual demands icons." If the moviegoing experience is ritual, then the elevation of theatres to icons logically follows. "The operative word for icon is still magic," adds Fishwick.

Historic preservationists have identified old movie theatres as valuable structures representing an earlier era and have focused their energies on saving buildings in jeopardy of being demolished. "One by one, many of the buildings that housed the most popular entertainments have followed the road show, vaudeville and the double feature into oblivion," writes author Constance Greiff, in *Lost America: From the Mississippi to the Pacific*. "Taking a body count of some of our country's lost and mutilated buildings touches only the surface of our loss. For far more is being lost than a specific number of square

feet of old lumber, brick and mortar. We have been losing the most readily comprehensible and tangible evidence of the forces that have shaped our history. We have been erasing the rich and diverse variety of national, racial and cultural strains that were blended into the American fabric. We have been losing not only the knowledge of ourselves and our roots that buildings and sites illuminate, but the visual delights that they can provide. And most lamentably, we have been losing them in a haphazard and senseless manner, without reckoning what we can afford to part with and what we must keep.”

From a historical perspective, movie theatres are purely a 20th century phenomenon, the first ones opening around the turn of the century. It took C. Francis Jenkins’ invention of a projector to make watching a movie a communal experience. The first theatres were makeshift affairs, usually conversions from kinoscope parlors or old general stores. Dubbed “nickelodeons” from the five-cent admission price and the Greek word for theatre, these 100-seat theatres were characterized by gaudy exteriors and spartan interiors. Early showmen made every effort to differentiate their buildings from their chief competitors — penny arcades and vaudeville theatres.

What nickelodeon exteriors lacked in decorative flair, they made up for with flash. Circus-style banners, posters and signs were used to entice patrons to boxoffices to buy tickets. Boxoffices, carryovers from the old carnival barker’s platform, quickly became as identifiable with movie theatres as red-and-white striped poles were with barber shops.

Nickelodeon interiors were primitive, unadorned screening rooms, long and narrow with flat floors and structural support pillars blocking sightlines. Poor quality images were attributed to unreflective screens. Safety and comfort within these theatres were minimal.

Yet the popularity of the movies sparked a building boom. By 1907 some 5,000 nickelodeons were selling an estimated 5 million tickets a day. Three years later, the total had swelled to 8,000 and by 1915, some 20,000 theatres were operating, with the daily attendance holding steady at 5 million. The Golden Age of Movie Houses, however, came after World War I when the ranks increased to some 25,000 during the early 1920s.

As the competition increased, theatre operators were forced to place greater emphasis on architectural design and amenities. Early theatre architects chose not to use traditional styles already identified with other institutions. Banks had long adopted Grecian motifs to convey security and stability. Churches and colleges had been linked to Gothic design since the Renaissance. Movie theatre owners and builders thought theatres should reflect the purpose of the building — to dangle entertainment, romance and fantasy before a mass audience.

Designers intentionally sought to make theatres stand out from the context of neighboring commercial structures by creating dramatic facades, including

flashy marquees and electric signs. Designs borrowed from classic European buildings of Romanesque, Baroque, Renaissance and Louis XIV and modified exotic motifs such as Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, Spanish, Moorish and Persian. The resulting mixture was often dubbed “American eclecticism,” a style that allowed each theatre to be unique. Theatres were painted warm and cheerful colors — red, orange, gold and tan — as part of their visual seduction. Interior space was reconfigured, floors were sloped and staggered seating plans made it possible for everyone to have a clear view of the screen. As part of the shift toward sophisticated showmanship, theatres were elaborately decorated, often with gorgeous stage settings, luxurious drapes and enchanting music. The move toward excess started in the sumptuous palace-style theatres built in cities, especially New York and Chicago, and quickly filtered down to theatres in small towns. Ada Louise Huxtable, long-time architectural critic of *The New York Times*, praised these monuments of the silver screen as the “richest and most extravagantly romantic architecture this country has ever produced.”

The immense popularity of the new theatres along with the improving quality of movies guaranteed a terrific commercial return to the film industry and the theatres themselves. Moviegoers were drawn to these structures, one theory suggests, because of new yearnings afoot in society. After the First World War, the working class exhibited an avid curiosity about the rich, which Hollywood fed with movies about beautiful people who lived in elegant mansions, drove expensive cars and defined the high life. “In the age of mass consumption, the movies influenced the tastes and aspirations of the masses,” suggests Karen Safer, who wrote her thesis on theatre design. “Movies presented standards of dress, furnishings and social behavior hitherto unknown to millions who had never seen the inside of elegant hotels, restaurants or private villas.” Decorative movie theatres simply helped make patrons of modest means feel like millionaires.

Ostentatious theatres also made a statement about America, insists critic Neal Gabler. “With their pretensions to high art they testified, rather poignantly, to a powerful yearning in the popular culture of the time: the yearning to show Europeans that we could be as classy as they were,” Gabler wrote in *The New York Times*. “What these theatres celebrated, as well as the desire to live our dreams, was America’s awakening sense of its own cultural democracy. In their almost obscenely elaborate decor and garbled architectural idioms, in their vivid if vulgarized sense of classiness, in their musical pretensions, they made ‘culture’ accessible to anyone who had a quarter. And if the attempts at culture seemed almost too earnest, the atmosphere less one of taste than of parvenu tastelessness, then that was American, too — part of the charm and ultimately what made the effort moving.”

By affording the disgruntled masses the opportunity to enjoy the same superb

surroundings as the upper class, these elegant theatres may have acted as a national safety valve during the Great Depression. Most Americans relished this democratization of entertainment and the fact that everyone paid the same low price for an unreserved seat. The poor liked the idea that they could literally rub elbows with the rich at the movies. In addition to serving as “shrines of democracy,” these theatres appeared to fill other societal functions as well. Movie houses offered people something missing from their lives, said theatre architect S. Charles Lee: “religion, solace, art, and most important, a feeling of importance.” Shrewd exhibitors recognized such “needs” and catered to the public, producing both profits for themselves and a clientele happy with the bargain.

The prevailing business philosophy was that moviegoers were attracted to theatres that offered them an opportunity to bask in beauty and luxury they could never afford at home. Theatre owners were said to believe that audiences increased in direct proportion to the amount of decoration in a movie house. Overornamentation may have been a trick played on a gullible public, but it proved reliable at the boxoffice.

During the Depression, moviegoers were forced to cut back on attendance, despite the allure of technological innovations such as Technicolor and sound pictures. As boxoffice receipts fell, thousands of theatres were forced to close for an indefinite period. Perhaps as many as 12,000 movie houses went on hiatus, although many eventually re-opened. Obviously, few new theatres were built during the 1930s. Curiously, this decade was also the time when the art of the movies reached its zenith, with the 1939 crop producing the most classics.

The Hollywood studio system itself was generally credited with bringing the film industry to its peak. “A golden age in American cinema was due not only to an abundance of talent and Resources but also to the general stability, efficiency and productivity of the Hollywood studio system,” says film historian Thomas Schatz. “The key to that system was vertical integration. In those years, the top studios — MGM, Paramount, Warner Bros., Twentieth Century Fox and RKO — not only produced and distributed movies but ran their own theatre chains as well. These ‘integrated majors’ owned or controlled about 2,800 theatres in 1939, which included almost all of the first-run houses in major American cities and generated the lion’s share of the boxoffice revenues.”

By the late 1930s, Americans were still going to the movies at a clip of 80 million tickets a week, down significantly from the pre-Depression days but roughly eight times the weekly rate of attendance some 50 years later. Two events in the early 1940s immediately affected the Hollywood dream factory — the outbreak of World War II and congressional legislation that prohibited block booking, the system studios used to dictate their film programming preferences to theatres across the nation.

In 1948 moviegoing reached its peak. An average citizen went to 44 movies that year, spending in aggregate \$ 2 billion in some 25,000 theatres. With gross revenues estimated at about \$ 80,000 each, most theatres earned tidy profits. With the boxoffice booming, the Hollywood film industry got gloriously rich. The 400 movies produced in 1948 earned an average of \$ 5 million each in boxoffice receipts, with production costs for most pictures running less than \$ 750,000.

Ironically, as movie industry's success peaked, it also attracted the scrutiny of the United States Government, which was set on breaking up the studios' domination of all phases of the industry — production, distribution and exhibition. After the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that no movie studio could control all three spheres, the studios were forced to sell off theatres in their chains in the 1950s. Without theatres, the studios no longer could be guaranteed play dates for their pictures, so they decided to reduce the number of films produced in order to create a shortage and assure exhibitor demand. The plan was “a disaster for the industry,” says Alan Trustman, author and screenwriter.

Hollywood's output was also stifled by the investigations of the House Un-American Activities Committee, which accused industry figures of having affiliations with the Communist Party. By refusing to answer the questions of the committee, these producers, directors and screenwriters, dubbed the “Hollywood Ten,” were sentenced for contempt of Congress, sent to prison for short terms and blacklisted from working in the industry.

In other legal action, movie censorship was ended, resulting in ever-more-explicit content. At the same time, the industry set up a voluntary classification system to rate movies so consumers would know what to expect when they bought a ticket.

The changing economics of the film industry, from the 1950s through the 1970s, dictated other structural changes in Hollywood. Foremost among those was the end of the studio system. After the studios could no longer own or control their film markets, they decided they could no longer afford production facilities and began relying on independent production companies to actually produce the films. Soaring production costs and theatres' business expenses were not offset by higher admission prices. When attendance figures sagged, production shrank and an inevitable crunch ensued.

Television is usually cited as the most convenient scapegoat for the demise of old movie theatres, since nearly everyone born after 1950 was thought to spend the bulk of their leisure time gazing into the tube. It's true that some audiences — especially the older generation — did replace moviegoing with television viewing, but their reasons weren't as obvious as TV was free and easily available. They felt assaulted by new movies which they believed were too profane, violent or sexually explicit. Some film themes, especially the explora-

tion of such heretofore taboo subjects as racism, aging or revolution, upset them and challenged their fixed views. While film realism may have appealed to gritty 18- to 24-year olds in the prime moviegoing audience, it also represented a significant hazard, the loss of illusion, the essence of any art form.

Societal changes also affected the film business. Audiences became more fragmented with special interests. Moviegoing behavior became more informal during the 1960s as American attitudes shifted. This new informality reshaped the design of theatres. Traditional enclosed boxoffices were removed and cashiers now sold tickets at open counters inside lobbies.

Another phenomenon that began to occur in the 1960s was the mass retirement of the generation of independent theatre owners and operators who got into the business in the early days and had aged into their sixties. Over the years, many had let their theatres run down, so that the businesses were no longer very appealing to moviegoing patrons or to prospective buyers. Derelict theatres were frequent victims of urban renewal programs, which razed vast sections of downtown areas in many cities in the late 1950s and early '60s.

The malling of America was well under way during these years. Over three decades — the '60s, '70s and '80s — some 32,560 shopping centers would be built, mostly in suburban areas where people lived and wanted to shop. Most successful malls included a multi-plex cinema because of the abundance of free parking near the theatre entrance. The first such multi-plex cinema in a suburban mall was built in Kansas City in 1962 by businessman Stanley H. Durwood.

So while thousands of old movie houses were closing, a new type of theatre was being built in the 1960s, increasing the total number of screens throughout the country. New multi-plexes accounted for about 6,000 screens added during the 1960s and '70s, a boom some in the industry described as "overbuilt." Despite the losses of single-screen theatres, the National Association of Theatre Owners reported that there were nearly 19,000 commercial movie screens in the U.S. in 1983, including about 2,000 drive-ins.

While many moviegoers were attracted to multi-plexes because they were more modern and generally cleaner than older theatres, not everyone was satisfied with the new mini-cinemas. Some moviegoers said that they felt cramped for space and griped that the theatres were only plain white boxes, devoid of decor, style and atmosphere. Oddly enough, the new multi-plex theatres were more like the old nickelodeons in size, intimacy and design than the larger, decorative theatres they often replaced.

A host of other factors contributed to the cumulative decline in moviegoing. Some moviegoers stopped going out to theatres because a few audience members displayed such unacceptable manners that the pleasure of the experience was no longer worth the annoyance. Those who enjoyed snacking at the movies

became increasingly aware of the spiraling high prices of concessions and the lower value of the fare.

Some people abandoned theatres after they could watch new movies recorded on video cassette and played back on their home TV monitor with a VCR unit. The assumption was that “home theatres” offered experiences similar to movie houses with more control ; home viewers could set their own time schedule for showings, relax in their own easy chairs and enjoy snacks from their refrigerator. But observant moviegoers quickly realized that a movie on a small TV screen doesn’t come anywhere close to creating that sense of awe, power and “magic” that can only be attained from a much larger-than-life image. Besides, there’s nothing at home like the collective response of a typical audience in a theatre.

Theatres faced a whole new reality in the mid-1970s — a shift from a buyer’s to a seller’s market. Theatre owners became victims of the cost-price squeeze and already slim profits disappeared. Older, single-screen theatres began closing with increasing frequency. By the mid-1970s, some 9,000 theatres were shuttered. The trend that had started in the 1950s had turned into a calamity.

Other media had turned up the level of competition for movies by the mid-1970s, putting further pressure on marginal theatre operations. Made-for-TV movies improved in quality and became bolder in dealing with contemporary issues, despite the limitations of the public airwaves. Cable television channels began to offer movies with no commercial interruptions and virtually no editing for language or sexually explicit content.

The challenges facing movie theatres seemed so numerous that their futures appeared quite unpredictable. Competitive forces vying for people’s recreational time and entertainment dollars were increasing in number and intensity, both within the communications industry and with new outsiders such as amusement parks and an ever-widening array of sports. Business expenses were soaring, with rising utility bills, higher staff wages and advertising costs. The budget crunch caused theatres to begin cutting corners and dropping the less vital services, such as uniforms for ushers, then the ushers themselves. Routine maintenance, such as repainting, was postponed and the ambiance of many older theatres declined. As audiences more often opted for the clean, white multi-plex theatres in the malls, attendance at older, single-screen theatres continued to shrink, making their plight more critical.

By the late 1970s, the survival of theatres was a prime issue and the predictions were grim. In late 1977 the prestigious consulting firm of Arthur D. Little issued a study which confirmed that since 1948, American moviegoers had cut their consumption from 33 films a year to only five. Their statistics on annual movie attendance showed a drop from 4 billion in 1948 to about 960 million in 1976. But it was the study’s predictions that captured the press’ headlines —

the forecast that movie theatres were likely to have almost disappeared by 1985. David L. Fishman, a researcher on the project, said that home entertainment systems, with a largescreen TV set, video cassette and disk players, cable and premium channels, would replace the neighborhood theatre. It was simply a matter of extending the effects of a 30-year trend.

Theatre attendance figures tell much of the story of the fate of movie houses. In the late 1940s, moviegoing peaked at 90 million a week, nearly three-fourths of the potential audience. That figure plummeted to 60 million a week in the 1950s and the slide continued past 40 million a week through the volatile 1960s. In recent decades, moviegoing stabilized at 20 million a week, a figure that represents a mere 9 percent of the current population.

During those forty years of declining moviegoing, the number of theatres also decreased dramatically, perhaps by as much as half, while the population grew by more than 50 percent. In recent years the actual number of theatres has become obscured, so a precise total to measure losses is impossible. Statistical data used in the theatre census is deceptive in an important way — movie screens are now counted as theatres. Since the majority of screens are now situated in multi-plex theatres, statistically, a single theatre operation with three screens is counted as three theatres.

A clearer picture of the changes within the industry emerges if you look at a few cities. Consider the case of Nashville, Tennessee: In 1967, there were 10 single-screen theatres in the city and six drive-ins in Davidson County. Twenty years later, in 1987, there were no drive-ins left and only three single-screen theatres still operating. Yet the recent theatre census lists a city-wide total of 72 screens. The inventory, however, does not enumerate the total number of theatre seats, which hasn't increased significantly. Nashville still has about the same number of seats — roughly 10,000 — because mini-cinemas typically have 150 seats per screen, while older single-screen theatres usually contain about 1,000 seats.

In other cities, the fate of vintage theatres fits a similar pattern. Of the seven original movie houses in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, five have been demolished, one is closed but still standing and another has been converted into a performing arts center. In Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, when the downtown theatre district was destroyed in the 1970s, the sole survivor of the six theatres was the Criterion. In Kansas City, Missouri, only two of the sixty theatres that were showing movies in 1933 were still in business 55 years later. The other theatres have closed, been adapted to some other use or been demolished. Some met the wrecking ball to make parking lots and a freeway. The most common re-use was churches, but old theatres have also accommodated other businesses such as a delicatessen, body shop, night club, concert hall, dinner theatre, clothing store, drug and alcohol treatment center and insulation company.

Ironically, one theatre is an antique shop and another houses old architectural pieces used in historic preservation projects.

Old movie houses often engender intense support from loyal patrons. When the Granada Theatre in Dallas, Texas, closed in 1986, last night moviegoers held a candlelight vigil outside the theatre and submitted a petition with 2,000 signatures urging the management to keep the theatre open. Some citizens' groups have even rescued old theatres. Examples include Deposit, New York, Tiffin, Ohio, St. Joseph, Missouri, and Ashland, Kentucky.

The preservation movement has also helped recycle hundreds of old theatres into other uses, saving money, energy and part of the national heritage. Yet far more theatres have been lost than saved, admit members of the Theatre Historical Society, a Chicago-based group that studies theatres. "Probably 80 to 90 percent of America's historic theatres, those operating in the Golden Age, have disappeared," estimates Iain Mackintosh. That proportion is higher than those of railway stations or churches.

So what does the future hold for movie theatres? If the boxoffice is the barometer of the business climate of the movies, as Motion Picture Association of America President Jack Valenti suggests, then the industry has been stable for the last 25 years, lending support for an optimistic future.

The two issues that theatre owners seem most concerned about at the outset of the 1990s are the quality of the movies being produced and the impact of home video. Despite the widely held belief that better pictures would cure boxoffice ailments, there is little agreement about what the public wants, much less how to influence the production system to provide it.

Theatre owners have quite rightly taken competition with home video seriously. In the early 1980s, for the first time, film industry revenues from video were greater than those from television broadcasts of movies. By 1986, revenues from video sales and rentals had soared past the boxoffice as the studios' primary source of income. It was generally assumed, as the VCR penetration of American households neared 70 percent at the end of the decade, that moviegoers would be watching more movies at home than in theatres. High definition and big-screen television sets (70-inch screens with vivid images) represent yet another emerging threat to theatres in the 1990s.

For many communities, villages and small towns across America, the last picture show has already played — its theatre closed, if not torn down or adaptively reused. For many "antique" theatres, those built during the Golden Age of the movies, the future looks bleak. Theatre operators uniformly express both concern and resignation about the future. While some old theatres doggedly remain open, even if barely surviving, others are being abandoned by circuit executives. Some independent owners have been able to sell out to chains; others have simply closed the doors and retired. Many have let theatres deteriorate.

rate beyond the point where the buildings have little investment potential. Unless people with vision — city officials, dedicated preservationists or entrepreneurs with deep pockets — come along to rescue them, these old theatres will continue to close and await an uncertain fate, more often than not, the wrecking ball. Whatever the future holds, the days of the small, old-fashioned, single-screen movie theatre are surely numbered.

Addendum :

Movie theatres have always seemed uniquely American, even though they have long operated in most parts of the planet. That's because the movies spring from American culture. "This art form is America's art," says Jean Firstenberg, director of the American Film Institute, "and it is our national contribution to the world."

The history of Japan's movie industry closely parallels America's. While Vitascope showings began prior to the turn of the century, the first movie theatre was the Denkikan (Electric Theatre), which opened in 1903 in Asakusa, an early Tokyo entertainment district. From the beginning, movie tickets were scaled for the well-to-do, ranging from first-class reserved seats to general admission.

During the silent film era, Japanese theatres employed *benshi*, who not only narrated the film but also explained the projection process to moviegoers who were curious about the new medium. Once the 'talkies' were introduced in the 1930s, the *benshi* were phased out. Throughout the pre-war years, the Japanese film studios were prolific, creating and distributing products for their 2,500 theatres nationwide.

During World War II, more than half of the movie theatres in the cities were either destroyed or closed. Few theatres were ever opened in rural areas, since these communities were largely served by mobile projection units. In October 1945, only 845 theatres were operating.

New theatres were part of the post-war building boom. In January 1946, some 300 new theatres were flung together, bringing the total to 1,137. Throughout the 1950s, theatre building continued apace, with two new facilities opening every day. By January 1957, the total had reached 6,000. Three years later, 7,457 movie houses were in operation, nearly three times the pre-war number. Tokyo alone had more than 600 theatres at that time.

Not surprisingly, moviegoing in Japan reached its peak in 1955, when attendance reached 1.13 billion patrons. "The decade of the 1950s, apart from being the most prosperous in the history of the Japanese cinema, is considered by many to be *the* creative Golden Age," says author Joseph L. Anderson. Not only was the industry prolific, adds author and critic Donald Richie, but it also was "one of the world's most vitally creative movie industries and it created some

of the most beautiful and truthful films ever made.”

Then, following the pattern in the U.S., troubles for the movie industry began. Foreign films took over the market and while theatres charged higher ticket prices for imported pictures, they were less profitable than domestic films. Initially, Japanese movies were shown on television immediately after their theatre run, but when the film industry's distrust of TV turned to enmity in 1956, films were withdrawn from broadcast airplay. TV turned to American shows and films for programming, which made the upstart medium a formidable rival for films.

Boxoffice attendance plummeted during the 1960s, as television continued its household penetration, reaching 95 percent of homes in 1970. As attendance at the movies fell to 300 million in 1968, more than half of the movie theatres in the country were shuttered. Many were converted to other business uses, the most common of which was bowling alleys. Many of the same problems cited in the U.S. kept patrons away from theatres: overcrowded conditions, poor quality projection and sound systems, patrons' bad manners including smoking in restricted areas, annoyance with on-screen advertising, dirty floors and lax maintenance and generally poor theatre management. Even new theatres were often so hastily built that they appeared shabby in no time.

As movie audiences increasingly stayed home to watch television, movie production declined and studios eventually floundered. “Various attempts to recapture the crowds over the 1970s and 1980s had only an adverse effect,” observed Joanne R. Bernardi, an American researcher who studied the Japanese film industry.

Theatre closings have continued into the 1990s. The 1985 census of movie houses in Japan counted 2,579, but that total had shrunk to 1,990 by December 1990. In Tokyo the number of theatres has dropped below 250, less than half the total thirty years ago.

Most theatres in Japan are “very dilapidated and in a state of disrepair,” says Bill Pfeiffer, president of Disney Home Video Japan. Few owners are willing to invest in remodeling since the land value of their site makes it unprofitable to use such a large amount of space only part of the day. So they let upkeep slide and the downward trend continues.

A much more comprehensive study of the Japanese movie exhibition industry awaits to be done, focusing on its interrelationships with television and other media.

Meanwhile, major Japanese electronics corporations are buying out Hollywood studios in the hopes of creating cultural software for their high-definition television systems. Such business plans bypass movie theatres, making their future appear even more tentative.

Some theatre operators are still valiantly trying to win customers and willing

to employ any innovation. For instance, two theatres in Kobe are letting patrons rate the movie after they've seen it and pay what they think it was worth. While some pay only the minimum admission fee, a few have exceeded the suggested top of the scale. This innovative scheme underscores how the fate of theatres is intertwined with the film industry itself and that the future of both is tied to offering the Japanese moviegoers fare they want to see.

(Former Foreign Researcher of the Research and Development Division.
Present : Professor of the University of Georgia)