

At the movies



1938 photo



1938 file photo

A big comeback: The original Silver Theatre opened in 1938 but was shut down in 1985. It stood empty until its renewal began in 2001.



Plush and comfy: The "rehabilitated" theater now seats 400 — down from the original 1,100. Upgrades include cup holders, wider seats, state-of-the-art acoustics and digital video recording capabilities.

A sterling place for film history

An art deco gem, the Silver Theatre in suburban D.C. is AFI's new home

By Lynne Perri
USA TODAY

SILVER SPRING, Md.

What began as a local effort to save a piece of history has blossomed into the heart of a new development and the home of the American Film Institute.

The Silver Theatre, a 1938 art deco theater designed by renowned theater architect John Eberson, re-opens Friday with a lavish gala. Searchlights and a red carpet will welcome the likes of actor/director Clint Eastwood to the 49,000-square-foot, \$20 million complex, deemed the AFI Silver Theatre and Cultural Center. Eastwood will be honored with the new AFI Silver Legacy Award. Public open houses and screenings begin April 12.

The non-profit AFI, the group that every year brings us those best-of movie lists of various kinds, had been based at The Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., since 1975. The new facility, in a close-in suburb, makes AFI more accessible to visiting tourists (it's near a metro stop) and launches a partnership with The Discovery Channel, which has its headquarters a few blocks away.

In June, AFI and Discovery will host Silverdocs, a documentary film festival in the main auditorium (which seats 400 and has a new 42-by-19-foot screen) and two smaller theaters. The auditorium also can be used as a classroom and a broadcast center with state-of-the-art equipment.

The space — "rehabilitated," not renovated, because it's not an exact replica — brings back the look and feel of the theater's beginnings. The building has a nautical theme. It mimics the lines of a ship when seen from above; from street level, the view includes a smokestack such as you might see on an ocean liner (decorative only, of course). Peacocks and shells can be seen in the wall décor. More than 40 colors were used on the interior (the original had 60), including the blues, yellows, reds and deep browns typical of the period.

The revamp was a long time coming, says Richard Striner, a founder and former president of the Art Deco Society of Washington. He led a 19-year campaign to save the theater, where renovations began in 2001.

Theater director Murray Horwitz, who has written for Broadway, movies, television and radio, says the site is ideal for making memories: "The relationship of the theater to the screen area is near-perfect."

Revealing details: When workers scraped away water-damaged plaster, a few original fixtures, including the central design element, were uncovered.



Under construction: The building was empty and unheated for 10 years, causing rapid deterioration of the interior. Design firm Gensler Architecture, Design & Planning was aided by some original blueprints from Drew Eberson, architect John Eberson's son.

Photos by
H. Darr Beiser,
USA TODAY



Take me back: Artists did painstaking research to re-create murals in vintage style. Among sources were black-and-white photos and descriptions from people who were there in the theater's heyday.



Surround sound: The Allen digital organ, which will provide a soundtrack for silent films and special events, was moved from AFI's old home at The Kennedy Center.



By Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY