At the movies

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.”

Photos by
H. Darr Beiser,
USA TODAY

Asterling place
for film history

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

By Lynne Novi
USA TODAY

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