Moving Toward the Picture Palace: The Tampa Theatre Comes to Town

Janna Jones

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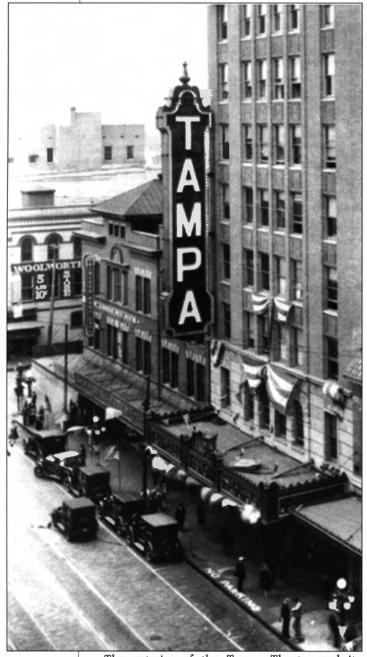Dr. Janna Jones

"God Bless America, my home sweet home!" The Tampa Theatre audience finishes singing with patriotic enthusiasm and applauds Lee Erwin, the Mighty Wurlitzer virtuoso who leads them in this nostalgic sing-a-long. Tonight is "An Evening of Silent Classics," and the elfish Erwin, who has played the Mighty Wurlitzer organ in more than 400 venues around the world, is providing the accompaniment for a screening of *The Great Train Robbery*, *Big Business*, *Gertie the Dinosaur*, and *Safety Last*. This cinematic journey into the past is part of the National Film Preservation Board and the Library of Congress' National Film Registry Tour at the Tampa Theatre.

When the applause dies, Tampa Theatre director John Bell steps up to the podium on the small stage and introduces David Francis, the Chief of Motion Picture Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division at the Library of Congress."When we planned this tour," begins Francis after a polite round of applause, "this is the sort of place that we dreamed of – an original theater with an organ for our program of silent films. So, at last, our dream has been realized. The first items on the program are something special to Tampa, because they are actually films shot here in 1898, the time of the Spanish-American War. I think Tampa was chosen because of Henry Plant's railroad and his luxurious hotel – they made Tampa an ideal setting off point for the troops to leave for Cuba." For two minutes, the Technicolor audience silently watches yellow and brown shadows captured on nineteenth century film.Indistinct soldiers pick up blurry boxes of supplies and place them on a loading dock. When the soldiers disappear into bright light, we applaud respectfully. The next film, as brief as the first, offers century-old images of war preparation. Filmed from the window of a slow moving train, the panoramic footage shows groups of soldiers standing in front of railway cars. After a few minutes of silent attention, we applaud the brittle film and its enduring images of life in Tampa a century ago. These ghosts – the soldiers, the railroad, the Spanish American War, and the Edison Company that recorded it – give us a flavor, Francis tells us, of the early days of cinema and a portrait of a Tampa none of us have ever seen. The sepia image not only carries us into Tampa's past, but also shows us some of the forces that would forge the way for the Tampa Theatre to be built twenty eight years after Edison's films of the Spanish-American War. The framed apparitions evidence the success of Plant's railway, the notoriety the Spanish-American War brought to Tampa, and the visual impact of Edison's Vitagraph. Yet, the images are fleeting, bound in celluloid, and I want the camera to show us more.

Beyond what I can see in the frames are the industrial and urbanizing influences in Tampa that began developing in the 1880s, and culminated in the construction of the Tampa Theatre in 1926. Tampa's industrial development, the expansion of the railway and the introduction of the streetcar, the formation of Franklin Street as the center of commercial activity and circulation, and the city's boosterism of the 1920s were all

factors leading to Tampa's economic boom and the expansion of the city's middle class. These aspects of modern urban life, along with the growth and commercialization of film entertainment were critical factors in the eventual construction of the Tampa Theatre. In fact, the two went hand in hand in the creation of the theater as a place of

The exterior of the Tampa Theatre and its elaborate canopy and marquee on Franklin Street. *(Photograph courtesy of the Burgert Bros. Collection, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library.)*

public leisure, social interaction, class and status distinctions, cinematic experience, and a symbol of Tampa's rapid growth. Much of the social residue created by mass entertainment, commercialization and urbanization settled in the space of Tampa's opulent picture palace on October 15, 1926, the theatre's opening night.

In this paper I explain the significant forces leading to Tampa's urbanization as refracted through the space of the Tampa Theatre. The construction of Henry Plant's South Florida Railroad, promotional activities of Tampa's Board of Trade's, Tampa's booster rhetoric, the development of Tampa's street car system, the commercial evolution of Franklin Street – the heart of Tampa's downtown – and the emergence of pre-cinema and cinema spectacles that helped to develop an urban mass audience are the critical urbanizing elements that converged and culminated in the social space of the Tampa Theatre. While the theatre claimed to be a palace of entertainment for the masses, its new patrons received lessons about public behavior and class distinctions. Although the instructions the patrons acquired helped them find their place within a spectator culture, the theatre itself was a realm of placelessness mirroring the transformative experiences its patrons were encountering in their growing city.

The Tampa Theatre has been a deeply symbolic space and a locus of cultural meaning in Tampa for the last 72 years. A gargoyle- and statue-stuffed castle of fancy, "the most beautiful theatre in the south" has also been called the "crown jewel" of the city. The picture palace – the economic, cultural and architectural apex of Tampa's urban development during the twenties – reigned as the queen of the city until the early sixties. Then, the very forces that first publicly elevated the theatre – transportation development, increased mobility, and economic expansionled to an increasingly suburbanized Tampa, which ultimately undermined her power, and left her alone in a nearly empty downtown. Integration helped to displace the theatre's status even more. Tampa's black citizens, who had never been welcomed in the theatre, finally began regularly frequenting the theatre in 1968. The theatre's white middle class patrons fled to drive-ins and other theatres closer to their new suburban homes. Yet, the impact of the Tampa Theatre on the city was not forgotten, and in 1976 the city bought and restored the theatre in the hopes that its re-opening would encourage resurgence in commercial activity downtown.

For the last twenty-two years she has sat on her throne on Franklin Street ruling over many abandoned buildings and mostly uninhabited sidewalks and streets patiently waiting for her loyal subjects to return. Today, the picture palace does have a faithful following of patrons who enjoy the theatre's art films, revel in the historic ambience of the auditorium and savor one of the last remaining urban public spaces in a city afflicted with epidemic suburban sprawl. While Tampa's

movie palace that dominated motion picture exhibition from the late 1910s through the advent of the stock market crash and the subsequent depression of the late 1920s. The highly profitable picture palaces provided the bulk of the movie industry's revenue. Far from white elephants, Douglas Gomery maintains that they were lucrative enterprises that were the most profitable enterprises in film industry. In 1926, for example, the year the Tampa Theatre opened

View looking north on Franklin Street from Lafayette Street, 1926. The old Hillsborough County Courthouse is on the right. *(Photograph courtesy of the Burgert Bros. Collection, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library.)*

periphery continues to expand, the Tampa Theatre stands as a historical monument to a once thriving centralized city that only hopes to flourish again.

The Picture Palace Phenomenon

It is doubtful that there will ever be anything as remarkable or fantastic in movie theater architecture as the urban

for business, an average of 50 percent of America's film audiences attended the 2,000 picture palaces in 79 cities.[1]

The fantasies that the films promised to spectators paled in comparison to the surroundings that the patrons found themselves in once they bought their tickets. Located in prime downtown locations, the showplaces for the city were never hard to find. Like the Tampa Theatre, picture

palaces were usually near a trolley or street-car stop. Ornate box offices surrounded by a sea of terrazzo jutted out onto the sidewalk, and bas-relief and stone figures marked the period-revival exteriors. Often the picture palaces were named after the cities of their locations. Huge signs with neon letters illuminated "The Chicago," "The Los Angeles," and "The Tampa" as if they were the city's flagship theater.[2] The extravagantly decorated and highly eclectic historic modes of the exteriors distinguished the theaters from the buildings around them, explains Charlotte Herzog, while also giving them a stamp of legitimacy.[3]

underlying requisite for success – the attraction of large crowds. He believed that people were searching for the exotic, and he played on their curiosity. Rathefel's theaters' interiors, like the Tampa Theatre and other picture palaces around the country, intentionally dramatized opulence.

Red velvet curtains, balconies, mezzanines, chandeliers, classical statues and fountains, orchestras and organs signaled to the palaces' new patrons that they had entered a refined space that required them to behave appropriately. Picture palace owners, Gomery contends, were able to fashion patrons of their choice rather than the oth-

The Branch Opera House on Franklin Street photographed by James C. Field in 1870. *(Courtesy of the Florida State Archives Collection.)*

While the picture palaces' exteriors were appealing, the interiors were designed to dazzle. The theaters, rather than the films shown there, were generally the main attraction. As the renowned picture palace owner Marcus Loew explained, "We sell tickets to theaters, not movies."[4] Palaces were so ostentatious that people paid for tickets just to see inside of them. Roxy Rathefel, the well-known manager of several New York picture palaces, understood the

er way around, helping to reposition the consumer culture in the United States.[5] Patrons managed their own behavior because of the dignified settings that were similar in ambience to the grand stage theaters. Picture palace patrons copied the codes of behavior established in stage theatres in the middle of the nineteenth century. Palace owners such as Balaban and Katz proclaimed their palaces were built "for all of the people all of the time," rather than

the few who wanted to appear more aristocratic than the rest. Yet their theatres did cater to the rising aspirations of customers drawn from better neighborhoods.[6] John Eberson, the movie palace architect who designed the Tampa Theatre, expressed a similar sentiment as Balaban and Katz. "Here we find ourselves today creating and building super-cinemas of enormous capacities," boasted Eberson, "excelling in splendor, in luxury and in furnishings the most palatial homes of princes and crowned kings for and on behalf of His Excellency – the American Citizen."[7]

Eberson's royal citizens were treated to a multitude of architectural and design delicacies when they walked through the doors of the Tampa Theatre for the first time in the middle of October 1926. Upon entering the cool, dim and curiously hushed theatre, they left behind the yellow glare of Franklin street's neon signs, the din of automobile horns and clanging streetcars and other familiar reverberations of life in the sweltering, humid city. Once their pupils adjusted to the dusky light, they beheld dozens of menacing gargoyles jutting from the sides of the two-story lobby, Spanish and Italian pottery, gilded mirrors, stuffed parrots and medieval tapestries. Spanish tile roofing and jewel colored, intricately tiled floors accentuated the twin marble staircases. Embellished with wrought iron balustrades and carved oak banisters, the palatial stairs led to the similarly adorned mezzanine.

As the theatre's astonished patrons made their way inside the auditorium, they confronted a Mediterranean temple of the past. Mellifluous lights, some on towering wrought-iron stands and others suspended from small balconies and alcoves faintly illuminated the flamboyant proscenium arch above the stage. Surrounding the arch, reproductions of Grecian and Roman antiquated statues peered gracefully down upon the auditorium's fifteen hundred red velvet seats. Whimsical Venetian facades, French colonnades, and quixotic Persian balconies helped to create an illusion of an outdoor courtyard that might have bordered the ancient Mediterranean Sea. A regal peacock perched outside a renaissance window, earth colored roof tiles embellished with white flowers and trailing vines, orange trees, and white doves seeming to soar through the shadowy air created the ambience of a make-believe Moorish

alfresco. When the flabbergasted ticket buyers looked above the rooftops of the excessive and sensual garden, the mystery of the auditorium intensified, for overhead was an expansive, simulated twilight sky brimming with twinkling stars and billowing cumulus clouds.
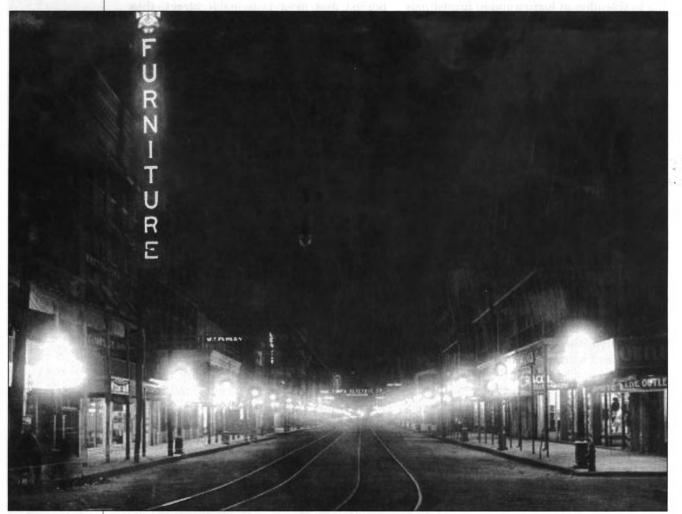
While Tampa Theatre patrons were entering a modern and technologically advanced movie theatre located on Tampa's busiest and most fashionable street, they also were discerning an aura of some forgotten and then rediscovered ruin near the Mediterranean shore. The juxtaposition and contradictions of its modern technology, ancient atmosphere, and montage of eclectic and exotic architectural styles astonished the picture palace's new patrons – many of whom had never seen a theatre with a balcony. Why and how did such an urban alcazar appear on Franklin Street in Tampa, Florida in 1926? To begin to answer that question it is necessary to understand how the town of Tampa grew into a city.

The Railroad's Urbanizing Influence

The moderate growth trend Tampa experienced in the last decade of the nineteenth century escalated dramatically in 1898 with the outbreak of the Spanish-American War. The War Department had not intended to use Tampa's railway and port facilities, but Henry Plant, a railroad developer, wrote a letter to the secretary of war praising Tampa's railroad lines and expressing his concern that the railroad lines were vulnerable to attack. In response to Plant's letter, Secretary Alger integrated Tampa into his plan of defense, and the city of Tampa began its preparation to play a part in the Spanish-American War.[8]

Like the twentieth century's two world wars, the Spanish-American War more than doubled Tampa's population and economy. Tampa became the major port of embarkation for men and supplies. 30,000 soldiers came to Tampa within a two-month period in 1898. Tampa's retail and entertainment establishments reaped great profits when soldier's paychecks began circulating, and millions of dollars spread through the city's economy. Besides the dramatic increase in revenue, the nation's attention turned to Tampa. "The city," writes Durwood Long, "enjoyed the limelight of free advertising of inestimable value."[9] The publicity of the

Spanish-American War, insists Gene Burnett, would actually triple Tampa's population in the decade following the war.[10]

While Plant's plea to the secretary of war boosted the city's economy and made "Tampa" a familiar place around the country, Plant had been laying the tracks for Tampa's economic expansion and urbanization for nearly a decade before the Spanish-American War. Some historians suggest that road began construction in 1883 on a railway connection from Tampa to the eastern seaboard, Tampa was well on its way to becoming a modern city.[12] Three years later, Plant had completed his plan for Tampa as a major railroad and port center. Tampa was linked by rail with cities as far away as Jacksonville and a 200-foot steamer connected Tampa with Key West and Havana.[13] Plant finished construction of

Nighttime view of Franklin Street at Harrison Street taken by W. A. Fishbaugh in 1916. The photograph captures Tampa's first "Great White Way" lighting, the bright illumination of the downtown business district made possible by the installation of electric lights on ornamental iron posts along Franklin Street. *(Courtesy of the Florida State Archives Collection.)*

when Plant chose Tampa for port development and for a railroad terminus in the early 1880s, he secured Tampa's economic future. Rail transportation in the last decades of the nineteenth century was one of the most important factors in the formation of high concentrations of southern populations. "By 1900," notes T. Lynn Smith, "important towns were aligned along the principal railways like beads on a string."[11]   When Plant's South Florida Rail- his extravagant Tampa Bay Hotel (now a part of the University of Tampa) in 1891. The hotel rivaled Henry Flagler's Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine, Florida in opulence and the amount of national attention it received. Plant's railroad and port construction urbanized Tampa, dramatically increasing its economic production, accessibility to other regions, and inevitably, its population. While in 1880, Tampa's census recorded a meager 722 citizens, five years

later there were 2,739 people; by 1890, Tampa's population reached nearly 16,000.

Promoting Paradise

While Plant's railroad is a predominant reason for Tampa's urban and economic growth, Long contends that the promotional activities of the Board of Trade also were instrumental in turning the village of Tampa into a city.[14] In 1885, Tampa's Board of Trade, the town's first civic/financial organization, held meetings in Tampa's first cultural institution, the Branch Opera House. Within one year, the Board of Trade laid the groundwork for much of the economic prosperity Tampa would experience in the first decades of the twentieth century. The board led a movement in support of a city water works; it attracted ice factories necessary for the fish industry and pushed the local government to erect a bridge across the Hillsborough River, so Plant could build the Tampa Bay Hotel in Hyde Park.
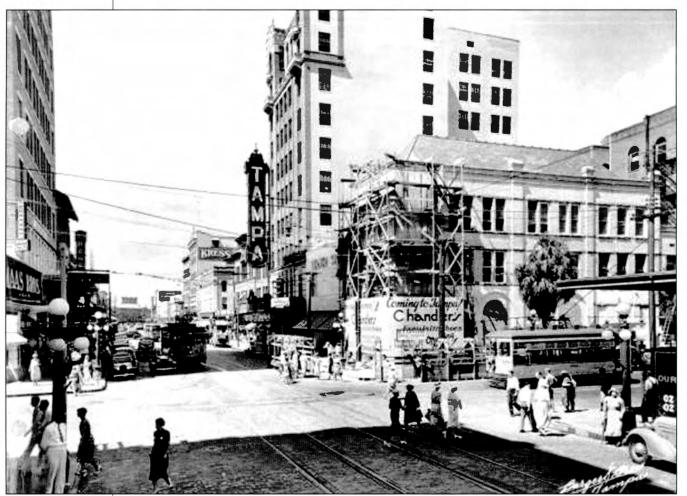
The board is most acclaimed for underwriting the loan needed to bring cigar magnate Vicente Martinez Ybor to establish Tampa's first major industry.[15] Persuaded by his friends, who had praised the qualities of Tampa, Ybor came to Tampa in September of 1885, to locate and purchase property for his cigar factories. The board offered to pay nearly half of the bill for the tract of land that Ybor desired. By October of 1885, Ybor City was plotted and construction on streets and homes began. Within a year and a half, four cigar factories were in operation and 1,300 people migrated to the area to work in Ybor's flourishing cigar industry.

One of the most important characteristics of southern civic and financial leaders during the south's urban development, argues Blaine Brownwell and David Goldfield, was their participation in the development of an urban consciousness. The associational activity of the civic booster helped to construct an urban awareness that "illuminated the possibilities of the southern city as a cultural center, a repository of capital and expertise, and ultimately of 'civilization'."[16] While Tampa's Board of Trade was initially comprised of store owners, lawyers and other professionals mirroring Tampa's early mercantile sensibilities, by 1892, real estate dealers and builders outnumbered retailers and lawyers. This shift both

reflected and shaped the contours of Tampa's urbanism for two decades. By 1911, manufacturers and managers exerted the greatest influence on board decisions helping to form the entrepreneurial sensibilities of the early city.[17]

A Tampa Board of Trade brochure, at the turn of the twentieth century, gloated that "between 1890 and 1910, Tampa's growth was the greatest of any city of its class in the United States. Since being a city the growth has been nothing short of marvelous."[18] The Board of Trade was not the only organization impressed with Tampa's staggering 596 percent increase in population between the years 1890 and 1910; newspapers noting the dramatic population increase renamed Tampa the "Queen City of the Gulf."[19]

Besides Plant, Ybor, and the Tampa Board of Trade, others consciously developed Tampa into a city with commercial assets affecting the city's growth and attracting tourists. For instance, George S. Gandy enhanced Tampa's reputation as southwest Florida's playground when the bridge he built opened in 1924, connecting Tampa with Pinellas County and the Gulf beaches.[20] But no one epitomized the dizzying Florida real estate boom of the 1920s like land developer D.P Davis. A mile from Tampa's flourishing downtown, Davis created Davis Islands by dredging up the bay and expanding some mud flat islands. Before the dredging was completed, Davis sold 18 million dollars worth of lots, creating Tampa's most prestigious residential and resort community.[21] Booster brochures and booklets about the Islands development and Tampa and advertisements placed in newspapers and magazines helped to lure thousands of people to buy a lot on Davis Islands, move to Tampa, or at least travel there for a vacation. Davis' 1925 promotional booklet depicted attractive scenes of middle class leisure with people playing tennis, boating, sunbathing and golfing. Its rhetorical effort became a hallmark of promotional publications. "As the brochure ticked the highlights of the development," explains James Ricci, "the language reinforced the image while calling to mind the ingredients and virtues Americans typically seek for their home or vacation."[22] Booster literature helped to create in Northern minds a compelling image of a middle class Tampa, attracting them and their dollars to

the city. Vacationers nicknamed "tin can tourists" drove to Tampa from northern states, contributing to the 100,000 people per year who visited the city during the boom years of the 1920s. Pitching tents and eating from tin cans, they experienced Tampa less extravagantly than those who vacationed on Davis Islands; however, during their visits they managed to pump millions of dollars into the local economy.

Popular magazines such as *Saturday Evening Post* and *Harper's Monthly* further enhanced the economy and Tampa's boom

constructed Gandy Bridge escalated land prices from 50 dollars to, in some cases, 10,000 dollars an acre. In 1920, a parcel at the intersection of Lafayette Street (now Kennedy Boulevard) and Florida Avenue sold for 20,000 dollars. Three years later the same property sold for 150,000 dollars.[23] In 1923, investors put nearly two million dollars into Tampa's building construction. One year later that amount doubled in the city, and by 1925, – at the peak of the boom – 23 million dollars had been spent on development.[24]

A view of of a very busy Franklin Street looking north from Zack Street. Two streetcars are approaching the intersection and the Tampa Theatre is on the right in the next block. Construction on the facade of the First National Bank can be seen. *(Courtesy of the Burgert Bros. Collection, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library.)*

development. National writers, enthused by the state's sunny skies, warm weather, and beaches, depicted Tampa as an Eden, a gold mine, and a resort and business paradise, helping to fuel the economic advances and land development that took place in and around Tampa during the first half of the 1920s. In 1923 and 1924, rampant speculation in the properties along the newly

In part, Tampa's urban and economic growth during the twenties depended on mediated images of a blissful resort. Portraits of leisure in paradise helped to define the reputation of Tampa. Booster rhetoric that put Tampa "on the map" called forth images of paradise, gold mines and Eden, creating a mosaic that always referenced some place other than the city itself. For

example, Tampa Theatre's architect, John Eberson, who spent several winters in Florida before he was hired to design the Tampa Theatre, contributed to the utopian rhetoric. He attributed his inspiration for the atmospheric design of his picture palaces to the vibrant panoramas he saw while vacationing. "I was impressed with the colorful scenes which greeted me at Miami, Palm Beach and Tampa," Eberson remembered. Visions of Italian gardens, Spanish patios, Persian shrines and French formal gardens flashed through my mind, and at once I directed my energies to carrying out these ideas."[25] As Eberson's vision of a fashionable Tampa emerged as a collage of images of ancient cities, Tampa's identity and its sense of place in the mid-twenties was in fact misplaced. For when Eberson envisioned Tampa, the city itself vanished, and he imagined instead an amalgam of Italy, Spain, Persia and France. Eberson said that such a montage of Tampa greatly influenced his design of the Tampa Theatre, an atmospheric picture palace. The Tampa Theatre was designed with the idea of delivering its patrons to paradise by taking them away from the city in which they lived.

The Impact of the Streetcar

The increase in Tampa's industry also meant growth in utilities, communication services and urban improvements. As the city grew in population, business districts and neighborhoods multiplied, and new innovations in communication and transportation systems allowed residents to traverse Tampa's expanding boundaries with relative ease. In 1884, Tampa boasted two telegraph lines. In 1885, a local street railway company laid its rails. By 1887, Tampa Electric Company turned on the city's lights, and by 1889, homes and businesses were using water from a city supply. A bond issue in 1889 financed a 65,000 dollar sewage system and 35,000 dollars for street pavement. By 1890, telephones were ringing in Tampa.[26]

The appearance of streetcars greatly affected Tampa's residents by reconfiguring Tampa's metropolitan boundaries. In 1892, Tampa Suburban Railroad Company began running street cars across Hillsborough River to Hyde Park, a developing residential area, and Ballast Point, the southern tip of Tampa. In May of 1893, Tampa Street Railway electrified its lines, resulting in a price war between the two companies.[27] The price reduction – two cents per person – further increased the possibility for travel throughout the city, fostering more participation in leisure activities outside the home. Schools, churches, and social clubs, for example, chartered the streetcars to commute to Ballast Point Pavilion for picnics and dancing. Sometimes groups rode the cars without a destination, filling the cars with song.[28] As the downtown area developed, residents relied upon streetcars to take them to Franklin Street for shopping, dining and entertainment. An indispensable part of urban life, Rabinowitz argues "street cars helped to usher in the golden age of the downtown area."[29] Following the 1926 opening of the Tampa Theatre, the Franklin Street streetcar dropped off passengers at the front door of the picture palace.

A symbol of urban maturity, streetcars changed the way citizens experienced the city. The cars expanded the city by increasing passengers' accessibility between the commercial center and developing suburban areas. The cars also contracted the time it took to cross the city and created a reduced sense of geography, a more navigable and efficient Tampa. Besides traversing an expanding city in less time, the streetcar passengers' shift in space-time perception resulted in a cinematic experience of the city. This change, which Wolfgang Schivelbusch calls "panoramic" perception, parallels the characteristics of cinematic viewing. On the train journey, Schivelbusch explains speed caused the foreground to disappear; detaching the traveler from the space that immediately surrounded him. The landscape was no longer experienced intensively (as on horseback); it was perceived impressionistically.[30] In a less dramatic way than the railroad car because traveling speed is less, the streetcar created a similar panoramic sensation. Industrial development and urbanization resulted in a need for a streetcar system for Tampa. The cars altered the experience of time and space for its riders, as would cinema during the first few years of the twentieth century. When movie theaters opened along Franklin Street, Tampa residents began experiencing a similar passage of time and space, for watching movies paralleled riding the streetcars that carried them downtown. In a movie theater, as in a streetcar, the passenger/spectator is among others, yet is

actually seated alone. Both the streetcar passenger and the cinematic spectator travel in time and space, explains Giuliana Bruno, "viewing panoramically from a still sitting position through a framed image in motion."[31] The streetcar, like railroads, bridges, and exhibition halls, was a literal and metaphorical vehicle for a life in transit. As Bruno explains, they were all "signifiers of a new notion of space and mobility, signs of an industrial era that generated the motion picture."[32] In other words, when city dwellers jumped off the streetcars at the door of the Tampa Theatre they did not stop traveling. Instead, the movement continued long after they purchased their movie tickets, for the Tampa Theatre transported its inhabitants to the cosmopolitan and often glamorous world of Hollywood. While Tampa Theatre patrons were growing accustomed to increased urban mobility facilitated by Tampa streetcars, they were also cinematically traveling down other cities' streets, further expanding their perceptual boundaries and expectations of urban space.

Franklin Street: The Center of Display and Commerce

Franklin Street slowly grew into the centerpiece of downtown during the two decades before the turn of the twentieth century. The Spanish-American War had stimulated downtown business growth, but Tampa's population was not large enough to accommodate a magnitude of enterprises, except for those located on Franklin Street. The Branch Opera House, the Binkley Building, and the Hillsborough County Courthouse served as landmarks for retailers who wanted to locate their businesses as near as possible to Franklin Street's emblems of progress. By 1901, Franklin Street's center possessed all of the elements of a modern business district. The Tampa Board of Trade, First National Bank, Exchange National Bank, Citizen's Bank and Trust Company, Southern Loan & Jewelry Company, Tampa Furniture Company, Maas Brothers Department Store, O. Falk's Department Store, and a variety of smaller businesses such as shoe stores, clothing stores, grocery stores, a barber, a tailor, and a fruit stand, lined Tampa's most well traveled street.[33] The increasingly robust commercial and retail establishments on Franklin Street became a centripetal force,

and other retail and financial institutions sought to situate themselves near this central zone, promising them increased exposure. In the first decades of the twentieth century, peddlers still traveled through residential sections of Tampa selling such items as thread, lace, dress material, pie pans and curtain rods, but citizens soon grew to depend on Franklin Street for its convenience and diversity, as a place for shopping, strolling and social gathering.[34] Tampa's Board of Trade created a safer and more comfortable and aesthetically pleasing pedestrian environment on Franklin Street, reflecting the social needs and consumer demands of the city's citizens. Hard surfaced streets and sidewalks replaced the former pavements of cypress blocks, seashells and rotted wood, increasing the comfort and satisfaction of Franklin Street's travelers.

The topography and the tempo of Franklin Street transformed again in 1912, when the city's first skyscraper office building was erected. The Citizen's Bank Building, the tallest building in Tampa, located in the heart of the area that included Maas Brothers, O. Falk's, Woolworth's, and Kress, established the 700 block of Franklin Street. Distinguishing Tampa from other towns and small cities, the towering and conspicuous Citizen's Bank Building, visible from every street and sidewalk, provided Tampa's citizens with an emblem. The skyscraper symbolically told residents that their city was prospering and Franklin Street was a legitimate financial center. As downtown Tampa prospered and the 1920s drew near, more clothing, shoe and accessory shops sprang up along Franklin Street, complementing the established jewelers, pharmacies, banks, office building and department stores. Hardware stores, fruit sellers, and coffee merchants vacated the street, leaving room for more sophisticated and prosperous businesses such as Wolf Brothers, the men's clothing store. The stage had been built for Tampa's downtown to play out its economic successes, and Franklin Street was prepared for the boom years that were just around the corner.

It was no accident that investors chose Franklin Street in 1926 for the Tampa Theatre's location. Considered the crown jewel of the city, the Tampa Theatre reigned over the department stores and the less significant shops around it. Maas Brothers, O. Falk's, McCrory, Kress, and Woolworth's, clothing stores, jewelry stores, shoe stores,

Madame Himes Beauty Parlor was set up and operating in the lobby of the Tampa Theatre to promote the "It Girl," screen starlet Clara Bow, and her latest movie, *Love Among The Millionaires*, which opened in July 1930. *(Courtesy of the Burgert Bros. Collection, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library.)*

pharmacies, and three small movie theaters – the Victory, the Strand, and the Franklin – all lined Franklin Street when the Tampa Theatre opened its doors.

The department stores, like the street-cars, were also precursors to the cinematic experience for Tampa's residents. The imaginary gratification of "looking" constructed by the department stores windows and display cases, according to Anne Friedburg, were timeless spaces similar to and precursors of cinema. "The department store, like the arcade before it," Friedburg explains, "constructed a sheltered refuge for itinerant lookers, a sanctuary for consumption kept separate from the domain of production." [35] For Tampa's middle class residents who were growing accustomed to participating in an increasingly urbanized and commercialized spectator culture, the Tampa Theatre was a paramount spectacle. Like the windows and displays of the department stores surrounding the theatre, imaginary gratification came to the patrons at the

Tampa Theatre by gazing at both the films and their surroundings within the theatre. Patrons, for a sum of seventy-five cents, consumed both cinematic images of other cities, countries and historical periods and the antiquated and exotic Mediterranean-elsewhere atmosphere of the theatre. Two decades later, the cinematic relationship between the department store window and the Tampa Theatre was consummated when a local model took a bubble bath in the Sears store window to promote Greer Garson's 1948 film *Julie Misbehaves*. Similar to the way they gazed upon the latest fashions on display in the Maas Brothers window, spectators stood behind a rope on the sidewalk watching a model behind glass replicate a scene from an upcoming movie.

Popular Entertainment in the City

When Tampa residents and visitors flocked to the Tampa Theatre in the twenties, the Edison films I saw

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during the 1997 Library of Congress National Film Registry Tour were already a forgotten artifact of an unsophisticated technology. Edison's war films originally were projected on a Vitascope in vaudeville houses at the turn of the century. The Vitascope, the first film projector to show motion pictures onto a screen at a distance, created the conditions for assembling numbers of people into a film viewing audience. The emergence of the Vitascope was "an outgrowth and vital part of city culture," suggests Vanessa Schwartz and Leo Charney, "that addressed its spectators as members of a collective and potentially undifferentiated mass public."[36] But before Vitascope pictures thrilled audiences in 1896, singing, dancing, comedy skits and novelty acts filled the vaudeville halls. "The vaudeville years from 1880 to 1920, played a critical role in the transformation between popular culture and place," explains Robert Snyder.[37] A giant step toward the centralized entertainment industry, the shows were usually owned and operated by national chains that leased theaters in cities on the vaudeville circuit. The shows traveled from theater to theater in city after city. Vaudeville players traveling between theaters made it possible for spectators in Brooklyn to see the same show as ticket buyers in the Bronx; thereby enlarging the possibilities for a shared culture among people in different regions.[38]

Though the Vitascope created the first collective motion picture audience, the desire for public entertainment in American cities grew as quickly as the cities themselves during the last decades of the nineteenth century. A new urban population created by the industrial revolution flocked to circuses, traveling shows, penny arcades and dime museums. The rise of public entertainment was "a by-product of the enormous expansion of the cities," notes David Nasaw. "Commercial entertainments were, in this period at least, an urban phenomenon."[39] Paralleling the rapid population growth in Tampa between the years of 1870 and 1920, America's urban population increased from ten million to fifty-four million people, the average income for the industrial worker rose fifty percent, and the cost of living decreased fifty percent.[40] The increase in income along with decease in work hours resulted in a new generation of workers with leisure time and money.

"Going out was more than escape from the tedium of work," writes Nasaw, "it was a gateway into a privileged sphere of everyday life. The ability to take time out from work for recreation and public sociability was the dividing line between the old worlds and the new."[41]

Before the construction of Tampa's first commercial movie theaters, residents enjoyed conventional theatrical performances at the Branch Opera House, but downtown was also a place for other fascinating and less traditional exhibitions. In a vacant store next to Ball's Grocery Store, for instance, a woman sat in an elevated chair and painted china, wrote, sewed and played the piano with her toes. A curio shop, at the corner of Lafayette and Tampa Streets, exhibited hissing reptiles in department store display cases. And at Kress, the new department store, clerks made a show of grinding peanuts for the many spectators who had never seen peanut butter before.[42] These minor spectacles depended on the constant flow of pedestrians and money centered on Franklin Street.

Even before the construction of Tampa's first nickelodeon, residents gathered downtown to watch movies projected on an outside wall of Ball's Grocery, at the corner of Franklin and Madison Street. "The audience would fill the benches on the Court House Square, then overflow to the steps and curbs nearby," wrote a long time Tampa resident. "Sometimes one of Tampa's vocalists would sing with a picture. The music of the band helped to attract the crowds and made these movie nights seem much more like gala occasions."[43]

Tampa's first movie theater, a nickelodeon on the east side of Franklin Street, remained popular until the arrival of three corporate theatres in 1912. Downtown nickel theaters hit American city streets like wildfire in 1905. They were a small time business owner's dream. A few adjustments to a storefront – folding chairs, paper covered windows, a piece of canvas for a screen and a projector was all that was needed before a nickelodeon was up and running. Tampa's nickelodeon, housed in a small frame building, charged the routine five cents admission for a half hour long movie. "Of all the pictures I saw there," remembers Susie Kelly Dean, "the only one I remember was that of a man eating ice cream and sending the audience into gales

of laughter by the faces he made."[44]

Nickelodeons were generally located on side streets where the rent was cheaper. This kept costs down and attracted a different audience than vaudeville theaters. Nickelodeons opened the door of commercial entertainment to working class families, mothers whose arms were filled with shopping bags, children and single women. While the rise in incomes and decline in work hours contributed to the growth of urban entertainment, nickelodeons were accessible to workers who still had low wages and long hours. The five cent movie was inexpensive enough and short enough for the underpaid and overworked. Because the shows were continuous, workers could go to the theaters after work. For instance, the U.S. Steel Corporation's 12 hour work-day still left time for long lines of overworked steel-mill laborers at the nickelodeon, a 1908 Pittsburgh survey discovered. Part of the nickelodeon's success resulted from their ability to attract both the underpaid and overworked as well as those who were accumulating some disposable income. "By accommodating both kinds of schedules and pocketbooks, the movie theater managed to become – like the saloon, the church, and the fraternal lodge," writes Roy Rosenzweig, "a central working class institution that involved workers on a sustained and regular basis."[45]

But the nickelodeon could not accommodate the advent of the feature length film. The financial and artistic success of D.W. Griffith's twelve-reel *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915, forever changed cinematic viewing, resulting in higher ticket prices, reserved seating, scheduled shows and longer runs. As a result of the popularity of feature length films, the space and respectability of movie houses also changed.

Born in 1875, John Eberson came to the United States in the early 1900s, and settled in St. Louis, Missouri. By 1910, he was living in Chicago, and receiving steady work as a theater architect. In 1926, Eberson moved his base of operations to New York City, from where he designed Tampa's "Picture Palace," the Tampa Theatre. His death came in 1965.

Only centrally located moving picture theaters could accommodate and afford to show multi-reel films, and exhibiting them in theaters located on valuable urban real estate helped to seal the marriage of middle class audiences and movies. At first, feature length film exhibitors colonized old vaudeville houses, but by the end of 1915 theatre owners were building new opulent venues called picture palaces, which promised to satisfy the yearnings of the new and profitable middle class audience.

The Business of Leisure: The Tampa Theatre Comes to Town

The construction of the Tampa Theatre was a lavish marker of Tampa's confidence in itself as a city. The economic boom during the first half of the 1920's boosted Tampa's downtown status enough that investors believed that its urban center could and should support an extravagant 1,500 seat movie theater. When the picture palace opened its carved doors to the public on October 15, 1926, Tampa's population, industry and economy was flourishing. The city led the world in phosphate exportation and the manufacturing of high grade Havana cigars. It had the sixteenth largest port in the United States. In the same year the theatre was built, over two thousand new homes, eighty apartment buildings, fourteen churches, fourteen schools and two hospitals were constructed.[46] With 159 cigar factories, 382 other industries and a population brimming to more than 200,000, Tampa was considered the commercial center of South Florida. The Tampa Theatre marked the pinnacle of the city's success story during the boom years of the mid-1920s.

"The most beautiful theatre in the south," was built by Consolidated Amusements

The Tampa Theatre was showing the Helen Hayes film *What Every Woman Knows* in 1934, when this large crowd gathered at the entrance on Franklin Street for one of the theatre's popular promotions, Bank Night, held every Friday. *(Courtesy of the Burgert Bros. Collection, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library.)*

Corporation, a cooperative venture comprised of influential businessman associated with downtown Tampa's retail and financial community. Consolidated Amusements constructed a theatre that depended upon the convenience and centrality of a thriving downtown to lure its patrons. Theatre construction began in April of 1925, and for the next 18 months, Tampa contractor G.A. Miller employed multitudes of mechanics, carpenters, artists and decorators who transformed the dream-like architectural design of John Eberson into a reality.

Eberson, the most prolific and well known picture place designer in the world, designed over 1,200 architectural projects, built over five hundred theaters and was credited with the creation of the "atmospheric" theater of which he designed over one hundred. In part, Eberson's atmospherics were successful because of his innovative designs and because he effectively reproduced classical motifs using inexpensive materials. The statues that adorned his theaters were made from either plaster or staff, an inexpensive material made from plaster

and straw.[47] Classical forms reproduced with moderately priced materials lowered construction costs and maintenance for theater owners, and from a seat in the auditorium, the statues appeared to be museum quality pieces. Due to the constraints of the property size, the Tampa Theatre was one of the smallest of Eberson's designs, but was supposedly one of his favorites. He and wife traveled to Europe themselves to purchase many of the 250,000 dollars worth of antiques that graced the theater on opening night and still remain there today.

Two days before the Tampa Theatre opened, 1,500 seventy-five cent tickets went on sale. All of the tickets for the vigorously anticipated opening were sold within two hours. It is difficult to determine what the fifteen hundred ticket buyers specifically wanted to see opening night, but surely few went home disappointed. Paramount Picture's *Ace of Cads,* starring Adolf Menjou and Alice Joyce, was the feature film, but the motion picture was touted as only a minimal part of the evening's entertainment. The 1,500 ticket holders at the

opening night were treated to musical performances – both classical and popular in form, speeches acknowledging the city of Tampa's arrival to the big time with the opening of the Tampa Theatre, and three kinds of film entertainment – comedy, drama and news. But, the theatre patrons sitting in a theatre housing the latest technological advances in popular culture, also found in the opening night program a lesson in high culture.

Like Balaban and Katz, the Tampa Theatre management claimed their palace was for the people; it was for the ticket buyers who "might not know Art, but could feel it." The theatre provided popular film entertainment, but its design in many ways mimicked a high brow stage theater. In other words, while the theatre was extolled as an affable place for those unacquainted with the graces of high culture, reproductions of classical statuary and explicit instructions included in the opening guide suggest that the theatre's patrons would not or should not be undisciplined in the virtues of high culture for too long. Many of the program's pages were dedicated to photographs and instruction about the statuary reproductions found in various niches in the lobby, foyers and auditorium. Simulated masterpieces of Hebe, Hermes, Christopher Columbus, and Diana were only a few of the sculptures described. "The educational and cultural value of these art treasures," the program explained, "so beautifully enthroned in the grand architectural setting cannot be easily measured. Art, Mythology and History are collaborated in this modern Motion Picture Palace."[49] Most of the program was dedicated to photographs and descriptions of simulated statuary and the theatre's design. Hollywood actors such as W.C. Fields, Lillian Gish, Buster Keaton, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks were merely mentioned in a list of names that followed a paragraph claiming an organization of experts selected the films for the theatre.

Within its facade of high culture emblems, and a set of instruction about them, the program signaled to the new Tampa Theatre patrons that they should familiarize themselves with the standards and civility customary of the stage theater and then comply with them. When live theater began catering to various social classes in the mid-1800s, the theater became a place for training the new audiences how to behave in public, as the private manners of the genteel parlor overtook the public behavior of the theater goers. Individuals were taught to keep private bodily matters to themselves, Lawrence Levine explains, and to remain as inconspicuous as possible within the public realm of the theater as well as on the street.[50] While the theater entertained and tutored its new audiences, the notion that stage entertainment was really for the wealthy and the educated never diminished. The Tampa Theatre's decor summoned the qualities of genteel behavior and affluence of the mid-nineteenth century stage theater, setting a precedent for its new patrons' public behavior. Its design also served as marker of social status to the city's growing middle class population. The picture palace setting, as Gomery contends, appealed to middle class urban dwellers with social aspirations.[51]

In addition to photographs, descriptions of simulated statuary, and the theatre's design, the opening night program dedicated a half page description detailing the theatre's Air Cooling and Dehumidifying System. The first public building in Tampa to have air conditioning, the program boasted that the system would not only keep "new and fresh air in constant circulation, but removes all foul air and odors instantly." Anyone familiar with Tampa weather will certainly agree that air conditioning, particularly during the summer months, makes life tolerable; however, the air conditioning system, like the replicas of the classical statues, had important implications for patrons aspiring to separate themselves from the working class.

In the years before the picture palace, the conditions of the inexpensive movie house paralleled the realities of working class life. Floors were dirty, the air stagnant, and rats were almost as plentiful as the spectators. "Spartan, and even unsanitary, conditions make little impression on working-class movie goers; such surroundings were part of their daily lives," claims Rosenzweig, "but middle class commentators reacted with horror."[52] Part of their shocked reaction was the presence of a large group of working class people who looked and smelled differently from themselves. In order to attract middle class patrons, picture palace owners differentiated their theaters from working class venues by eliminating working class signifiers, such as their odors.

Views of the main lobby and stage clearly illustrate the "atmospherics" that movie palace architect John Eberson achieved in his design. The Tampa Theatre's interior delivered an out-of-doors facade that invoked images of courtyards, patios, shrines and gardens, all within a building on Tampa's Franklin Street – a blurring of inside and outside. *(Courtesy of the Burgert Bros. Collection, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library.)*

While the air conditioning system at the Tampa Theatre did cool the air, another distinctive quality was its ability to "remove foul air and odor." In other words, the system helped to eliminate all odors except for that of Tampa's middle class.

The opening of the Tampa Theatre, doused with simulated finery and riches, created a *public* space in the center of the city for many Tampa residents who were *privately* coming to terms with their new found middle class status. "The spirit of its conception, its architecture, its influence, will be the inspiration of many thousands," the opening night program declared. "The need is here. The people are here." As the city of Tampa flourished economically during the first half of the 1920s, more and more of the city's population found themselves living within and aspiring to middle class standards. The industrial and real estate development in Tampa, which created an urban culture, helped to generate the production of social sites of amusement and spectacle for the city's growing population. "The social spaces of distraction and display became as

TAMPA THEATRE
EBERSON-ARCHITECT
EAST SUPERIOR ST.

vital to urban culture as the spaces of working and living," explains David Harvey. "Social competition with respect to life-style and command over space, always important for upper segments of the bourgeoisie, became more and more important within the mass culture of urbanization, sometimes even masking the role of community in processes of class reproduction."[53]

Eberson's "atmospherics" reorganized space by transforming the theater's interior into an out-of-doors facade. The Tampa Theatre's auditorium invoked images of exterior Italian courtyards, Spanish patios, Persian shrines and French gardens. The term "atmospheric" as Eberson used it, is fitting for the blurring of inside and outside, yet it is also an appropriate term for the social organization of the space of the Tampa Theatre. "In the space of power, power does not appear as such," writes Lefebvre, "it hides under the organization of space."[54] The Tampa Theatre appears in 1926 as a public space designed to fulfill the social aspirations of the city's middle class; the theatre was an "atmospheric" of mass culture that nevertheless made explicit social distinctions.

Conclusion

David Nasaw has convincingly argued that both professionals and blue-collar workers felt an uncertain discomfort in occupying the extravagant halls of the picture palace. Yet, it was a democratic social space, one where everyone had gained entry with the tearing of the ticket, and "all felt equally welcome," says Nasaw, "because all were equally out of place." In the cloak of artificial dusk, surrounded by the exotic signifiers of other countries and epochs, and removed from the familiar sights and sounds of the city, the Tampa Theatre patrons did experience a feeling of being "out of place." Ironically, the theatre built to help secure Tampa's place "on the map" had no coordinates drawn from the city itself. The architectural bricolage of styles and periods forged in a random, but conscious, effort invoked a sense of elsewhere. Yet, the picture palace's dimly lit spectacular montage elicited a feeling of panoramic placelessness that was neither unfamiliar nor discomfiting, for it mimicked an increasingly commonplace logic of a visual society where disparate images could be edited together and understood without

explanation. Tampa residents had been learning to see the world this way for several decades.

"The rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impression: These are the psychological conditions which the metropolis creates," explained Georg Simmel in his 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life."[55] Simmel contended that the glut of stimuli found in modern cities transformed the psychic lives of those who lived in them. The panoramic sensation which transformed the street car/train passenger's perception of space and time, the imaginary gratification of "looking" that came to those who gazed at commodities framed in department store windows, the rise of cinema as a popular form of urban entertainment, and the construction of Tampa as a sunny Eden are but a few of the examples of city life that not only subjected city dwellers to a barrage of sensory stimulation but also anticipated the mobility and placelessness engendered in the "atmospheric" picture palace.

The placelessness invoked by the Tampa Theatre may have been disorienting to patrons, but it was not a disagreeable or an entirely unfamiliar sensation. Rather, the picture palace – a remarkable and imaginative passageway – enabled movie goers to gain quick entry to the fantasies on the screen, encouraging them to temporarily escape the experiences of their own lives in the city. The increasingly frantic pace of city life; the regimentation, boredom, and ever accelerating rhythm of industrial work; the crowded, frenzied, and stimulating urban environment, and the multiplying demands and pressing schedules of work and home were but some of the tribulations that Tampa Theatre patrons hoped to temporarily escape as they entered into the picture palace.

Nonetheless, I am reminded as I watch the films during the Film Registry Tour that early film entertainment was not simply an escape from the perils and complexities of city life. The films were often inverted or idealized spectacles of the patrons' everyday lives. In fact, while early motion pictures provided an experiential detour, they frequently transported patrons to other cities, inviting them to reflect and laugh at the cinematic and magnified portrayals of

the complications and absurdities of their own urban lives. Surely audience members chuckled when Harold Lloyd dangled perilously from a skyscraper clock above a congested Los Angeles street in *Safety Last*. Yet, some of their laughter might have been nervous recognition that they too clung to clocks. And, if movie viewers hooted when a crowd gathered to gleefully observe Laurel and Hardy demolish a stranger's Los Angeles home in *Big Business*, audience members might have been acknowledging their own moments of uneasy pleasure when the carnivalesque threatened the order of their city streets. Still, these films are comedies and while spectators may have experienced momentary discomfort, the pleasure found in watching these cinematic absurdities was reinforced by the fact that the viewers were sitting in the Tampa Theatre, their displaced bodies far removed from hazardous and cinematic streets of Los Angeles.

In many ways, the opening of the Tampa Theatre in 1926, symbolized the city's dream of four decades earlier. In fact, the theatre's owners were quite cognizant about the theatre's place in the city's evolution. "Like Tampa itself, the Tampa Theatre is destined to occupy a place of conspicuous importance in the development of Florida," the opening program announced. "The need is here. The people are here." Yet, as the audiences made their way through an architectural bricolage of European antiquities and manufactured icons of upper class civility, and as they sat in plush red seats watching the frames roll beneath the proscenium, the Tampa Theatre epitomized an atmosphere where its audiences were physically and mentally poised to be anywhere but in Tampa. On the one hand, the Tampa Theatre staged a sense of "placelessness" for a city that was confronting the anxieties and rapid changes of an increasingly industrialized America. On the other hand, each seat in the Tampa Theatre was ushering its audience toward their "sense of place" in a society of consumption and mobility built on the flickering images of a spectator culture. Brochures, magazines, glaring neon, department store windows, and the rise of cinematic entertainment all helped to situate and prepare citizens for more of the same as the twentieth century rolled forward. While the Tampa Theatre coalesced the forces at work in the city's growing consumer society of the twenties,

its place in the urban and visual landscape would eventually be superseded by the suburbanization of Tampa in the fifties and sixties. The red velvet seats would remain in place, but the construction of strip malls, drive-in theaters, and movie houses closer to the city's new suburban developments would eventually leave many of the rows in the Tampa Theatre empty. Finally, the advent of television created a new sense of place for spectators. Seated on couches, images flashing before their eyes, viewers turned their television dials, choosing the dreams they wished to privately consume in the security and comfort of their homes.

ENDNOTES

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